Chapter 1 ~ A Brief Photographic History

Carte de visite photographs were only evolutionary improvements from previous paper processes, yet they ushered in the first dramatic change in commercial photography since the introduction of the daguerreotype twenty years earlier. This paper photograph was created from a glass negative and was inexpensive to produce.

The carte de visite was patented in 1857 by the Frenchman Adolphu Eugène Disdéri in Paris, though the patent was actually for a camera that took four pictures, each 3.25" x 2.125" on a full-size plate. Cut and then mounted on a stiff card, these became the rage in France after Emperor Napoleon III stopped his marching army in front of Disdéri's studio, entered with his staff and sat for portraits. This would be a public relations coup that Disdéri could not have dreamed of.

Figure 1-1. 1860 paper photograph with hand drawn artwork.

However, the movement did not sweep the United States until the early 1860s. It is rare to find a carte de visite taken before 1861 as ambrotypes and tintypes were still the most common methods of producing pictures. Gradually they became more available, and then seemed to become an overnight sensation around 1863. This success probably was due to affordability. Until this time, tintypes were sold in wooden miniature cases, usually costing more than the photograph itself. The carte de visite cost significantly less to produce.

Cartes de visite and the first cabinet cards were created using common steps, chemicals, and papers. The cabinet cards were merely larger, and benefited from improvements in cameras and lenses. In the mid-1880s, new chemicals and papers were introduced which improved the photographs even further, but the technique for creating paper prints did not change much from the early 1860s to the late 1890s.

There was an earlier, but less successful process for paper prints. An Englishmen named William Henry Fox Talbot patented in 1841 a method for creating negatives on paper via a solution of salt and silver nitrate. His salt prints, or calotypes as he named them, were never intended for portraiture work, but were mostly used for architectural and landscape pictures. He strictly protected his patent and forced photographers to pay expensive licenses to use his technique. This did not set well with English or French photographers, and the process was never widely adopted in America. Besides the licensing issues, the grainy quality of the salt print could not match the clarity and beauty of the daguerreotype or even the ambrotype.

For the reader that wants to learn where their paper prints fit into the history of photography, we must first look at the daguerreotype in the 1840s.

The Daguerreotype is Born

1839 is recognized as the dawn of commercial photography even though scientists, chemists, and inventors had worked on various techniques for nearly 30 years prior, and some accounts have attempts at capturing permanent images as far back as the ancient Greeks.

Figure 1-2. c. 1850 daguerreotype

In the early 1830s Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre, a commercial artist and theater producer, entered into partnership with Joseph Nicéphore Niepce, a French inventor, to collaborate on improving a photographic technique that Niepce had been working on for years. Niepce advanced a technique that captured an image on a silver-coated copper plate but the images were not stable, and they eventually faded. The process was not marketable nor did he possess the wealth needed to sustain the efforts required to perfect the technology. Daguerre brought new ideas and money to the partnership, but most importantly, he quickly became the dominant partner. Niepce was in poor health and died in 1833, well before Daguerre refined the process. In about 1837 Daguerre finally came upon the means to *fix* a photograph, that is to keep it from further developing or fading after the image is created.

A Gift to the World from France

It did not hurt that Daguerre was a pragmatic businessman. After exploring different options to capitalize on the now-perfected process, including patent protection, bringing in investors, and other commercial options; he realized that maintaining financial control of the process would be nearly impossible once it was published. So, in 1839 he persuaded the French government to grant him a pension for life for recognition of a gift that he was offering the world.

> On January 7, 1839, *The Literary Gazette* in Paris published the following with great fanfare:
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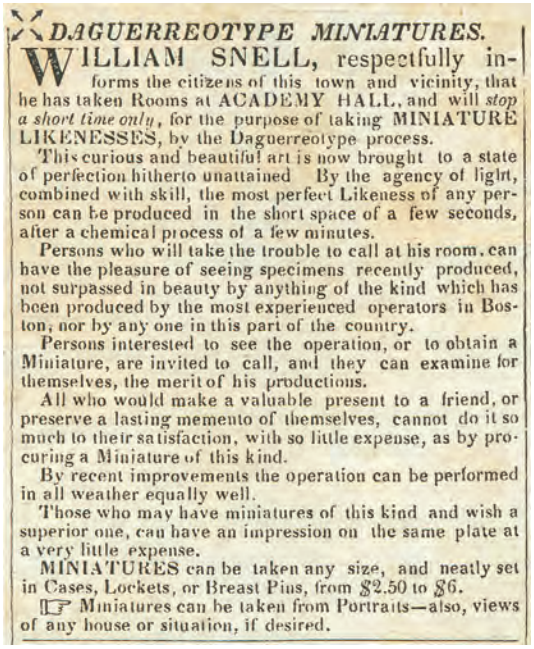
> *"We have much pleasure in announcing an important discover made by M. Daguerre, the celebrated painter of the Diorama. This discovery seems like a prodigy. It disconcerts all the theories of science in light and optics and, if born out, promises to make a revolution in the arts of design."*

While this announcement may seem a bit dramatic, it would indeed become prophetic. The full description of the process was presented August 19th of the same year to the French Academy of Sciences in Paris.

