

IN FOCUS

DAGUERREOTYPES

All nature shall paint herself—fields, rivers, trees, houses, plains, mountains, cities... by virtue of the sun's patent, all nature, animate and inanimate, shall be henceforth its own painter, engraver, printer, and publisher. Here is a revolution in art.

—“New Discovery in the Fine Arts,” *New-Yorker*, April 13, 1839

Shortly after the daguerreotype process was announced in January of 1839, its powers as “nature’s pencil” captured the imagination of the public, many of whom had not yet seen a photograph in person. A direct-positive image fixed on a sensitized silver-coated plate in a camera obscura, the daguerreotype was popularly described as a “mirror with a memory.” This exhibition presents a selection of one-of-a-kind images from the Getty Museum’s collection of over two thousand daguerreotypes, placing them alongside loans from two private collections. The works on view provide a unique vantage point from which to relive the initial shock of photography and to compare its early presence in the world with its omnipresence today.



ARCHITECTURE AND CITYSCAPES

When noted politician and scientist François Arago described the daguerreotype process to the French government in 1839, one of the benefits he outlined was that “one man alone” could potentially copy “millions of [Egyptian] hieroglyphs” that would take “twenty years and legions of draftsmen” to document. This was echoed in the fact that ancient edifices and foreign sites were some of the first subjects for early photographers. Many daguerreotypists traveled long distances to capture the ruins of Greece, Egypt, and the Near East as objects of study or images for sale to virtual tourists back home. Others looked to their own nation’s monuments or focused on vernacular architecture.



A DEMOCRATIC MEDIUM

By 1850 daguerreotype exposure times had decreased so markedly, often to a fraction of a minute, that portrait studios were an international commercial enterprise. The speed and affordability of the medium—in America one could purchase a photograph for today's equivalent of about two to five dollars—meant that more of the population could have their portrait taken, a position previously experienced only by the wealthy. The access to photography was more democratic not only for the sitter but also for the photographer, as manuals and equipment were increasingly available. Likewise, the camera image itself was perceived to be democratic, as the subjectivity of the artist was presumably eclipsed by the unbiased blink of the camera's shutter. Upper- or lower-class sitters, known or unknown individuals, could all be depicted in comparable ways and on similarly sized plates.



MOMENTS IN TIME

All language must fall short of conveying any just idea of the truth... Perhaps, if we imagine the distinctness with which an object is reflected in a positively perfect mirror, we come as near the reality as by any other means.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Daguerreotype,” *Alexander’s Weekly Messenger*, January 1840

Although the daguerreotype was widely undisputed as more like a mirror of reality than any other representational device, one of the initial frustrations with the medium was its inability to capture a fleeting moment. Because of the duration of exposure required to register an image on the plate, moving figures were either not recorded, leaving a street scene eerily empty, or depicted as blurs or ghostlike traces. Nevertheless, the daguerreotype was thought to be unsurpassable as a visual document of historical events.



DEFICIENCIES

The daguerreotype was haunted by two major shortcomings. One was that it could not render natural color, horrifying many sitters with the grayness of their complexions. The other was that, although it offered far better detail than its paper-process competitor (presented by William Henry Fox Talbot in England shortly after Daguerre's invention was announced), the daguerreotype could not be easily reproduced. Several early practitioners and scientists tried to create copies, but the labor and cost it took to produce them could not keep up with the contemporary demand for multiple images.



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