Daguerreotypes in Russia
A project by the State Museum and Exhibition Center ROSPHOTO in Saint-Petersburg

ABSTRACT

The consolidated catalogue “The Daguerreotype in Russia” presents the hundreds of daguerreotypes currently preserved in the museums, archives and libraries of the Russian Federation, compiled and categorized by the State Museum and Exhibition Centre for Photography ROSPHOTO (www.rosphoto.org) in the context of a national project for the preservation of documentary photographs. Among the represented collections we find: the Library of Academy of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg; the National Library of Russia, the State Museum of N. L. Tolstoy, the St. Petersburg Museum of Theater and Musical Art, National Museum of Republic of Tatarstan and the F.I. Tutchev Muranova State Museum.

The catalogue has been edited by ROSPHOTO, along with specially invited archivists and experts on art history and Russian history. Elena Valentinovna Barkhatova and Tatyana Grigoriyevna Saburova have contributed their valuable essays on attributions and the history of photography.

KEY WORDS: History of Photography, Russian daguerreotype, Cultural heritage, ROSPHOTO

The first issues of the multivolume Union Catalogue of Daguerreotypes in Russia are in preparation for publication in 2014. This important project, which combines the data from dozens of archival, library and museum collections, has been launched by the State Museum and Exhibition Center ROSPHOTO. The catalogue has been compiled under the general editorship of Elena Barkhatova and Anna Maximova with Tatyana Saburova as scientific editor.

The consolidated catalogue “The Daguerreotype in Russia” acquaints readers with unique works of svetopis (photography), created by the one of the earliest photographic method. The catalogue presents only a few hundred daguerreotypes, currently preserved in museums, archives and libraries of the Russian Federation.

This relatively small number of extant “Daguerre’s mirrors” can be explained not only by the “fragility” of plates – they darken when touched by atmospheric pollutants, and may be easily and completely effaced – but also by the very short period of active development and proliferation of this technology. The Era of Daguerreotype lasted about two decades, from the 1840s to the beginning of the 1860s.

The majority of the featured pieces are studio-produced portraits. It was the commercially-oriented portrait that became the dominant form of daguerreotype in the Russian Empire. Unfortunately, data about the shooting locations is scarce, while the related daguerreotypes have not survived.

The exceptions are the views of the estates, manors and interiors, taken in the 1850s, most likely under the order of their owners. Of note is the technical skill and artistic talent of both Russian and foreign daguerreotypists, whose portrait studios were opened in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and other cities and towns. Almost all of them - Martin Abadie, Ivan Alexandrovsky, August Baumgarten, Carl Dauthendey, Sergey Levitskiy, Joseph Peychez, Zwerner Brothers - underwent artistic training and demonstrated exquisite taste. The portraits of their contemporaries, created by those photographers, bespeak a great attention towards the models, composition, lighting and even the design of the daguerreotypes.

A number of studios, such as the flourishing portrait miniature workshop of Carl Peter Mazer, simply extended the range of available services by means of the fashionable and commercially attractive daguerreotype. Their works are highly praised and justly continue the traditions of the Russian portrait art of the mid 19th century.

The daguerreotype portraits, which are featured in the catalogue, depict many members, politicians, writers, Decembrists – those, who otherwise could have been known
to us only from paintings and drawings. The core of this publication is the material collected by ROSPHOTO in the course of painstaking implementation of the multi-year National Program for preservation of documentary photographs in the public funds of the Russian Federation. The publication of a consolidated catalogue, already a work-in-progress for more than five years, was conceived as part of this enormous and ambitious project. The impetus for the publication of museum collections of daguerreotypes in Russia was given in 1999, by an exhibition at the State Historical Museum in Moscow, At the Root of Photographic Art. This was accompanied by the publication of a full catalogue of this largest of our country’s collections of “silver pictures.” A catalogue of the second largest collection of daguerreotypes, stored in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg, was published in 2012. It was preceded by the catalogue from the exhibition The Epoch of the Daguerreotype, Early Photography in Russia, held at the world’s largest museum in 2011. In addition to these significant, in terms of quantity, metropolitan collections which have been studied and published more or less systematically, there are quite a few rare specimens of early “silver photography” preserved in other museums, archives and large libraries across Russia which will have their first publication in this catalogue.

