

# PHOTOGRAPHS

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## ARCHIVAL CARE AND MANAGEMENT

by MARY LYNN RITZENTHALER & DIANE VOGT-O'CONNOR

*with Helena Zinkham, Brett Carnell & Kit Peterson*



SOCIETY OF  
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Archivists**

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# INTRODUCTION

*Photographs: Archival Care and Management* is a how-to manual about the preservation and use of photographs in archives, libraries, museums, and other cultural heritage organizations.<sup>1</sup> Such archival repositories vary widely in size and subject focus, but also share many common needs. Archival repositories preserve treasured images that have powerful impacts. They also contain masses of photographs that rely on association with related images or textual records to convey information and provide evidence. This manual seeks to improve the management of collections containing visual materials by focusing on photographs that have enduring documentary value as historical resource materials for research, publication, exhibition, and teaching. Images appreciated chiefly as fine art objects are largely outside the book's scope.

Archives value photographs because they can provide unique information about many facets of public and private life as well as the natural world and the built environment. The creators of these visual images had many different purposes in mind, and it is important for archivists to consider the original functions and audiences for photographs along with their informational content. Photographs serve many purposes by providing

- evidence of the activities of individuals, families, and organizations, including businesses; civic, social, and cultural clubs; corporations; federal, state, and local governments; and educational and religious groups;
- historical and journalistic documentation of events, people, places, and processes in local, regional, national, and international arenas;
- instructional tools for visual understanding of diverse endeavors in human and material culture from art and architecture to cooking and car repair;
- investigative and analytical tools in fields that need authoritative proof such as insurance, law, and military intelligence;
- marketing, public relations, and propaganda vehicles to persuade viewers to accept a particular viewpoint or act in a certain way;
- product development tools in advertising, fashion, interior design, landscape design, manufacturing, and other fields; and
- source materials for study and research in the arts, sciences, humanities, and social sciences (e.g., architecture, astronomy, history, and anthropology).

Photographs have not always been recognized as important assets within archival repositories. Many images were relegated to a secondary status. Photographs were ignored in general records schedules and collecting policies, lacked sufficient description in guides or finding aids, and were, therefore, easy to overlook in reference and outreach work in many repositories. This volume provides both basic and in-depth strategies for factoring photographs into each stage of archival work.

As a compendium of practice, *Photographs: Archival Care and Management* addresses all aspects of managing photographs, from appraisal and accessioning through digital conversion and reference work. The practices apply to archival photographs scattered



among textual files as well as photographs organized as a substantial series of visual documentation in personal papers and institutional records. The manual also covers exclusively photographic collections—the publication files of magazines and newspapers, the negatives and working files of commercial studios and independent photographers, and subject-based compilations of portraits and views. There are provisions for selective attention to individual images, too.

While photographs are used increasingly to support a broad range of research topics and outreach services, archival practice regarding their organization and management remains far from standardized. This manual summarizes current methods and approaches to managing photographs in an archival context, with the realization that these methods will continue to evolve. Archives, libraries, and museums have found much common ground in recent years. The distinctions between institutional archives and special collection repositories are also diminishing, since many organizations manage both.<sup>2</sup> This manual presents practices that accomplish the common goals effectively while allowing for differences in details.

*Photographs: Archival Care and Management* stresses the principle of provenance and the development of systems to organize, preserve, and access whole collections for several reasons. Working with groups of related materials allows archivists to highlight relationships among photographic materials, which has tremendous value to researchers. Archives can obtain the greatest management benefit for the smallest expenditure of resources and staff time when they apply the principles of provenance and original order to care for large collections of images. Addressing the needs of the collections overall also ensures a useful level of control over many photographs rather than a few. Thus, appraisal decisions represent cumulative evaluations based upon looking at individual photographs but considering items in the context of the overall holdings. Preservation procedures emphasize the care of entire collections by focusing on proper storage, handling, and approaches to establishing preservation priorities.

