

Sidedoor Season 5, Episode 7: Young Harriet

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: For most Americans, Harriet Tubman is a familiar figure. I first learned about her in elementary school, as an icon who ferried enslaved African Americans to freedom on the Underground Railroad. At the time, I thought of her as a train conductor on a literal railroad. Unlike the Underground Railroad, Tubman herself was hard to imagine, as a real person. I think that's partly because I'd only seen her pictured as an older woman. In those photos, she's stiff and unsmiling, normal for the time, but difficult to relate to. The pictures didn't match her heroic story. One of these famous Tubman portraits can be found at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. Here's what it looks like.

[MUSIC]

Carla Hayden: What you see in this portrait is a woman who has lived a full life. She appears to be an older woman. You can tell that she is definitely, possibly in her 60s. I'd say she's in her 70s at least. And at that time in 1885, to live to that age was notable. She's wearing a shawl and a long dress. She has her hands folded over her stomach. And she has a wrap on her head, a kerchief on her head. And she has a quiet determination. You can tell that. And her gaze is, I would say, somewhat stern. And her mouth is uneven. It's, it's somewhat downturned.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: That description comes from a recent episode of the "Portraits" podcast. You'll meet the people attached to the voices in a minute. But first, here's "Portraits" Host, Kim Sajet.

Kim Sajet: And I'm the Director of the National Portrait Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution.

Lizzie Peabody: You may recognize Kim's voice. She's been on Sidedoor a few times. Today, I wanted to bring Kim back to discuss her recent episode about Harriet Tubman.

Kim Sajet: Interestingly, I think some kind of alchemy happens because when you actually have to describe portraits for an audio medium, then you get into it in a lot of depth. So, it's the stories of the people in the portraits, it's the people who made the portraits, the artists, and now how we think about them, you know, often very much later when both those entities are no longer with us. So, sort of it's about history and looking back at people.

Lizzie Peabody: So, when I'm scrolling through my podcast feed, and I see a show about a historical figure or an event that I suspect I already know the story of, I don't usually listen to it. What gave you the confidence to say that there's something here that people do not already know about Harriet Tubman?

Kim Sajet: There was a momentous moment in the history and portraiture world where a very rare photograph of Harriet Tubman came to light that completely changed the way that the history and the art community thought about her.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, this time on Sidedoor, we feature an episode of, "Portraits," and we'll hear the story behind this newly discovered Harriet Tubman picture that changes the way we see her, after a quick break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So, here's the, "Portraits" podcast. At this point in the episode, host Kim Sajet is speaking with Librarian of Congress, Carla Hayden about the Harriet Tubman portrait we grew up with: Tubman as an older lady, near the end of a long, hard life.

Carla Hayden: And that's been the tradition of viewing Harriet Tubman. She did all these daring things, but not having a visual image of her that would connect her experiences and what she did with that older woman. It was almost a...

Kim Sajet: Like a dissonance...

Carla Hayden: ...an oxymoron here.

Kim Sajet: Right! Yeah! That sort of doesn't match up.

Carla Hayden: Right here is Harriet Tubman. Yes.

Kim Sajet: Carla Hayden's Tubman took her life in her hands repeatedly to heroically cross into the South and lead others to freedom. She was small, only around 5 feet tall, but mighty. For Carla, it became personal when she made a trip to a plantation in Colonial Williamsburg and visited the cabins where enslaved people had lived.

Carla Hayden: And it was dusk!

Kim Sajet: Uh, huh.

Carla Hayden: Right before evening and I stood there and I thought, 'Would I have been brave enough to go into those woods with no (laughs) sense of where you were gonna end up. No cellphones. People have to think about what was happening in those times. You didn't have electricity and the lights of the highways or anything! And go and take that leap of faith to try to be free.

Kim Sajet: And follow the North Star.

Carla Hayden: And I thought I might... I don't know if I would have...

Kim Sajet: ...would have do that. Yeah.

