

DAGUERREOTYPE MANIA. PRESENTING DAGUERREOTYPES AT THE FOTOMUSEUM ANTWERP — FOMU

Tamara Berghmans, Curator, FOMU Collection

Introduction

The Fotomuseum Antwerp (FOMU) (Belgium) celebrated her fiftieth birthday in 2015 with a new collection presentation, titled *Photography Inc. From Luxury Product to Mass Medium*. The exhibition tells the story of photography and the photography industry from its earliest days to the present. Initially, photography was a craft. A photograph was a luxury item. Later, it became a mass product for a democratic market. *Photography Inc.* puts under scrutiny the interaction between the photography industry and the photographer. All the items on show come from the FOMU collection.



Framed ambrotype of a Berlin family (c. 1860) and some tintypes / copyright FOMU, Guy Voet

In the space of fifty years FOMU has assembled a collection of international importance. The museum collected a rich and varied collection of photographs (more than 900,000 items, positives and negatives) and cameras (around 23,000 examples). The photographic equipment collection is almost unique in terms of its size and diversity, and is world famous as a result. Virtually all camera types and technical innovations are represented by typical examples. The collection of photographs had also been greatly broadened and diversified, both in terms of its geographical and historical reach and also in terms of range, formal language and types.

An important part of this collection is made up by 193 daguerreotypes: beautiful examples of the first photographs. *Photography Inc.* presents a small selection of 33 of the most beautiful and precious examples under the title 'Daguerreotype Mania'. This article will focus on the preparation and the presentation of the daguerreotypes in the *Photography Inc.* exhibition.

What is a Daguerreotype?



Ambrotype group portrait of three students (c. 1870) in American style case / © FOMU, Guy Voet

The daguerreotype is named after the French inventor Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre who developed the process together with Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. The image is formed on a reflective copper plate that is covered with a thin layer of silver. The plate is sensitized with iodine vapor until it achieves a golden yellow hue and is then exposed in the camera. The exposure time varies from 15 seconds to 60 minutes. The plate is then placed above a mercury bath that is gradually warmed to a temperature of 60°C. The mercury vapors develop the plate, which is then fixed with sea salt. Like a Polaroid, a daguerreotype is a one-time process that, therefore, delivers a single irreproducible image. The result is a sharp and highly detailed, reflective image. Unlike paper, the daguerreotype is not flexible and is fairly heavy. The plate is very fragile and is therefore displayed in an airtight package or case, so that it remains 'unchangeable'.



Quarter plate daguerreotype portrait of a woman (c. 1850) in original wooden frame by M. Meurisse / © FOMU, Guy Voet

Although the daguerreotype was invented in Europe, it soon found its way to the United States, where it became wildly popular. The European and American daguerreotypes can be distinguished from each other by their housings. The open European model consists of a package: a decorated frame ready to be hung on the wall, usually made of painted glass and paper or cardboard. The closed Anglo-American model is a case: a portable object in leather or a synthetic material that you can carry with you like a wallet.

Preparing the Plates

Most daguerreotype objects have a long history behind them, which means, that they not only have undergone an ageing process but also incurred damage as they've been passed around between various owners. The conservation studio at FOMU has to ensure that these objects are sustainable for a while longer. On the one hand the conservators work preventively, on the other hand, they restore objects. This means that harmful elements have to be eliminated or treated without interfering too much with the authenticity of the object. The philosophy some twelve years back was that anything that came into contact with the plate had to be as acid-free as possible. This method involved a new airtight package being placed in the casing so that the plate does not come into contact with any acidic, original elements. FOMU was not in favor for this method and has moved away from it because many aspects of the object compared to how it originally appeared are not quite right. Now FOMU conservators only do very minimal interventions and make sure the plate is in the airtight package. For example, a blue sheen on the edge of a plate – soap-bubble colors – indicates that the package is no longer airtight. If the plate oxidizes, the image may systematically disappear. The conservators will not do much restoration per se, it's more about consolidating. This means, look at whether the package holding the plate is still effectively airtight or not and then make it airtight if need be to prevent further oxidization.

The Challenge of Presenting Daguerreotypes

In the exhibition the daguerreotypes are presented in an intimate setting. FOMU created the feeling of a small treasure house by building some kind of box with dark grey walls and built-in the walls. The small and dark vitrines are scattered over the walls, combined with a big vitrine with daguerreotype and tintype cameras and original lithographs with caricatures of the time.

