

EXHIBITS

Mathew Brady, A Patriot of Portraiture

In September 1839, the American painter, scientist, and republican intelligence officer Samuel F.B. Morse returned home to New York from Paris, bringing with him an invention which would revolutionize the creation of images, and change forever the way the world viewed itself and its evolving history. That invention was the Daguerreotype process—the first practical method of producing what we now call photographs—which had just been unveiled by the French government. This wondrous new way of drawing an image from life, rendering it in almost unimaginable detail and subtlety of shading on a silvered plate by the action of light alone, came at an uncertain time for America, however, as the nation was engaged in a profound, and ultimately bloody, debate over its mission and its future. The entrance of photography, which would come to play an unimagined role in that future, was not far off, for within a few years, the young man who was to become the most prominent Nineteenth-century American portraitist and Civil War photographer, Mathew B. Brady, would establish his first New York studio.

An opportunity to bring that decisive period of American history to life awaits the visitor to “Mathew Brady’s Portraits: Images As History, Photography as Art,” now at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C. Curator Mary Panzer has brought together over a hundred photographic images, including some originals not publicly seen in the century since the artist’s death. More than a display of Brady’s



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

“Jack Hays,” imperial salted-paper print, c.1857.

work, this exhibit presents today’s visitor with a challenging view into the tumultuous decades of mid- to late-Nineteenth century America, for Brady drew to his portrait studio many of the most illustrious personages and history shapers of his day—Presidents, statesmen, and generals; artists, writers, and inventors. Complementing Brady’s work in the exhibit, engravings, paintings, and related artifacts of the time highlight his extensive working relationships with artists in other media, as well as with publishers.

Bringing the Present to the Future

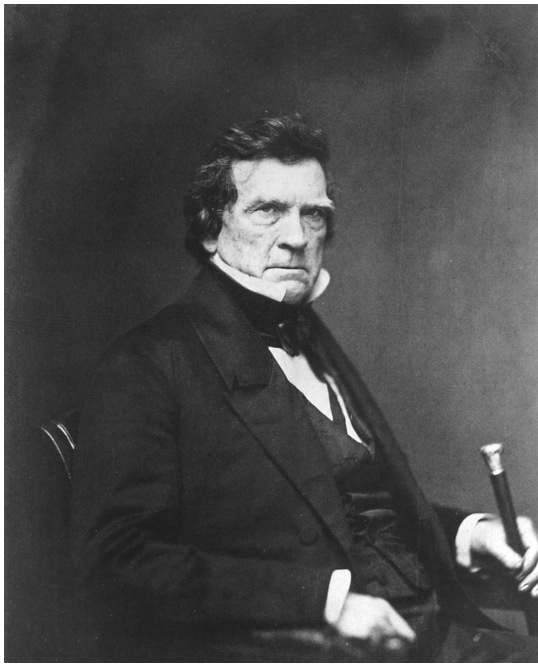
A student and friend of painter William Page, Brady was introduced to Page’s friend Morse, founder and president of the National Academy of Design, and to the leading artistic and scientific circles

around him, in late 1839 or early 1840, at the age of seventeen, and soon began studying photography with him, earning his living as a clerk and as a jeweler’s helper. America was experiencing rapid growth (New York City’s population alone, tripled from 1820 to 1840), watching the transformation of its industry by the power of steel and steam, and revelling in the fortunes thus created. At the same time, however, it was losing its direct moorings to the Revolution, and a drifting sense of national purpose accompanied the unresolved “compromises” of the era. Although Brady’s portraits would come to include such figures as Mrs. Alexander Hamilton, Daniel Webster, Gen. Winfield Scott, hero of the War of 1812, and Whig leader Henry Clay, few of these direct links to the Founding Fathers survived through the 1850’s.

With the profound issues of republicanism, economic development and internal improvements, and federalism being newly weighed and fought out, and with the storm over slavery gathering on the horizon, the question

of what America would become, what unique role it had to play, and what original contributions it would make in the realm of art and culture, sparked discussion in every sphere. Among the patriotic leadership—including leading artists of Brady’s and Morse’s circles—who recognized the need to define and strengthen a durable national identity, it was an issue of central importance.

