

Discovering F. Holland Day's Platinum Prints: A Collaboration between Curator and Conservator

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The three studies described in this essay show how the power of collaboration between curator and conservator can lead to a deeper understanding and richer contributions to the history of photography. Working separately, authors Verna Posever Curtis and Adrienne Lundgren gathered extensive background about the Library of Congress's (LOC) archival holdings of the American Pictorialist photographer F. Holland Day (1864-1933) (fig. 1).¹ Subsequent work in tandem brought their cumulative knowledge to bear on scholarship related to Day. The experience of working together and of sharing information about the collections at the LOC was a satisfying professional experience that demonstrated the ongoing benefits to be gained.

The following studies involving Day's platinum prints signal the importance of combining the art history and conservation disciplines for a deeper appreciation of an artist's work. In the first study, we ascribe an unusual unsigned portrait to Day. The second study presents our discovery of previously unknown negatives that foster a greater understanding of Day's commitment to religious subjects in photography, specifically his controversial work related to the Crucifixion. Lastly, our heightened awareness and technical understanding of platinum printing with glycerine afford an explanation for puzzling versions of Day's masterpiece series, *The Seven Words*.

F. Holland Day and Art Photography

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Massachusetts photographer F. Holland Day was known as a champion of art photography. He was a prominent figure within the international Pictorialist movement of amateur photographers who were seeking recognition for the medium as a fine art. A major exhibition that he organized and brought to London and Paris in 1900-1901 was the first to introduce Europe to the American art photographers in this "New School."²

Nonetheless, Day is not widely known today, perhaps owing to competition and conflict with the photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), who dominated the American photography world. Stieglitz published the groundbreaking journals for art photographers, *Camera Notes* (1897-1903) and *Camera Work* (1903-17), and in 1902 he organized the New York-based American Pictorialist organization known as the Photo-Secession. It was a disappointment to Day that Stieglitz was unresponsive to starting such a group in Boston two years earlier.³ Ultimately, Stieglitz's Photo-Secession became synonymous with American Pictorialism, and Day, who never joined the Photo-Secession, fell into obscurity. Only in the last quarter of the twentieth century have his works been rediscovered.

Day's devotion to the photographic medium progressed as he was making a reputation for Copeland and Day, the publishing partnership he founded with the editor Herbert Copeland (1869?-1923). This publishing house, specializing in fine printed books in the Arts and Crafts movement style, produced more than one hundred diverse titles from 1893 to 1898. After the enterprise ended, Day concentrated on photography until 1915.

Day's attention to detail in design, as evidenced in combinations of typeface, illustration, and paper, developed and flourished in the publishing business. This refined execution found clear expression in his innovative platinum prints, many of which are

Figure 1. Frederick H. Evans, *F. Holland Day*, 1900. Platinum print on French-ruled mount, 20.3 × 11.4 cm. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, 67.165.



Figure 2. F. Holland Day, [*Youth with winged hat, cropped at chest*], 1907. Platinum print with hand coloring, 13.2 × 15.6 cm. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, The Louise Imogen Guiney Collection, PH-Day, (F.), no. 347 (A size).

allegories and feature Christian or sacred subjects (fig. 2). Printed either with the help of his friend, the Boston studio photographer Frank W. Birchall (1857–1916), or by Day himself after he took up darkroom work, each photograph was executed, and often mounted, with meticulous care.

Day bequeathed his personal collection of prints and some of his books to the Library of Congress. Together with photographs more recently acquired from his colleagues and others, the LOC holds the largest collection of Day's work in the world. With his newly acquired correspondence archive, the collection is comprehensive and ideal for study.⁴

Portrait of a Japanese

An unusual unsigned platinum portrait of a Japanese man was acquired by the LOC in 2004 as part of the White Family Collection.⁵ It was mounted on Japanese paper in a vertical orientation resembling an Asian scroll (fig. 3). In 2012, when Lundgren treated the print, she noted and documented the portrait's secondary mount, a distinctive woodblock-printed Japanese paper.⁶

Clarence H. White (1871–1925), another leader in the Pictorialist movement, was a close associate and personal friend of Day. In fact Day had encouraged White to start his own school for Pictorialist photographers; it became the landmark Clarence H. White School of Photography in New York City. Though the White Family Collection is comprised mainly of White's own photographs and archives, it also contains identifiable prints by Day and other close associates.

