

Daguerreotype



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Photo J.G. Eynard-Lullin (c. 1842–1863) – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen

1. WHAT IS A DAGUERREOTYPE?

The daguerreotype was the first successful photographic process in the history of photography. On January 7, 1839 the daguerreotype was presented at the *Académie des sciences* in Paris. The daguerreotype is named after Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851), who invented the process together with Nicéphore Niépce (1765–1833).

The basis of the daguerreotype is a highly polished metal plate, consisting of a wafer-thin layer of silver on a copper support. In contrast to photographic paper, a daguerreotype is not flexible and is rather heavy.



Front and back side of a naked daguerreotype plate (after 1843)
Photographer unknown – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen

2. HISTORY AND CONTEXT

2.1 REAL AND SHARP

‘Accurate, detailed, and sharp’. This is how **Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre’s** invention was described in the press in 1839. Not just the sharpness but also the abundance of details gave spectators the impression that they were seeing something which actually existed. The need to see reality and the subsequent demand for images was strongest in the countries and regions most affected by the Industrial Revolution. It was in these areas that were more advanced in terms of the industrialisation, production, and distribution of goods that the necessary materials for the production of photographic images were available. Thus it was almost unavoidable that photography should originate in the United Kingdom and France.

2.2 THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPHERS

Even before Daguerre’s manual was translated and the first camera’s and supplies were made available in Paris, many set out to produce an image using ‘self-made’ cameras and chemical concoctions. The spread of this revolutionary medium was relatively rapid. By 1839 or early 1840, the process had already been introduced in several countries, including the United Kingdom, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Germany. **Samuel Morse**, the inventor of the Morse Code, introduced the medium in the United States in 1839. The daguerreotype was greeted with much enthusiasm and enjoyed a longer life (up to 1900) than in Europe.

2.3 IMPROVEMENTS TO THE PROCESS

The long exposure time, made necessary by the reduced light sensitivity of the plates and the lack of large aperture objective lenses, was the main stumbling block during the initial period. Exposures could only be made outside or where there was plenty of daylight available. Exposure times ranged from five to thirty minutes, depending on the weather conditions and the time of day during which the exposure was made. The vulnerability of the plates and the lack of colour were also a handicap.

Daguerreotypes were also very expensive and unaffordable for the larger part of the population. This does not alter the fact that the process was considered a new source of income by numerous business men, who, aided by scientists and engineers, worked out various important improvements (to the process) between 1839 and 1840.

An overview of a few important improvements:

- **GOLD TONING:**

L.A.H. Fizeau's gold toning produced a clear, strong, and stable image and became part of the standard process from 1840 on. It involved the dipping of the plate in a warmed solution of gold chloride after it had been fixed.

- **LUMINOUS INTENSITY AND LIGHT SENSITIVITY:**

- In May 1841, F.J. Claudet considerably improved the light sensitiveness of the daguerreotype plate by using various light sensitive silver salts: iodide, bromide, and chloride.

- Adaptation of the studio interior, such as mirrors to direct the light and blue windows (the light sensitive layer was more sensitive to blue light), improved the process further.

- J. Petzval's first mathematically precise and large aperture-lens was another important breakthrough. The optical company Voigtländer manufactured the lens and its corresponding camera.

- **PERFECT HIGH GLOSS:**

Various other improvements followed, including some concerning the preparatory treatment of the plate. From 1850 on, it became possible to galvanise plates, a process through which a silver layer of higher purity is applied by means of an electric current. A perfect high gloss of the plate was achieved by using special polishing equipment. The more visible polishing lines caused by manual polishing, made way for the sophisticated lines made by the polishing equipment.

2.4 THE FIRST CLIENTS

Numerous portrait studios opened their doors. Depending on the used equipment and materials, the sizes of the plates, and the available light, the exposure times range from 15 to 25 seconds per portrait. The portrait studio's clients, that is, those who could afford a daguerreotype, belonged to a first generation of people who had achieved a higher lifestyle thanks to the economic development. They therefore often wanted to show off their newly acquired status in their portraits. Beautiful furniture and various accessories were fixed elements in the décor in which they posed. The sitters posed sitting on a chair fitted with a metal neck brace, which enabled them to keep still for the entire duration of the exposure. The bourgeoisie's demand for portraits led to the enormous success and rapid spread of daguerreotype photography throughout Europe and the United States.

