ON THE MATERIALITY OF IMAGES

How to Protect a Daguerreotype?
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To Louis Daguerre it was clear that an image could easily be damaged, simply by touching it. In his report of the ‘Chambre des députés’ from 1839, the French physicist Francois Arago compared the delicacy of the image with a ribbon of lace and the wings of a butterfly. For him this was even an obstacle in the further distribution of the invention of Daguerre. For that reason, Arago forwarded a request to Mr. Dumas to solve this problem. Dumas proposed to protect the surface of the daguerreotype with a varnish, a boiling solution of one part dextrin into five parts of water. This protective layer could easily be removed by immersing the plate in boiling water. Daguerre himself had some clear ideas on how to protect a daguerreotype. He proposed to keep the plate behind glass, fix it and make it thus inalterable for sunlight. When you took the image on a journey, he advised to keep the daguerreotype in a box with a strip of paper on the joints.

HOUSING
Although gold toning improved the stability of the surface, the image was still very sensitive to physical and mechanical damage. In a short time, the unprotected silver surface would be covered by a tarnished layer. This layer would gradually blur the image. That is why we normally find a processed daguerreotype plate in a special protective housing. These housings are considered to be an integral part of the daguerreotype.

CONFUSING
The label ‘daguerreotype’ is often used to describe the typical style of the protective housing, not the plate. That is understandable, because these housings were also used for other photographs such as wet collodion positives and even

Ill 1. Wooden box for daguerreotype with daguerreotype plates, Collection Museum Enschedé, Haarlem
prints on paper. Soon after the introduction of the wet collodion process, negatives were presented as positives, first on glass (ambrotype), leather and textile (pannotype) and later on lacquered plates (tintype, ferrotype). This practice added firmly to the confusion. Photographers benefitted from this confusion keeping the labels ambiguous. What did they mean by 'Daguerreotype sur papier', prints made after daguerreotypes, prints from daguerreotypes or paper photographs that were mounted in a nice housing?

**COMPETITOR**

Nevertheless, the wet collodion positive was a strong competitor for the daguerreotype. It was cheaper and less time-consuming to produce a wet collodion positive. Gradually, the daguerreotypists shifted to this new technique, although many of them believed that the daguerreotype was the ‘real thing’.

**BUSINESS**

Photography became a serious business. The number of photographers increased and the market for daguerreotypes was reduced. Special offers to attract a clientele, became a daily practice, although quality was not always guaranteed. In the 1840’s, having a daguerreotype portrait was a privilege, an exclusive and precious jewel. From the 1850’s on, when other types of photography flourished, the price of a daguerreotype portrait decreased to a more acceptable level.

**TECHNIQUE OR TASTE?**

If you visited a studio in the 1850’s to make a portrait to enhance your social status, the photographer offered you a wide choice of techniques. It would be difficult for you to make a distinction between a well-made ambrotype and a daguerreotype. Especially if it was mounted in a similar decorative housing. You might prefer the more easily readable ambrotype. The ambrotype was darker and face and skin looked more natural. Unless you were seduced by the sharpness and brilliancy of the daguerreotype. You would probably follow your taste, rather than choosing a technique. Whatever technique you would choose, the portrait looked more or less the same to you and you were sure to buy something fashionable.

To be continued