This book emphasizes the special needs and characteristics of photographic materials. Readers new to archives will, however, find brief explanations of archival methods in the text. The footnotes and bibliography cite sources of information for learning more about general processes in archives. To help experienced archivists whose work with photographs is only one of many responsibilities, each chapter includes ideas about what to do when resources are limited. For archivists who expect to deal with photographs routinely, who need to prepare for a special project devoted to photographs, or who are already immersed in photographic collections full time, each chapter also provides systematic, detailed guidance for undertaking specific procedures and resolving complex issues.

By encouraging best practices for managing photographs, the manual provides attainable goals with the realization that repositories cannot necessarily achieve ideal circumstances immediately. The manual thus offers guidance in setting priorities, weighing risks, and making sound decisions based on the character, research potential, condition, and scope of the photographic materials. Institutional goals and priorities that affect the manner in which photographs are stored, used, and handled must be evaluated. With all of these factors in mind, it is possible to make reasonable and balanced—if sometimes difficult—decisions regarding the management of photographs.



*Photographs: Archival Care and Management* begins with an overview of photographs from historical, aesthetic, and sociological perspectives. Since some technical knowledge of photographic materials is required to identify, store, date, and use images effectively, a brief technical history of photography appears in the second chapter, along with aids for recognizing the major photographic processes. The third chapter introduces techniques for reading and researching photographs, with practice exercises and citations to numerous reference tools.

Building upon this broad foundation, succeeding chapters explain the procedures and issues involved in managing photographs according to the sequence in which most of the work occurs: appraisal and acquisition; accessioning and arrangement; description and cataloging; preservation; reference services and the research room; legal and ethical issues of ownership, access, and usage; copying and duplication; digitizing; and outreach with public programs, public relations, and fund-raising. The recent arrival in archives of “born-digital” photographs (photos originally created in electronic formats using digital cameras) is generally addressed through text boxes that highlight the rapidly evolving technology of this relatively new format. The appendices cover supplies, workstations, funding sources, general help sources, and learning resources. A glossary of technical photographic terms and a bibliography of core readings complete the manual.

Many examples and footnote references point to resources available on the World Wide Web. Archives increasingly post their access tools, general policies, and photographs through the Internet. Consulting websites is necessary for understanding the current role of images in archives. Some resources are in fact now only available through the web. For the purposes of this manual, the value of the web-based resources outweighed concerns over the frequency with which websites change addresses or disappear altogether. Every effort was made to cite the names of the host sites as well as document titles to help the reader locate sources when addresses change.<sup>3</sup>

Although archives, historical societies, libraries, museums, and other organizations that manage collections containing photographs increasingly follow similar standards and practices, each community’s vocabulary can differ in unintentionally confusing ways. *Photographs: Archival Care and Management* uses the following words in their most general, inclusive sense, rather than repeatedly providing the distinctive terms for each community.

- *Archives, archival repository, and repository* refer to any organization or department that has responsibility for photographs of enduring value. This includes corporate, governmental, museum, religious, and university archives as well as special collections in historical societies, libraries, research institutes, and other cultural heritage organizations.
- *Archivist and staff member* refer to any person who works with photographs in an archival setting, including paid employees, interns, and volunteers. The actual job titles may be archivist, conservator, curator, librarian, specialist, or technician.
- *Collection* refers to any grouping of photographs including formal record groups, series, family papers, corporate records, and thematically assembled collections—sometimes called artificial collections.



- *Description* refers to any activities or access tools that provide systematic information about photographs, including catalogs, finding aids, authority files, and other metadata.

Formal definitions of archival terms appear in text boxes throughout the manual. The definitions come from *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, compiled by Richard Pearce-Moses, published by the Society of American Archivists in 2005. The text boxes refer to this source as the “SAA Glossary (revised).”

