

"The Only News I know / Is Bulletins all Day / From Immortality."

A Likeness of Emily? The Investigation of a Questioned Photograph

By Joe Nickell

Since 1961 a controversy has flared from time to time over the "other" photograph of Emily Dickinson. Whereas history had seemed to bequeath only a single photograph of the poet—a daguerreotype of her at about seventeen years of age¹—a newly discovered portrait was now claimed to depict her at about age twenty-nine. Many were persuaded it was indeed she, and it was even reproduced as a frontispiece to volume two of Richard B. Sewall's *Life of Emily Dickinson*, although the caption left open the question of its authenticity.²

In contrast to the one-of-a-kind, mirror-imaged daguerreotype, the discovered photo was a paper print made from a glass negative and pasted onto a small mount. The size gave such photographs the name *cartes de visite*, but they were used less as visiting cards than as collectibles mounted in special albums.³

On the back of the *carte de visite* in question was written "Emily Dickenson [sic] 1860." It had been purchased by bibliophile Herman Abromson from the 1961 mimeographed catalog of a Greenwich Village bookseller named Samuel Loveman. Unfortunately, Loveman—

who died in 1976—had a dubious reputation. Many scholars and book dealers who had known him called him "a fraud and a

a supply of bookplates from the late Hart Crane (who Loveman claimed had been his homosexual lover) and pasting them



At left, the only acknowledged photograph of Emily Dickinson, taken in Amherst about 1847. At right, a *carte de visite* labeled "Emily Dickenson 1860." But is it of our Emily?

forger" and avowed "his word was not to be trusted."⁴

William Bond, director of the Houghton Library at Harvard, stated: "In addition to perfectly legitimate rare books and manuscripts, some of the things [Loveman sold] were certainly fraudulent. I remember in particular a number of books said to have come from Herman Melville's library with his annotations, in which the annotations were certainly forged."⁵

Charles Hamilton, in his *Great Forgers and Famous Fakes*, says that Loveman "dabbled in forgery," obtaining

in books that Crane would have been likely to own. Hamilton adds that "nearly every catalogue that Loveman issued was filled with fabulous 'bargains'—books signed by Melville, Mark Twain or Hawthorne—a whole galaxy of great authors, all priced at ten to twenty-five dollars each. The signatures were in pencil and were not, of course, genuine; but it was exciting to study his catalogue and pretend that such bargains really existed."⁶

As it happens, the notation on the "Dickenson" *carte de visite* is in pencil; worse, it is in the distinctive, palsied, backhand script of Samuel Loveman.⁷ It was recognized as such by several of Loveman's acquaintances who were queried by mystery writer Jane Langton. She conducted extensive research on the photo—which she generously shared with the present writer—as background for her suspense novel *Emily Dickinson Is Dead*.⁸

Loveman, however, had pretended the signature was genuine. His catalog list-

ing, alternately referring to the picture as a “daguerreotype” and as a “crad [*sic*] de Visite,” describes the notation as if it had been on the carte when Loveman acquired it.⁹ Observing that the last three digits of the 1860 date appear to have been erased from the mimeograph original, Langton wrote: “It looked very fishy. Why did Loveman seem to pretend that someone else had written the inscription on the back? Why had he scrubbed out three digits from the date?” Again she wondered, “Had Loveman changed his mind about the date?”¹⁰

According to some of Loveman’s acquaintances, his only known basis for identifying the portrait as Dickinson’s was that he thought it resembled her and that it “had such a sensitive quality.”¹¹ A bookseller portrayed Loveman as one who eschewed reference books and used his own impressions as the basis for his catalog claims.¹²

Unlike a daguerreotype recently identified as the poet’s mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, which was discovered among Norcross family photos,¹³ the questioned photograph has no provenance whatsoever. Cartes de visite were typically sold in batches of a dozen or more,¹⁴ yet not one copy appeared in the poet’s effects at her death. Neither did family members have a copy, and they had to resort to doctoring copies of the known daguerreotype in an attempt to produce a more suitable, mature likeness for publication purposes.¹⁵

Indeed, in 1862 when Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote to Dickinson asking for a photograph, she replied: “Could you believe me—without? I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur—and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves—Would this do just as well?” She added, “It often alarms Father—He says Death might occur, and he has Molds of all the rest—but has no Mold of me...(L268).

