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Framing Freedom: The Harriet Hayden Albums

Curated by: Makeda Best, Oakland Museum of California, and Virginia Reynolds Badgett, Boston Athenæum

Exhibition Schedule: Boston Athenæum, March 18–June 22, 2024

Exhibition catalogue: John Buchtel and Makeda Best, *Framing Freedom: The Harriet Hayden Albums*, exh. cat. Boston: Boston Athenæum, 2024. 87 pp.; 77 color illus. Softcover: \$25.00 (ISBN: 9798218373849)

Reviewed by: Anne Strachan Cross



Fig. 1. Entrance to the exhibition *Framing Freedom: The Harriet Hayden Albums*. Boston Athenæum. Photo by author

Inspired by two carte de visite albums that once belonged to the African American activist Harriet Bell Hayden (1816–1893), *Framing Freedom: The Harriet Hayden Albums* used the titular objects to explore the world of nineteenth-century activism, the role of women in the fight for Black freedom and equality, and the political and social networks of Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood, where the Athenæum sits. Both albums were given to Hayden by other members of Boston's interracial abolitionist community and feature photographs of local politicians, authors, activists, friends, and family members. Intended for intimate, domestic display in the home, the albums testify to the Hayden family's participation and standing in a group with shared values and political ideals. Cocurated by Makeda Best, currently Deputy Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Oakland Museum of California and former curator of photography at the Harvard Art Museums, and Virginia Reynolds Badgett, former Assistant Curator at the Boston Athenæum, *Framing Freedom* presented the albums to a wider public for the first

time and positioned the objects as prompts to tell a broader story about Boston's historic free Black community and the fight for Black civil rights in the nineteenth-century. The exhibition also used the albums' display as an opportunity to highlight Hayden's own political values and activism, which have been overshadowed by the better-known activities of her husband, Lewis Hayden (c. 1811–1889); this interventionist approach is asserted in the exhibition's introductory wall text.

Originally from Kentucky, Harriet Hayden self-emancipated in 1844, escaping enslavement by fleeing to the North along with Lewis and her son, Joseph. Together they settled in Beacon Hill, where Lewis operated a profitable clothing store and the family participated in antislavery activism, including sheltering freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad and hosting the militant abolitionist John Brown prior to his raid on Harper's Ferry.¹ In addition to being a prominent merchant, Lewis Hayden was a leading member of the American Anti-Slavery Society and one of the first Black legislators to serve in the lower house of the Massachusetts General Court.² As a symbol of friendship and the family's status within the abolitionist community, Harriet was gifted the two *carte de visite* albums in the early 1860s by Robert Morris, one of the first Black lawyers in the United States, and Dr. Samuel Birmingham, who was also active in antislavery work. The albums were acquired by the Boston Athenæum in 2018.³

Displayed in the Athenæum's Norma Jean Calderwood Gallery, which opened in 2023 as part of a large expansion into an adjacent building, *Framing Freedom* was presented in one room with barely any separate interior walls to guide viewers within the space, save for those at the entrance to the exhibition. The display began with an introductory panel that outlined the stakes of the exhibition; nearby were two *cartes de visite* of Harriet and Lewis (fig. 1). Notably, there are only two known, extant photographs of Harriet, and none in the albums around which the exhibition was organized.⁴ Instead, this *carte de visite* of Harriet was borrowed from a private collector; the other, lent by the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC, appeared later in the exhibition. Although diminutive in size—the standard size of *cartes de visite* is 4 by 2 1/2 inches—the two portraits nonetheless provided an important anchor, rooting the discursive materials that followed in the lives and persons of these two figures. After the introduction, visitors encountered an adjacent wall featuring two images based on period maps that helped to situate viewers geographically, both within Beacon Hill and along the various routes of the Underground Railroad. A small text in the corner of the room also warned viewers of the challenging content of the exhibition, including discussions and historical objects related to slavery, racism, and violence, as well as the inclusion of historical racial language and imagery.



Fig. 2. View of the main gallery of *Framing Freedom: The Harriet Hayden Albums*. On the right is the section "United & Persevering Resistance." Boston Athenæum. Photo by author

The next, and larger, gallery consisted of a series of vitrines lining the walls of the room, with the albums themselves occupying a case in the center (fig. 2). The presentation

offered sections on nineteenth-century activism in Boston; fashion and freedom; the history of the Haydens' home as a "citadel of liberty"; the use of photographs as political tools, particularly within abolitionist networks; and the domestic parlor as a site for political and reformist activity.

The first section comprised a selection of objects related to nineteenth-century antislavery activism in Boston, particularly Black Bostonians' resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the recruitment of the 54th Massachusetts infantry, the first regiment of free African Americans in the Union Army. Included in this section were several objects related to the 1854 trial of freedom seeker Anthony Burns. Born enslaved in Virginia, Burns self-emancipated, sought refuge in Boston, and even worked at Lewis Hayden's store before he was recaptured under the Fugitive Slave Act. The exhibition featured several publications and illustrations pertaining to Burns's trial, as well as the handcuffs he wore as he was marched down to Boston's Long Wharf to be returned to slavery.⁵ These materials were displayed alongside other nineteenth-century objects of political activism in Boston, including broadsides opposing the Fugitive Slave Act, engraved portraits of local abolitionists, a Currier & Ives print of the 54th Massachusetts in battle, and various antislavery publications that circulated in the city. This section provided a firm context for the Haydens' politics, especially that of Lewis Hayden; both the wall panel and objects related mostly to Lewis's political activities and less directly to Harriet.