The mutual competition between photographers and studios caused a decrease in prices and enormous quantities of daguerreotypes flooded the market.

2.5 THE UNITED KINGDOM – A SPECIAL CASE

In the United Kingdom, the introduction of the daguerreotype followed a quite different course. The production of daguerreotypes was only permitted under the license of R. Beard. In 1841, Beard was the first to open a photo studio in the United Kingdom and to acquire a license for the process. The purchase of a license was so prohibitive that the number of licensees remained very limited. The extreme patent control affected the spread of the daguerreotype in the United Kingdom, which consequently remained quite restricted.

2.6 TOPICS

Even though the portrait remained the most popular format, the daguerreotype was used to record many other topics as well. Topographic and documentary subjects were handled, but places, objects, natural phenomena, and remarkable events were also portrayed.

2.7 COMPETITION

Despite the profound impact William Henry Fox Talbot's (almost simultaneous) invention of calotype photography and saltprint in the United Kingdom later had, , initially this reproducible negative-positive process had to make way for the unique, non-reproducible daguerreotype. The daguerreotype's advantage was that it met the demand for highly detailed and sharp reproductions of reality, in contrast to other paper-related processes.

In the course of the years from 1840 onward, however, most of the weak points of the salted paper print and the calotype were gradually resolved. Because of these improvements, more and more photographers offered, aside from daguerreotypes, photographs on paper as well. The aim was to develop a sharper and more transparent negative. They also looked for materials other than paper as a carrier for the image. Thus paper negatives were treated with wax to increase transparency and to suppress the disturbing paper fiber. The print was improved through the application of a light sensitive layer onto the paper so as to produce a sharper photo image.

In this way, in 1850 Louis-Désiré Blanquart-Evrard made improvements to the salted paper print process and introduced the albumen print – which uses a thin layer of albumen emulsion on the print paper to produce the desired clarity.

Frederick Scott Archer developed a recording technique in 1851 based on the use of a collodion emulsion on glass. This process could easily be combined with the albumin print. As a result, wet collodion came to prevail over all the other recording techniques, including daguerreotypes, within a relatively short time span. The advent of the carte-de-visite portrait in 1854 made the paper-based processes increasingly more popular. And as photography continued to evolve, the daguerreotype's uniqueness proved its biggest disadvantage.



O. Kriegsmann, Portrait of a little girl in angel's dress, c. 1901, daylight paper, carte-de-visite



Silver hallmark of manufacturer Charles Christofle (Paris, France), 1850 – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen



Hallmark with silver content, c. 1848-1860
– FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen



Perforations in the plate caused by the clamps
used when polishing the plate (c.1840-1855)
Photographer unknown
– FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen



Example of polishing lines on a daguerreotype (c.1840-1843)
Photographer unknown – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DAGUERREOTYPE

3.1 THE NAKED PLATE

3.1.1 *Standard sizes*

The production of plates for daguerreotyping became a standardised process from very early on. Manufacturers used standard sizes, a practise comparable to today's use of paper formats such as A4, A3,... etc.

One of the most popular sizes amongst European daguerreotypes is 1,8 x 8,1 cm, also known as the quarter plate.

3.1.2 *Silver hallmarking*

Silver plating was a legally regulated and controlled process. Manufacturers hallmarked their product with a silver hallmark. This embossed emblem of roughly half a square centimetre is usually found in one of the corners of the plate. A hallmark normally consists of the manufacturer's logo and a number indicating the silver content. Silver hallmarks can contain useful information pertaining to the provenance of a daguerreotype.

3.1.3 *Mirror-polished*

The photographer would usually prepare the daguerreotype plates for use himself, which also left its traces. On order to obtain a mirror-polished surface, he would polish the plate using specialised instruments. This process is visible in the extremely fine polishing lines which run parallel across the surface. A plate during preparation was never to be touched by hand. Special clamps were used instead. The usage of these clamps is often visible through bent edges and corners. Some of the clamps even perforated the plate or left an indented pattern. These elements also provide information concerning a daguerreotype's history and use.



