

Preserving the Texture of Time at the Eastman House Museum

For many years, a remarkable portrait of 19th century America has been preserved at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, the world's oldest photography museum. And it is—literally—a portrait: a collection of some 3,500 daguerreotypes whose lighting and focus are so crisp, a viewer can almost feel the texture of the subjects' clothes. Among them are 1,200 images taken by Albert Southworth and Josiah Hawes, considered to be two of the finest American portraitists of their century. Now, a \$250,000 grant from the NPS-administered Save America's Treasures program, to be matched by other sources, will help stabilize these "aesthetically unparalleled" images—in the words of the award documentation—while improving storage and enhancing access.

WHEN NEWS OF FRENCH CHEMIST LOUIS DAGUERRE'S INNOVATION REACHED America in 1839, a host of imitators sprang up. Southworth and Hawes' Boston studio advertised "the perfect daguerreotype," targeting the rich and influential. Their clientele included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, and Daniel Webster.

THERE ARE OTHER COLLECTIONS OF SOUTHWORTH AND HAWES IMAGES, BUT the largest is at the Eastman House, which in 2005 partnered with the International Center of Photography in the traveling exhibition "Young America: The Daguerreotypes of Southworth & Hawes," which also featured images from numerous other collections (the



The pair teased out the most compelling qualities of the process, using 8 x 6-inch plates, which, though difficult to work with because of their large size, yielded superior quality. And they did not farm out work, as many studios did. They took all their own images, which in technique, composition, and feeling transcended the form of the commercial portrait, becoming art.

There is a reticence, a grimness even, in the faces of the subjects, perhaps reflecting the mores and hardships of the time. Occasionally, a light expression seems about to emerge, making one wonder if a subject was as intriguing in person as he or she is in a gallery of faces.

Southworth and Hawes, in business from 1843 to 1863, captured more than individual portraits. As their reputation grew, they became the photographers of choice for the major figures of the time, producing a picture of the era. According to the exhibit text, "Their studio attracted icons of the great American political, economic, and cultural movements and events of the 1840s and 1850s: transcendentalism, European revolutions, American nativism, the China Trade, the annexation of Texas, the Mexican War, and the Gold Rush." What a viewer sees today is nothing less than a glimpse of the human face of history.

Above: A sampling from the Eastman House daguerreotype collection, which provides an unparalleled glimpse into the mid-19th century. Right: An unidentified woman at Southworth and Hawes' Boston studio in 1852. The pair mastered daguerreotype technology, elevating it to an art form.

exhibit is still online at www.eastmanhouse.org/icp/pages/young-america.html). The George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, located in the Colonial Revival mansion where the Eastman Kodak founder lived from 1905 to 1932, opened as a photography and film museum in 1949. Aside from housing one of the world's oldest film archives, it is a national historic landmark due to its association with Eastman, considered the father of modern photography. The institution is an international leader in conserving film and photographs, offering instruction to curators and archivists from around the world.

Visit the George Eastman House at www.eastmanhouse.org. For more information on Save America's Treasures, go to www.nps.gov/history/hps/treasures or contact the National Park Service Historic Preservation Grants Division at (202) 354-2020, ext. 1.

ALL PHOTOS GEORGE EASTMAN HOUSE, INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