Fig. 3. View of "Parlors & Friendships" section of *Framing Freedom: The Harriet Hayden Albums*. Boston Athenæum. Photo by the author

Across the main gallery was a selection of objects that attested to the nineteenth-century domestic parlor as an important space of political activity (fig. 3). A wall label explained that, according to period conventions, the home was the realm of Harriet Hayden's activism, "as opposed to the public sphere that Lewis Hayden sought to shape." The Haydens most likely displayed their *carte de visite* albums in the parlor, where they would be shown to their reform-minded friends, family members, and visitors, accompanied by verbal storytelling. This section of the exhibition was dedicated not only to *cartes de visite* that were employed as political and social tools by other prominent African American figures, including Edmonia Lewis, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass, but also household goods that were activated by their association with various reform movements.

This latter category included a teapot, cup, and silk purse printed with abolitionist imagery, as well as a bonnet worn by a resident of the Home for Aged Colored Women, an organization founded in 1864 to support elderly Black women in Boston. A stunning landscape painting by the African American artist Edward Mitchell Bannister, who was a member of Boston's Black activist community and the Haydens' Beacon Hill neighbor, was also on display in this section. A critical loan from the Worcester Art Museum, the Bannister painting worked to place photography, as a medium, within the broader visual and material culture of abolition in Boston.

In the center of the main gallery were the two featured albums (fig. 4). The objects were placed back to back, facing opposite directions (fig. 5). In the case were also several mounted cartes de visite that had been removed from the albums. Floating inside double-glass frames, the display of these selected cartes de visite allowed visitors to glimpse both the fronts and backs of the objects, including several elaborately printed photographers' backmarks. The rest of the photographs excised from the albums were presented in cases and in frames on the back wall of the main gallery. Large text panels mounted alongside this group highlighted the Haydens' network, including multiple generations of activist families whose portraits are included in the albums, the history and popularity of cartes de visite in the nineteenth century, and the role of fashion as an expression of Black freedom and agency, particularly within photography.



Figs. 4, 5. Left: The display of the Harriet Hayden albums with the cartes de visite removed; right: The display of the Harriet Hayden albums, in *Framing Freedom: The Harriet Hayden Albums*. Boston Athenæum. Photos by author

It is a unique task to fashion an exhibition from a set of objects as small and intimate as cartes de visite, which were meant to be held in the hand. Inexpensive to produce, these photographs were generated in large numbers, exchanged widely, and often included inside letters. Their portability and ubiquity allowed for not only the maintenance of friendships and family ties during the nineteenth century but also the exchange of information, including the formation of celebrity and propaganda. Once collected, the photographs would then be placed inside albums, where they would be seen alongside other images of friends and family members, as well as pictures of famous authors, politicians, military heroes, and period celebrities like Tom Thumb and Jenny Lind. The scholars Andrea Volpe and Elizabeth Siegel describe how the democratic nature of cartes de visite—whose affordability made portraiture available to a wide variety of subjects—and their inclusion inside albums created imagined communities that blurred the lines

between the public and private realms.⁶ In her study of Civil War photo albums, Volpe also describes how cartes de visite helped secure investment in the Union's claim to nationhood by combining emotional connection with national affiliation through the collapsing of distance between national leaders and ordinary Americans.⁷ In the case of the Hayden albums, the inclusion of photographs of friends and close intimates alongside more publicly known figures, such as the novelist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the singer and activist Louise De Mortie, materializes not only the investment of the Haydens' community in the cause of Black freedom and equality but also the increased visibility and public character of Black activism in the 1860s, as it expanded beyond parlors to the nation's battlefields.

In temporarily dismantling the albums, the curators expanded the material and spatial footprint of these otherwise intimate and contained objects, allowing the Haydens' political and social networks and the personalities of the sitters to take up greater space. However, there was something lost in this display as well, as it omitted information regarding the order in which the photographs appeared within the albums and the inscriptions that may have accompanied them.⁸ Although it is understandable that the curators could not have visitors flipping through the fragile albums themselves, the exhibition would have benefited from a digital scan or other didactic materials that recreated the experience of the albums and enhanced understanding of the ways in which the albums visually structured social and political relations among the portraits.⁹ One wonders how the albums' compilers may have grouped certain subjects together as a sign of sitters' real-life intimacy. A catalogue essay by Best works to recover the albums' objecthood by emphasizing their material and haptic qualities; Best describes how the "thick and cardboard-like pages of the albums" were designed both to hold the small, mounted cartes de visite and to "withstand frequent interaction."¹⁰ Best also notes that in some cases portraits were tucked behind others in the albums, a detail that is not included in the exhibition design or label text.¹¹ Although the exhibition emphasizes the albums as individualized, networked objects, the limitations of their display necessarily complicate an articulation of these ideas.