At the beginning of the preparation of the consolidated catalogue, the main task of the specialists of the Museum and Exhibition Center at ROSPHOTO was to identify and collect information about the unique monuments of early photography in Russia. However, at the stage of categorizing the material obtained from colleagues, it became clear that in many cases the items were in need of further scrutiny, particularly for dating and establishing of provenance and attribution. Not all the necessary information about daguerreotypes is known to the keepers: this sort of material, unlike paintings or graphic works, is still lacking in systematic studies. Also the lack of literature on the history of photography in 1840–1860 and professional directories of daguerreotypists, both Russian-born and foreigners operating in Russia, often complicates the attribution and dating of these ancient photographs.
Complications also stem from the poor present condition of daguerreotypes due to their chemical and physical deterioration, which makes their analysis incredibly difficult. The editorial board of the catalogue includes ROSPHOTO’s officials along with invited experts: specialists in Russian history, in art history and archivists. The principal contributors of the essays on the history of photography and attributions are Elena Valentinovna Barkhatova (NLR) and Tatyana Grigorievna Saburova (SHM). Without their participation, knowledge and experience, this project would simply not have been possible.

It is the editors’ intent that the volumes of this publication, while retaining the basic principles and general structure of item descriptions, will be distinguished from each other: some of them will feature several small collections, whereas others will be fully dedicated to a single major one, such as the volumes of the State Historical Museum (Moscow), the Institute of History of Russian Literature (Saint Petersburg) and the Literature Museum (Moscow).

The first volume of the catalogue presents the daguerreotype collections of the Science Library of the Russian Academy of Arts (St. Petersburg), State Russian Museum (St. Petersburg), State Museum of Leo Tolstoy (Moscow), St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Musical Art (St. Petersburg), National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, Multimedia Complex of Actual Arts (Moscow), State Museum of A. Pushkin (Moscow), All-Russian Museum of A. Pushkin (St. Petersburg), St. Petersburg branch of the Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the F. I. Tyutchev Muranovo Estate Museum Park. In most cases, a catalogue section dedicated to a particular collection is accompanied by an article on the history of the collection or some summary information about it.

Continuing their work on the identification of the monuments of early photography in the state archives of the Russian Federation, the compilers of the catalogue “The Daguerreotype in Russia” hope to publish the entire body of the existing “silver pictures”, not only saving them from oblivion and “extinction”, but also giving an impetus to further in-depth study of these precious assets of the nation’s historical and cultural heritage.

THE CATALOGUE INCLUDES THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION:

- Number in the catalogue
- Photographer: the name of the studio or the owner (operator)
- Studio location: almost all daguerreotypes were made in Russia. A few exceptions have been included based on their historical significance. For example, there are, inter alia, two daguerreotype portraits of E. F. Tyutcheva, the second wife of F. I. Tyutchev, made in Munich, Germany, in the collection of the F. I. Tyutchev Muranovo Estate Museum Park
- Caption (title)
- Original (if any) of the daguerreotype copy
- Date of creation
- Plate material
- Hand coloration (if present)
- Size: with respect to whole plate (half-plate, quarter-plate, sixth-plate, etc.) and in centimeters: height by width; the size of the mat window (the visible part of the image) followed by the size of the entire package (or/and plate size, for previously dismantled and measured items)
- Introduction to the catalogue
- Acronym of the museum, archive or library
- Inventory or accession number
- Inscriptions on recto and verso: stamped or imprinted labels and markings of daguerreotype studios, framers, case makers, pass-partout (mat) manufacturers, etc. (preserving the original spelling)
- Accession information
- Description: package composition and most prominent features (indicated separately if they differ from the original one);
- Information about restoration
- Indication of the first publication
- Exhibitions: history of the item’s presentation to the general public. Only abbreviated names of exhibitions are given (full names are given in the appendix at the end)
- References: publications in which the item was mentioned, listed or shown. Only abbreviated titles are given (full titles are given in the appendix at the end)
- Biographical information about the sitter(s)
- Illustrations: present a general view of the item and housing, as well as some details of the image. There are also detailed pictures of photographers’ labels, owners’ inscriptions and autographs
- Appendix: at the back of the catalogue provides an index of daguerreotypists, lists of acronyms and abbreviations, literature (in alphabetical order) and exhibitions (in chronological order). A full biographical index of daguerreotypists, photographs of studio labels, along with full indices of sitters and references, will be published in the last volume of the catalogue.