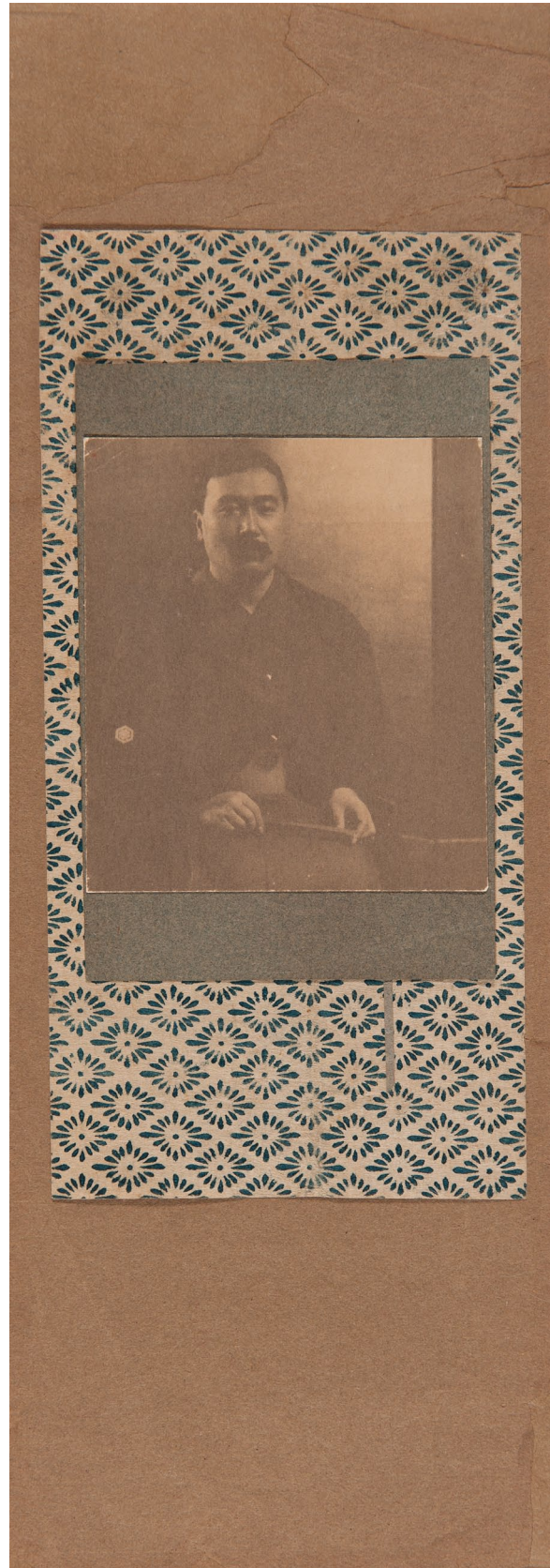


Figure 3. F. Holland Day, *Portrait of a Japanese*, 1900 or earlier. Platinum print, 8.3 × 7.3 cm. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, The Clarence H. White Family Collection, Gift of Kathleen B. White in Memory of Clarence H. White, Jane Felix White, and Maynard Pressley White, Jr., DLC/PP 2004.027.143.

When Lundgren later studied Day's papers and processes, she carefully noted discernible mount fragments on the versos of his prints, creating a searchable database that proved to be very useful for making comparisons. It led to



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4a

Figure 4. F. Holland Day, [*Woman in drapery with hoop earrings*], c. 1898. Platinum print, 15.9 × 11.9 cm. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, The Louise Imogen Guiney Collection, PH-Day, (F), no. 112 (A size).
4a. Verso.

the discovery that small pieces of residual mount paper on the versos of three pre-1900 portraits by Day (fig. 4) were the same Japanese patterned paper used in the mounted *Portrait of a Japanese* (see fig. 3).

