

# Smithsonian Acquires Rare Photographs From the First African American Studios

Daguerreotypes by James P. Ball, Glenalvin Goodridge and Augustus Washington are the centerpiece of a collection that could rewrite the early history of American photography.

By Aruna D'Souza

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Larry West was a mergers and acquisitions specialist when he happened upon an article in The New York Post in 1975 that said antique photographs were on the verge of becoming the next big collectible. Inspired, he walked into a shop in Mamaroneck, N.Y., and came across a daguerreotype — an early form of photography, made on highly polished metal plates that is almost startling in its hologram-like effect. It depicted an African American man in a tuxedo, elegantly posed before the camera. West purchased it for \$10.70.

“Including tax,” he said with a laugh in a phone interview.

The find kicked off West’s 45-year-long passion — some might say obsession — with daguerreotypes, as objects of beauty and as records of American history, including the active role African Americans played as both makers and consumers of photography from its earliest invention.

Now, an important segment of his collection, most of which has never been on public view, has been purchased by the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) in Washington, D.C., an event that Stephanie Stebich, the museum’s director, called “a coup.” The museum said the purchase price was in the mid-six figures.

The group of 286 objects, dating from the 1840s to the mid-1920s, includes a cache of 40 daguerreotypes made by three of the most prominent Black photographers of the 19th century, James P. Ball, Glenalvin Goodridge and Augustus Washington, making SAAM’s the largest collection of such work in the country, and surpassing the 26 daguerreotypes by these photographers at the Library of Congress, the museum said.

Unidentified artist, "Untitled (woman with hair ribbon)," ambrotype. "We see beauty, we see fashion," said Deborah Willis, the historian and scholar of African American photographic history. "We see these multidimensional experiences of Black men and women during that time period." Smithsonian American Art Museum

Unidentified artist, "Untitled (man with vest and jacket)," daguerreotype, Smithsonian American Art Museum, the L. J. West Collection of Early American Photography. Smithsonian American Art Museum

Included in the purchase is an extensive collection of photographic jewelry — intimate objects that were made to be worn on the body, embedded with tiny daguerreotypes or other types of photographs, perhaps along with locks of hair. West calls the group made by and for African Americans "the rarest of the rare."

Rounding out the acquisition are portraits of abolitionists and photographs related to the Underground Railroad, with special attention to the women — both Black and white — who worked to raise money for the operation.

West's collection "really allows us to dramatically expand the canvas that most people see when they think of early photography in the United States," said Lonnie G. Bunch III, secretary of the Smithsonian and former director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

"What I'm so pleased about is not only the representation of women abolitionists, but also the representation of African American photographers who are often undervalued and overlooked," he added.

The timing was opportune, as SAAM kicks off a reinstallation of its permanent collections over the next few years. John Jacob, its curator for photography, says that the newly acquired objects will play a central role.

J. P. Ball, "Untitled (double portrait)," sixth-plate tintypes. Smithsonian American Art Museum, the L. J. West Collection of Early African American Photography. Smithsonian American Art Museum

The invention of the daguerreotype process in 1839 was major news at the time, and almost immediately photography studios blossomed throughout the United States, offering a novel way for ordinary people to represent themselves, at a fraction of the cost of a painted portrait. Black photographers were at the forefront of this new technology, and Black people of means flocked to their studios.

"The transition from miniature painting to the photographic portrait is really a democratization of portraiture," Jacob said. "But in order to explore that story, a collection has to have diverse photographers and the images have to have diverse subjects — that's the only way to tell the story of democratization. We couldn't tell this story before; now, by bringing in Larry's collection, this is something can do now."

Figures like Ball, Goodridge and Washington established prosperous studios catering to both Black and white clientele. Ball worked in Cincinnati, Minneapolis, and Helena, Mont., among other places; Goodridge worked alongside his brothers in York, Penn.; and Washington established his studio in Hartford, Conn., before moving to Liberia in 1853.

The materials from West's collection have the potential to deepen, and even rewrite, the early history of photography in the United States, said Makeda Best, curator of photography at the Harvard Art Museums. "It tells us that everyday African Americans were both consumers and producers of this new media, that they recognized its

importance right away," she said. "Not only did we create images for ourselves but we were participating in the development of this new technology."

Unidentified artist, "Untitled (brooch, man with goatee)," albumen print in metalsetting. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Smithsonian American Art Museum

Augustus Washington, "Untitled (woman with books)," quarter-plate daguerreotype. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Smithsonian American Art Museum

Best added that as the collection becomes available to a broader public, it shifts the geography of photographic history. "There was a lot going on outside of New York and other major cities," she said. "This collection is showing us again how little we actually know about the range of photographic practices in the U.S. in this period."

The three photographers at the center of the acquisition were active abolitionists — perhaps not surprising given what an important role photography played in the movement to end enslavement and, as Bunch noted, "to counter the narrative of African Americans as only poor, as a stain on America rather than as contributors to America."

Deborah Willis, the photographer, widely known scholar of African American photographic history, and a commissioner of SAAM, underscored this point in a phone interview. "We see beauty, we see fashion," she said. "We see these multidimensional experiences of Black men and women during that time period."

She added that the photographs broaden our view of the African American experience by depicting "not only the challenges or 'suffering' of the Black body, but stories of Black men and women who were entrepreneurs, who had dreams, who were motivated by the politics of the time."

G. J. Goodridge, "Untitled (woman holding cased image)," ca. 1851 or later, daguerreotype. The West collection "tells us that everyday African Americans were both consumers and producers of this new media, that they recognized its importance right away," said Makeda Best, a curator at the Harvard Art Museums. "We were participating in the development of this new technology." Smithsonian American Art Museum

The fact that it took West 45 years to amass 40 daguerreotypes by African American photographers speaks to how few such objects survived, and how dogged the collector was in his search, Jacob said. “When I first started it was much easier,” West said. “Most of the collectors are old white guys,” he said with a self-deprecating laugh. “Some ladies also, to be fair.”

West collected on the side while working for Avon in the 1970s, focusing his attention on photographs of Abraham Lincoln. After he moved to Tiffany and Co., in 1978, he discovered the existence of photographic jewelry. Upon retirement in 2017, he moved from New York City to Washington, D.C., in order to be “closer to the history,” he said. His focus on African American photography of the era intensified in the past two decades.

Part of the acquisition includes West’s research materials and his own treatise about the collection. “This is a treasure trove for whole new generations of art historians,” Stebich, the director, said. There are plans to convene a symposium and other opportunities for experts to engage with the collection before the works go on public view, probably in fall 2023.

“All collectors and historians have this dream for their collections — is my material going to be used, and is it going to endure?” West said. With the addition of his collection, West says, the Smithsonian “can tell a lot of stories they couldn’t tell before.”

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