The daguerreotype became an instant success around the world. Prominent people such as Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph, rushed to Paris to learn the process directly from Daguerre. By 1853, over 85 daguerreotype studios were established in New York City alone, producing thousands of images.[1] The beautiful pictures mesmerized everyone, even though capturing and developing the photograph was quite cumbersome.

First, a copper plate was coated with silver and carefully polished until the surface became shiny and free of scratches. Before it was inserted into a camera, several chemical processes were required to sensitize the plate to light. Exposure time in commercial studios could be up to a minute which required great concentration to sit motionless that long. An abundance of blurred images and dour looks in early photographs are available today, revealing the tense struggle of sitting still.

Today, many people mistakenly believe that life 150 years ago was so difficult and depressing that the subject brought his burden into the photography studio. Yet, in reality it is much easier to maintain a relaxed facial expression which appears as a frown, rather than a forced smile for any length of time.



DAGUERREOTYPE MINIATURES.

WILLIAM SNELL, respectfully informs the citizens of this town and vicinity, that he has taken Rooms at ACADEMY HALL, and will *stop a short time only*, for the purpose of taking MINIATURE LIKENESSES, by the Daguerreotype process.

This curious and beautiful art is now brought to a state of perfection hitherto unattained By the agency of light, combined with skill, the most perfect Likeness of any person can be produced in the short space of a few seconds, after a chemical process of a few minutes.

Persons who will take the trouble to call at his room, can have the pleasure of seeing specimens recently produced, not surpassed in beauty by anything of the kind which has been produced by the most experienced operators in Boston, nor by any one in this part of the country.

Persons interested to see the operation, or to obtain a Miniature, are invited to call, and they can examine for themselves, the merit of his productions.

All who would make a valuable present to a friend, or preserve a lasting memento of themselves, cannot do it so much to their satisfaction, with so little expense, as by procuring a Miniature of this kind.

By recent improvements the operation can be performed in all weather equally well.

Those who may have miniatures of this kind and wish a superior one, can have an impression on the same plate at a very little expense.

MINIATURES can be taken any size, and neatly set in Cases, Lockets, or Breast Pins, from $2.50 to $6.

☞ Miniatures can be taken from Portraits—also, views of any house or situation, if desired.

Figure 1-3. 1842 daguerreotype advertisement.

The early buyers of daguerreotype photographs were not impoverished people. Acquiring an image was quite expensive for the period.

An 1842 advertisement in the Portsmouth, New Hampshire Journal read in part:

"Miniatures can be taken any size, and neatly set in Cases, Lockets, or Breast Pins, from $2.50 to $6.00".[2]

Various economic models put the value of the 1842 dollar between $20 and $28 in current dollars. Even at the lowest range, the cheapest daguerreotype in 1842 would have cost the equivalent of $50 in today's money.

Furthermore, the general population did not have extra money to spend on frivolous items. Fifty dollars may have been two or three months income. It would be another decade before photograph prices came down to a level that middle-class citizens could afford.

The daguerreotype was the predominate means of photography until the late 1850s. By this time, less expensive, easier to produce ambrotypes became popular. Virtually all serious daguerreotype photography ceased by the mid-1860s.

Ambrotype, Next Generation Photograph

The daguerreotype was the only commercially viable photograph process for over a decade. However, by the mid-1850s the less expensive and easier-to-produce ambrotype became popular, contributing to the demise of the daguerreotype by the early 1860s.

Figure 1-4. 1860 ambrotype, an image on glass.

Various alternatives to the expensive and difficult daguerreotype process were tried in the 1840s, including an early use of paper as negative, but with little success. Experiments with glass proved more successful. As early as 1851 an Englishman by the name of Frederick Scott Archer experimented with a technique that developed images on glass. This was particularly attractive to photographers, as it was easier and cheaper than the daguerreotype method which used silver-plated copper plates.