Day's use of this mount paper suggested that he may have been the creator of the unsigned portrait of a Japanese man, but we were not confident of this attribution until we located another Japanese portrait illustrated in *Photo-Miniature*.⁷ The illustration showed Day's portrait of the actress Madame Yaco affixed to a mount similar to that of the Japanese man. Its caption indicated that it had been shown in the 1900 Philadelphia Salon (fig. 5). Entries in the catalog for this important exhibition revealed that Day had two Japanese portraits on display—the one of



Figure 5. F. Holland Day, *Madame Yaco*, 1900 or earlier. From *Photo-Miniature* 2, no. 20 (November 1900): 343. Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections.



Figure 6. F. Holland Day and Frank W. Birchall, [*Crucifixion, frontal, with Mary, Mary Magdalene, Joseph and St. John (?)*], 1898. Gelatin dry-plate negative on glass, emulsion up, 35.6 × 27.9 cm. Massachusetts Historical Society, Frank W. Birchall Collection. Note the red retouching, which is evident in the corresponding print (see fig. 7).



Figure 7. F. Holland Day, [*Crucifixion, frontal, with Mary, Mary Magdalene, Joseph and St. John (?)*], 1898. Platinum print, 17.7 × 8.8 cm. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, The Louise Imogen Guiney Collection, PH-Day, (F), no. 129 (A size). This contact print was made from the negative shown in figure 6.

7a. Detail showing evidence of retouching on the negative shown in figure 6.

Madame Yaco and a work titled simply, *Portrait of a Japanese*.⁸ It seemed likely that this was the unsigned portrait of a Japanese man in the White Collection, especially as the two Japanese portraits, one of a man and the other of a woman, similar in composition and mounting style, would have made a visually pleasing pair in the 1900 Salon. Lundgren's database of mounting paper confirmed that Day began using this paper in 1895 for portraits he printed, and we concluded that an attribution to Day was defensible. We have now added this highly unusual platinum print to his known works.

Crucifixion Series

In 1890 Day attended the famous Passion Play in Oberammergau, Bavaria, and it made a profound impression on him. Having been staged at the opening of every decade since 1634,⁹ the elaborate performance reinforced his conviction that the portrayal of sacred subjects in photography was legitimate. He believed that the new artistic medium had the potential for representing the Passion as earnestly and respectfully as productions in the theater, and that photography could match similar representations already acceptable in painting and the graphic arts.¹⁰ Day had been gathering ideas for his Christ series since 1896 when he produced his *Entombment*. He took on the task of staging Christ's Passion in the summer of 1898, culminating in the creation of *The Seven Words*, which will be discussed later.

Day chose a rocky hillside near his home in Norwood, Massachusetts, as the setting for the Crucifixion scenes. He enlisted friends for supporting parts as Christ's followers, the thieves, and Roman soldiers. Normally thin, but becoming gaunt and growing a beard expressly for the role, Day himself portrayed Christ. It was generally assumed that his friend Birchall operated the camera.¹¹

The well-known relationship between photographers Day and Birchall came into clear focus when two negatives from the Birchall Collection of negatives in the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS), showing Day inspecting his own negatives, were reproduced in *Making a Presence: F. Holland Day in Artistic Photography*.¹² Birchall had been recognized as both a photographer and a photofinisher who printed for others in the Pictorialist circle, but his role in the printing of Day's Crucifixion series required confirmation.¹³

In 1904 a fire in the Harcourt Building in Boston, where Day and other artists had studios, destroyed most of his work. The next year Day wrote to Birchall, who was disbanding his Boston studio to move to the country, to find

out if any of the negatives of *The Seven Words* were still in Birchall's possession. Birchall replied that he thought that all Day's negatives had been returned,¹⁴ but the possibility remained that some could have been overlooked.

No works by Day were listed in the inventory of the Birchall Collection at the Massachusetts Historical Society, although negatives by other Pictorialists, including Gertrude Käsebier (1852–1934) and Francis Watts Lee (1867–1945), have been identified.¹⁵ Curtis did see several entries entitled "Crucifixion." As this would have been an unusual subject for Birchall, Lundgren traveled to Boston to inspect them and discovered that the six were, in fact, by Day, two of which related to prints in the LOC's collection.¹⁶ The other four negatives (a crucifixion of the thieves, two of Descent from the Cross, and a Deposition of the Body to the Tomb) belonged to Day's Crucifixion series by virtue of their location, models, size, and retouching, even though corresponding prints have not been discovered.

