

Earliest Techniques Expert Group: Daguerrotypes, Salt Prints, Albumen Prints

Daguerreotypes are sharply defined, highly reflective, one-of-a-kind photographs on silver-coated copper plates, packaged behind glass and kept in protective cases. Introduced in 1839 by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, the daguerreotype process was the first commercially successful photographic process, and is distinguished by a remarkable clarity of pictorial detail. Daguerreotypes were popular through the 1840s and into the 1850s, especially for portrait photography.

Salt prints are the earliest photographic prints on paper. They are often distinguished by their lack of precise image details and matte surface. Salted paper print images are embedded in the fibers of the paper, instead of being suspended on the surface of the paper, as in the later albumen prints and gelatin silver prints. Salted paper prints were "printed-out" in contact with paper negatives; the image was formed solely by the action of light on metal salts, without chemical developers.

Albumen prints are the most common type of photographs from the 19th century. The process involves coating a sheet of paper with albumen (egg white), which gives the paper a glossy, smooth surface. The albumenized paper is sensitized with a solution of silver nitrate, then exposed in contact with a negative. Albumen prints are "printed-out," meaning that the image is created by the action of light alone on light-sensitive paper, without the use of chemical developers.

