ON THE MATERIALITY OF THE IMAGES

 Dating American Daguerreotypes

ABSTRACT

For those who wish to determine when an undated American daguerreotype was taken, clues must be sought out both in the image and in the physical housing of the daguerreian plate. This article discusses a variety of dating methods and pertinent reference materials. Methods include a study of clothing and hair styles, the physical and chemical aspects of the plate, identifying the years of operation of known photographers, and examining the housing components of mat, preserver and case. One example is analyzed according to all these methods.

This article also refers the reader to references on clothing, hallmarks, and American photographers, as well as to the author’s own research, available as a free book, Fixed in Time. This book is based on original research and presents dates of hundreds of daguerreotype, ambrotype and tintype mats and cases. It may be downloaded at Fixed In Time Facebook page.

KEY WORDS: Daguerreotype, Ambrotype, Photography chronology, Photography history, American Nineteenth Century Photographic Miniature Cases

This paper discusses the various ways in which American daguerreotypes can be dated and directs the reader to helpful reference materials. New research by the author, available online, is summarized.

(iii. 1) Who is this intense-looking young man? Sometime during the daguerreian era he wandered into a studio to have this portrait taken. This was no small expense; he probably dressed up for the occasion. He wanted to look his best for what was possibly his first, or only, photograph.

What can be learnt by looking closely? As collectors and curators we must become detectives. The fictional detective Nero Wolf, who never left his New York City apartment, solved cases moving no further than his armchair. Our field of investigation is also small—usually no more than a few square inches of copper, silver, wood, glass and leather.

From the way his lapels overlap we know that this is an original daguerreotype and not a copy of an earlier one; the image is mirror-imaged as is usual. There are, unfortunately, no studio props nor painted backdrop. His hands are not shown so we can not tell if they are rough. He holds no tools of his trade. All we have are his clothing and hair style, his expression, and the physical package of plate, mat and case.

There are four ways to determine when “Otto”, as I call him, had his portrait taken.

• The name of the photographer, if visible, allows us to look up the years during which he was in business.
• The mat, preserver, and case styles can be examined.
• We can examine the image for clues in clothing or hair style.
• The physical aspects of the plate may reveal the manufacturer and how the plate was processed.

The first two methods often reveal a fairly precise date, but can result in a wrong answer if the daguerreotype is no longer behind its original mat or in its original case. The last two methods are useful but guarantee only
a minimum date. The best way to accurately date an American daguerreotype is to combine all these methods - first research the photographer, mat style and case style; then verify the result with a “reality check” based on the subject’s clothing and hairstyle.

Craig’s Daguerreian Registry

Often the daguerreotypist’s name is found stamped on the brass mat or embossed in the case’s velvet pad. Ninth plate daguerreotypes from the 1850s are often backed with a card listing the daguerreotypist’s name, address and dubious virtues such as quickness or cheapness. Craig’s Daguerreian Registry, a monumental reference of daguerreotypists and manufacturers, identifies when and where each American daguerreotypist operated. The data is culled from city directories and period advertisements. The two volume second edition can be purchased at Craigcamera.com. An older, less comprehensive, but free, online version can be found at Craigcamera.com.

The physical plate

The daguerreotype was made possible by a fortuitous mixture of chemistry, industry, and ingenuity. All three aspects left their mark, sometimes literally, on the daguerreotype. Technically, the daguerreotype changed very little after 1842, so the physical aspects of the plate are most useful for dating very early images. An excellent article on this subject by Denis Waters, published in the Daguerreian Annual 2000, is available online at Finedags.com.

Ungilded daguerreotypes are from 1842 or earlier. These early daguerreotypes are bluer and are of lower contrast than those treated with gold chloride. It has been suggested that the early users of gold toning were over-enthusiastic, using more gold chloride than necessary and producing daguerreotypes which are actually gold in color. The use of the Wolcott camera is also an indicator of a very early daguerreotype. Because it uses a concave mirror instead of a lens, the images are not laterally reversed. The Wolcott camera left telltale unexposed strips along the side, which allows their images to be differentiated from non-reversed copy daguerreotypes.