The negatives from Day's Crucifixion series in the Birchall Collection are likely the only Day negatives in existence. However, questions remained. Were these negatives used to make original prints though some have no extant corresponding prints? Did Day leave some of these subjects out of his final printed series because he considered them unsuccessful or unimportant? Or, could we identify whether prints that may have been made from those negatives were, in fact, part of a finished series at one time?

The answers came by comparing a negative and a known print (figs. 6, 7), which revealed matched retouching marks. They led us to conclude that at least one negative found in the Birchall Collection was the direct source for the extant platinum print. Furthermore, the cropping lines, applied masks, and retouching on the other Crucifixion negatives in the collection strongly suggest that Birchall had also produced prints from them.

The discovery of the Crucifixion negatives in the Birchall Collection confirmed that Day's photographer friend was also the printer of the series: he had made the final Crucifixion platinum prints. It also confirms that Birchall had been a full participant in the series—as proxy photographer for Day while he acted in the role of Christ on the Cross, as Day's negative processor, and as his printer.

Assembling the newly discovered negatives with all of the other known images revealed to us that the Crucifixion series was more expansive than previously understood (figs. 8–11; see also fig. 7). As Day advocated, he had orchestrated a comprehensive sacred series concerning



Figure 8. F. Holland Day, *Calvary*. From *Art Interchange* 43, no. 2 (August 1899): 30. Library of Congress, General Collections.



Figure 9. F. Holland Day and Frank W. Birchall, [*Descent from the Cross*], 1898. Gelatin dry-plate negative on glass, emulsion up, 35.6 × 27.9 cm. Massachusetts Historical Society, Frank W. Birchall Collection.

the Crucifixion and its aftermath and had met his own challenge to demonstrate that a photographer with serious intent could render a sacred Christian subject with respect. Our collaborative investigations revealed what had not been discovered previously. Not only had we identified existing Day negatives and added them to his oeuvre through this discovery, we also gleaned a fuller understanding of Day's vision for Pictorialist photography.



Figure 10. F. Holland Day, [*Entombment with Mary at right*], 1896. Platinum print, 6.3 × 9.5 cm. Private collection.

The Seven Words

The study of *The Seven Words* points out the difficulty of ascertaining the authorship of prints within a known photographer's work. Day took Christ's apocryphal pronouncements as he took his last breaths on the Cross as the impetus for this culminating piece, and it became his "photographic tour de force" and "his signature work."¹⁷ By attaching a mirror to his camera, he acted out Christ's expressions and was able to compose close-ups of his head and neck, as Christ, by himself. A highly expressive and personal seven-part series was the result, corresponding to his interpretations of each Word from first, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do," to last, "It is Finished."

There are several extant versions associated with the seven negatives of *The Seven Words*, and these exist either as a series of seven individual prints or combined in a single substantially smaller continuous unit.¹⁸ The series of individual prints is presented in two ways: either housed together in an original frame or mounted individually on paper mounts. LOC has two complete sets, totaling fourteen prints. Unlike Day's own framed copy, now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), the LOC prints are individually mounted on handmade French-ruled mounts. The two LOC sets consist of identical images, although they were printed in two different sizes.¹⁹ The texture and appearance of the platinum paper used for printing both sets are different from the other papers used by Day in LOC collections. Moreover, their French-ruled mounts do not resemble any other Day mounts at the LOC or else-

where, so we wondered whether they were actually printed and/or mounted by him. The most remarkable aspect of our study was learning that an investigation of glycerine printing could answer this question.

That each LOC image has an identical image in the other set (fig. 12) poses a contradiction. The vignette appearance suggests that the prints were developed by selectively applying glycerine-diluted developer with a brush.²⁰ But because this method of platinum printing involves applying the developer by hand, it is impossible for two prints to be identical. To reiterate, each glycerine-developed print is necessarily unique, and that precludes the possibility of identical prints, such as those at the LOC.



Figure 11. F. Holland Day, [*Christ's Resurrection from the tomb*], 1896. Platinum print with hand coloring, 15.1 × 12.2 cm. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, The Louise Imogen Guiney Collection, PH-Day, (F), no. 137 (A size).

