Pascual Pérez y Rodríguez
The Origin of Photography in Spain

This article centres on the discovery, in 2012, of a daguerreotype image that belonged to a rather varied collection of photographic materials dating to the late nineteenth century, which was donated by the Hermitage of Our Lady of Consolation of Llutxent to the Library of the Valencian Museum of Illustration and Modernity (MuVIM).

The aim of the Library and Documentation Centre of the MuVIM is to make its documentary resources available to the technical staff of the institution itself, as well as to outside researchers. Inaugurated on October 20th 2004, it is specialized in historical source materials relating to the periods of the Enlightenment and the Modern age, and apart from its books it also has a collection of photography that, despite its limited size, is certainly significant.

As can be seen from the illustration the recently discovered daguerreotype is a half-length portrait of a male sitter (Ill. 1). Although the surface which bears the image is very tarnished, a positive or negative image appears depending on the angle at which it is viewed, which clearly identifies it as a daguerreotype. It soon aroused the interest of the technicians at the library as, despite its degree of deterioration, there are several features that make this unique item particularly significant.

Identification of the sitter and dating of the daguerreotype

At this time sitters were often portrayed together with objects and items connected in some way to their professional activities, and collectors in the English-speaking world commonly refer to such portraits as “occupational daguerreotypes”. This seems to be the case here since, as far as one can discern considering the state of corrosion of this daguerreotype, the sitter appears to be holding in his right hand a printer or bookseller’s stamp upon which the initials JR can be read, and in his left hand a sheet of paper or piece of cloth. At this point one should bear in mind...
that daguerreotype images are reversed from right to left as in a mirror. (Ill. 2)

The study by Ana Reig1, the director of the library of MuVIM, tells us that the Hermitage of Llutxent from which this daguerreotype came to the library was founded in 1770, and throughout its history it had five directors until 1957 when, under the terms of a will, its management passed to the priest, writer and art critic Alfons Roig Izquierdo. Between 1837 and 1876 the Hermitage was administered by José Rius Benet (1811-1877), who belonged to a family of printers from Valencia who practised their trade from the eighteenth century until 1908. José Rius married Catherine Monfort Rius, the granddaughter of the famous Valencian printer Benito Monfort. Considering the date of his directorship and his initials JR he thus seems to be a perfect candidate for the identity of the man in this daguerreotype.

Since the daguerreotype technique was most widely practised between 1839, the year of its invention, until around 1860, we can safely affirm that this daguerreotype portrait was created at some time during this period of some twenty years. A study of the way the stamp used in the printing firm of José Rius Benet changed over time can allow us to narrow down the probable date of its realization. In the mid-nineteenth century it was quite common for the owner of a printing press to mark the publications of his firm with a stamp bearing his initials or the name of his printing firm. As we have pointed out, the sitter holds in his right hand something that could well be a printer's stamp. We know from various sources that the initials JR were used as a stamp by José Rius only after 1848, which thus gives us a terminus ante quem non date for the realization of the portrait.

Identification of the daguerreotypist

It is usually very difficult to determine the identity of daguerreotype photographers. In Spain the first professionals to practise the technique were usually itinerant and very few of them signed their works. Furthermore the fact that this daguerreotype was found without any original mounting, case or frame means that we have no such indications that might help us to understand the context in which it was made. However, we cannot overlook the possibility that this daguerreotype image may have been created by Pascual Pérez Rodríguez.

Pascual Pérez Rodríguez has been widely studied by the collector and photography historian José Valencia Huguet, to whom we owe the reconstruction of this photographer's professional activities. Huguet defines him as a writer and a journalist, as well as being one of the pioneers of photography in Valencia, whose first daguerreotypes are dated to 1847\(^2\). Other historians of photography such as Francisco Alonso Martínez\(^3\), emphasize the importance of Pascual Pérez as the first Spanish photographer to publish an album of photographic prints. This was entitled *Álbum del Cabañal*, and it consisted of three volumes, each of them with five sheets illustrated with “large views taken on the daguerreotype on paper”.

Unfortunately we know of their existence only thanks to references to engravings of the time, since none of these albums is known to have survived until the present day. We do however possess a number of prints made from photographs taken by Rodríguez between 1857.
and 1860, at the time when he was collaborating with the review El Museo Universal⁴. (ill. 3)

Born in Valencia on February 16th 1804, Pascual Pérez Rodríguez was a prolific writer and translator of texts in French, English, Italian, Portuguese and the Limousin dialect of Occitan. He studied at the Seminario de las Escuelas Pías, and went on to occupy important positions in the College of Zaragoza and the College of the Pious Schools, where he taught humanities. He left the religious life in 1835 in order to pursue his interests in literature and photography, which brought him a remarkable degree of popular recognition, but very little economic success. We know that Pascual Pérez was trained in the art of the daguerreotype by the professor of chemistry at the University of Valencia, José Montserrat y Riutort who, together with José Gil, created the first daguerreotype image ever to be taken in Valencia. They used a camera that they had built by themselves, although they had no photographic prints presumably from a calotype paper negative. It depicts the musician Pascual Pérez y Gascón and was exhibited at the Museum of the University of Navarra, in the exhibition El mundo al revés: el calotipo en España just a few days following its discovery by the Valencian collector Juan José Díaz Prósper. There seems to be a reference to Pascual Pérez Rodríguez was in fact the founder and director of the journal Diario Mercantil between 1834 and 1844, and following 1849 it was printed by the firm of José Rius. In addition their relationships with the Real Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, are well known, as well as the fact that in 1849 José Rius was officially recognized as the society’s printer. We also know that in 1851, along with the photographer Le-Masson, Pascual Pérez exhibited a collection of daguerreotype portraits at the Royal Economic Society, the catalogue of which was then printed on the press of José Rius.