Daguerreotypes are the most difficult photographs to display in an exhibition. Most daguerreotypes are small objects, ranging from a whole plate (6½ x 8½ inch) to a 6th plate (2¾ x 3¼ inch) or 16th plate (1 ⅝ x 6½ inch). This means that they are looked at from a very small distance. They are intimate objects, meant to be held and guarded closely. Some plates are even incorporated in jewelry. Not only are they small precious objects, but the plate acts like a mirror. One of the biggest challenges is creating a good viewing experience of the daguerreotype. It is extremely



Overview of the 'Daguerreotype Mania' chapter in the exhibition *Photography Inc. Le Daguerreotype* sliding-box daguerreotype camera (1839) – the first commercially-manufactured camera – by Alphonse Giroux is displayed next to the Voigtländer Ganzmetallkamera (1840-1841) and the Mirax and Ertée tintype cameras in the central vitrine / © FOMU, Guy Voet

difficult to control the lighting sources and eliminate secondary reflections that interfere. This can obscure the plate or show a negative image. Daguerreotypes have to be presented in the correct angle, so that the positive image is seen. Many factors, such as the height of the viewer and even the clothes they are wearing, influence the viewing experience. If looked from the wrong angle with bad lighting conditions, the viewer will only see himself as if looking in a mirror.



Daguerreotype portrait of a young boy (1854) by Philibert Perraud and a portrait of two women, both with painted glass / copyright FOMU, Guy Voet

In the FOMU vitrines one or more daguerreotypes are presented. All the plates are displayed in handmade acrylic supports at a 45° angle to eliminate direct reflections. The dark painted vitrines offer the best background to view the plates. For the lighting of the vitrines FOMU worked together with light expert Chris Pype (Licht Bvba). Each framed daguerreotype was carefully lit by one or more fiber optic light fixtures, that were built-in the walls. Gallery lighting was kept to a minimum to emphasize the illuminating daguerreotypes.



Framed ambrotype of a Berlin family (c. 1860) and some tintypes / copyright FOMU, Guy Voet

Because of the extremely precious and fragile nature of the daguerreotype special care is needed in presenting the objects. Although daguerreotypes are moderately light-sensitive, the material of the package and the pigments of the hand-coloring are quite fugitive. Daguerreotypes are composite artifacts, that can have complex reactions to their environment. Not only are they presented in an acclimatized exhibition space (temperature and relative humidity), FOMU contacted Tru Vue for a sponsorship of the Optium Museum Acrylic. Since it gives 99% UV protection, is abrasion resistant, anti-reflective, anti-static and shatter resistant, this was the best choice for the vitrines to protect and present these unique and thus non replaceable daguerreotype objects.

FOMU opted for acrylic instead of glass for several reasons:

- Shatter resistance: safety reasons for the collection (break-in security) because of the valuable and unique objects
- Shatter resistance and scratch protection: re-usability of the vitrines (transport, storage and handling)
- Anti-static: because of the anti-static layer of Optium Acrylic the vitrines attract less dust
- FOMU is used working with plexi-glass and has all the equipment in house to cut and clean plexi
- FOMU worked with Tru Vue glass products in the past and wanted to try out the Optium Acrylic
- Weight: Tru Vue glass is heavier than the acrylic, which makes the plexi easier to handle

Daguerreobase

More information on the FOMU daguerreotypes is to be found on www.daguerreobase.org. FOMU is coordinator of the international daguerreobase project, an online application designed to contain detailed information about daguerreotypes. Members can view, edit and store records of individual daguerreotypes and establish relations to other records based on a wide range of characteristics. This includes collections, owners, creators, hallmarks, housing models, sizes, materials and free text descriptions. Daguerreobase aimed to bring together digital images and descriptions of more than 25,000 European historical daguerreotypes. European daguerreotypes are scarce since they are scattered in institutional and private collections all over the world. Many aspects of the daguerreotypes still need to be discovered.

Website:
www.fomu.be
www.daguerreobase.org

Videos about restoration FOMU daguerreotypes on YouTube:
 Ann Deckers, Head of Collection Department
www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_F3DWcsJkk
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wz6f80W5LAG
www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZeYGtck8ck
www.youtube.com/watch?v=pagg8C9xxfs



Tamara Berghmans – Curator, Fotomuseum Antwerp Tamara Berghmans is curator of the Collection Department at FOMU – Fotomuseum Antwerp in Belgium. She has a PhD in Art History and has worked as Assistant Curator of Photography at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and has lectured at the Vrije Universiteit Brussels. She is the author of several publications, including *Photography Inc.* (Lannoo, 2015), *Ed van der Elsken. Looking for Love on the Left Bank* (Aman Iman Publishing, 2013), *The Eye of the Photographer* (Lannoo, 2012) and *The Making of a Photobook. Sanne Sannes' Maquette for 'Diary of an Erotomaniac'* (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, 2010).

E-mail: tamara.berghmans@fomu.be