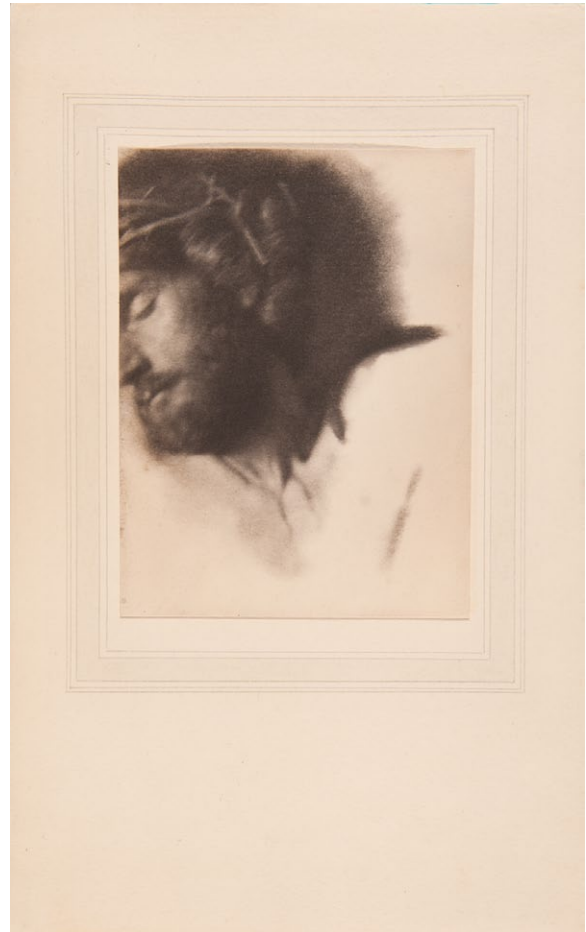


12a

Figure 12. F. Holland Day, *It Is Finished*, from *The Seven Words*, 1898, printed 1912 by Frederick H. Evans.

12a. Platinum print, 15.7 × 11.9 cm. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, The Louise Imogen Guiney Collection, PH-Day, (F.), no. 149 (A size).

12b. Platinum print, 20.1 × 15.2 cm. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, The Louise Imogen Guiney Collection, PH-Day, (F.), no. 156 (A size).



12b

Adding to the puzzle, another matching set of vignettted prints of *The Seven Words* coming from English photographer Frederick H. Evans (1853–1943) was found at the George Eastman Museum (GEM), Rochester, New York. Evans, a former book dealer, was Day's longtime associate and regularly exchanged prints with him. The vignetting conundrum, it turns out, can be explained through the examination of this set and its accompanying portfolio.²¹ The GEM portfolio arrived with a typewritten introduction signed by Evans. He explained that in 1912 he rephotographed, at Day's request, an original set of glycerine-developed *Seven Words* that Day had given him following a studio fire in 1904 that had destroyed Day's work.²² Evans was known to have produced a significant amount of photographic copy work after 1900,²³ and he was at this time using handmade French-ruled mounts (see fig. 1) as his standard presentation.²⁴ Clearly, the mounts in all three sets, those at LOC and GEM, were applied by him.

Evans evidently made at least three copies of *The Seven Words*, keeping one for himself (now at GEM) and giving the other two to Day (acquired in the bequest to LOC). Our knowledge of the process of glycerine printing made it possible to connect the three sets previously thought to have been independent of one another. In point of fact, none of the prints in these sets actually could have been developed with glycerine. They must be platinum copies which Evans made from an original set of glycerine-developed platinum prints that are no longer extant.

The significance of this finding is twofold. The LOC prints and mounts can now be understood in their proper context and their anomalies explained. The prints were made on a paper different from other papers in Day's oeuvre but that conforms to Evans's work in 1912. The mounting, as we had suspected, was not a technique used by Day, but it was used by Evans.²⁵ Furthermore, the identical appearance of the sets is explained by their not being glycerine developed. Nor are they originals. They are platinum prints rephotographed and printed by another artist more than a decade after the production of the originals by Day, which are presumed to be lost.

