
LESSONS OF THE HOUR — FREDERICK DOUGLASS

BY ARTIST ISAAC JULIEN

ON VIEW MARCH 3—MAY 12



Lessons of the Hour, 2019
10-screen installation
Dimensions variable
Edition of 6 plus 2 AP, and a Sponsorship Edition of 2



Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow (After Anna Murray Douglass), 2019
Wet-plate collodion tintype mounted in tulipwood frame
16 7/8 x 14 7/8 in.
Edition of 3 plus 1 AP



Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow (After Frederick Douglass I), 2019
Wet-plate collodion tintype mounted in tulipwood frame.
16 7/8 x 14 7/8 in.
Edition of 3 plus 1 AP



Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow (After JP Ball), 2019
Wet-plate collodion tintype mounted in tulipwood frame
16 7/8 x 14 7/8 in.
Edition of 3 plus 1 AP

NOTES

“Pictures come not with slavery and oppression and destitution, but with liberty, fair play, leisure, and refinement. These conditions are now possible to colored American citizens, and I think the walls of their houses will soon begin to bear evidence of their altered relations to the people about them....Every colored householder in the land should have one of these portraits in his parlor, and should explain it to his children, as the dividing line between the darkness and despair that overhung our past, and the light and hope that now beam upon our future as a people.”

— Frederick Douglass in a letter to Louis Prang¹

Photography democratized the genre of portraiture, as it allowed most people to have a memento of themselves at a certain moment in time. Before photography, one could only have their resemblance immortalised if painted on a canvas, which was expensive and time-consuming. One of the first techniques widely utilized by photographers around the world was the daguerreotype. Invented by Louis Daguerre in 1838, this technique consisted of an image imprinted onto a silver-coated copper plate. Later on, other techniques such as ambrotypes and tintypes were developed. After it was invented in the early 19th century, it didn't take long until photography became the most popular means of image reproduction in the world.

Tintypes were popularized in the 1860s and 1870s, as this type of photography-making was fairly inexpensive, could be developed quickly, and be produced nearly anywhere, with very basic materials and processes. Different from what its name might suggest, tintypes do not contain any tin. The images were usually printed on thin sheets of iron, coated with black enamel to prevent rusting, and a layer of collodion photographic emulsion.

Isaac Julien has reassessed the tintype technique and portrayed three characters who are featured in *Lessons of the Hour*. For doing so, Julien had a tintype camera and developing facility on the film set provided by Rob Ball who made the tintypes for the *Lessons of the Hour* project. The three tintypes exhibited at MAG are portraits of the characters of Frederick Douglass, J.P. Ball, and Anna Murray Douglass. The series of tintypes is titled “Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow,” after Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, who Douglass once said was “the most promising colored man in America.”

Frederick Douglass had a passion for photography and publicly lectured on the subject. Some of his ideas were precursors to those of the influential German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, whose book, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, was published 75 years later. Scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. sees Douglass’ relationship with photography as an anticipation of W.E.B. Du Bois’ definition of black peoples’ “double-consciousness.” According to Gates, “it attests that for Douglass, at least, double-consciousness is the hallmark of genius, the sign of the privileged few. And Daguerre’s genius is that he rendered in two dimensions, in tangible form, this wondrous process of visualising ourselves doing an action and reflecting upon it as we do it, rendering the subjective “objective,” giving it form.”²

Anna Murray Douglass was Frederick Douglass’ wife for 44 years, until her death in 1882. As their daughter Rosetta Douglass wrote, “too often are the facts of the great sacrifices and heroic efforts of the wives of renowned men overshadowed by the achievements of the men, and the wonderful and beautiful part she has played so well is overlooked.”³ Anna Murray Douglass was no exception to this. Even though Fredrick Douglass was the most photographed man in America in the 19th century, only few photographs of Ms. Douglass remain. By including a tintype of her character in the exhibition, Isaac Julien hopes to make Anna visible to the audience as a means of historical reparation and feminist affirmation. Anna Murray Douglass was an active participant in the Underground Railroad, having helped free hundreds of people from slavery, including Douglass himself.

J.P. Ball was one of the most prominent black American photographers of his time, and had an extremely successful photography studio and salon in Cincinnati, Ohio. Douglass was photographed by J.P. Ball and he published an article about Ball on the front page of his newspaper, alongside an engraving of Ball’s gallery. According to Bernier, the gallery “offered up a microcosm of what America could be: an integrated place where patrons like Douglass could mingle, listen to music, and feel ennobled by the art as they waited for their portraits. True art could indeed break down racial barriers.”⁴ These scenes are reimagined and re-enacted in *Lessons of the Hour* as expressions of the utopian values and ideas that Douglass and his fellow artist shared.

*Rafaela Mendes Ferreira, Isaac Julien Studio
London, January 30, 2019*

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1. As quoted in, John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century’s Most Photographed American*. New York and London: Liverlight Publishing Corporation, 2015.
 2. Henry Louis Gate, Jr., *ibid.*, p. 208.
 3. Rosetta Douglass, *Anna Murray Douglass: My Mother as I Recall Her*, p. 4.
 4. Celeste-Marie Bernier, *ibid.*, p. xxi.