Whether or not Emily’s self-description is compatible with the carte de visite may be debated, as may other details. For example, as Richard Sewall stated in 1973, “So far no technical reasons have been raised against its authenticity—except perhaps the fact that she’s wearing

earrings....‘It doesn’t seem like Emily Dickinson to be wearing earrings,’ say some. But others say, ‘Why shouldn’t she have worn earrings?’”¹⁶ But, unlike the daguerreotype of her mother, which depicts her wearing a distinctive dove-and-flower brooch that was later found among the poet’s effects,¹⁷ the jewelry worn by the person in the carte has no known connection with Emily Dickinson. The matching earrings and brooch are not among the family possessions at the Houghton Library at Harvard.¹⁸

If Emily Dickinson had had a carte de visite picture taken in 1860, it probably would have been done by the local Amherst photographer, J.L. Lovell, who bought out an earlier photographer in 1856.¹⁹ Apparently Lovell was the sole photographer in Amherst at the time. His cartes, however, invariably have his imprint on the verso, whereas the “Emily Dickenson” carte bears no photographer’s identification. Besides, had Lovell taken such a photograph, Mabel Loomis Todd would surely have discovered the fact. She needed such a picture when she prepared Emily’s letters for publication in 1893, and Lovell (who lived to 1903) was a close friend of hers.²⁰

Although the lack of provenance and other historical evidence weigh heavily against the photograph’s authenticity, ultimately the matter must be settled on the basis of the likeness itself. As one writer observed, “There really was a resemblance between the woman in the picture and the 17-year-old Emily Dickinson.” That, however, simply invites the response that of course there is a resemblance or the equation would not have been made. Mere resemblances between people do not constitute proof of identity.

False photographic attributions are rife. As Michael J. Deas states in his scholarly book *The Portraits and Daguerreotypes of Edgar Allan Poe*: “Spurious portraits of historical figures are not uncommon, yet the number of such portraits said to represent Edgar Allan Poe is staggering. Scores of fictitious Poe portraits are scattered in public and private collections throughout the United States; Washington’s National Portrait Gallery alone has in its files references to

at least twenty-five such likenesses, and the number increases almost yearly. Approximately half of these works are posthumously produced, heavily altered derivatives based on established life portraits..., while others are merely paintings or photographs of anonymous subjects erroneously identified as Poe.”²¹

Similarly, early in her research Jane Langton received this cautionary response from John Lancaster, curator of Special Collections at Amherst College Library: “You should know that we receive several inquiries every year asking us to pass judgment on pictures alleged to be of Emily Dickinson....I have never seen one with any sort of useful provenance (including Abromson’s), and visual comparisons are notoriously uncertain.”²² Likewise, William F. Stapp, curator of photography of the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, responded: “It is difficult to reconcile the rather sensuous beauty of the woman in Mr. Abromson’s carte de visite to the young woman depicted in the one authentic daguerreotype of Emily Dickinson. The piece, moreover, not only has no provenance, but it appears to be unique and completely undocumented. I have learned to be very suspicious of pieces like this, which essentially cannot be authenticated, and since it passed through the hands of a questionable dealer, there is an even greater likelihood that it is spurious.”²³

Langton’s research led her to query several doctors who “differed on whether or not these two women are the same person.”²⁴ Also, superimposition of photographic transparencies by Tufts University medical photographer Kay Smathers showed some similarities in features but a marked difference in the breadth of the face.²⁵

In my own investigation, I felt that the previous opinions offered in the case tended to be simply impressionistic responses to the carte portrait or represented well-meaning but inexperienced attempts at facial-feature analysis. Therefore, I resolved to enlist the services of a nationally recognized forensic anthropologist, Emily Craig, who readily agreed to assist in this important historical case.

Ms Craig is on the staff of the Forensic

Anthropology Center at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. A medical illustrator as well as an anthropologist, she was featured on the CBS television series *48 Hours* in a May 13, 1992, program titled "Hard Evidence." There she demonstrated the technique of facial reconstruction on the skull of a murder victim whose body was discovered in an advanced state of decomposition. Most recently, she was on the forensic team that identified charred bodies in the wake of the Branch Davidian sect tragedy near Waco, Texas.

Using photographic slides prepared from the two photographs, Ms. Craig then used an established forensic procedure that involved projecting the "known" image (the daguerreotype) onto a sheet of white paper and tracing the outlines of the features, then using another projector to superimpose the "questioned" image (the carte de visite) onto the first, adjusting the latter to achieve a best fit, and then tracing its features. The projected images and the tracings were then compared and analyzed. The resulting file was designated "case 93-17."