Conclusions

These studies demonstrate the difficulties in attribution particular to the medium of photography. The experience of working in collaboration has made us keenly aware of the complexity in dating and attributing photographic negatives and prints. Visual examination of the image and indisputable provenance do not always provide assurance about who actually produced a photograph or when it was made. The curator's customary research into provenance, exhibitions, publication history, and cultural context may be insufficient for determining the creator of a work. As for the conservator, identification of photographic materials need not be an end in itself. Either a conservator or curator can recognize that pieces of a puzzle may be missing and find connections among works in several collections.

The resulting gains from our collaboration between the disciplines of conservation and art history, as shown in these case studies, yield more investigative avenues to pursue for either curator or conservator. The attribution of *Portrait of a Japanese*, for instance, supports Day's interest in Japanese design and contemporary theater, which was imported to America by the Kawakami Troupe that performed in Boston in the winter of 1899–1900. Further comparisons with known photographs may prove that the man in Day's portrait was Madame Yaco's husband Otojirō Kawakami, the innovative theatrical entrepreneur whom Day, the performance-based photographer, may well have admired. Or research might indicate that the subject was Bunkio Matsuki, the Boston-based seller and promoter of Japanese goods from whom Day purchased supplies.

In another example, knowing that Day did not print the Crucifixion series may help explain another aspect of them: the extant prints lack Day's distinctive sense of nuance. Perhaps he was not entirely satisfied with the outcome of the printing. Could a dissatisfaction have contributed to his desire to learn more about printing in London two years later, as is understood from his cousin and teacher Alvin Langdon Coburn?²⁶

In the case of *The Seven Words*, we know that an original set of prints without vignettes (now in the MFA) remained framed in Day's possession following his studio fire. Yet we can speculate that Day may have also liked the glycerine vignetting of the prints to such a degree that he requested Evans copy and reprint that set for him in platinum years later.

Combining knowledge from the disciplines of art history and conservation holds promise for discovering and unraveling other fascinating mysteries. Because chemical processing is at the heart of historical photography,

we cannot ignore the fact that insight into process is of primary importance. Merging the liberal arts and other disciplines with science becomes essential, therefore, for understanding the history of photography.

Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge the following who supported our research: Constance McCabe, National Gallery of Art; Patricia J. Fanning, Bridgewater State University; Joe Struble, George Eastman Museum; and Helena Zinkham and the Office of Scholarly Programs, John W. Kluge Center, Library of Congress.

Notes

1. For more information about Curator Verna Posever Curtis's organization of the collection in the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (LOC), and basic research on Day's biography, see Balk 1994; Curtis and Van Nimmen 1995, xiii–xiv. In 1994, Curtis received an American Association of Museums–International Partnerships among Museums grant with Pam Roberts, then curator and librarian at the Royal Photographic Society, Bath, England, to study and compare the F. Holland Day collections in their respective institutions. Their collaboration resulted in an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; and Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, in 2000–2001, which was accompanied by a book, Roberts et al. 2000.

In 2012, Conservator Adrienne Lundgren received a LOC Kluge Staff Fellowship for the yearlong study toward a materials' catalog of the Day collection at the LOC. See Adrienne Lundgren, "The Photographs of F. Holland Day: Developing a Materials-Based Catalogue Raisonné in Photography," John W. Kluge Lecture, September 19, 2013, online at www.loc.gov. This study included the systematic measurement of 668 prints and an analysis of the papers Day used for printing and mounting.

2. Photo Club of Paris 1901.

3. Van Nimmen 1994, 372–74.

4. Day's studio archive of his photographic prints was part of the 2,000-item collection the LOC received in 1934. Day left this material as an anonymous gift, and he credited the Louise Imogen Guiney Collection. Balk 1994, 384–86. Between 2011 and 2013, the Norwood Historical Society gave the LOC Day's papers and remaining archival photographs retained in Day's historic home in Norwood, Massachusetts. For information regarding the archive, refer to the F. Holland Day Papers finding aid prepared by the LOC Manuscript Division, 2012, rev. 2016, online at www.findingaids.loc.gov.

5. Kathleen B. White, granddaughter-in-law of the photographer Clarence H. White, began donating her family's collection to the LOC in 2003. For more information about the Clarence H. White Family Collection, Gift of Kathleen B. White in Memory of Clarence H. White, Jane Felix White, and Maynard Pressley White, Jr., see LOC Prints and Photographs online catalog at www.loc.gov/pictures.