Before sensitizing a daguerreotype, the plate must be polished. During this laborious process the plate must be clamped held fast. Various methods of clamping were used, some of which were patented. Most left identifying marks or bends on the plate.

Clamping methods are discussed by Floyd and Marion Rinhart in their classic reference, The American Daguerreotype. Unfortunately, dating a daguerreotype by the clamping mechanism will only give you an earliest possible date, as daguerreotypists tended to keep equipment throughout their career.

The housing

Daguerreotype mat and case styles changed continuously during their 20-year history. There are over 600 different sixth plate case styles. The commonest designs remained popular for half a decade, but many of these 600 cases were made only briefly and some can be dated to a particular year. Dates for many mat and preserver styles are similarly constrained. In 1969 the Rinharts published American Miniature Case Art, where they illustrated and dated over 200 daguerreotype cases. I have updated their research, benefiting from the Internet which has allowed me to locate over 3000 objectively datedcased images, including 1400 dated American daguerreotypes. The fruits of my research are published in Fixed In Time, a free online book which illustrates and provides dates for over 400 mats, 300 cases, as well as dates for preservers, case gliding patterns and some case pads. Anyone can download this PDF at Fixed In Time Facebook page.

Unfortunately, many daguerreotypes are no longer behind their original mats or in their original cases. Fortunately, the majority of these repackaged images can be identified by comparing the dates of the mat, preserver and case. The odds are slim that these three dates will agree if they are not original to the image.

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Ill. 4, A pocket guide to the commonest daguerreotype mat shapes and designs. Photo credits: mat #4 by Jason Wright; mat #6 by Diane Smith; mat #7 by vintagephotosrus; #13 by mainstreetbooks

Preservers

It is well known that the preserver was introduced around 1847; from that some jump to the false assumption that preserver-less daguerreotypes predate 1847. In reality, any daguerreotype without a preserver is just as likely to be 1849 or later. Preserver-less daguerreotypes continued to be made through 1853, but they were outnumbered by the flood of daguerreotypes with preservers. (ill. 6)

Of the approximately 100 preserver designs, only four were used in the 1840s. These early preservers are among the few shown in Fixed in Time. Starting in 1851, many additional styles appeared. The multitude of preserver designs have defied a full cataloguing but they break out into three broad categories: simple, classic and florid.

Preservers through the mid 1850s generally have simple repeating patterns, like wallpaper. Since the pattern repeats, any of these preserver styles could be made for any size. (ill. 7)

Around 1856 new styles appeared featuring bilateral symmetry, parquet or barber-pole diagonal decoration, and leaves marking the corners or centers of each side. As they bear a resemblance to the pilasters and columns of Classical architecture, I call these classic. (ill. 8)

Appearing around the same time, but predominant after 1859 are florid preservers with reinforced corners. (ill. 9)
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Cases

Before there was the daguerreotype, there was the miniature painted portrait. These tended to be put in small morocco leather cases. It was natural that such cases would be used for daguerreotypes as well. In America, it soon became the fashion to decorate case lids; these designs are the best way to date a case. But a quick glance at the other parts of the case can usually identify whether the case is from the 1840s, 1850s, or 1860s.

Cases from the early to mid 1840s have plain pads, usually silk but occasionally velvet. The lack of case gilding, combined with a lack of pad decoration and lack of a preserver, are often sufficient to identify an early daguerreotype. The earliest of these cases are perfectly flat on the bottom with a noticeably arched lid; by the mid 1840s cases are more symmetric, with slight arches on both the lids and the backs.

Lids which flip upwards rather than to the side, often found with metal hinges, are generally found dated before 1846. (Ill. 10)

Ill. 9, Example of florid preserver
Ills. 10, 11, Examples of plain silk case pad and of decorated velvet case pad

The late 1840s introduced velvet case pads stamped with bold floral designs. Case gilding, the decorative gilded frieze found on the inner case rim appears first in 1846 but remains uncommon for several years. During this period construction techniques changed; the diagonal cuts of the glued corners are replaced by more secure rabbet joints.