Example of bent corners
on a daguerreotype (after 1843)
Photographer unknown
– FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen

3.1.4 *Trimming plates*

Some cameras or plate holders were not made to the standard sizes of plates and required a custom size. The Viennese model (Voigtländer), for instance, used circular plates. The daguerreotypist himself had to then trim the plates. This explains why some plates have a skewed side or a missing hallmark.



Voigtländer Ganzmetallkamera (replica 1956) – 1840-1841
– FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen
Instrument for circular daguerreotype plates with a diameter of 90 mm.
Equipped with a Petzval objective, opening 1:3,7, f.149 mm

3.1.5 *Grainless*

The daguerreotype is unique as it is created through direct exposure in the camera. This means that from the daguerreotype no further prints can be made. The exposed silver plate is developed with mercury fumes. The exposed areas consist of microscopic silver-mercury amalgam particles. This amalgam is milky grey/white and matte; the grey tones in this way correspond with the recorded subject. The light-sensitive silver salts on the unexposed areas remain unchanged and are removed during the fixing and washing. On these places the silver mirror surface of the plate becomes visible.

When something dark is reflected off of the polished silver the amalgam seems white next to the black parts. Compared to an enlargement of a negative, a daguerreotype looks virtually grainless. Today's viewer thus experiences it as an image with an exceptionally high resolution.

3.1.6 *Slight accent*

A daguerreotype rendered no colours. Rather, colour was applied when desired, and was usually done with paint. The applications varied from a slight accent here and there - such as a red blush on someone's cheek or coloured-in clothing - to more rigorous colourings which might include entire atmospheric backgrounds. Jewels in particular were touched up with gold paint or etched into the silver coating to obtain a glittering effect.



Portrait of Jozefina Nelsen in floodlight (c. 1853–1865)
Photo André F. J. Dupont – Letterenhuis, Antwerp



Colouring of an erotic stereodaguerreotype (c. 1850)
Photographer unknown – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen

3.2 THE INSEPARABLE HOUSING

A naked plate (a daguerreotype without its housing) seldom occurs. The housing is an essential component of the daguerreotype. This is mainly because the plates are extremely vulnerable. A good housing is solid, well fitting and to a certain extent airtight. It has to contain at least the following components:

- *A sturdy base or ‘backing’*
- *A way to keep the daguerreotype in its place (plate securing), for instance by using strips of adhesive paper*
- *A cover glass to protect the image side of the plate*
- *A seal/binding to keep all the parts together and to protect the plate from harmful influences*

The housing had to protect the daguerreotype but it could also have an aesthetic aspect. This was primarily expressed in colours and designs on matting and decorative papers. The protective cover glass was sometimes painted as well which resulted in a frame that was more even and tight than a mat. Painted glass covers often occurred in combination with mats, providing a characteristic effect.

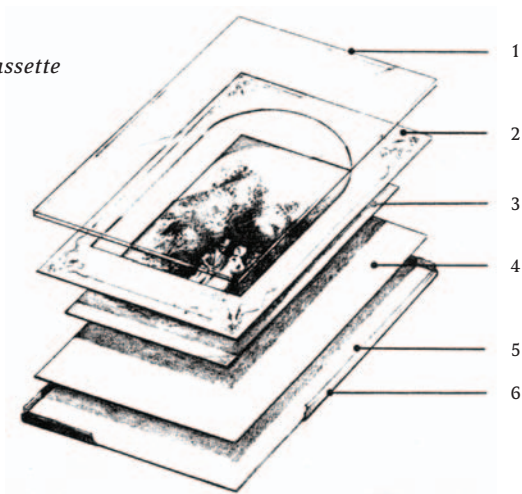
Daguerreotypists often decorated bindings and cover papers with relief prints - for example in a diamond pattern or in the shape of a flower.

3.2.1 *Cassette and case*

There are two types of housing for daguerreotypes: an open ‘European’ model and a closed ‘Anglo-American’ one. The terms ‘cassette’ and ‘case’ are also used to distinguish between the two. The cassette was mainly found on the European continent and consisted mainly of glass and paper or cardboard. In this model the image is directly visible so that the owner could give it a fixed place in the house, framed or not according to taste.