6. The paper was *kara-kami*, which can be a woodblock printed paper that uses a magnolia plank or one that is stenciled. There is no impression left by the block in this technique. Motifs are small and resemble repeating textile motifs. Meredith 2001, 192.

7. McFarland 1900, 342. Lundgren found the periodical volume while selecting photography manuals, books, and nineteenth-century periodicals for transfer from the LOC's General Collections to its Rare Book and Special Collections Division. Thanks are due Dana Hemmenway for pointing out the McFarland article.

8. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts 1900, 12. They were numbers 34 and 39, respectively. Clarence H. White's own copy of the catalog from this exhibition, DLC/PP 2004:027.2.452, came to the LOC as part of The Clarence H. White Family Collection.
9. The play continues to be performed during the summer in years ending in zero.
10. Day 1899, 62, 37–38.
11. While impossible to know for certain, Patricia J. Fanning believes Birchall to have been involved in taking at least some of the Crucifixion negatives. Patricia J. Fanning, "Frank W. Birchall and the Crucifixion Studies of F. Holland Day," 14–15 (unpublished manuscript, 2015, in the authors' possession).
12. Fairbrother 2012, 4, 10.
13. F. W. Birchall to F. H. Day, July 27, 1894, July 14, 1896, September 18, 1898, F. Holland Day Papers, box 6, Manuscript Division, LOC. These letters document Birchall's printing of Day's negatives and contain requests for Day to proof them.
14. "I do not find any of your negatives among mine except one of Alice Lee reading which Mrs. Lee brought me from you. The seven last words copy must have perished." F. W. Birchall to F. H. Day, May 25, 1905, Day Papers.
15. The Frank W. Birchall Collection of negatives at the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS) consists of his own negatives and those of several other photographers, only some of whom have been identified. Patricia J. Fanning discovered that there were negatives by Gertrude Käsebier, Francis Watts Lee, and Sarah Sears, for whom Birchall printed.
16. Two negatives, potentially one of them a duplicate, correspond to PH-Day (F.), no. 129 (A size), Prints and Photographs Division, LOC.
17. Fanning 2008, 107.
18. In 2014, the 150th anniversary of Day's birth, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), exhibited key prints that had been in Day's home and recently purchased from the Norwood Historical Society. Day's own copy of *The Seven Words*, consisting of seven individual prints housed in an original black wood frame (each print 13 × 10 cm), and the crown of thorns he wore when he posed for it highlighted this show. The exhibition was organized by Anne E. Havinga.
19. The small prints, PH-Day (F.), nos. 143–49 (A size) measure 15.7 × 11.9 cm. The prints in the larger set, PH-Day (F.), nos. 150–56 (A size), measure 20.1 × 15.2 cm.
20. See Adrienne Lundgren, "The History and Use of Glycerine in Platinum Printing," in this volume.
21. The title page of the portfolio reads, "The Seven Last Words, A Series of Photographic Studies by and from F. Holland Day, Boston, USA, Printed in Platinotype by Frederick H. Evans," GEM, 1973:0027:0001-7. The LOC's large size corresponds to Evans's explanation that he printed 1.5 times larger than the original MFA set. For the match to the two prints seen in figure 12 (LOC), see GEM, 1973:0027:0007.
22. The whereabouts of this glycerine set, presumed to have been made by Day and given to Evans, is unknown at present.
23. A set of platinotype facsimiles of William Blake's illustrations to Robert John Thornton's *Pastorals of Virgil* by Frederick H. Evans is in the Rare Book and Special Collections Division, LOC, PA6804.B7 B55 1912 Rosenwald Collection. A group of reproductions also can be found at GEM in the file labeled Frederick H. Evans: Art Reproductions, Photomicrographs and Miscellaneous Collection.
24. Lyden 2010, 38–39.
25. Frederick H. Evans, *Wells Cathedral; Stairway to Chapter House*, 1902, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, PH-Evans, (F.) no. 12 (B size); see plate 6 on page 34, in this volume. The French-ruled mounts seen on *The Seven Words* series in the LOC collections have pinpricks at the corners where the ruled lines meet. These pinpricks match French-ruled mounts found in Evans's works.
26. Coburn 1978, 14.

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