Carla Hayden: I might have hesitated, but then, you never know because the harshness of slavery, you would have taken that chance.

Kim Sajet: She is known as the Conductor of the Underground Railroad, one of the most famous fugitive slaves, who not only gains her own freedom by making the perilous journey on

her own, about 90 to 100 miles from Maryland to Philadelphia, but that she actually goes back. She puts her life, and multiple times in peril, and saves somewhere around 70 people; her family, and friends, and acquaintances through multiple journeys up and down the Mason Dixon Line. But she definitely to your point, looks like an older woman, and in fact, she still has many years to go as she dies in 1913. And this portrait was taken in 1885. She lives to be 91 years old.

Carla Hayden: Yeah and to see a new century! And when you think about someone who had been in slavery to go into the next century, after so many things had happened. And what her views and impressions might have been...

Kim Sajat: It's extraordinary!

Carla Hayden: ...it's remarkable to think about.

Kim Sajat: Yeah! She, she of course experiences slavery. Then she directs troops during the Civil War on behalf of the Union. She's a scout. She's a spy. I think she's one of the first women, in fact, ever to lead a garrison of soldiers. She's also advocating all the time for education, but also for women's right to vote. And it's too bad in a way that she dies just before that vote arrives in 1920. She dies in 1913, but it was on the horizon. She knew a lot of the suffragists and, you know, what a determined woman. Wendell Phillips actually said that he thought she was the most sagacious friend. You know, that some sense of, I don't know, feisty, I guess, and nothing was going to get in her way.

Carla Hayden: Well, you'd have to be to lead troops as a woman....

Kim Sajat: As a woman!

Carla Hayden: ...of color.

Kim Sajat: Not just that, Tubman was doing all this despite having sustained an injury that had lasting physical consequences.

Kasi Lemmons: Not only is she tiny and a woman, she falls periodically into seizures.

Kim Sajat: Right!

Kim Sajat: Kasi Lemmons is the Director of, "Harriet," the biographical film about Harriet Tubman that was released in 2019. Cynthia Erivo, who played Harriet, was nominated for two Academy Awards: Best Actress and Best Song.

[MUSIC]

CLIP OF CYNTHIA ERIVO AS 'HARRIET' FROM THE FILM, "HARRIET": If I'm free, my family should be too. I made up my mind. I'm going back.

[MUSIC]

CLIP FROM THE FILM, "HARRIET": Why are you back here? It ain't safe.

[MUSIC]

CLIP OF CYNTHIA ERIVO AS 'HARRIET' FROM THE FILM, "HARRIET": I come to get you.
[MUSIC]

CLIP OF CYNTHIA ERIVO AS 'HARRIET' FROM THE FILM, "HARRIET": Bring all of you to freedom.

[MUSIC]

Kasi Lemmons: So, you can imagine following somebody. You're running for your life. And this is a person who periodically will fall completely unconscious and cannot be waked. And also, she had religious trances. She would fall into a trance and start kind of moaning to herself, and swaying back and forth. So, she was absolutely peculiar. You know?

Kim Sajet: Yeah.

Kasi Lemmons: And I think that people might have doubted her, but came to believe they met one of these very, very special people who might be touched in some way.

Kim Sajet: Harriet's visions began after she sustained a head injury.

Kasi Lemmons: She went into a market. The market was at a crossroads and an overseer pursued a slave, who we're not sure if this was a runaway or not, but he was somebody that was off the plantation at that moment. And the foreman was furious and she stepped between them as the foreman, or whoever it was, threw a farm weight from the counter at her head.

Kim Sajet: Brave woman, right from the very beginning. And how long was she out? Because she was unconscious for awhile, correct? Did you...

Kasi Lemmons: She was unconscious for quite awhile and we know that her head was bleeding. It was cracked open and the kerchief on her head was driven into her head actually, and that they didn't want her bleeding all over the place. And they put her in a room that had some sort of loom in it. And they sat her on the loom. And then she was made to work in the fields and that the blood ran into her eyes.