This manual replaces the *Administration of Photographic Collections* written by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, Gerald J. Munoff, and Margery S. Long and published by the Society of American Archivists as part of its *Basic Manual Series* in 1984. Despite the passage of time, the texts of the first two chapters, which introduce the history and technology of photography, still contain useful information. Those chapters were updated with a light touch while respecting the work of the original authors. The original author of the preservation and copying chapters incorporated substantial new information on those topics. New authors wrote afresh for the appraisal, arrangement, description, and legal chapters, because those areas have changed so extensively in the last twenty years. Entirely new chapters, written by new authors, discuss digitizing photographs, reading and researching photographs, reference services, and outreach.

## Introduction Notes

- 1 Much of the information, particularly in the digital imaging, legal, and preservation chapters, is also applicable to the needs of professional photographers and private collectors.
- 2 Institutional archives concentrate on the photographic records of their parent institutions to document functions, operations, structures, and general history. Examples include corporate, government, religious, and university archives. Collecting (or thematic) archives and special collections in libraries acquire personal and family papers; photographs gathered to document particular subjects, creators, or formats; and works by individual photographers and agencies in addition to the records of institutions that lack their own archives.
- 3 The website addresses were last verified in May 2006. As the addresses change in the future, using a search engine such as Google could help track down the cited resource by its title or creator.



## PHOTOGRAPHS IN ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS

*Margery S. Long and Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler*

### Introduction

Humankind's desire to record information in concrete form—whether to create and maintain an orderly society or to exercise self-expression—dates back thousands of years. Before writing, oral traditions that relied on speech, song, and dance were used to retain the memory of a culture.<sup>1</sup> From the drawings in the caves at Lascaux, France, executed almost twenty-two thousand years ago, to the introduction of writing almost five thousand years ago, information has been shared via evolving systems of pictures and symbols. Written archives date back to the ancient world. The photographic record, by comparison, is very young. It began in France in 1826, when Nicéphore Niepce placed a camera loaded with a light-sensitized pewter plate in an attic window. After being exposed to the sun for eight hours, the plate contained the image of his courtyard. Niepce called it a heliograph, using the Greek words for sun and writing.<sup>2</sup>

In the years since Niepce's invention, photography has become a vital, familiar part of life and a universal form of communication. Journalists use photographs to inform and entertain their readers. Meteorologists use satellite photographs to plot and predict the weather. Urban planners, oceanographers, environmentalists, and developers of natural resources consult aerial photographs when making decisions on projects. Physicians depend on the X-ray and photomicrography in research and diagnosis. Television newscasters inform their audiences of world events through photographic images. Photography helps people to understand their world and affects almost every aspect of their lives. The widespread use of con-

temporary photography is accompanied by an interest and reliance on the historical photographic record that has accumulated in archives, historical agencies, museums, private collections, and other organizations since the first photograph was captured. Virtually all aspects of human inquiry build on the past to help evaluate and understand the present, and photographs provide a unique visual link with and a record of the past.

### The Photographic Record

Photographs have not always been regarded as important historical sources. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, in her 1857 essay "Photography," admonished the art world to cease thinking of photography as the usurper of artists and realize its own importance. "Photography's . . . business is to give evidence of facts, as minutely and impartially as only an unreasoning machine can give. Photography . . . is sworn witness to everything presented to her view . . . facts which are neither the province of art nor of description, but of that new form of communication between man and man. . . ."<sup>3</sup>

Oliver Wendell Holmes, an ardent amateur photographer, was so impressed with photography that he called it "the mirror with a memory." In 1859, he wrote that there would "soon be such an enormous collection of forms that they will have to be classified and arranged in vast libraries, as books are now . . . We do now distinctly propose the creation of a comprehensive and systematic stereographic library, where all men can find the special forms they particularly desire to see as artists, or as scholars, or as mechanics, or in any other capacity."<sup>4</sup> In 1888, George E. Francis addressed the American Antiquarian Society with a request that it begin a "systematic and comprehensive photographic record of our country and our time."<sup>5</sup> For the most part, these pleas for a photographic library went unheeded.