The discovery of this daguerreotype and its attribution to Pascual Pérez has a great importance for the history of photography in Valencia, as it is the only known daguerreotype portrait he produced.

The missing link
In February 2015 a photographic portrait by Pascual Pérez was found, but it is a salted paper print presumably from a calotype paper negative. It depicts the musician Pascual Pérez y Gascón and was was exhibited at the Museum of the University of Navarra, in the exhibition El mundo al revés: el calotipo en España just a few days following its discovery by the Valencian collector Juan José Díaz Prósper. There seems to be a reference to Pascual Pérez Rodríguez was in fact the founder and director of the journal Diario Mercantil between 1834 and 1844, and following 1849 it was printed by the firm of José Rius. In addition their relationships with the Real Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, are well known, as well as the fact that in 1849 José Rius was officially recognized as the society’s printer. We also know that in 1851, along with the photographer Le-Masson, Pascual Pérez exhibited a collection of daguerreotype portraits at the Royal Economic Society, the catalogue of which was then printed on the press of José Rius.

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Pascual Pérez Rodríguez was of course not the only daguerreotypist who could have made this portrait, but the existence of a connection between him and the presumed sitter, José Rius Benet, makes his authorship more probable. Pérez Rodríguez’s use of the calotype in an advertisement published in 1849 in the Diario de Barcelona, which announced that Mr Coca was the first person in Spain to realize photographic prints on paper. The Diario Mercantil then responded to this claim in a letter pointing out that in the city of Valencia prints of this kind had been successfully produced for a year and a half, although the newspaper did not specify exactly who had been making them. The printed portrait photograph by Pascual Pérez has been dated to 1848, on the basis of the historical context just described, and this would make it the first photograph on paper known in Spain, antedating those made in Seville and Cadiz, which were commissioned by the Englishman Claudius Galen Wheelhouse in 1849, and were included in his album Photographic Sketches from the Shores of the Mediterranean. Pascual Pérez was aware of all the new discoveries taking place in Europe in the field of photography, also because ever since the first year of its publication in 1851 he was a correspondent for the periodical La Lumière: Beaux-Arts, Héliographie, Sciences, founded and directed by B.R. de Montfort, who was also the founder of the Société Héliographique de Paris, as was stated on the cover of the magazine. (ill. 4)

A grid has been drawn in pencil on the half-length printed portrait of Pascual Pérez y Gascón, which suggests that it was used as the pattern for a drawing or an engraving. This idea is backed up by the existence of an engraving of the musician published in 1850, which was possibly based on this photograph. This is further evidence for the early date of this photograph, indicating that its one of the first known examples of photography on paper in Spain, and it also gives us some important information about the way photography was used in the world of publishing. It can be seen as the discovery of a genuine missing link in this period of the transition from daguerreotype to photography on paper or the “daguerreotype on paper” as Pascual Pérez Gascón himself still defined it. (ill. 5)
Elements for the history of photography

The two pictures we have described, apparently unimportant and unconnected, have actually proved to be crucial elements in the history of photography in Spain and they have shed some light on the early period of its beginnings, which is still relatively unexplored and unknown. The study of photography in Spain is in fact rather difficult, since there is a lack of well-structured basic notions due to the fragmentation of the funds and the photography collections. This situation forces historians to put the various elements of the past together like craftsmen.

Accustomed as we are to reconstructing the history of photography on the basis of large collections that have a particular emphasis, sometimes offering a somewhat biased or partisan vision, we tend to make a limited interpretation of the facts instead of examining a wide-ranging set of variables that can give us the keys for understanding the mentality and cultural expressions of an era. This exercise should be the consistent approach of the historian. The two photographs we have looked at speak to us of the coexistence of the daguerreotype and the calotype and of their use in the same historical period by the same photographer, as well as revealing the practical applications of photography in the contemporary context of publishing.

That the founding fathers of photography, especially Niépce, were seeking for ways to fix the image of the camera obscura and to transfer them onto a lithographic plate in order to produce multiple prints on paper, is a well known idea in the history of photography, but until now in Spain we did not know of any surviving photographs, which could allow us to study their use and application in this regard at such an early date.

Perhaps dazzled by commercial daguerreotype portraits, sometimes delicately illuminated by the addition of colour, or by calotype travel albums with their exotic landscapes, we who investigate the history of photography perhaps do not pay enough attention to the idea that an important element in the development of photographic technique was its applications in the world of publishing, in which the woodcut, intaglio engraving, lithography and photography all had a common goal: to represent the world as faithfully as possible.

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NOTES

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