3.2.2 Construction of the cassette

1. COVER GLASS
2. PAPER MAT
3. PLATE
4. BACKING
5. FINISHING PAPER
6. BINDING



Construction of a European daguerreotype
– Illustration T. Pritchard



Photo J.G. Eynard-Lullin (c. 1842–1863) – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen

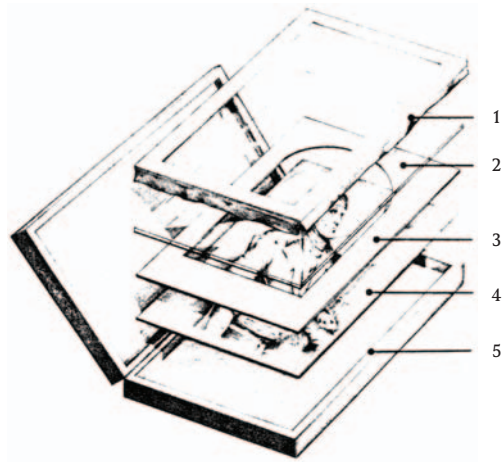
3.2.3 *Folded shut*

The case was the standard housing in the United Kingdom and North America. It usually consisted of a wooden base covered with leather or paper. An early form of plastic was also used. This thermoplastic material consisted of finely ground shellac and coloured sawdust, and was pressed in steel moulds for making the cases. Cases made with this plastic are known as 'union cases'. Although the shellac-plastic is often confused with gutta-percha plastic (an early plastic-based hard rubber), union cases were never made from the latter.

The case could be carried like a wallet, and had a hinge and a clasp so it could be closed. The inside was lined and able to hold either one or two daguerreotypes.

3.2.4 *Construction of the case*

1. PRESERVER;
a strip of flexible brass that
clamps the parts together
2. GLASS COVER
3. BRASS MAT
4. PLATE
5. HINGED CASE



Construction of an Anglo-American daguerreotype
– Illustration T. Pritchard

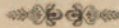


Photographer unknown (c. 1840–1865) – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen

HISTORIQUE ET DESCRIPTION
DES PROCÉDÉS
DU
DAGUERRÉOTYPE
et du Diorama,

PAR DAGUERRE,
Peintre, inventeur du Diorama, Officier de la Légion-d'Honneur,
membre de plusieurs Académies, etc.

Nouvelle Edition,
CORRIGÉE, ET AUGMENTÉE DU PORTRAIT DE L'AUTEUR.



Paris,
ALPHONSE GIROUX ET C^{ie}, ÉDITEURS,
RUE DU COQ-SAINT-HONORÉ, N^o 7,
où se fabriquent les Appareils;
ET CHEZ LES PRINCIPAUX LIBRAIRES, PAPETIERS,
Marchands d'Estampes et Opticiens.

1839.

4. DAGUERRE'S INSTRUCTION MANUAL

The publication of Daguerre's *Description pratique du procédé nommé le Daguerreotype* in 1839 was big news. Interest in the treatise was so overwhelming that it was reprinted several times, not always with Daguerre's permission.

In combination with the required equipment, certified by Daguerre himself, they sold like hot cakes.



Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, 1839 – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen

Making a daguerreotype was a very labour intensive undertaking. Numerous steps were involved and very toxic products were used that affected not only the plates but also the photographer's health. Following is a summary of Daguerre's manual with a short description on the making of daguerreotypes.

"The process is divided into five procedures."

1. THE POLISHING AND CLEANING OF THE PLATE.
2. THE APPLICATION OF THE LIGHT-SENSITIVE LAYER.
3. THE EXPOSURE OF THE PLATE TO LIGHT IN THE CAMERA OBSCURA.
4. MAKING THE LATENT IMAGE VISIBLE.
5. THE REMOVING OF THE LIGHT-SENSITIVE LAYER,
SO AS TO PREVENT FURTHER DEVELOPMENT.

