

## **Daguerreobase: Digitizing photographic heritage**

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**Abstract:** The tendency to digitize and create online archives has recently become more common among cultural institutions. Digitizing collections and crowdsourcing the information bring more benefits to museums and the public because the digital medium facilitates a wider exposure and the circulation of a more consistent body of work. In the same line of practice, the Daguerreobase Project is a conservation initiative to digitally archive daguerreotypes on a large scale.

**Keywords:** daguerreotype; photography; history of photography; archive; collection; Romania; Daguerreobase

The tendency to digitize and create online archives has recently become more common among cultural institutions. Digitizing collections and crowdsourcing the information bring more benefits to museums and the public because the digital medium facilitates a wider exposure and the circulation of a more consistent body of work. In the same line of practice, the Daguerreobase Project is a conservation initiative to digitally archive daguerreotypes on a large scale.

The daguerreotype is the first functional photographic process that was invented in 1839 by Louis J.M. Daguerre in France and was used until 1860. The photograph was made on a copper-silvered plate and could not be multiplied. The plate was polished to attain a mirror like surface, then it was sensitized, exposed in the camera and developed. The end result was a unique direct-positive image with great clarity.

Despite its superior qualities the process also had some drawbacks, such as a long exposure time that required a rigid posture that made expressions difficult to hold. The images were black and white and in some cases, the plates were manually colored with pigments in order to make them look more realistic.

The daguerreotype had a range of external elements of packaging that helped to display and secure the image, since the silver layer was more fragile and exposed to deterioration. In order to protect the plate, it was covered in layers of paper, cardboard, metal, glass and then it was sealed. The packaging format was diverse but two common types of housing were mostly used, the framed European model and the cased Anglo-American.

The invention of photography had a great impact on the public and it was used to explore reality and record the world. The daguerreotype was applied in equal measure in the arts and science, bringing new information and perspectives to these fields. The earliest photographic images are significant because they hold a high value as visual and historic documents.

The Daguerreobase Project archives daguerreotypes and digitally preserve these priceless images in a broader context. The Netherlands Photo Museum in collaboration with the Antwerp Photography Museum, Belgium elaborated the project and introduced several European countries, including Romania.

The online platform offers a complex network of collections of daguerreotypes presenting an overview of the global cultural heritage. The project consists of a digital database that includes detailed records and images, compiling a vast catalogue of over 16.000 daguerreotypes. The archive also consists of newspaper clippings, cameras, paper reproductions of daguerreotypes and historic literature. The items are inventoried according to a standard list that describes the photographic object. The centralized registration system acts as a collective cataloguing tool for daguerreotypes from private and public collections assembling a unitary international archive.

The project is also engaged in developing recent literature by online publications that can be accessed freely. The book *Daguerreotypes. Europe's Earliest Photographic Records* was compiled especially for the project in order to give an overview of this type of cultural heritage. It has been translated into ten European languages to bring closer the knowledge to the countries and communities involved in the project. *The Daguerreotype Journal* is an online magazine with five editions that present historic and technical aspects of the process, photographers, studios and methods of conservation.

During the project, Daguerreobase collaborated with Europeana cultural heritage portal and integrated a selection of the items into their website. In this context, the daguerreotypes benefit of a wider exposure. Another initiative is the online virtual

exhibition *1839-1860-Photography on a silver plate* that presents the history of the process in an interactive format.

The multilingual platform functions as a virtual and cultural environment that allows cross connections and relationships to be established between the collections based on the search of common criteria. The main goal of the project is to create a solid infrastructure of information in order to disseminate metadata and deliver a valuable digital content by opening collections to a wide public. As a result, a more cohesive body of work can be consulted and new knowledge can be generated by revealing and linking missing information. This approach provides a more engaging experience and interaction with the information and it develops new research strategies that are beneficial for photographers, artists, historians, curators, collectors, researchers and conservators.

With the implementation of the Daguerreobase Project in Romania, the first inventory of daguerreotypes took place at a national level. A unitary collection of a hundred fifty eight items was compiled from five public institutions and seven private collections. At the moment, seventy three items are available online and the rest are to be processed and uploaded into the database. Part of the daguerreotypes have not been identified, inventoried or exhibited online before.

The institutions and private collectors that participated in the project are the following: the Romanian Academy Library (13), the Romanian National Library (4), the Prahova County Museum of History and Archeology (1), the Arad Museum Complex (6), the Banat Museum Timișoara (1), Adrian-Silvan Ionescu (26), Tudor Berza (2), Ștefan Sava (3), Cristian Graure (2), Theodor Ulteriu-Rostás (7), Mihai Stănescu (75), Călina Bârză (6).

Following the registration, several findings have emerged from the research, such as new information about the photographer, plate manufacturer, studio, year, location, the packaging elements and the degree of deterioration of the object. The entire Romanian collection, with the exception of two items that depict statues, is composed of individual, couple or group portraits. Concerning the origins of the daguerreotypes and the nationality of those portrayed the institutions together with two private collectors hold twenty-three daguerreotypes that depict forty-one Romanians. The limited number of the photographs increases their value, as they are precious and remarkable images. In the case of the private collectors, most purchase theirs from abroad, making a larger and more culturally diverse contribution to the overall local collection. Most of those daguerreotypes come from France, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Sweden and Denmark.

This documentation was possible due to the Daguerreobase project that made the information available through a detailed inventory and digitizing the photographic objects. The content is structured and delivered freely on the online platform. This approach brings many benefits such as digital conservation, disseminating metadata, valuing visual heritage and interconnecting institutions and collections. The Daguerreobase project continues to register daguerreotypes and to bring to light significant details about the earliest photographs.