Note: Much of this chapter is reprinted from *Administration of Photographic Collections*, published by SAA in 1984, with new information on selected topics, updated footnotes, and many new illustrations. The section on "Research Uses of the Photographic Record" originally in this chapter was replaced by chapter 9, Reference Services and the Research Room.



Eventually librarians did form picture files of engravings, lithographs, and clippings from magazines and newspapers, as well as of photographs, as a reference service for their patrons. They arranged the pictures in the same subject classifications as books and other published materials. The subject classifications chosen were determined by the librarian's knowledge and interpretation of the meaning of the pictures and any identifying information that accompanied them. The terms used for the subject files were taken from standard library classification systems and subject heading lists or from locally devised schemes.<sup>6</sup>

Archivists and historians did not always recognize photographs as primary source materials. In the formative years of archives, only written records were regarded as archival and deserving of preservation. Pictorial materials, if they were retained at all, often were removed from the collections of records and manuscripts and assembled in general picture files; the principle of provenance was seldom applied to them. Some archivists designated photographs "miscellaneous ephemera" or "memorabilia" and relegated them to the last boxes in manuscript and archival collections. Many photographs were not even noted in finding aids, and were left in their original location, intermingled with manuscripts, documents, and correspondence. Since photographs often had no identifying information written on them, such undisturbed positions in archival collections were fortunate. Often the only clue to identification for some photographs is their location in files, reports, or diaries, or their proximity to a letter describing the events or naming the people shown in the photographs. To this day, many archivists would argue that leaving photos in their original location is a good thing, adding value and context to the photographs as well as to the associated textual files.

The photographic record steadily accumulated in size and content as archives and historical agencies acquired collections of archival materials. Today the archival collections of photographs are as diverse in subject and size as the institutions that house them. A historical society, large or small, usually collects photographs that emphasize the history and culture of a specific geographic or political region. The archival collection of a religious group or denomination often includes a visual history. Business archives document the history of commerce or industry and their products. Institutional archives, such as those of colleges, universities, or social agencies, also build visual histories of their parent institutions and often develop a topical collection as well. These topical collections

document a wide range of subjects, such as women, social welfare, immigrants, labor, railroads, mining, ethnic groups, performing arts, literature, and photography itself. Government archives contain photographs from the agencies and departments within the jurisdiction of the local, state, or federal government they represent.

### **Photographs from Historical, Aesthetic, and Sociological Perspectives**

Long before Niepce made his discovery in France, many scientists and artists in other countries had attempted to capture the elusive image of reality. Not until 1839, when Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, who had formed a partnership with Niepce, revealed his process, had a practical method been achieved to create a sharp, clear, permanent image. It did not take Americans long to learn this new technology. By 1845, every good-sized town and city in the United States had a daguerreotype studio and traveling photographers hauled their cameras on wagons through the countryside.

Photography had a profound influence on American society and served as a direct aid to cultural nationalism. Americans were trying to free themselves from ties to England and Europe and develop customs, traditions, and a culture that would unite the expanding country. To develop this nationalism, the public needed accurate visual information about the landscape, scenes of life in urban and rural society, and pictures of great men and women of the age. Photography provided such clear images of American life that the viewer had a feeling of actually experiencing the scenes and events. Photography allowed provincial Americans to see people and places that they would never encounter in their ordinary lives, and it helped them adjust to the transition from an insulated agrarian society to the more integrated society of the industrial revolution. Photography helped to educate and encourage artistic taste in the newly forming middle class of craftsmen and tradespeople, who had money to spend and a desire to imitate the social graces and tastes of the moneyed and landed classes. Members of the middle class wanted to immortalize themselves in portraits as the upper classes did with paintings: the middle-class portrait was the photograph.

