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Frederick Douglass most photographed American of the 19th century; images used to prompt change

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Jim Shelton

May 04--FREDERICK DOUGLASS

NEW HAVEN -- The most photographed American of the 19th century wasn't a bearded guy in a stovepipe hat.

It wasn't a president, an inventor, a captain of industry, a general or a crusty gent writing under the pen name Twain.

It was a former slave, Frederick Douglass, who rattled the chains of oppression in the nation's face.

"There are at least 160 photographs of Douglass that we've found so far," said Zoe Trodd, a faculty fellow at Columbia University who is in New Haven to do research for a pair of scholarly projects on the famous abolitionist. She outlined some of that research at an event held by the Yale University's Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance and Abolition.

Until recently, Gen. George Armstrong Custer was thought to be the most photographed American of the 1800s, with about 155 known photos, Trodd explained. After that are Abraham Lincoln and writer Walt Whitman, with 130 photos each.

Author Mark Twain and showman Wild Bill Cody actually had more photographs taken, but many of those came after the year 1900. As for the most photographed people in the world in the 19th century, that would be members of the British royal family, with roughly 600 photographs each.

But unlike any of those others, Douglass used his image explicitly to provoke social change.

"It became one of his most powerful arguments against slavery and for full and equal citizenship," according to Trodd. "Douglass is shattering expectations in his photographs. He's transforming the African American body into an emblem of heroism and pushing the boundaries of possibility for black masculinity."

Two of the Douglass photos were taken in Connecticut, Trodd noted, including one taken in New Haven in the 1860s.

The existing photographic record of Douglass begins with an 1841 daguerreotype image, taken just a few years after Douglass escaped to freedom from slavery. He was 23. The final photo of Douglass came on his deathbed, in 1895. Continued...

In between were images -- many of them iconic -- that presented an aura of dignity, determination and gravitas.

Trodd said Douglass orchestrated most of his photos with a clear vision of how he wanted to be presented. He almost never smiled. He didn't use props. He removed elaborate backdrops and decorative elements.

In part, Douglass was trying to counteract the many images of African Americans in submissive poses, wearing little clothing. He also wanted to negate cartoonish representations of black facial features.

In later years, after he'd become world famous, he used his photographic image to offset paintings and sketches in the media that made his features look more Caucasian.

"He's battling racist caricatures," Trodd said.

The result is a visual legacy that continues to this day. Trodd has documented murals, statues and public displays of Douglass in New York City, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Detroit, Dayton, Washington, D.C., Boston and elsewhere. Douglass also adorns books, stamps, paintings, drawings and web sites.

Meanwhile, the search for more Douglass photographs continues. Ideally, Trodd said, she'd like to locate another five or 10 photos.

You never know when Gen. Custer's researchers will try to make a last stand.

Call Jim Shelton at 203-789-5664. To receive breaking news first – text the word NHNEWS to 22700. \*Msg & Data Rates May Apply. Text HELP for help. Text STOP to cancel.

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