While a few similarities were observed (e.g., the vertical distance between the irises and the root of the nose in the two photos, corresponding to the skull's eye orbits and the anterior nasal spine), there were significant differences. These included a cleft chin in the portrait of Emily Dickinson that is absent from the individual in the carte photograph. This is a genetically determined feature that does not disappear with maturity.²⁶

Other differences were the mid-philtrum distance (between the root of the nose and the upper lip) and the distance between the chin point and (a) the root of the nose, (b) the center of the right iris, and (c) the chin-lip fold. (In the latter case, explains Ms. Craig, "this distance variation can appear to be corrected with head tilt, but then the simultaneous superimposition of the eyes and the anterior nasal spine is eliminated.") In addition, the root of the nose and the corresponding anterior nasal spine fail to lie in the same vertical plane in the two portraits. There are additional differences in the soft-tissue contours, hair lines, and eyebrows, although they "may or may not

be a direct result of anatomical variations in the underlying structure."²⁷

Noting that bones of the face are fully developed between ages fourteen and sixteen, then (given the approximate age of Emily Dickinson when the daguerreotype was made) "there would not be any measurable modification in the bony structure of the face until advanced aging processes were evident." Therefore, the differences in the location of the features between the two photographs "cannot be the result of age changes," Ms. Craig noted, stating in conclusion: "There is the possibility that a skull and face of one individual can fit all the facial features of another individual, and therefore superimposition is considered more of a value in exclusion. In case 93-17, all of the features cannot be simultaneously superimposed; therefore the evidence does NOT corroborate the hypothesis that the photographs are of the same individual."²⁸

The forensic analysis confirms what had been suggested by the historical evidence as well as the fact that the name and date on the photograph were falsified. Apparently Samuel Loveman simply came across the carte de visite and, noting a passing resemblance to Emily Dickinson, decided to take pencil in hand and give the fantasy a semblance of reality. Like the picture itself, however, it was *only* a semblance.

Acknowledgments

In addition to Jane Langton—to whom I am indebted for her painstaking research and her generosity in sharing it—and to others mentioned in the text and notes, I am grateful to Georgiana Strickland for enlisting my services in this fascinating case, and to Emily Craig for her expert help in bringing it to what I believe is a correct conclusion, albeit one that will be disappointing for many Dickinson admirers.

Notes

1. Amherst College Library, reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of Amherst College. Note that the photograph is printed here in reverse position from previous printings. This reversal is based in part on the fact that most daguerreotypes are printed in reverse. An additional factor is the recently discovered daguerreotype of Emily Nor-

cross Dickinson (see Polly Longworth, *The World of Emily Dickinson* [New York: W.W. Norton, 1990], p. 41), apparently taken at the same time and by the same photographer (same pose and props) and wearing a brooch now at Harvard's Houghton Library. Sylvia de Santis, head librarian at the Monson [Mass.] Free Library, which holds the daguerreotype of Mrs. Dickinson, reports in a letter to the author (March 3, 1993) that magnified examination of the brooch shows the daguerreotype to be printed in reverse. It seems likely, then, that the daughter's daguerreotype is also reversed.

2. Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), 2: frontispiece.

3. William C. Darrah, *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth Century Photography* (Gettysburg, Pa.: W.C. Darrah, 1981), 1-4.

4. Quoted in Jane Langton, "Emily Dickinson's Appearance and Likenesses with Special Consideration of the Abromson Photograph" (1984), 1:11. This is one of four manuscript notebooks generously loaned the author by Ms. Langton; another copy is on file at the Jones Library, Amherst, Mass.

5. William Bond, letter to Jane Langton, March 29, 1982, quoted in *ibid.*, 18.

6. Charles Hamilton, *Great Forgers and Famous Fakes* (New York: Crown, 1980), 198-99.

7. The identifications include one by Loveman's former partner, David Mann; see his letter to Jane Langton, n.d., in Langton, "Emily Dickinson's Appearance," 1: 10. See also Dan DeNicola, "Is It Really You, Emily Dickinson?" *Yankee Magazine*, November 1983, 216-19.

8. Jane Langton, *Emily Dickinson Is Dead* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984).

9. The page from Loveman's 1961 catalog containing the entry is reproduced in Langton, "Emily Dickinson's Appearance," 1:82.

10. *Ibid.*, 8.

11. *Ibid.*, 10.

12. *Ibid.*, 14.

13. Sylvia de Santis (Head Librarian, Monson [Mass.] Free Library) to Joe Nickell, March 3, 1993.

14. Darrah, *Cartes de Visite*, 5-6.

15. Millicent Todd Bingham, *Emily Dickinson's Home* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), 519-20.

16. Sewall, quoted in DeNicola, "Is It Really You...?" 124.

ing of Tashjian's fine book along with Brett C. Millier's *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (1993). I do not know if Cornell knew Elizabeth Bishop's poetry. But Bishop knew his work. She attended at least one Cornell exhibit, assembled—late in life—at least one collage of found things in homage to Cornell, and, in *Geography III*, in what might be seen as still another imitation, included

her translation of Octavio Paz's poem on Cornell, "Objetos y apariciones," in a book otherwise made up entirely of her own poetry.

