

African American man tintype portrait

African American man tintype portrait

c. 1865-1900



Title Statement

African American man tintype portrait African American man tintype portrait MSS 16795

Author: Ellen Welch

Publication Statement

Publisher: Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

P.O. Box 400110

University of Virginia

Charlottesville, Virginia 22904-4110

URL: <https://small.library.virginia.edu/>



2023-06-26

Profile Description

Creation: This finding aid was produced using ArchivesSpace on 2026-03-05 17:44:25 +0000.

Language Usage: Description is written in: English, Latin script.

Descriptive Rules: Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

MSS 16795

Unit ID

[Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID

/repositories/3/resources/1551

Unit Date

c. 1865-1900

Mixed Materials [X032668454]

BW 57 (box)

Container

1 (folder)

Language

English

source

Max Rambod

Extent

0.03 Cubic Feet One letter-sized folder.

Repository

Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

The collection is open for research use.

Immediate Source of Acquisition

This collection was purchased from Max Rambod, Inc. by the Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia Library on 1 March 2023.

Preferred Citation

MSS 16795, African American man tintype portrait, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.

Biographical / Historical

"African Americans' engagement with photography in the 19th century began a tradition for Black photographers' use of photography today to promote social change. African Americans, whether they are in front or behind the camera, create empowering images that define the beauty and resilience contained within the Black experience." (1)

"To pose for a photograph became an empowering act for African Americans. It served as a way to counteract racist caricatures that distort facial features and mocked Black society. African Americans in urban and rural settings participated in photography to demonstrate dignity in the Black experience." (1)

"For African Americans in particular, photographic portraits offered a means of self-representation and empowerment. The abolitionist Frederick Douglass—who was himself the most photographed man of the 19th century—consistently championed the medium for its capacity to affirm the humanity and dignity of its sitters and challenge dehumanizing, racist stereotypes. Other Black Americans, including native Virginian James Presley Ball (1825–1904), practiced and shaped the medium from its earliest years." (2)

Sources: "How Black people in the 19th century used photography as a tool for social change" <https://www.si.umich.edu/about-umsi/news/how-black-people-19th-century-used-photography-tool-social-change>

"A Powerful Influence: Early Photographs of African Americans from the Collection of Dennis O. Williams" Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Dr. Sarah Kennel, curator. November 19, 2022- June 15 2023. <https://vmfa.museum/exhibitions/exhibitions/powerful-influence-early-photographs-african-americans-collection-dennis-o-williams/>

Tintypes were portable, cheap, and fast to make. They came onto the scene in 1853 and were used through 1930. Photographers could easily sell their services at fairs or travel to battlefields. Some of the most common subjects were Civil War fields and soldiers, who would send photos home to loved ones.

Tintype creates a photographic image on a thin sheet of metal or iron that has been coated with a dark lacquer or enamel. The metal plates are coated with chemicals, exposed to light in a camera, and processed with additional chemistry. This creates an underexposed negative image. When that negative is placed on a dark background, the transparent areas appear black, which makes the plate look like a positive image.

Content Description

This collection features one 2.25 X4" tintype photograph of an unidentified African American man dressed in a three-piece suit with a bowtie, pocket square, and derby hat with a sash perched at a stylish angle on his head. The man leans against a marble column against a plain background in a studio.

The tintype was invented in 1855, one decade before the emancipation of enslaved African Americans across the United States. His suit, medium, and background suggest a date roughly within the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

These portraits come from a time just after emancipation when African Americans were creating new lives for themselves. Photography was one way to commemorate freedom and memorialize prosperity.

Keywords

African American young men

tintypes (prints)

Max Rambod