In this context, Brady’s work stands clearly above the vast majority of the work of his peers, for an important reason. Beyond the technical excellence which separated the few who went to the effort and expense to master this new and unpredictable medium, and even beyond the artistic talents which likewise distinguished the best of its practitioners from the rest, Brady



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

"William L. Marcy," imperial salted-paper print, c.1856.

brought a higher purpose to his endeavors. He saw, in the photographic process, the potential to create a permanent public record of those who took responsibility to shape the course of history in his time. Throughout his life, from portrait studio to Civil War battlefield, Brady emphasized that his life cohered with this social purpose, and his friendship with such patriotic figures as Morse, and the writer and republican intelligence operative James Fenimore Cooper, attest to it. Among other things, America's National Portrait Gallery is the fruit of Brady's resolve.

A New Medium for Science and Art

When he opened his first photographic studio in 1844, on New York City's Broadway, Mathew Brady was only twenty-one. He devoted countless hours of work to perfecting the Daguerreotype process; according to one account from the early 1850's, Brady performed many thousands of experiments to bring the techniques of Daguerreotype imagery under complete control. (Remember, none of the conveniences of control we now take for granted—film speeds, light meters, standardized chemistry for processing, etc.—existed then; each plate was prepared from scratch, by hand.) He sought out the best chemists, as well

as camera operators, over-seeing every process, and making himself, according to his contemporary Edwards Lester, "master of every department of the art, sparing no pains or expense by which new effects could be introduced to increase the facilities or embellishments of the art."

In addition to an array of various cameras, he had an ingenious complex of specially designed skylights installed in his camera room, arranged to enable him to direct or diminish light by aid of flat and concave reflectors and light-blocking screens, in order to coax from the lens' insensitive image, the painterly quality he sought. Although Brady suffered from

poor and worsening eyesight, and (as in other large studios) employed a number of camera "operators," it was he who brought in and arranged the most important subjects.

Despite the technological constraints, Brady found ways to bring the best conventions of Classical portraiture to his work. He placed sitters against a plain, low-key background, emphasizing the character of the subject through a combination of carefully arranged pose and expression—almost always employing some "turning" of the body, directing the sitter's gaze away from the lens, and tailoring of the light on subject and background. Although his subjects had to pose motionless,

pressed against a steady head clamp, for up to a minute, his portraits rose above the frozen, self-conscious appearance so typical of even the better work of the time (compare, for example, the portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Beach by Jeremiah Gurney, one of Brady's more celebrated contemporaries). We see, for instance, Mexican-American War hero Jack Hays, revered for bravery as well as military skill and discipline, informally posed in formal attire, his demeanor at once calm and alert, simultaneously at rest and in motion. William L. Marcy, a three-term Democratic governor of New York and one of the notorious "Holy Alliance" which put its stamp on politics for decades, looks across at us with the fierce determination that must have given more than one opponent pause. Clara Barton, photographed by Brady in the 1860's, when she was distributing aid and supplies to soldiers, would later establish the Red Cross in the United States. Brady shows us a woman of compassion and inner strength, a person troubled by the toll of the conflict which led her to travel onto the battlefield.

From the early 1840's, Brady's reputation for excellence grew rapidly, and he

won prizes for his work at major international expositions here and in Europe. He was accepted and respected as a peer in the country's leading artistic circles. In 1849, he travelled to Washington for the inauguration of Zachary Taylor, and returned with portraits not only of Taylor and Millard Fillmore, but (again according to Lester), of "nearly every member of the



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

"Clara Barton," albumen silver print, c.1866.

Senate, many congressmen, and the justices of the Supreme Court.”

National Tragedy, National Rebirth

In February 1860, Brady took the first of what would be many photographs of Abraham Lincoln, as the presidential candidate was on his way to make a speech at Cooper Union [SEE inside front cover, this issue]. Lincoln was wearing a black suit badly wrinkled from travelling, and despite his exceptional height, cut less than an impressive figure, according to accounts. Yet, Brady's image of this man, whom he was meeting for the first time, overcomes the creases and a homely lankiness (Brady later recounted pulling up Lincoln's collar to make his neck appear shorter), to present a figure of simple but comely stature. Lincoln, as well as his wife and sons, would return many times to Brady's studio in the years ahead. And, when Brady determined to document the War, Lincoln signed a card saying "Pass Brady," to give him access to every situation. Since that time, and for succeeding generations throughout the world, Brady's photographic images have conveyed the austere power and nobility of the American nation resolutely mobilized, lest government "of, by, and for the people . . . perish from the Earth" [SEE inside front cover, this issue].