Kim Sajet: Wow.

Kasi Lemmons: So, we know shortly afterwards, while she was still bleeding, she was made to work in the fields.

Kim Sajet: And then the visions started at that point?

Kasi Lemmons: Yes. She attributes this to the start of her, her visions and which are related to, you know, some sort of seizures that she had, and that she had as a result of this injury and which she thought brought her closer to God.

Kim Sajet: I've often looked at those pictures and I'm not sure if I can see where the impact of that object hit her or there's always something a little bit about her eyes. I'm not sure if I'm making that up or whether you see that too.

Kasi Lemmons: We're not sure exactly where it hit her.

Kim Sajat: Ah!

Kasi Lemmons: One thing I used in the movie was in very high-resolution pictures, you see a mark between her eyes and that's what I used in the film.

Kim Sajat: Like Carla Hayden, Kasi did not see the full measure of Harriet Tubman in the famous portrait of her as an older woman.

Kasi Lemmons: She has in her eyes in the 1885 portrait, a deep sorrow.

Kim Sajat: Yes!

Kasi Lemmons: And in her mouth. She has deep sorrow on her face. And one could almost see if one didn't know her story, one might even see resignation, but of course, we know. Knowing her story, we know it's not resignation at all. So, the portrait itself can be misleading in terms of her character.

Kim Sajat: But then, in 2017, something happened that would rock the world of scholars and curators alike.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajat: We began to hear whispers that another portrait of Tubman had been found. A photograph lost to history for nearly 150 years.

[MUSIC]

Carla Hayden: I was part of really, almost a discovery (laughs) of the opportunity to see Harriet Tubman in a new light.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Coming up after a quick break, we hear how Carla Hayden came to collect such a treasured piece of history. And Kim shares a suspicion that there might be more Tubman photos out there waiting to be discovered.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We're back! And when we left the, "Portraits" episode, we were hearing about how the real Harriet Tubman was a tough woman of action, bravely leading troops, and helping enslaved African Americans to freedom, despite her small stature and a serious injury. So, let's jump into this second segment of, "Portraits." Here's Kim.

Kim Sajat: So, it's 2017 and Carla gets a call and a colleague on the other end says...

Carla Hayden: "We have an opportunity to be part of a purchase with the new African American Museum." And so, I'm listening and thinking, "Okay." And then the person said, "The first known photograph of Harriet Tubman." And I said, "What? What do you mean? What type of photo?" And they said, "She's young!" (Laughs). And that's really was the expression, "She's young!"

Kim Sajat: Young! As in approximately 45 years old. Carla couldn't believe her ears.

Carla Hayden: "What? What do you mean young? What's it look like? Where was it taken?" So, I had a lot of questions. So, it was exciting! And what it was was the earliest known photograph of Harriet Tubman, dated from about 1868 to '69, right when she was saying what had happened to her, when she was being recorded, when people were recognizing after the Civil War, Lincoln had been killed, all these things were going on. And here is Harriet Tubman as you'd never seen her before. And I remember the first time that I got a chance to really look at the photograph. It was, "Oh my God! This is the woman..."

Kim Sajet: Yeah!

Carla Hayden: "...that lead troops and that was so forceful and was a nurse and did all of these things and was so determined." This is Harriet Tubman in her prime.

Kim Sajet: The photograph was in an album that the Library of Congress eventually acquired jointly with the National Museum of African American History and Culture at the Smithsonian. It had belonged to a Quaker teacher named Emily Howland, who worked at a freedman's camp. Emily was also an artist, abolitionist and suffragist and she added photographs to the album over the years. Some were family members; many were friends and some were historical figures like Tubman. I asked Carla Hayden how she felt when she saw Tubman's new portrait with her own eyes.

Carla Hayden: I'm in the position as Librarian of Congress, which was already quite personally significant because professionally, first female, so you can imagine, joy in mudville for my library.