4.1 STEP 1: "ONE SHOULD BEGIN BY SCRUBBING THE PLATE WELL."

REQUIREMENTS: *olive oil, a piece of very finely combed cotton, extremely finely ground pumice in a muslin bag, nitric acid dissolved in water (1:16), iron thread rack, spirit burner.*

Sift some pumice through the muslin onto the silver surface of the plate. Rub in a circular motion with a piece of cotton soaked in olive oil. Regularly refresh the piece of cloth. Remove the oil and grit with a clean cloth. Apply the acid with a wad of cotton wool. Make sure that the acid does not fall in drips but is spread equally so that the plate is covered with an even film. Polish again, this time lightly.

Lay the plate on the rack, with the silver in the flame of the burner. After about five minutes the surface will acquire a whitish film. Lay the plate on a cold surface and polish away just the whitish layer. Treat with acid another two times. Repeat this one more time before using the plate, followed by light polishing. Finally clean the plate well with a piece of cotton.

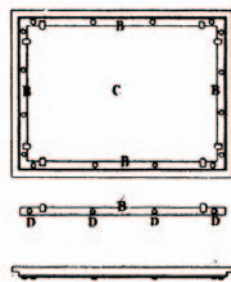
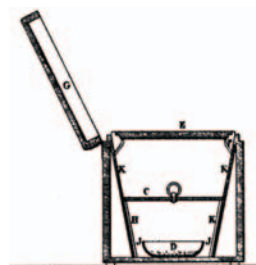


Plate holder, 1839
— Illustration from Daguerre's manual

4.2 STEP 2: "THE PLATE SHOULD BE LEFT IN PLACE UNTIL THE SILVER SURFACE IS COVERED WITH A FINE GOLDEN YELLOW VEIL."

REQUIREMENTS: *box for vaporising iodine, plate holder, cassette of the camera obscura, four metal strips, a punch and a box of pins, iodine.*

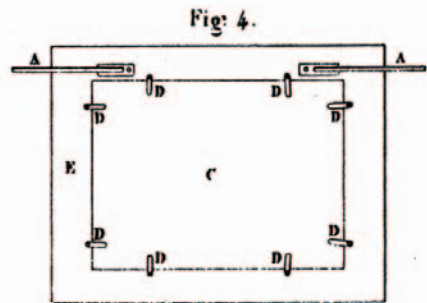
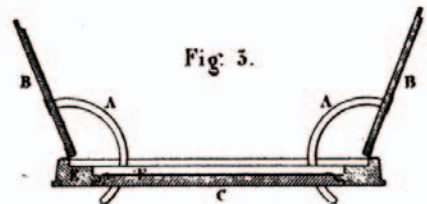
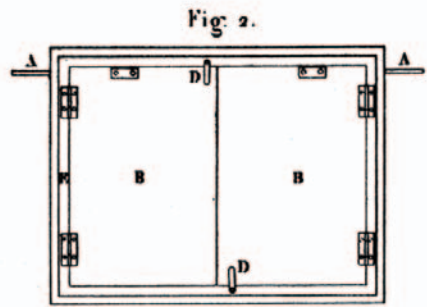
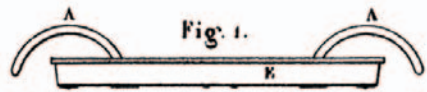
First clamp the plate in the holder by means of the metal strips. Use the punch to push the pins into the side. Spread the iodine in the basin at the bottom of the box. Cover it with muslin to equalise the vapour and at the same time to prevent spray on the plate when the cover is snapped shut. Place the cassette with the plate facing downwards on the four corners at the opening and gently close the cover.



Box for vaporising iodine, 1839
— Illustration from Daguerre's manual

For the following procedure there is no fixed time span, as it depends on various factors. It normally takes between five and thirty minutes, during which the silver surface should become golden yellow. It is important to monitor this change closely: to prevent it from acquiring a purple colour, place the box in a space with just enough light. A room with the door ajar, for example, is suitable. Inspection of the plate should in that case be done quickly.

When the colour reaches the desired tone, the holder can be placed into the cassette that fits onto the camera obscura. Additional light can be provided by a candle, but avoid exposing the plate to direct light. Preferably make the exposure immediately, or within an hour.



