

Research into the Design, Testing, and Practical
Application of a Secondary Protective Housing
System for Daguerreotypes

*The development of a preservation package that
was implemented in the “Young America” exhibition
of Southworth & Hawes daguerreotypes*

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Abstract:

This research outlines the design, testing, and practical application of a secondary protective housing system for daguerreotypes developed for a major, multi-venue, daguerreotype exhibition.

I. Introduction

Goals and objectives

The primary goal for this work was to design, prototype, test, and build a protective daguerreotype preservation housing system that could be applied to the *Young America* exhibition of daguerreotypes. The objectives were project oriented, and resulted in a practical design that was implemented in the exhibition process. The paper describes the research rationale, testing methods and results, and a final design for the housing system that was incorporated into the exhibit. The concluding section addresses further research directions for evaluating and improving the design and testing of the daguerreotype preservation package and secondary housing environments.

Background

This applied research is a direct continuation of the exhaustive investigation of daguerreotype bindings and housings, and their preservation and environmental impacts conducted by Hanako Murata in 2003 entitled: *Investigation of Historical and Modern Conservation Daguerreotype Housings*.¹ This work stands out as a definitive study on the subject, and it was also motivated by the upcoming exhibition of the daguerreotypes of Southworth & Hawes that was in the conceptual planning stages at the time of her research. Murata's studies conclusively showed the air permeability of the standard modern methods of binding daguerreotypes and concluded that a beneficial area of further research was to incorporate a secondary housing system to improve the preservation environment for daguerreotypes.

The *Young America* exhibition featuring daguerreotypes exclusively from the studio of the Boston daguerreotype partners, Southworth & Hawes, is a collaborative exhibition

between the International Center of Photography (ICP) and the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography & Film. It opened to critical acclaim at ICP on June 17, 2005. The challenges presented by the exhibition of daguerreotypes are many, and in the case of this exhibition of approximately 160 daguerreotypes, it involved multiple institutions, private lenders, and a core selection of approximately 60 plates from the collections of the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography & Film. The exhibition was planned for three venues: The International Center for Photography (NYC), June 17 – September 4, 2005; The George Eastman House International Museum of Photography & Film (Rochester, NY), October 1 – January 8, 2006; and the Addison Gallery (Andover, MA) January 13 – April 09, 2006.

The Collaborative Consortium

From the early planning stages, meeting the conservation requirements inherent in mounting a major exhibit of daguerreotypes was acknowledged to be a key underlying effort of this exhibition. *Young America* is not the largest exhibition of daguerreotypes to be mounted recently, nor even necessarily the most complex, but it is significant in that it is comprised of the works of a single studio that has significant representation in three major American museums: the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography & Film, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Mr. Grant Romer, Director of the Advanced Residency Program in Photograph Conservation, long-time Conservator at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography & Film, and Curator of the *Young America* exhibit, brought the three institutions together as a consortium with the purpose of advancing preservation practices for the stewardship of institutions with significant daguerreotype holdings, but with the immediate conservation concern being the shared responsibilities of the upcoming exhibition. The holdings of the three institutions comprise nearly 1,500 daguerreotypes of a known extant body of work of 2,500 works held in other institutions and by private owners. As a group overall, these works have been more observed, documented, and anecdotally reported upon, than the works of any other single maker of daguerreotypes. Concerns in the past had been raised about image deterioration and stability, previous cleaning campaigns, and all the very relevant issues related to the

preservation and exhibition of daguerreotypes overall. A first meeting of the Consortium took place on December 07, 2004 at the Metropolitan Museum², and resulted in the acknowledged need for unified standards and a body of research to help guide institutions in the exhibition and storage of daguerreotypes. The *Young America* exhibition was viewed as a first step toward a more directed approach in documenting condition and controlling microenvironments for the exhibition and transit of daguerreotypes. The preliminary design and testing of an exhibition Preservation Package, a micro-environmentally controlled housing was presented at that meeting, as well as preliminary results of testing the thermal effects of lighting systems on sealed exhibition packages.

A key point raised in the meeting was the clear need for better documentation of condition for these linked collections, and daguerreotypes in general. None of the institution has complete records of condition transcending the multiple eras of curators and conservators, records that allow a satisfactory interpretable record of condition and actions that may have occurred throughout the life of the plates while in the care of the various institutions. Visual documentation and its interpretation is difficult at best with any class of object, but daguerreotypes present an extreme documentation challenge, given the reflective surface and the difficulty in recording subtle differences in density and tone that may be indicative of environmentally induced changes in surface. Each lighting condition dramatically alters what the viewer (or camera) sees, and the documentation challenge is to establish a base-line condition image for future reference. The documentation program for this exhibition has led to a program of high resolution digital imaging and condition reporting that is described in a corollary document, *The Digital Image Condition Reporting Program for the “Young America” Exhibition of the Daguerreotypes of Southworth & Hawes*³.