A visit to the portrait photographer's studio was an occasion (see fig. 1.1). People dressed in their best and most stylish clothes for the sitting. The studio reinforced the aura of special occasion with an atmosphere of grandeur. Because of the need for large sky-



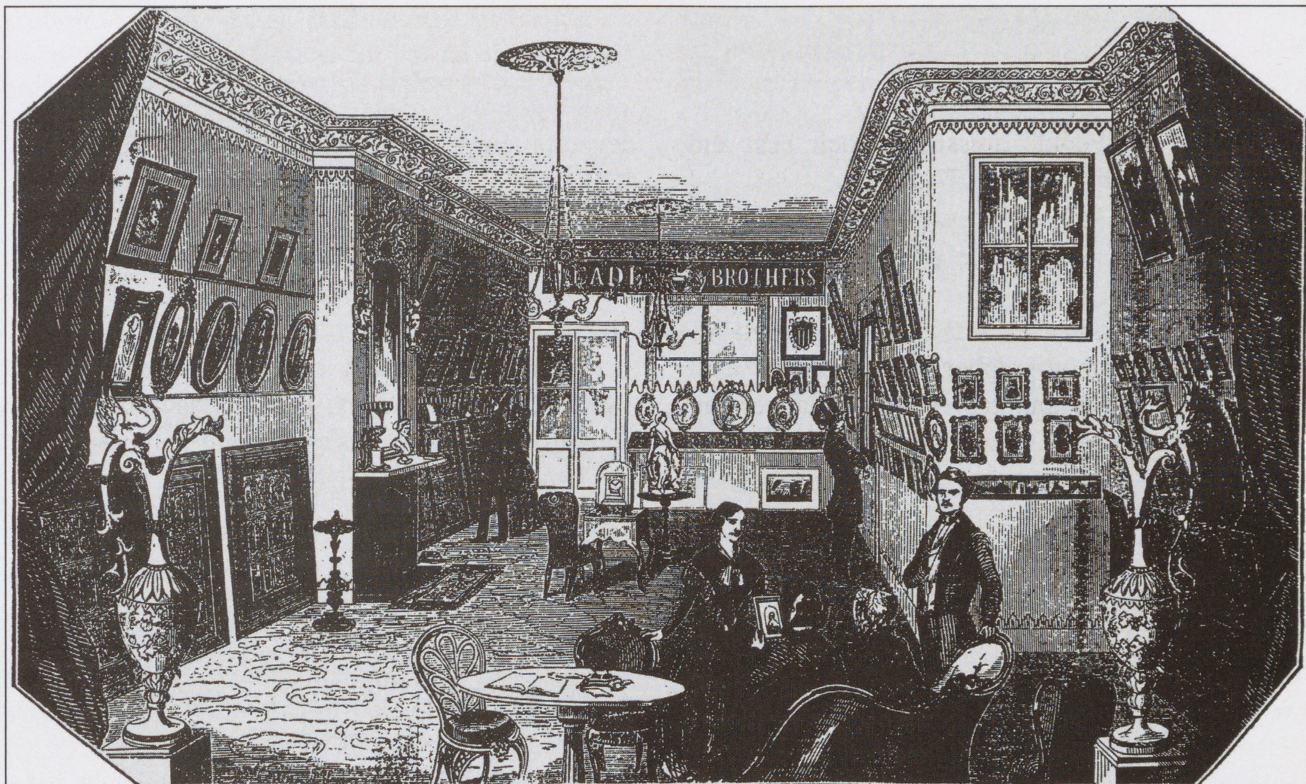


Fig. 1.1. "Interior view of Meade Brothers' Daguerreotype Gallery, Broadway, New York." The reception area of a typical daguerreotypist's studio was elaborately furnished and displayed samples of the photographer's work for sale. *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, February 1853, Vol. IV, No. 6.

lights to provide strong natural light, the studio was usually on the top floor of a building. The reception area was as large and elaborately furnished as the photographer could afford. Displayed on the ornate walls and tables was a daguerrean gallery of the photographer's artistry for sale: portraits of prominent people and scenic views of local and faraway places, which clients surveyed while they waited their turn to be photographed in the "operating room" at the rear of the studio. After the sitting, the daguerreotype was developed and placed in a decorative case.

