

Photography over Time: Comparing Formats

an in-archives exercise by Robin Michals

featured on [TeachArchives.org](http://www.teacharchives.org) at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/photo-formats/>

Students examine daguerreotypes, lantern slides, and silver-gelatin prints to analyze the technological development and changing social meaning of photography over time.

Introduction

The goal of this exercise is to use archival photographs to illustrate that photography is a changing technology. I myself have seen a very dramatic change in the technology of photography. When I went to college in the 1970s, serious photography was black and white and printed in a darkroom. My students have only a vague notion of film and most have never seen a slide. Many of them shoot dozens of photos everyday with their phones and post to Facebook, Instagram, etc. Some of my students have no idea why someone might want a stand-alone camera. I want them to understand that the technologies and the uses for photographic imagery have been different in the past and will continue to grow and change.

In this exercise, students compare three photo formats: daguerreotypes, lantern slides, and silver-gelatin prints. Being able to handle the original photographs teaches students a lot about photographic technologies. Daguerreotypes are processed on a reflective surface which can be hard to reproduce. In the archives, students are able to tilt a daguerreotype to see the reflection and to open the small cases which enclose them. Lantern slides are made of fragile glass, and students can view these on a light box in the reading room.

I had not predicted how the setting of the Othmer Library at Brooklyn Historical Society would enrich this exercise. From where students stand when they are handling the daguerreotypes, they can also see several painted portraits. One of these is of Sarah Rierson Middagh by Jefferson Gaunt (1806-1864). It was painted in 1838, one year before the first daguerreotype was made. It is very clear how much the early daguerreotypists took from the earlier medium when you can see them both at the same time. Both portrait media share the formal pose, the blank expression, and the gold frame. Students came away with a sense of how different photography was in its infancy and also how a new medium is at first defined by what came before.

Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Identify and distinguish the varying methods that have been used to create photographs
- Articulate a working knowledge of the technical and historical developments that have influenced photography and that will continue to change it in the future

Context

Before visiting the archives, students watch and have an informal class discussion about *Early Photography: Making Daguerreotypes* produced by the Getty Museum.

Visit

Number of Visits: 1

Duration of Visit: 50 minutes

Agenda

15 minutes [Standard introduction](#)

20 minutes Work in pairs

15 minutes Wrap up

Students stand in pairs at a waist-level counter to examine three different photographic formats: a daguerreotype, a lantern slide, and a silver-gelatin print. Each station is equipped with white cotton gloves. Learn more about care and handling policies [here](#).

Each student is required to turn in written responses to the in-archives [handout](#). Students are asked to write a short description of each photograph as an artifact before they describe the image depicted. By the end of the activity, students are asked to synthesize their observations and to compare and contrast the experience of viewing each of these formats.

Wrap Up

Students reconvene for a brief, informal class discussion to share individual observations with the group.

End Products

Class Blogs

After the archives visit, students complete a follow up assignment on our course blog. I ask students to compare the daguerreotype they examined in person with a digital photograph that they have taken themselves.

Blog Prompt: Write a post of at least 200 words comparing the daguerreotype that you handled today at the Brooklyn Historical Society and any digital photograph that you have taken this semester. How does the format change the experience of both taking and viewing photographs?

This pushes students to evaluate their observations and it encourages open-ended responses.

Archival Material Used

Student Pair 1

Daguerreotype of Rev. Eleazer Williams “The Dauphin,” 1853, DAG.53; Photography collection; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

[Quaker Cemetery], circa 1935, v1980.2.53; Prospect Park lantern slide collection, 1980.002; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

[Pasqualle at Ruby's Bar watching the 1984 World Series], 1984, v1992.48.9; Anders Goldfarb photographs of Coney Island, v1992.48; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Student Pair 2

Daguerreotype of Lavinia Longmire with William (1 year old) and Walter (2 years old), circa 1860s, DAG.55; Photography collection; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

[Prospect Park crowd], circa 1870, v1980.2.54; Prospect Park lantern slide collection, 1980.002; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

[Child on Coney Island ride], 1984, v1992.48.47; Anders Goldfarb photographs of Coney Island, v1992.48; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Student Pair 3

Daguerreotype of Wallberger Metzger, circa 1855, DAG.01; Photography collection; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Crowd in field], circa 1870, v1980.2.56; Prospect Park lantern slide collection, 1980.002; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Older woman on Coney Island boardwalk], 1984, v1992.48.53; Anders Goldfarb photographs of Coney Island, v1992.48; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Student Pair 4

Daguerreotype of Abraham Ditmas, circa 1845, DAG.02; Photography collection; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Parade Grounds, Foot Ball], circa 1940, v1980.2.57; Prospect Park lantern slide collection, 1980.002; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Children on ride], 1980, v1992.48.65; Anders Goldfarb photographs of Coney Island, v1992.48; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Student Pair 5

Daguerreotype of Mary Elizabeth Frye, circa 1865, DAG.03; Photography collection; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Prospect Park – Ice Skating], circa 1940, v1980.2.58; Prospect Park lantern slide collection, 1980.002; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Man smoking on boardwalk], 1984, v1992.48.56; Anders Goldfarb photographs of Coney Island, v1992.48; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Student Pair 6

Daguerreotype of Christina Payne Hallock, circa 1855, DAG.04; Photography collection; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Prospect Park Boating], circa 1930, v1980.2.60; Prospect Park lantern slide collection, 1980.002; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Man and elderly woman], 1984, v1992.48.40; Anders Goldfarb photographs of Coney Island, v1992.48; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Student Pair 7

Daguerreotype of Amelia Farington, circa 1855, DAG.05; Photography collection; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Prospect Park Skiing], circa 1935, v1980.2.61; Prospect Park lantern slide collection, 1980.002; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Ruby's Bar], 1984, v1992.48.7; Anders Goldfarb photographs of Coney Island, v1992.48; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Student Pair 8

Daguerreotype of Edgar Hicks, circa 1865, DAG.06; Photography collection; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Prospect Park American Legion celebration], circa 1920, v1980.2.72; Prospect Park lantern slide collection, 1980.002; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Woman and men on Coney Island boardwalk], 1983, v1992.48.34; Anders Goldfarb photographs of Coney Island, v1992.48; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Student Pair 9

Daguerreotype of George Frost Hicks and John Middagh Hicks, circa 1865, DAG.07; Photography collection; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Prospect Park picnic ground], circa 1920, v1980.2.88; Prospect Park lantern slide collection, 1980.002; Brooklyn Historical Society.

[Bike on Coney Island boardwalk], 1984, v1992.48.21; Anders Goldfarb photographs of Coney Island, v1992.48; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Further Reading

“Early Photography: Making Daguerreotypes.” YouTube video, 5:43. Getty Museum, 2012.

This Exercise Was Used In

GRA 2330: Digital Photography A required beginning photography course taken by second year design students.

Course Materials (included)

In-Archives Handout

Cite This Exercise

Robin Michals, “Photography over Time: Comparing Formats,” *TeachArchives.org*, accessed [insert date here], <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/photo-formats/>.

In-Archives Handout

by Robin Michals



Part of an in-archives exercise at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/photo-formats>

Name: _____

Describe the entire daguerreotype as a physical object.

Describe the image depicted on the daguerreotype.

Describe the lantern slide as a physical object.

Describe the image depicted on the lantern slide.

Describe the silver-gelatin print as a physical object.

Describe the image depicted on the silver-gelatin print.

Compare and contrast the three photographic formats as physical objects. Consider the very different way that each is made and how the physical process of making the photograph influences the image the photographer was able to create.