National Treasure Discovered in a Shoebox

*The Royal Palace in the Oldest Photograph of Oslo?*

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III 1. The daguerreotype in its original mounting, typical of the early 1840’s with the octagonal cut white mat and in a thin housing. The image is reversed, a consequence of the daguerreotype process. The National Library of Norway, id. FAU 120, not dated, signed in print “TESTMAN fecit” on the wide gold line of the lithographed mat. Mount size 10,3 x 12,7 cm.
Five years ago this daguerreotype was hidden in a shoebox with a stack of postcards illustrating architectural motifs in Denmark. The box was part of a bequest and it was opened in Copenhagen by an heir who happened to be an expert on the history of photography. Eventually, this unique photograph found a permanent home at the National Library of Norway, not far from the Royal Palace shown in the view. The plate is mounted behind glass and looks like a mirror image on a polished silver surface.

The image has not appeared in publications regarding the history of photography in Norway. Other daguerreotypes of city views exist, views of Bergen and Trondheim, for example, but they were taken more than 10 years later. The Oslo daguerreotype is a view from a spot in the city which was known at that time as Christiania. Christiania was named after the king of Denmark and Norway, Christian IV, who decided to build a new city in 1624 nearer to the Akershus fortress. The location offered better protection from the frequent town fires which afflicted the population of the earlier, wooden settlement further south. The new streets were laid out in a grid pattern and a law limited the use of wood in newly erected buildings. In 1924 the name of the city was changed to Oslo. Today

III 2. Image digitally reversed shows that the light is coming from the left (fjord side) and highlights the palace’s southern aspect. The palace façade with its short columns and high roof were modified ca. 1846. Following major alterations, the palace had a flat roof and a covered balcony which was supported by taller columns.
this, the oldest part of central Oslo, started in 1624 is called Kvadraturen.

The daguerreotype quickly became the world’s first widely-used photographic technique, but its introduction into Norway was slow. There are very few specimens which date before 1845, somewhere made by travelling foreigners including Carl Ferdinand Stelzner. Its popularity peaked around 1855, then dwindled towards the end of the decade when other processes, which were cheaper and easier to use, allowed photographers to make multiple copies from glass plates negatives. Although these alternatives spread rapidly through Europe, some photographers in Norway continued to make daguerreotypes until as late as 1868.

This image is one of the oldest photographs known in Norway. It is in relatively good condition, its reasonably intact housing having provided adequate protection, although air and impurities have penetrated the paper-sealed housing. The reverse is covered with a piece of thin blue paper holding the metal plate. The sharp edges of the plate have cut through the paper, allowing air to enter. Degeneration has begun to appear at the edges surrounding the image on its shiny polished silver surface in the form of dark silver sulphide (tarnish), which is often present on daguerreotypes.

To prevent further damage, an extra layer of glass was placed on both the verso and recto and a new seal was attached at the edges. It is presently kept cool and safe in an archival box in one of the National Library’s climate-controlled rooms in underground storage where only a few employees have access to it.

The view over the chimneys and roofs of the city focuses on the considerable volume of the Royal Palace. Like most early daguerreotypes, this image is optically inverted, which initially made it difficult

III 3. Detail from Christiania with Nearest Surroundings, map by Carl B. Roosen dated 1843. Here we see that the Palace (centre) is clearly located outside Christiania. The University buildings are indicated, but only half of them were built at the time. The layout of Karl Johans gate and adjoining streets is marked. National Library of Norway, Map 483h
III 4. Reversed close up of the Palace
to pin-point the exact location from which it was taken [Ill. 2]. A daguerreotype image is made by a lengthy process which produces one picture only. There is no negative, and no further identical copies can be made from it.

**THE FIRST NORVEGIAN DAGUERREOTYPE CITYSCAPE**

The Palace is the most obvious element in the composition; the buildings in the foreground are actually quite a distance away from the royal residence, which stood outside the city [Ill. 3]. The optical resolution near the centre of the image is very good. Magnification enables us to count all the Palace windows, also on its foreshortened side wing [Ill. 4].