Like Cornell, Bishop admired Dickinson. Given this, one wonders what she would have made of the fact, had she known it, that Cornell was so taken with Patterson's *Riddle*—a book she found not inspiring but "infuriating." While

Bishop balked at the identification of a lesbian lover for Dickinson, Cornell responded to Patterson's "new evaluation," as he put it, by rereading the poetry—to his profit, and ours.

George Monteiro is professor of English and Portuguese at Brown University. His books include Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance.

Likeness of Emily? continued from page 3

17. Longworth, *The World of Emily Dickinson*, 41, 129.

18. W.H. Bond to Jane Langton, in Langton, "Emily Dickinson's Appearance," 2:10.

19. Daniel Lombardo, *Tales of Amherst* (Amherst, Mass.: Jones Library, 1986), 84.

20. Langton, "Emily Dickinson's Appearance," 1:20-22.

21. Michael J. Deas, *The Portraits and Daguerreotypes of Edgar Allan Poe* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1988), 7.

22. John Lancaster to Jane Langton, Dec. 15, 1981, in Langton, "Emily Dickinson's Appearance," 2:6.

23. William F. Stapp to Jane Langton, May 20, 1982, in *ibid.*, 86-87.

24. *Ibid.*, 1:vii.

25. *Ibid.*

26. D.H. Enlow, *Facial Growth* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1990), cited in Emily A. Craig, report to Joe Nickell (Forensic Anthropology Case No. 93-17), July 26, 1993.

27. Craig, Report on Case 93-17.

28. *Ibid.*

Joe Nickell is a former investigator for an international detective agency who specializes in historical investigations. The author of ten books, he teaches English at the University of Kentucky.

Joseph Cornell, continued from page 7

this April grass—then there are sadder features—here and there, wings half gone to dust, that fluttered so, last year—a mouldering plume, an empty house, in which a bird resided" (L184). Cornell transformed Dickinson's evocative description into a box that speaks of loneliness, the spiral form implying the passage

of time, while the bird's feather on the floor of the box crystallizes Dickinson's words. These objects capture the poet's awareness of the passage of time and the impermanence of life.

Much has been said of Cornell's attempt to transfix time, to seal it hermetically in his boxes, a tribute to the beauty and memory of the past. So too Dickinson, in recurring themes of loss, of renunciation, seals emotions against the passage of time. When we open her poems, the pages of her book, it is like the experience of poem 675. We discover "Summer—When the Lady lie / In Ceaseless Rosemary—" It is as she wrote to her cousin John Graves: "Then I lift the lid to my box of Phantoms, and lay another in, unto the Resurrection" (L186).

Thus we see that Cornell understood the words as well as the spirit of Dickinson. His art celebrates this confluence between himself and her, one that persists outside the chronological span of time. To be sure, Cornell's admiration for the poet resulted in more than these four examples. By interpreting Dickinson's poetry in his unique way, he translated her life and work into the visual. Given the opportunity to see his boxes and to know his art, Dickinson herself might have paid Cornell the same compliment as did poet Octavio Paz: "Joseph Cornell: inside your boxes my words become visible for a moment" (quoted in Ashton, 118).

References

Ashton, Dore. *A Joseph Cornell Album*. New York: Viking Press, 1974.

Hollander, John. "Words on Pictures: Ekphrasis." *Art & Antiques*, March 1984, 80-91.

McShine, Kynaston, ed. *Joseph Cornell*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980.

Ratcliff, Carter. "Joseph Cornell: Mechanic of the Ineffable." In *Joseph Cornell*, ed. Kynaston McShine. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980.

Rosenberg, Harold. "Object Poems." *New Yorker*, June 3, 1967, 112-18.

Waldman, Diane. *Joseph Cornell*. New York: George Braziller, 1977.

Maryanne Garbowsky is professor of English at the County College of Morris, New Jersey, and author of The House without the Door.

[For review of a book on Cornell, see page 14.]

Leslie Dill, continued from page 5

silk, paper—just as Emily wove her gold thread into poetry, into fascicles—might be Jane sending the gold back: Lesley and seven Indian Women in New Delhi meet each day to paint cloth, cut out armloads of letters to flurry together with plaster and glue. They hang them from clotheslines, curtains of words that wave and flutter in the hot breeze, "Speaking White," daring to see a "Soul at the White Heat," a poem repeating, repeating like a mantra, breathing in the wide high noon ephemerals of "Emily, Emily."

Susanna Rich is a poet, author of The Flexible Writer, and associate professor of English at Kean College of New Jersey.

Lesley Dill lives and works in New York City. She has exhibited extensively in the United States and is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Library of Congress. Dill spent 1992 in New Delhi.