To Show or not to Show Daguerreotypes?

Today, more than ever before, daguerreotypes are recognised as being a “unique and irreplaceable” part of the world’s cultural heritage. The past few years were rich with new researches in the field of their preservation and conservation and currently special attention is given to safe methods of displaying and exhibiting these precious images.

The Winter 2013 issue of The Daguerreian Society Quarterly (September-December) published an editorial by Keith F. Davis, Senior Curator of Photography at the Nelson-Atkins Museum titled “Is the Sky Falling?” inspired by the well known case of the Young America The Daguerreotypes of Southworth & Hawes exhibition, organized in 2005 by the George Eastman House and the International Center of Photography. Exhibition catalogue

The Daguerreian Society has agreed to share this article and other relevant publications with our journal, and we are planning reciprocate to inspire a broader discussion that will also involve European institutions, curators and conservators.

If the Sky is Falling?

by Keith F. Davis, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City - Missouri

Daguerreotypes have been “in the news” the last year or two, but in ways that have become increasingly worrisome. We are concerned about both the logic and the scope of the claims, or warnings, that have been made about the potential “light sensitivity” of daguerreotypes and thus, the danger of exhibiting them. This is an issue of huge importance to institutions that have and/or desire to show daguerreotypes. We aim to observe the highest of professional standards, but this concern seems unsupported to us by actual experience and evidence. Some of these media reports border an apocalypse. Under headlines such “A Vanishing Past?”, and “Scientists Attempt to Save Disintegrating Artworks” we are told that “daguerreotypes...may be deteriorating before your eyes. No one knows exactly why, or how to save them”. Despite the qualifications and question marks, much of this reporting strikes us as extreme and misleading.

As we know, the core problem here is real, but very specific. In the 2005-2006 Southworth & Hawes exhibition “Young America”, some daguerreotypes exhibited visible and rapid deterioration while on display. Of the show’s 160 plates, 5 changed dramatically and another 25 slightly. Most of these changes involved a “disfiguring bloom or white haze” that developed in the exhibit’s first month. Initially, at least, a professional consensus formed around the presumption that, over the course of their history, the plates have been exposed to sodium chloride. This chemical on reaction to the silver surface, formed light-sensitive silver chloride compounds that then printed-out under exposure of light.

Since the 2005-2006 exhibit, research has moved in various directions, including new attention to the nano-structure of the daguerreotype plate, the presence of organic materials on the surface, the effect of exposing plates to very high-energy UV radiation, and the possibility of contaminants from modern materials used to protect these formerly uncased plates. It has been suggested that environmental conditions alone, without exposure to light, could also produce the disfiguring white haze. At present, work continues on several fronts, but without definitive answers.

We have enormous respect for both the seriousness of the original issue and the talents of all those now involved in research. However, we are unhappy that the fields remains
in a sort of conceptual limbo: dire warnings have been made, but little or no new information of practical value has been generated.

The key problem now is one of clarity of definition. The original “Southworth & Hawes problem” has been inflated by some into a vastly larger and, in our view, entirely speculative “daguerreotype problem”. This sweeping generalization is problematic. To our knowledge, all of the plates that have ever changed rapidly on exhibition were by Southworth & Hawes. Most importantly, they shared a common provenance history: all had been stored together, for many decades, in the legendary S&H Studio Collection. To date, we have not seen a single documented instance of any non-S&H plate, or, more precisely, any non-S&H Studio Collection plate, showing signs of light-sensitivity in the course of exhibition.

Logically it is impossible to prove a negative. If we are asked “Can you prove that all daguerreotypes are not potentially light-sensitive?” we must answer “no”. But, that isn’t a productive question: it can only lead to paralysis. Instead the practical question is something like this: “Is it legitimate to generalize our concern over the S&H problem to all daguerreotypes?” The logical response here should be “Only if we have actual evidence that the problem is generic”.

As it happens, the data for that determination is everywhere around us, in the sum of all other daguerreotype exhibitions in our lifetimes. The changes in 2005 to the S&H plates in question were rapid and (in five instances) dramatic. The key question here is this: has any other comparable deterioration been seen in non S&H Studio Collection Plates in any of these numerous other exhibitions? The fact of these past shows, and the condition of all the included daguerreotypes, is of critical and central importance to this “generalisation” issue.

The collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (formerly Hallmark Photographic Collection) has been active enough to yield “a significant number of “test cases”. A handful of these plates were exhibited in 1995; these and many more were then included in major shows in 2001, 2003, 2007, and 2013- as well as in the on-going collection rotations, since mid-2007, in the NAMA photography galleries. In all cases, exhibit illumination conformed to generally accepted levels. A highly technical monitoring protocol was not in place to evaluate these plates on a before - and - after basis (and this remains a practical challenge). However, an important lesson of the 2005 S&H case is that if such changes were going to happen, they would have happened quickly and they would be obvious to naked eye. We have seen no such changes in any of our plates - S&H and non S&H, alike - as a result of our exhibition history. And in informal conversation with other curators and conservators, we have not been told of any documented 2005-type changes at other institutions. These facts carry significant weight.

This lack of hard evidence for any non-S&H light-induced deterioration suggests strongly that what was seen in 2005 is not a general “daguerreotype” problem at all. Rather, it is specific to a single set of plates with a unique, shared history of processing, handling and storage. Lacking evidence to the contrary, we emphasize the importance of stressing this narrative - the facts we firmly know to be true - rather than encouraging, or allowing, others to make far more dramatic but unproven suggestions.