Kim Sajet: (Laughs). Popping that champagne cork.

Carla Hayden: Oh boy! Librarians, yes! However, as a person of color, to be the Librarian of Congress was so personally significant and to be a descendent of people who were punished, whipped. There were so many laws about people who looked like me learning to read to then be put in the position to be the Head... still hard to say that sometimes... of the largest library in the world was just overwhelming.

Kim Sajet: Yeah.

Carla Hayden: You see, but to have the curator finally bring the item up to the office to a special room with, and you can imagine there was white gloves everywhere and everything because it was very fragile. The album itself was... think about a pack of cards, but very thick and the binding was loose and it was fragile. You could tell, but then to open it up and you have to carefully open it up. And then to see it there. She actually sat for that and I'm looking at what come out of that camera and that process was just something.

Kim Sajet: A copy of young Harriet's portrait also made its way to Hollywood in a sense. Here's Director Kasi Lemmons again.

Kasi Lemmons: I was in the office of a Producer, who'd begun to talk to me about making a movie on Harriet Tubman and she showed me this picture that surfaced that I had never seen before. And it's not too much to say that I fell in love when I saw this picture of Harriet Tubman.

Kim Sajat: Kasi's film focuses on the younger Tubman, escaping slavery and going back to rescue others. Cynthia Erivo plays her as brave and determined, but also warm and loving.

Kasi Lemmons: One of the things that I learned about Harriet and learned about her story that was incredibly moving to me and that I did not know before was that its really a love story.

Harriet was motivated by love. Love of her family, love for her husband, and then rescuing her people was connected to that, but almost incidental. It started with love of family.

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Kasi Lemmons: She's slender. She's much younger. Her hair is, is wavy. She's wearing a beautiful dress or skirt with a bodice that is very sophisticated looking. The top of it is quite delicate. It has many buttons down the front and the sleeves are ruched. She looks graceful and she looks at home in her own skin. And she's looking at the camera. A very direct look. If you look carefully at her eyes, you see so much. You see sadness and you see... I see righteousness and I see the power. You see incredible power in her eyes. It's a very compelling photograph.

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Kim Sajat: So, was that the moment where you said, “Yes, I'll take on this project?”

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Kasi Lemmons: Yeah. If I hadn't vocalized it at that moment (laughs)...

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Kim Sajat: (Laughs).

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Kasi Lemmons: ... it was going to be in the next five minutes. (Laughs).

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Kim Sajat: (Laughs). It's like all right. You're on!

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Kasi Lemmons: We wanted to bring young Harriet because this is a time in her life where she was doing her most exciting work. Her life lends itself inherently to an adventure story.

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Kim Sajat: Yes!

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Kasi Lemmons: But we couldn't connect the image of her as an old, almost kindly looking, yet but slightly stern old lady to the stories we knew of her heroics. And so, that was important. It

was like, we wanted you to feel like you got to sit down with her at a time where she was really involved in incredibly heroic work in her life.

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Voice of Reporter: Political Activist, Harriet Tubman, won't be on the face of the \$20 bill until 2028. The bill was intended to be released as part of the 100th Anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote.

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Kim Sajet: And would you put the young Harriet on the money?

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Kasi Lemmons: I would put the young Harriet on the money.

[MUSIC – “Stand Up” From the Film, “Harriet”]

Lizzie Peabody: Wow! What a great story and an incredible find. So, tell me about how this photo came to be discovered then.

Kim Sajet: It came up on auction, and there's a whole backstory that I have completely got obsessed with and it relates to this remarkable woman called Emily Howland. So, Harriet's picture is the last picture in an album that Emily Howland collected. Now, Emily Howland was born in 1827, and she died in 1929. And she was this amazing woman. She was a Quaker. She was an abolitionist. She was a teacher, but where she shares a history with Harriet Tubman is they were friends. And her album, if you look at it, is made up of these incredible groups of reformers who believed in education, land reform, quite a few suffragists too, as we know, Harriet was also someone who fought for women to get the vote. And they knew all these people: Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Sojourner Truth would go and stay at Emily's house.