For today's photographer, there is no better model to use in studying the art of portraiture. For historians, and for citizens, Brady's dedication has left a priceless window into our past—a window we would do well to consult today. For, in Brady's work, we find many of the life and death issues which confronted the nation then, within our gaze today.

—Philip S. Ulanowsky

The exhibit will be at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. through Jan. 4, 1998. It will travel to the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Mass., and the International Center for Photography in New York City. The beautiful exhibit catalogue, "Mathew Brady and the Image of History," by curator Mary Panzer, is available from the Smithsonian Institution Press for \$39.95.

ART

Leonardo's 'Last Supper': A Lesson in Metaphysics

It is a true pleasure to witness the joy invariably experienced by visitors to the "Last Supper" [SEE inside back cover, this issue], one of the masterpieces of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), in the Refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, in Milan. In the Sixteenth century, Francis I was so taken by it, that

he nearly had the wall demolished and brought back to France! Happily, today we have faithful photographic reproductions. But, whence comes the enchantment? We shall here attempt to discover what gives this work such power, and the means Leonardo developed to achieve it.

The fresco, at 15 ft. by 28.5 ft., was completed by Leonardo when he was forty-three years of age, between 1495 and 1497, a very eventful period of his life. Dissatisfied with the prevailing fresco technique, which required rapid execution on fresh plaster, Leonardo worked in oils on an impression (base of ground color) for absorption, which permitted retouching at will. This risky technique caused deterioration as early as 1517, according to witnesses. We need not recount here the story of the battle between the retouchers, on the one hand, and the restorers, on the other, each trying to "heal" the work.

In my view, the most savage of the massacres done to the painting—outside of the restorations—are: the enlargement of the door by the Dominicans in 1652, cutting off the feet of Christ and adjacent apostles; that of the dragoons of

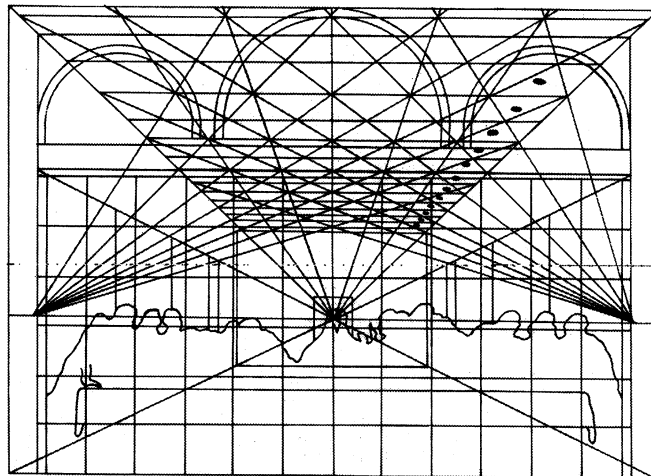


FIGURE 1. *The central vanishing point is in the face of Christ.*

Napoleon, who turned the refectory into a stable and took pleasure in throwing bricks at the heads of Christ's disciples; and that of the Allied bombing of the convent in 1943, which the fresco miraculously survived.

Against an 'Exterior' God

To better understand the innovative character of Leonardo's "Last Supper," compare it with that of Andrea del Castagno (1421-57), which Leonardo might have seen in Florence, as it dates from 1447 [SEE inside back cover, this issue]. The excellent art historian Jacques Cagliardi describes it in his book, *The Conquest of Painting*:

"When one enters the ancient refectory of the convent of St. Appollonia, one is startled by what one believes to be thirteen lifelike polychrome statues. They are seated around a table, in a great hall of marble which appears to emerge from the wall; silence, isolation, and immobility dominate . . . —this last is broken only by the movement of hands, which are raised, opened, and come together. The frozen features of the apostles, enveloped in thought, create an even heavier atmosphere; none of them dare to