Cases from the 1840s are likely to have the lids decorated and plain backs, although this combination appears occasionally through to 1852. (Ill. 11)

Velvet pads stamped with busy designs characterize cases from the 1850s. Case gilding is common, applied to nearly all leather cases. During this period the leather miniature case gradually lost popularity, squeezed out of both ends of the market by either expensive union cases or inexpensive pressed paper cases. (Ill. 12)

The majority of daguerreotypes reside in cases illustrated and dated in Fixed In Time. This book will usually give you a better date than following the general rules stated above.

Any date derived solely from examining the case must be treated with caution, as many daguerreotypes are no longer in their original cases. My experience is that the fancier the case, the more likely that it is not original. Union cases, being collectable, are especially likely to have been combined with unrelated daguerreotypes.

Otto

Let us now return to Otto, our gentleman with the curious facial hair. Using Fixed In Time we can date this mat to 1854 and the preserver to 1853-1855. The case is similar to one of the commonest daguerreotype cases (named by Rinhart The Romanesque Urn) common during much of the mid 1850s. This particular case, however, is an uncommon variant, from 1855.

1854. 1853-1855. 1855. You couldn’t ask for a tighter convergence of dates. This daguerreotype appears to have the original seals, hence most likely the mat is original. But just to be sure, we should check that...
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Otto’s clothing and hairstyle are consistent with the mid 1850s.

Here Joan Severa’s Dressed for the Photographer, the acknowledged bible for anyone wishing to date 19th century photographs by clothing, is an invaluable reference. Dating a daguerreotype by the clothing is most reliable for young adults, who usually do their best to appear stylish and up-to-date. For older subjects, practicality often trumps style; their “best outfit” could be several years old. Severa’s book is most useful for young women’s clothing, as their styles are better documented in original sources. Typically the new Parisian styles would be illustrated in magazines such as Godey’s Lady’s Magazine; within a year less decorated “democratic” versions of these dresses would be copied by seamstresses and housewives across the country. In the age before “off the rack” clothing, older dresses would commonly be altered to fit the current fashion; hence a young woman would often be photographed in the latest style even if her dress was several years old.

Back to Otto: His coat is loose, which implies the 1850s, although this is hardly convincing evidence. His collar and tie are similar to ones shown by Severa dated to 1852, 1856, and 1857. These mid 1850s dates are supported by the style of Otto’s hair, swept up in the middle to form a high wave. Otto sports an unusual combination of mustache, neckbeard and soul patch, making Otto difficult to date by his facial hair. Otto’s clothing and neckwear provide reasonable confirmation that Otto’s portrait was taken in 1854 or 1855.

So what was he thinking about as he sat for his portrait? The United States in 1854 was economically booming; the “Panic of 1857” was still to come. Otto’s confidence is obvious; perhaps he was contemplating further business success. In 1854-1855 there was the Crimean War, Pope Pius IX promulgated the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, the Republican party was founded, Dr. John Snow’s explained London’s Cholera epidemic, and Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass appeared. Otto may have had a lot on his mind.

NOTES

3. Floyd Rinhart, Marion Rinhart. The American Daguerreotype is out of print and not available online. An earlier version of Rinhart’s hallmark table was printed in the New Daguerreian Journal in 1975, and is available online. However, the numbers assigned to hallmarks in NDJ are different from the ones used in The American Daguerreotype, and should not be used.
4. An objectively dated cased image is a) any period photograph or artwork in a daguerreotype case which has either a date written in period 19th century hand or b) has a written date specific to the month or better or c) any image which can be dated to within a year by the age of a known subject, by using Craig’s Daguerreian Registry, or by any other objective method.
6. Rinhart. in American Miniature Case Art, page 18, suggests this change happened in the early 1850s. My research indicates that the mitrer joint was introduced around 1847, but not universally used for many years.
8. Severa, pp 3-4
9. Severa, p 106
10. A neckbeard grows underneath the jaw, framing the face but leaving it unobscured. A soul patch is the tuft of hair underneath the lower lip.