In the 1850s photography grew rapidly as a result of refinements of the known processes and the development of new ones. The collodion process introduced two new portrait forms, the ambrotype and the tintype. Because they were cheaper than the daguerreotype, they brought photography into the lives of even more Americans. The most important use of the collodion process became the wet plate negative, which, for the first time, made possible duplicate paper copies of a photograph. The development of the albumen process for paper prints in 1850 eventually made the older process obsolete. Albumen paper prints were mounted on cards of various sizes, including *cartes de visite* (a French term meaning "visiting

cards"), cabinet cards, and stereographs, and they were very inexpensive.<sup>7</sup>

Personal photograph collections were common in the 1860s. On parlor tables, families had collections of cased photographs and albums containing tintypes, cartes de visite, and cabinet cards depicting family members, landscapes, travel and architectural views, and portraits of famous statesmen, military leaders, and celebrities in literature, music, and the theater (see fig. 1.2). Collections of stereographs reproduced many of the same images, as well as views of the wonders of the world, scenes illustrating news events, Civil War views, and scenes of family life and humor, and they were standard parlor entertainment for family and friends. Many of these family collections are now in archival repositories, preserving a rich social and cultural record of an era.

Lantern slides, positive transparent images on glass, were another form of photograph developed in the nineteenth century to entertain and educate. These glass slides were usually presented by traveling lecturer-projectionists in narrated "magic lantern" shows in meeting halls in towns and cities throughout the country. Sets of lantern slides, in original slotted wooden cases, along with their scripts and advertisements for





Fig. 1.2. Collections of photographs were enjoyed by families in the 1860s whose parlor tables held albums containing cabinet cards, cartes de visites, and tintypes as well as collections of stereographs to view in hand-held stereoscopes. Scrapbooks containing personal snapshots appeared later. *Objects courtesy of Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler.*

the shows, offer documentation for the study of nineteenth-century social history. As artifacts, these materials are also of interest to students of photographic history and material culture.

### *Aesthetics*

The fact that most early daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, and card photographs are portraits reflects the high demand for personal likenesses and the relative immobility of the picture taking process. Exposures were long and subjects had to remain perfectly still. Thus, outdoor scenes, landscapes, and street scenes generally appeared deserted, since people present when the exposure began either walked out of the scene and did not register in the image at all or became a blur before the exposure was completed. As technology improved and exposure times shortened, photographers learned that in taking long shots looking down streets, people and vehicles moving toward or away from the camera registered less of a blur than traffic that crossed before the camera lens. Cameras were mounted on elaborate stands to keep them steady during long exposures. Until magnesium flash lighting was developed in 1878, not enough light was available in the interior of homes, buildings, or factories to take photographs indoors, except in photographic studios with skylights.

Composition, lighting, and the conventions of posing not dictated by technical limitations were borrowed directly from portrait painting. The subjects of nineteenth-century photographs are shown in serious,

formal poses, sometimes with the chin resting on a hand to help steady the head during the long exposures. A cast-iron stand with a headrest was a common piece of studio equipment (see fig. 1.3). Open smiles were difficult to maintain during long exposures. Also, since teeth were not as well cared for as they are today, the sitter did not want to reveal them to the camera; smiling poses are a twentieth-century convention.

Women are shown wearing their very best—dresses of the latest fashion, fancy bonnets or precisely coiled or curled hair, and jewelry. If they did not own any jewelry, the photographer could paint on touches of gold in the finished photograph (see fig. 1.4). Men were almost always attired in their best suits, rarely in the garb of their profession or trade (see fig. 1.5). Cartes de visite and cabinet card photographs of the 1860s and later reflect the Victorian era's elaborate decorative settings. Painted studio backgrounds are seen, sometimes with architectural details and furniture props for the sitter. Women are often shown at full length to show a current fashion (see fig. 1.6). During the Civil War, officers posed in an affected military stance, many with the right hand placed inside the coat in a pose often seen in portraits of Napoleon. The subjects were photographed in the way they wanted to be seen, and their photographs reveal many of the fashionable affectations of the times (see fig. 1.7).