**THE PALACE HAS BEEN PHOTOGRAPHED BY OTHERS**

The first Norwegian daguerreotypist and professional portrait photographer, Oluf Frederik Knudsen, who established his portrait studio in 1842 in Christiania, made a “successful picture” there in the summer of 1840 and his image received a favourable review in the influential paper *Morgenbladet* on December 23rd, 1840. Unfortunately, this daguerreotype has not been located.

The very first Norwegian photographer, Hans Thøger Winther (1786-1851) had photographed on paper the streets and the magnificent building possibly as early as in 1839 or by 1843 at the latest. His viewpoint was from a spot a stone’s throw from where he lived and conducted an extensive publishing activity with a rental library, bookstore, publishing house, book printing and lithographic press [Ill. 5]. Winther’s interest in photography developed rapidly after January 1839, and he independently developed three methods to make photographs on paper in just over three years. His “light images on paper,” as he called his own inventions, were described in his book *Instructions “On How To Make Light Images On Paper In Three Different Manners”* which he printed in his own establishment in 1845, after several failed attempts to sell it by subscription in Christiania, Stockholm and Copenhagen (1842, 1843) and later in Leipzig (1844). Winther’s criticism of the daguerreotype’s weaknesses and his interest in promoting his paper-based photography may have been partly responsible for the lukewarm Norwegian approach to Daguerre’s process.

**DATING BY SUBJECT MATTER**

The photograph has not been dated by the author so it is not possible to pinpoint the date of the exposure. However, based on existing information about the history of the Royal Palace and the history of the camera, it seems reasonable to date the image close to 1843. The Palace building in the daguerreotype has a gabled roof and a facade with short pillars at ground level in the middle. None of the major changes that would come in 1846 appear to have been started.

An illustration of The Royal Palace in a dated map [Ill. 6] shows the building with a flat roof but unchanged facade. If the picture is reliably dated 1844, it would support the theory that the rebuilding of the roof was completed first, beginning in 1844 but that the facade remained unchanged at that time. The official dating of the completed rebuilding is 1846, while the interior had been fully furnished by 1849.

**THE FAST LENS BY J. M. PETZVAL**

Exposure times in photography’s earliest years could be as long as several minutes. This was far better suited to architectural or other still motifs rather than portraits of living persons. This initial period, however was very brief and portraits became the main subject of the camera made images for the following two decades. Short exposure times were achieved following several developments. One of them was a fast lens, which was championed by Josef Maximilian Petzval, a mathematician from Slovakia who designed such a lens in Vienna in May 1840, and cooperated with the instrument-maker, Peter Wilhelm Friedrich Voigtländer, in producing a camera body [Ill. 8]. The result, a
Ill 5. Grunnings farm in Christiania. Winther’s Lithograph, after a Light Image by Winther. Lithograph based on a photographic image by Hans Thøger Winther published in 1843 in one of his own journals, Ny Hermoder. His viewpoint is located very close to where he lived and not far from where both Testman and O.F. Knudsen took their photographs. National Library of Norway BldS

Ill 6. Detail from Map of Christiania with a Square Mile of Surroundings by Vibe and Irgens, dated 1844, based on measurements of Christofer Hansteen. National Library of Norway Map 190, ex. 2
revolutionary Voigtländer all-metal daguerreotype camera [Ill. 9] used a circular plate. It was an instant success and sold hundreds every year starting January 1841 (700 were sold in the first year of production).

PICTURE ASSEMBLY:
AN UNUSUAL PLATE FORM
AND A CAMERA OF VIENNA
The assembly is simple though elegant, consisting of a thin white mat behind a plate of glass edged with a gilt-embossed paper border. The mat’s octagonal window is surrounded with thick and thin golden lines, one of them bearing the photographer’s signature [Ill. 10]. The thin paper covers the plate edges and separates the delicate image from the glass and is typical of the 1840s. The verso tells an interesting story, as the plate’s unusual form of partial circle can be seen through the thin backing material [Ill. 11]. The top and bottom are straight and parallel, while the sides are evenly curved and follow the shape of a circle where both arcs have a common centre point. The diameter of the circle is about 97 millimeters, which would fit the famous “Voigtländer Ganzmetal” daguerreotype camera with its groundbreaking f/3.6 portrait Petzval lens of f/149 mm focal length and 37 degree angle of view.