Cassette of the camera obscura, 1839
— Illustration from Daguerre's manual

4.3 STEP 3: “ALL THAT REMAINS NOW IS TO OPEN THE DIAPHRAGM OF THE CAMERA OBSCURA AND TO CONSULT A WATCH TO COUNT THE MINUTES.”

REQUIREMENTS: *camera obscura*.

Place the camera in front of a brightly illuminated object. Adjust the focus by moving the matte glass screen forwards or backwards. Place the cassette onto the camera, without dislodging it. Cover the lens and then open the doors of the cassette in the camera with the handles. Everything is now ready for the exposure. Open the lens and count the minutes.



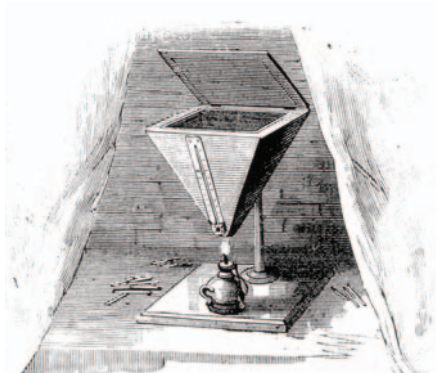
Making the exposure in the studio
– 19th century engraving

“In Paris the exposure time varies between three and thirty minutes, in more southern countries it is shorter. The season and time of day are of considerable influence.”

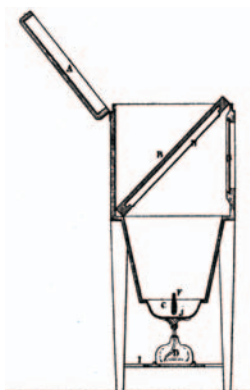
4.4 STEP 4: “THE IMPRESSION OF THE IMAGE OF NATURE EXISTS ON THE PLATE, BUT IT IS NOT VISIBLE.”

REQUIREMENTS: *at least a kilogram of mercury, spirit burner, box for vaporising mercury, glass funnel with a long tube, box with slits.*

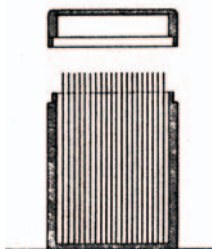
Use nothing more than a candle to illuminate the workplace during this operation. Pour the mercury with the aid of the funnel into the basin at the bottom of the box, until the bulb of the thermometer is submerged. Place the closed cassette obliquely in the box so that the plate can be seen through the little window.



Box for vaporising mercury – 19th century engraving



Box for vaporising mercury, 1839
– Illustration from Daguerre's manual



Box with slits, 1839
– Illustration from Daguerre's manual

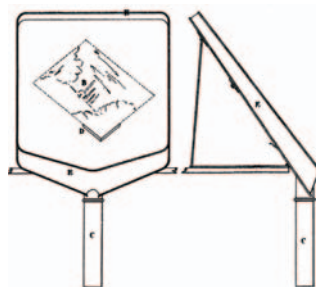
Ignite the burner and heat the mercury to 60°C. Remove the burner immediately as the temperature must not rise above 75°C. In the meantime, follow the development of the image through the little window with a very frugal use of candlelight.

Terminate the development when the temperature falls to 45°C. In case of over-exposure one can stop at a higher temperature. Remove the plate from the holders and let it slide into the intended box. As long as the plate is stored in it, no changes will take place for at least a few months, provided that one does not look at the results too often and not during the day.

4.5 STEP 5: "THE MERCURY THAT DRAWS THE IMAGES IS PARTLY DEPOSITED AND ADHERES TO THE SILVER."

REQUIREMENTS: *hypo (sodium thiosulphate), a tilted tray, two tin-plated copper tubs, a jug of distilled water, a pair of tongs.*

First fill one tank with hypo and one with tap water. Heat the water bath without allowing it to boil. Immerse the plate for a moment in the water and then transfer it to the hypo. Agitate it gently with the tongs. The yellow film on the light-sensitive layer will disappear.