Lizzie Peabody: How common is it for a photograph like this new one of younger Harriet Tubman to turn up after more than 100 years?

Kim Sajet: It's not that common, but I do have to say what's super interesting for everyone out there is that this was a carte de visite. And cartes de visite were taken in either fours, eights, you could even get a camera that would take 12 pictures at a time.

Lizzie Peabody: To get 12 pictures from a camera, that camera needed to have 12 lenses. And Kim says that since there were probably multiple lenses, that means there are likely multiple pictures.

Kim Sajet: Yeah! It's highly probable that there are other portraits of the exact same Harriet Tubman out there in the universe, unless they were tragically destroyed. So, while we have this one that was found of her at a really young age, it's highly likely there are at least three others if not more...

Lizzie Peabody: Wow!

Kim Sajat: ...out there.

Lizzie Peabody: That's wild to think. So, I have a couple follow up questions. You've mentioned cartes de visite, which I think literally, in French, means a visiting card.

Kim Sajat: Hmm, mmm.

Lizzie Peabody: Right?

Kim Sajat: Right, but it didn't actually work like that in America. The visiting card was this idea that you would come and you'd present yourself. It's a little bit like our business cards today. However, there's no big coincidence that they became hugely successful because they were very cheap. You could get about 12 for something around \$20. And of course, as we're sending soldiers, and nurses, and doctors, and everyone out to war, literally hundreds of thousands of these cartes de visites were found on the bodies of the slain or in the pockets of.... It was a, it was a, it was a comfort to a nation to know that, in fact, you could carry around the portrait of your loved one. And it's really the first time that portraiture comes off its pedestal and it becomes egalitarian. So, everyone can afford to get a carte de visite made and then we give them to their friends as a sort of a friendship thing.

Lizzie Peabody: And in that spirit of friendship, Emily Howland received this photo album as a gift. This was during the Civil War, while she was working as a teacher in a sort of a refugee camp set up by the Union soldiers to protect formerly enslaved African Americans flooding North.

Kim Sajat: And it was a New Year's gift. It was, it's dated January the first, 1864. And, and so she's, you know, to my friend Emily, and she gives her this album and this was really common. And it likely had one, maybe two pictures and then over the following couple years of... She would fill the pages with the people that she admired. I should mention that Harriet is included in the album twice. She's the only person that's in there twice.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajat: She fills this album with her friends, who are kick-ass people in every way, the reformers. What's also very unusual is three quarters of the album are women, about 10%, a very large proportion for a white woman are African Americans. So, Emily's album really is a symbol of what she believed and the company she kept.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: What a great illustration of what the, "Portraits" podcast does is it takes a single image and then we've wrapped it. There's so many different historical layers to peel back. It's just fascinating.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajat: You know, I actually say in the interview with Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress, that it's a perfect example of her world and my world coming together because it looks like a book, but inside is a Portrait Gallery.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: That was Kim Sajet, Director of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, and Host of the podcast, "Portraits." As you can hear, Kim really knows her stuff, and the podcast features great interviews. You can hear more art and history stories from Kim by subscribing to, "Portraits" wherever you're listening to this!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Don't forget to check out, "Portraits" on Apple Podcasts! And while you're there, leave us a review! It's like a little written carte de visite that tells future historians, "This person enjoyed Sidedoor." And check us out on Instagram and Twitter @sidedoorpod. We'll share both of the Tubman portraits that we talked about there.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks to Ruth Morris, Concetta Duncan, and Samantha Musser.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Greg Fisk. Extra support comes from John, Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. Other episode music is by Joe Kye.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, email sponsorship@prx.org.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: And in most cases, what happens is people would show their families and there was a lot of griping about this. A lot of people said, you know, spare me another visit...

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Kim Sajet: ...to so and so's family and looking at all their boring relatives.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). Oh gosh!