The lens was constructed during the first half of 1840 in Vienna by Josef Maximilian Petzval, who engaged the instrument-maker, Peter Wilhelm Friedrich Voigtländer, to construct a camera housing. When this camera appeared on the market in January 1841 it caused a sensation as it could be used for portraiture with the short exposure times offered by the new Petzval lens. Being able to speculate about which camera may have been used just by looking at the shape and size of the picture is a rarity.

THE VOIGTLÄNDER
DAGUERREOTYPE CAMERA
The camera consists of two conical sections screwed together. The shorter cone contains a ground glass screen with an eyepiece at the end which was used for focusing. The cone would be replaced with a flat, circular plate holder measuring 98 mm in diameter with a sensitized daguerreotype plate for the exposure. To insert the plate, the camera had to be removed from the rack and taken into a darkroom in order not to let daylight spoil the plate. The lens cap functioned as a shutter. The camera could be purchased complete with darkroom equipment and a set of disk-shaped copper plates coated with silver on one side.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER
The signature lithographed on the mat “TESTMAN fecit” indicates the author of the view. The placement of the signature is lithographed to suit vertical formats, typical of portraits. One can possibly assume that the photographer worked with portraits and had invested in a stock of these lithographed mats. The word photography was not at the time in general use, hence the use of “fecit”, customary for graphic arts. Testman’s name is not mentioned in contemporary Norwegian publications, but it is found in a list of Danish photographers active in 1844.

Peter Otto Testman (recorded variants are Peder and Olavius and surname variant Testmann) was born in 12.01.11806 in Eiker, Buskerud, Norway, but he spent most of his life in Denmark. His father, Johan Christopher Testman, was born 8.11.1761 at Hauge farm, and his mother, also Norwegian, Sophie Amalie Omsted, was born there in 08.09.1787. The family moved to Copenhagen in 1807, the same year it was heavily shelled by the British Navy which attacked and burned much of the city.

Testman graduated from high school in Copenhagen in 1826. After a few years he returned to Norway, where he began studies at Det Kongelige Frederiks Universitet in Christiania (now Universitetet i Oslo), matriculating in 1827 and continuing with theology studies in 1828, while boarding with merchant Johannes Polti. When his mother died on May 15, 1829, he was there by her side in Christiania. There is no record of him completing a degree in Norway.

In January 1838 he was married in Copenhagen to Henriette Marie Hohlenberg. It is mentioned that he exhibited his daguerreotypes in 1844
III 8. Two Petzval lenses: to the right, No. 135 Voigtlander & Sohn, Vienna, designed by Petzval for the famous all-metal camera Preus Museum, Horten.

III 9. Photographic conservator Ann Deckers, FoMu Fotomuseum Provincie Antwerpen showing a replica of the Voigtlander daguerreotype camera, nr. 84 and daguerreotypes, 97 mm in diameter, made with the original camera in the early 1840s.
Ill 10. Close up of the signature on the mat of FAU 120. The fact that the photographer’s name appears on the short side and not under the image indicates that plate was probably from a stock of lithographed mats intended for portraits, i.e., the vertical format.

Ill 11. The back of the Daguerreotype FAU 120 with handwritten title Royal Palace in Christiania ("Konge-slogett i Christiania"). Through the paper, it is possible to measure the disc height to about 82 mm and a circle diameter of about 97 mm. The disc’s unusual shape suggests that it could have been trimmed from a standard quarter-plate 108 mm X 82 mm and thus adapted to a circular plate holder for the 97 mm disks required by the Voigtländer daguerreotype camera.
at The Industrial Society in Copenhagen. At this time he was a starch manufacturer. In spite of having a family, Peter Otto chose to volunteer in 1848 and took part in the three-year Danish-German war as a private in the Tredje Bataljong. Service led him to Glorup where he met and became friends with the poet H. C. Andersen. In May 1848 Andersen wrote a short poem about Testman where he praised his friend, saying: “In thee we feel Norway’s Heartbeat / In time of need they known their Friends”.

His military service was rewarded with promotions to lieutenant, Knight of Dannebrog, and later captain. His career ended as postmaster, a position he held until his retirement. One of his daughters, Caroline Sophie, became a well known activist for women’s rights. In his last years Testman lived as a widower with his other his daughter, Emilie Antoinette, until he died in January 1890.

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