

# DAGUERREOTYPE

## RECORDING THE FACES OF MILLIONS OF PEOPLE

“When Daguerre announced his great invention to the public in the summer of 1839, he explained how it worked but not really what it was for. The process was obviously a miracle of the age of science, and like any miracle it was self-justifying. Painters did say that it would be a great aid to art, and physicists said it would be a great aid to science, but the important thing, on which everyone agreed, was that it was astonishing.” (Szarkowski, *Looking at Photographs*)

Photography made its grand entrance into society with the daguerreotype. Widely in use between 1840 and 1860, the daguerreotype was the first form of photography available to the general public. Invented by Louis Daguerre in 1837, the process involved polishing a sheet of silver-plated copper to a mirror finish, treating it with iodine and bromine vapors in a lighttight box until the surface turned yellow, exposing it in a camera, and then placing the exposed plate over a source of heated mercury vapors until the image appeared.

What did the common man and woman do with this new tool? They used it to take pictures of themselves—the first type of “selfie.” Thousands of daguerreotypes survive to this day, but very few are of landscapes or buildings. The visage of many a noteworthy person of the nineteenth century is known to us because of the daguerreotype—Abraham Lincoln, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson. But there are thousands and thousands of people represented whose identities are not known. For the first time, people were able to have pictures of themselves on tables and shelves in their homes and know what recent ancestors looked like.

“The barber had one. So did the shopkeeper, the taxidermist and the wheelwright.” (Jonathon Keats, “How the Daguerreotype Made Americans More Democratic,” *Forbes*, 2015.) Daguerreotype studios were everywhere, even in trailers pulled by teams of oxen out to the middle of nowhere. Portraits of individuals were common, often posed with clothing and objects that defined their occupations and interests. Wedding and family portraits were popular. Child mortality in this era was high, and many families posed their son or daughter’s corpse in a family photograph, giving them a way to hold on to their physical image forever.

