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Article: An Experimental Era: The Ungilded Daguerreotype in Early America (Abstract)

Author(s): Rachel Wetzel

Topics in Photographic Preservation, Volume 17

Page: 154

Compiler: Jessica Keister and Marie-Lou Beauchamp

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Topics in Photographic Preservation is published biannually by the Photographic Materials Group (PMG) of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC). A membership benefit of the Photographic Materials Group, *Topics in Photographic Preservation* is primarily comprised of papers presented at PMG meetings and is intended to inform and educate conservation-related disciplines.

Papers presented in *Topics in Photographic Preservation, Vol. 17*, have not undergone a formal process of peer review. Responsibility for the methods and materials described herein rests solely with the authors, whose articles should not be considered official statements of the PMG or the AIC. The PMG is an approved division of the AIC but does not necessarily represent the AIC policy or opinions.

An Experimental Era: The Ungilded Daguerreotype in Early America

Rachel Wetzel

Presented at the 2017 PMG Winter Meeting in Kansas City, Missouri.

The earliest daguerreotypes made between 1839 and 1841 before the addition of the gliding layer are unique examples of an experimental phase of photography that pose different challenges to conservators and caretakers of photographic collections to ensure their longevity. While the daguerreotype process was made public in August of 1839, many subsequent changes occurred that improved upon Daguerre's original published formula. After several years of experimentation with the process, it eventually was streamlined to make it more repeatable and consistent, allowing for the opening of many portrait studios around the globe. A vast majority of the daguerreotypes that exist in collections, on the art market, in the flea markets and as family heirlooms have been gilded. The known information about daguerreotypes pertains to the more commonly gilded version while little has been written about their more fragile, ungilded counterparts. This lecture will explore the history of the daguerreotype from its birth in Paris and trace its path to the United States, where some of the improvements to the process were developed, while simultaneously examine why ungilded daguerreotypes require some further investigation from conservators on how to preserve them for future generations to come.

Rachel Wetzel

Photograph Conservator

Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts