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Harris, Mazie M. *Paper Promises: Early American Photography*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2018, 224 pp., $49.95 (hardback).

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The notion that antebellum Americans preferred daguerreotypes over paper-based photographic mediums is pervasive in histories of photography. The standard version of that history cites the superior quality and artistic appeal of the daguerreotype as the reason for its ascendancy. Mazie Harris successfully challenges that long-held notion on two fronts in her book *Paper Promises*, which accompanied her 2018 Getty Museum exhibition of the same name. First, she demonstrates that salted paper prints were more common than previously thought and, through dozens of exquisite examples, shows that they were every bit as detailed and artistic as daguerreotypes from the same era. Second, and perhaps most importantly for photographic historiography, Harris shows that early American suspicion of paper-based currency was more influential on the way early mediums were perceived than a supposed aesthetic deficiency in paper photographs.

Harris deftly connects the early history of photography with a growing body of work on the effects that Jacksonian-era banking deregulation had on America before its Civil War. Tying original archival research in with secondary literature such as Stephen Mihm's *A Nation of Counterfeiters*, Harris shows that the destabilization of the American economy caused by lack of a national standard currency and rampant counterfeiting was a major factor in the popularity of daguerreotypy. Printed, as they were, on silver treated glass, daguerreotypes evoked the durable nature of hard specie, just as minted coins were perceived as inherently more valuable at the time than printed bills. An excellent visual example of this that Harris includes in her discussion of the pre-War "Committee for the Suppression of Counterfeiting" are printed ads made to look like fake $100 and $200 notes that photographers such as Mathew Brady and Jeremiah Gurney used to market their daguerreotype services.

Harris also considers how the emerging understanding of artistic intellectual property influenced perceptions about the value of photographic work. There is a central paradox here crucial to understanding how the evolution of photographic patent and copyright played out, particularly in the American context. The very factors that made daguerreotypes prized also made them difficult to share. Daguerreotype portraits of famous generals and politicians were often turned into artistic renderings and lithographic engravings, but in doing so they were transferred to paper in books, weekly magazines, and *cartes-de-visite*. Thus, the images with the most economic value, i.e. those that generated enough public interest to have a market beyond a single copy for home use, had to be distributed in a form that was perceived as inherently lower in value. This made it difficult to prosecute cases of infringement in court and to win the cultural battle in the court of public opinion that photographers deserved to be compensated for their intellectual property.

In addition to being an excellent contribution to the history of photography, it should not be overlooked that *Paper Promises* is an exceptionally gorgeous exhibition book. Even a casual perusal of the salted paper prints reproduced in this volume will cure anyone afflicted with the notion that they were inferior to daguerreotypes, even in the early years. Following a common convention of the genre, this book also includes essays from two other authors that complement Harris's findings. Christine Hult-Lewis's piece on how photography gained a new kind of legal status by use as evidence in California land claims after the Gold Rush will be an interesting read

for those interested in photography law. Matthew Fox-Amato's essay on "Plantation Tourism" examines a largely forgotten set of stereographs from Southern photographers James M. Osborn and Frederick E. Durbec. It is an excellent piece on representation and power in early American photography that might inform and inspire all kinds of important further research.

Because it so convincingly – and artfully – corrects long-held assumptions about the first two decades of photographic history, I believe this book to be required reading for future scholarship in the field. In the same way that early histories lionized Mathew Brady as the sole photographer of the Civil War and perpetuated "lost cause" narratives with flattering portraits of Southern generals, they often inflated the role that daguerreotypes played in the development of photography. The history of photography has benefited greatly by challenging such overly romantic, nostalgic narratives. Harris has made an excellent contribution to the literature by continuing that important effort.