

An Image Is a Mystery for Photo Detectives

Written by Randy Kennedy



The phone call was routine, the kind often made before big auctions. Sotheby's was preparing to sell a striking rust-brown image of a leaf on paper, long thought to have been made by William Henry Fox Talbot, one of the inventors of photography. So the auction house contacted a Baltimore historian considered to be the world's leading Talbot expert and asked if he could grace the sale's catalog with any interesting scholarly details about the print — known as a photogenic drawing, a crude precursor to the photograph.

"I got back to them and said, 'Well, the first thing I would say is that this was not made by Talbot,' " the historian, Larry J. Schaaf, recalled in a recent interview.

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“That was not what they were expecting to hear, to say the least.”

In the weeks since Dr. Schaaf’s surprising pronouncement was made public, “The Leaf”, originally thought to have been made around 1839 or later, has become the talk of the photo-historical world. The speculation about its origins became so intense that Sotheby’s and the print’s owners decided earlier this month to postpone its auction, so that researchers could begin delving into whether the image may be, in fact, one of the oldest photographic images in existence, dating to the 1790s.

This week the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, which own similar photogenic drawings that once belonged to the same album as “The Leaf”, said that they planned to perform scientific analysis and further research on their images as well.

With these decisions, suddenly, a group of antique images known to the academic and auction worlds at least since 1984 — when Sotheby’s first sold them, fetching only \$776 for the leaf print — have become the subjects of a high-profile detective story that could lead back to the earliest, murky years of the birth of photo technology and that could help to fill in crucial historical blanks.

Dr. Schaaf, who said he was not paid by Sotheby's or by the owner of "The Leaf" print, said that he had been aware of the images — also known as photograms, cameraless prints made by placing objects on photosensitive paper exposed to light — for many years. He had seen five of the six prints that were once compiled in an album by Henry Bright, a Briton whose family was part of a group of scientists and tinkerers active around Bristol in the late 18th century.

But as with so many other early photographic images, Dr. Schaaf said, there was so little information about these that he never gave much thought to their origins. "In most cases we just don't have any place even to get started", he said.

It was when Sotheby's inquiry reminded him that the images came from the Henry Bright family that he began to think about them again and to connect the dots with research that he had been doing for years into a group of photographic experimenters who had long predated Talbot and Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, the other acknowledged inventor of photography.

Probably in the 1790s, according to accounts written shortly afterward, Thomas Wedgwood, a son of the Wedgwood china family, began experimenting with what he called solar pictures, making images on paper coated with a silver nitrate solution. A friend of his, James Watt, wrote in a 1799 letter that he intended to try similar experiments and in 1802 another friend, Humphry Davy, wrote an account of Wedgwood's experiments in an article for a scientific-society journal, titling it "An Account of a Method of Copying Paintings upon Glass, and of Making Profiles, by the Agency of Light Upon Nitrate of Silver."

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Like the lost plays of Aeschylus that were written about but did not survive themselves, no known examples of the work of Wedgwood and his circle have ever been found. But Dr. Schaaf, in looking deeper into the leaf image, realized that these legendary lost images had something else in common: their creators were all part of the close social circle of the family of Henry Bright.

“The reason that I got so excited about this was that it was the most solid, indicative collection I’ve seen,” he said. “I’m fully prepared for ‘The Leaf’ to have been made by Henry Bright, or by his father, after the 1790s. But I’ve never seen a story that fits together so neatly.”

He added, with the resolve that comes from more than 30 years of research into early photography and Talbot, “Someone could obviously come along and say that these images are all in fact Talbots, but they would be wrong.”

Jill Quasha is the photo dealer and expert who bought “The Leaf” in 1989 as she was building the Quillan Collection, a group of world-renowned photographs that Sotheby’s sold (without the leaf print) for almost \$9 million on April 7. She said that it was still too early to say exactly what type of research would be conducted on the image. Tests could include those to determine the age of the paper and to identify the chemical makeup of any substances on the paper.

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“I think it has to be done quickly and efficiently and with the least amount of damage to the photograph,” said Ms. Quasha, who added that she hoped the research could be completed within six months so that the print could be put up for auction again with a more iron-clad, and perhaps stunning, provenance. (As a Talbot, it was estimated to sell for \$100,000 to \$150,000; if it is determined to be older, it could bring substantially more.)

But Dr. Schaaf cautioned that even when the all scientific evidence is in — along with what might be found by deep sleuthing in the archives of the families of Bright, Wedgwood, Watt and Davy — the best that experts might be able to say about it being among the oldest photographic images is “maybe.”

“Somewhere in the course of the work we might find a smoking gun,” he said. “But then again, we very well might not.”

by *Randy Kennedy*
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