Given the complexity of the photo album, the exhibition would have also been enriched by curatorial self-reflection. For example, what were the intellectual and practical challenges of working with these objects? What were the benefits and costs of physically disassembling an object in order to reconstruct a story of political and social networks? What role did language play in framing these untold histories of Black Americans? Since many of the portraits are labeled "identity unconfirmed," how did the curators decide on this and other terms?¹² As an exhibition that was likely geared toward an undergraduate-level audience or above (during my visit there, a college class was receiving a tour), *Framing Freedom* could have leveraged didactic texts to give audiences insight into these museological challenges, further activating the albums as material and networked objects.¹³

In addition to the identities of many of the sitters, several questions remain about the Harriet Hayden albums, including who compiled them. Although the curators assert that the albums are the product of Hayden's own vision and authorship, Best also describes her as "expanding upon the images placed in the albums by Morris and Birmingham."¹⁴ The exhibition could have given more ideological space to these questions that persist about the albums in order to prompt viewers to contemplate both the significance of this visual

archive and the many aspects of enslavement and Black liberation that remain not only lost to history but unfixed and open to possibility. Such uncertainty and open-endedness may still seem uncomfortable within an institutional space, but it is critical to introducing audiences to current historical methods, particularly around slavery and abolition in the United States. In the end, *Framing Freedom* provides a complex story about the Haydens' abolitionist work and the activist networks that congregated near the Boston Athenæum, as well as about the promises, challenges, and importance of presenting quotidian objects of Black American history.

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Notes

¹ On the Haydens' sheltering of freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad, see Makeda Best, "Harriet Hayden's Life, Albums, and Abolitionist Family," in John Buchtel and Makeda Best, *Framing Freedom: The Harriet Hayden Albums* (Boston: Boston Athenæum, 2024), 22. On their hosting of John Brown, see John Buchtel, "Introduction: Harriet Hayden in the Archives," in Buchtel and Best, *Framing Freedom*, 12.

² Best, "Harriet Hayden's Life, Albums, and Abolitionist Family," 29.

³ Best, "Harriet Hayden's Life, Albums, and Abolitionist Family," 25; and Leah Rosovsky, foreword to Buchtel and Best, *Framing Freedom*, 7.

⁴ Rosovsky, foreword to Buchtel and Best, *Framing Freedom*, 8.

⁵ Burns's freedom was eventually purchased by the Reverend Leonard Grimes of Boston's Twelfth Street Baptist Church. This information appears on the object label that accompanies the display of the iron handcuffs worn by Burns as he was marched down State Street to Boston's Long Wharf to be returned to slavery. These handcuffs were on loan to the exhibition from Revolutionary Spaces in Boston.

⁶ On the collapsing of the public and private spheres in carte de visite albums, see Elizabeth Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photographic Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); and Andrea L. Volpe, "Collecting the Nation: Visions of Nationalism in Two Civil War-Era Photographs Albums," in *Acts of Possession: Collecting in America*, ed. Leah Dilworth (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 89–111.

⁷ Volpe, "Collecting the Nation," 93.

⁸ Best notes that a later owner, possibly William Monroe Trotter, annotated the albums with the names of sitters, including that of "Papa [Lewis] Hayden," whose photograph is now missing from the album ("Harriet Hayden's Life, Albums, and Abolitionist Family," 25).

⁹ Notably, the images in the exhibition catalogue are also cropped to the photographs' edges, thus omitting the original format and unique materiality of the albums' pages.

¹⁰ Best, "Harriet Hayden's Life, Albums, and Abolitionist Family," 25.

¹¹ Best, "Harriet Hayden's Life, Albums, and Abolitionist Family," 26. For comparison, see how the Library Company of Philadelphia has digitized the Stevens-Codgell/ Sanders-Venning family album, whose photographs represent multiple generations of a middle-class African American family in Philadelphia. In the case of one of the family's albums, the Library Company elected to digitize the images in situ, showing multiple images overlapping each other: <https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/object/digitool%3A130521#page/1/mode/1up>.

¹² As I previously observed of the Hayden albums, the sitters' identities were likely known to the album's organizers and/or beholders, and thus their naming was not required to appreciate their portraits. Anne

Strachan Cross, "Questions of Recovery in Photographic History," in *Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in Early American Vernacular Art*, ed. Emelie Gevalt, R. L. Watson, and Sadé Ayorinde (New York: American Folk Art Museum, 2023), 230–37.

¹³ The tone and language of many of the exhibition labels suggested an educated audience, specifically one with prior knowledge of the advanced themes related to the exhibition. For example, the label adjacent to the Harriet Hayden albums described carte de visite albums as having "played a distinct role in the Black community as they gave shape to and imagined both the present and the future," without defining how they engage with the concept of Black futurity.

¹⁴ Best, "Harriet Hayden's Life, Albums, and Abolitionist Family," 34.