Tilted tray for rinsing the plate, 1839
– Illustration from Daguerre's manual

Put the plate back into the water bath and at the same time bring the distilled water to a boil. Now lay the wet plate into the corners on the tilted tray and pour the boiling water over it. One litre is usually more than enough to rinse away the remaining salt and iodine.

The image obtained can be permanently damaged through the slightest touch. Varnishing results in the image being totally ruined. Plates should be glued down and placed behind glass in order to preserve them; "they are from now on inalterable, even in sunlight."





Mechanical damage to a portrait of an unknown lady
Photographer unknown – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen

5. PRESERVING AND ACCESSING DAGUERREOTYPES

Daguerreotypes are about 150 years old. Undamaged examples are rare or in some cases nonexistent. Yet a daguerreotype lasts much longer than most contemporary photographs if it is protected from certain influences. Air and water, corrosion, mould, insects and, above all, people, can damage and threaten the lifespan of the daguerreotype.

5.1 THE ORIGINAL FORM

The FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen and the Nederlands Fotomuseum try to restore damaged and altered daguerreotypes to their original form. Unfortunately this is not always achievable as it is difficult to determine the original condition. In addition, original cassettes usually have harmful and deteriorated parts which need to be replaced. The conservator tries to fix these damaged parts while altering the outward appearance of the daguerreotype as little as possible. Modern materials – which make an intervention clearly visible – are only used when absolutely necessary. In this way, the conservator is also able to prevent the object from being mistaken for an original.

5.2 WEAKNESSES

Photos, including daguerreotypes, are primarily objects that are a part of people's lives. Daguerreotypists and case builders did not always handle their materials very carefully, and not everyone approached the daguerreotype as if it was a museum piece. Even collectors, museum staff and conservators did not always adopt an ethics of restraint. It is crucial therefore to know how vulnerable a daguerreotype is and where its weaknesses lie. Damage can occur in three ways: mechanical, biological or chemical.

5.2.1 *Mechanical damage*

Mechanical damage is damage caused by physical force. A daguerreotype might fall, so that glass and wooden parts break and the plate becomes deformed, but it can also be actively damaged. Wear and tear are, of course, inevitable. Many plates show scratches – probably because owners wanted to wipe them clean – and fingerprints regularly appear. Yet mechanical damage is not always the result of human intervention. The deterioration of paper and glass can cause the deposition of tiny particles on the plate, penetrating the surface. Or the sharp edges of a mat can scratch away the silver unnoticed.

5.2.2 *Biological damage*

Biological damage is caused by organisms. Insects and fungus can harm a daguerreotype by eroding the cassette for example, or by causing stains. Some organisms even lodge onto the plate.

5.2.3 *Chemical damage*

Chemical influences form a major threat. They are difficult to perceive, are active almost everywhere and hard to control. 'Ordinary' air contains substances and gases that react with all sorts of material, including paper, wood and metal. Oxidation, discoloration and dehydration are the result. The materials used for the housing can also include harmful components, such as acids or glue. Finally, treatment with the wrong substances can seriously damage a daguerreotype. It is not so long ago that daguerreotypes were still restored with 'silver dip' (thiourea), which in the long term can form a milky film on the image.

5.3 ELEKTROLYTIC CLEANING

When it is necessary to clean a plate it is done, after a careful preliminary analysis, by means of electrolysis. This involves laying the plate in a solution of ammonia through which a regulated electric current is then led. Electrolytic cleaning separates deteriorated particles from the silver. Oxidation stains and earlier interventions with 'silver dip' can be removed almost entirely by this method. Electrolysis is not possible however if the plate has been painted or if it has not been gold toned.

5.4 MADE TO MEASURE

In order to preserve the object in the best possible way a so-called 'preservation cassette' is made to measure. This consists of acid-free materials and, if necessary, UV-resistant glass. The parts of the original cassette are usually combined with new parts which are hardly visible but provide much greater stability. Finally, the casing is sealed to keep out harmful gases.



