

Harvard Daguerreotypes, NHPRC-Sponsored Project: Brief Summary Report

In 1995, the Harvard University Library Preservation Center received a grant from the [National Historical Publications and Records Commission](#) to address the preservation and access needs of Harvard's daguerreotypes. These daguerreotypes offer primary evidence of early uses of photography as a tool for scientific methodology as well as artistic expression in mid-nineteenth century America. With daguerreotypes housed in fourteen locations throughout the university — including libraries, museums, archives, and academic departments — most researchers did not have access to the collections as a whole, nor were they able to compare images in separate collections.

There were two project goals: (1) to preserve the originals, including condition assessment, stabilization, and rehousing; and (2) to improve access to the images, including enhanced cataloging and the creation of copy images for research use. With the project nearly complete, we have accomplished the following steps:

Preservation: Conservation Assessment, Treatment, and Rehousing

- a survey to assess the condition of a newly-acquired collection of daguerreotypes has been completed and a preservation plan for the collection is in place
- 80 selected daguerreotypes have been stabilized
- all daguerreotypes have been rehoused in custom-designed permanent, durable four-flap storage enclosures

Enhanced Access

- a comprehensive, item-level finding aid for the daguerreotypes is nearly complete, and collection-level catalog records have been added to the national bibliographic databases
- 795 daguerreotypes have been photographed to 35mm color slide film; the slides were then used as photointermediates to produce continuous-tone microfilm and Kodak Photo CD digital images
- the microfilm is available to researchers through interlibrary loan

Publication

A Curious and Ingenious Art: Reflections on Daguerreotypes at Harvard, published for the Harvard University Library by the University of Iowa Press, 2000, celebrates this collection brought together for the first time and examines the telling histories behind these early photographic records.



Daguerreotype portrait of Edwin DeForest (1806-1872) in the role of King Lear. Attributed to Mathew Brady. Courtesy of the Harvard Theatre Collection.