

the problem of the unknown sitter

Unknown man 54

Hill and Adamson, Calotype, ca. 1845, 21.70 x 16.20
Scottish National Portrait Gallery PGP HA3532

The image of an unknown man which introduces our website, is a failure. The pioneering photographers Hill and Adamson never printed this paper negative into a positive print - what would have been the intended portrait. We can, however, recognise in this image a human figure, a man, striking a familiar pose - the pose of a portrait - for the camera. But the photograph does not show enough detail for us to recognise its subject, and we cannot see whom this is a portrait of.

The image fails not simply because of technical difficulties of the calotype process; it fails because we cannot identify its subject, the unknown man who sat for his portrait. This kind of failure is not unusual: many portraits depict now unknown sitters, and lie unwanted in basements or are sold cheap at markets. So what is the value of a portrait when we don't know who it is?

unknownsitter.com is the collaborative project of artist Nicky Bird, art historian Lara Perry and five other contributors from a range of disciplines. Together, we explore the problem of unknown sitters, and the value of their portraits. We ask how different disciplinary approaches to the interpretation of such portraits might illuminate our understanding of portraits of unknown, and known, sitters.

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[National Portrait Gallery](#) (London)
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