The styles of recognized, successful photographers were imitated by local practitioners who wanted to produce salable photographs. Photographic styles swept across the country from east to west and filtered down from city to small town. Changes in



Fig. 1.3. A.H. Wheeler, "The Photographer," Berlin, Wis., 1893. A cast iron stand with an adjustable clamp to hold the subject's head steady during long exposure times was frequently used in taking portrait photographs. The camera was also on an adjustable stand. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*





Fig. 1.4. Unidentified photographer. Daguerreotype, family portrait. The long exposure time required for daguerreotypes often resulted in stiff, rigid poses of the subjects who dressed in their best clothing. The jewelry—either real or creatively applied—on the woman and child in this portrait is highlighted in gold. *Courtesy of Thomas Featherstone.*

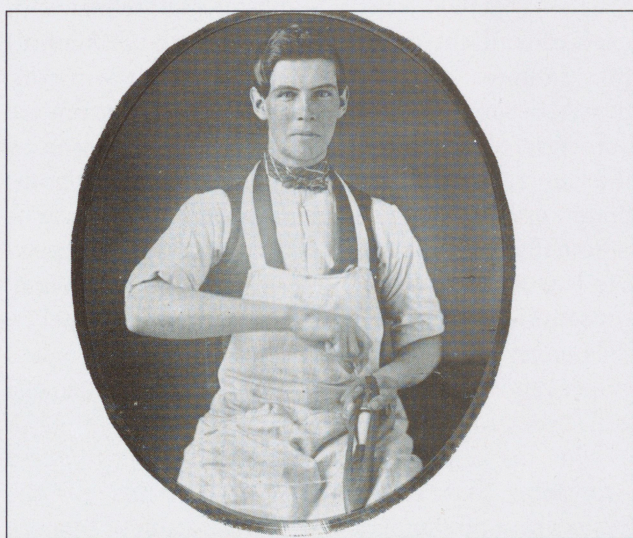


Fig. 1.5. Unidentified photographer. Daguerreotype, “Young weaver holding a shuttle, ca. 1853.” Unlike photographs in which the subjects posed in their best clothing, this image is representative of occupational portraits in which workers were professionally posed with the tools of their trade. This portrait of the mill worker was likely taken in the photographer’s studio. (1996.1) *Courtesy of the Osborne Library, American Textile History Museum.*

portrait photography spread rapidly because this was the most lucrative part of the business. Full-length views gave way to close-ups, which made the subject more recognizable and thus pleased the sitter. Artful



Fig. 1.6. Painted studio backgrounds and props created a variety of aesthetic backdrops for the sitters. Note the sample photographs that displayed the work of the studio. *Courtesy of Thomas Featherstone.*

poses, with the subjects in natural positions and enhanced with props of flowers or books, replaced the stilted poses that resulted when the subject sat or stood rigid and stared straight into the camera. Innovative camera placements presented new perspectives on familiar landscape and architectural scenes. A favorite scene, Niagara Falls, was photographed from countless viewpoints and camera angles to present a fresh approach to a scenic wonder that had been photographed repeatedly from the beginning of the daguerrean era. The subjects of scenic views, as well as new camera angles, were copied from well-known photographers—subjects such as the homes of the wealthy, busy thoroughfares, public buildings, and vistas in public parks. There was no market for photographs that recorded the life of the ordinary, lower classes. Even the photographs taken by amateurs reflect the more refined tastes, styles, and customs of the period. Amateurs learned technique from the study and imitation of the work of successful professional photographers.<sup>8</sup>