Results of a thiourea treatment and a broken glass cover
 Photographer unknown – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen



Results of a thiourea treatment on a portrait of an unknown man
 Photographer unknown – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen



Results of a thiourea treatment and a broken glass cover
Photographer unknown – FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen

5.5 COMPROMISE

Since daguerreotypes usually consist of many different materials, a compromise has to be made when preserving them. What is best for the plate is less desirable for the wooden or paper components of the housing. One of the least harmful solutions is to preserve the plate at a constant temperature of 18° C and a relative atmospheric humidity (RH) between 45 and 50 per cent - the ideal preservation conditions for paper and cardboard. It is also important that the daguerreotype always be stored flat and with the image side facing down. This should prevent residual elements of the glass corrosion from causing irreparable chemical damage to the image.

6. OPENING

6.1 MEETING PLACE

The conservation studio is a transit zone for photographic collector's items and a centre for gaining available information. It is also the place for learning about daguerrotypes, the plates and cases of which can differ greatly in appearance and quality. Having recorded these divergent characteristics for many years, the Conservation Department has established a source of information of international importance for daguerreotype research.

6.2 EVERY DETAIL

The Nederlands Fotomuseum began developing the Daguerreobase in 2004. This is a digital registration system specifically for daguerreotypes, whereby each object's external and historical characteristics can be accurately described. Daguerreotypes are generally taken apart and carefully documented during conservation. This is done in the museum, and recorded both photographically and in writing. The conservator or registrar is then able to enter all the details that come to light directly into the Daguerreobase where they are stored centrally.

6.3 OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN

For every component, no matter how small, a separate description can be made. This is very useful as every detail can include important information about the history and origin of the object. Similarities between daguerreotypes from other collections, perhaps even originating from other parts of the world, can subsequently be retrieved with a simple search operation.

6.4 ACCREDITATION

An example: a conservation studio is dealing with a daguerreotype of unknown origin. It has a conspicuous mat and a hallmark of which little is known. The description of the mat yields similarities in the Daguerreobase with a series of objects from Hungary, all of which also bear the same hallmark. It is possible that the registrar there has a lot more information regarding the origin of the objects. This could include even the name of the maker and of the person portrayed, a date and an indication of place.

Conclusions can already be drawn on the basis of the information collected, as happened earlier with a series of daguerreotypes that could be ascribed to Carl Rensing, one of the first photographers established in the Netherlands.

6.5 BUNDLED KNOWLEDGE

The goal of the Daguerreobase is to provide access to the data of as many daguerreotypes as possible on a worldwide level. Every addition to the existing information is considered a gain. Generally speaking, daguerreotypes in museum collections are safely stored away. Cross relations between these collections therefore seldom come to light, though they are often precisely the missing piece of the puzzle for researchers. The Daguerreobase is intended to simplify the research in the field of the daguerreotype, and similarly to offer an overview of this unique facet of our global cultural heritage.



Group portrait (c. 1843–1855)
Photo Carl Rensing – Prentenkabinet Leiden

7. THE DAGUERREOTYPE PROJECT AT THE FOTO MUSEUM PROVINCIE ANTWERPEN

The daguerreotype collection of the FotoMuseum consists of 183 pieces. The Flemish Community endorsed the restoration project in function of the daguerreotype collection of the FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen in 2007.

The restoration/accessing project ran for the duration of two years and proposed the following general objectives:

- *Inventorying, conservation, and restoration of the daguerreotype collection of the FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen in order to optimise and warrant accessing and preservation in the long term.*
- *Exchange of expertise and information in the field of the historical daguerreotypes and restoration procedures.*
- *Optimisation of our own registration systems, development and digital archiving of the used restoration databases.*
- *Inputting of the research-related data in the Daguerreobase international database.*
- *Development, digital archiving, and quality control of the Daguerreobase website.*
- *Connect with the wider heritage network through specific research in the area of heritage conservation and management.*

The daguerreotypes from the Fotomuseum's collection were included in the Daguerreobase. Daguerreotypes of the FotoMuseum Provincie Antwerpen and other institutions can be consulted on:

www.daguerreobase.org

8. WANTED: DAGUERREOTYPES!

We are still looking for interesting daguerreotypes for the Daguerreobase so as to expand our expertise pertaining to these objects.

If you wish to obtain more information concerning the Daguerreobase and daguerreotypes, please contact:

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