



PEABODY MUSEUM  
*of* ARCHAEOLOGY & ETHNOLOGY

PRESS RELEASE

# Preserving Rare Daguerreotypes

**Before treatment:** A rare daguerreotype of two Native American men “To?h min ne, a brave” and “White Pidgeon”, c. 1850s. Photo courtesy Elena Bulat, Weissman Preservation Center. Harvard University. PM 35-5-10/53067.



**After treatment:** The same daguerreotype. Conservators replaced the corroded filmy glass with borosilicate glass, cleaned the daguerreotype surface with pressed air, and repaired the case. Photo courtesy Weissman Preservation Center. Harvard University.

**(Cambridge, March 9, 2008)** Thirty-six rare daguerreotype portraits from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology have recently been stabilized and preserved for future generations, in collaboration with the Weissman Preservation Center at Harvard University Library and the Mellon Foundation. Until photo conservators got to work, some daguerreotypes were nearly obscured by the deterioration of glass and other components, while others suffered from cracked or broken cases.

“It was an absolutely unique experience working with these. Daguerreotypes are such complex objects. There was a great variety of different material used together in a very tight environment: silver, copper, brass, velvet or silk, paper, leather, and wood ,” said Elena Bulat, Photo Conservator at the Weissman Preservation Center at Harvard University Library.

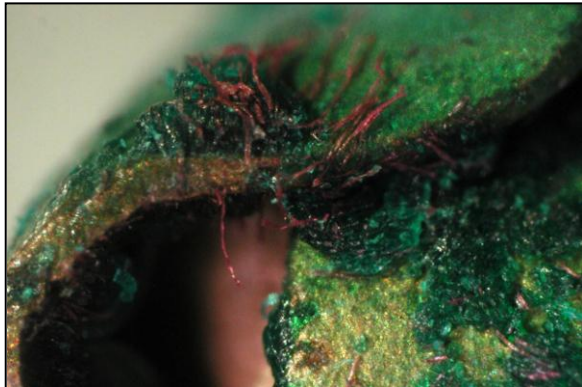
The daguerreotypes are extremely delicate and required special care while handling. For example, the polished silver surface is very delicate and vulnerable. Even the soft touch of a cotton swab will permanently scratch it. “You want to hold your breath while doing a treatment. It’s a great responsibility for a conservator,” Bulat said.



A 19-century Boston newspaper was revealed as binding material inside one of the daguerreotype’s sealed brass frame. Photo courtesy Elena Bulat, Weissman Preservation Center. Harvard University.

Daguerreotypes are the earliest form of photography. The images were made on a two-layer plate (copper and silver), sensitized in silver iodide and developed with the fumes from warmed mercury. They were usually matted, covered with glass, and sealed to prevent damage and tarnishing, creating a plate package. Most were also enclosed in a fabric-lined leatherette case. Conservators replaced corroded glass-fronted cases with modern borosilicate glass and applied new archival binding tape to keep the plate package together and protect the daguerreotype.

The daguerreotypes contained some surprises, too. Sandwiched inside one daguerreotype's sealed brass frame were scraps of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Boston newspaper. Bulat says that "makes sense, because one of the photographers was from Boston." The newspaper was apparently used to bind layers of the daguerreotype plate package together. Another surprise was revealed while photo-documenting various



Copper corrosion on a daguerreotype at 50x magnification. Photo courtesy Weissman Preservation Center, Harvard University.

types of deterioration on the plates at high magnification—some of the images are beautiful enough to hang on a gallery wall. Conservation scientists from Harvard's Straus Center for Conservation analyzed various types of corrosion on the glass and brass frames to understand the deterioration.

The daguerreotype treatment project began as part of a joint summer internship in 2007 between the Peabody Museum and the Weissman Preservation Center at Harvard. It quickly became an 18-month comprehensive preservation project thanks to a multiyear grant from the Mellon Foundation in support of the Weissman Center.

### **About the Peabody's Daguerreotype Collection**

The Peabody's daguerreotype collection is unusual for its subject matter-- South Carolina slaves, and unidentified Native American, Chinese, and Hindu people. "These daguerreotypes are extraordinary because of the enormous breadth of scholarly approaches they invite--from sociocultural and biological anthropology to the history of science, photography, and art, to american history, and immigration studies," explained Peabody Museum Associate Curator of Visual Anthropology Ilisa Barbash. The daguerreotypes were apparently collected by scientist Louis Agassiz during the 1850s. Agassiz is best known for his accomplishments in glaciology and systematics, and as founder of Harvard's Museum of

Comparative Zoology. He was also well-known for his opposition to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and as a proponent of the theory of polygenesis, that races were created independently.

### **About the Peabody Museum**

The Peabody Museum is among the oldest archaeological and ethnographic museums in the world with one of the finest collections of human cultural history found anywhere. It is home to superb materials from Africa, ancient Europe, North America, Mesoamerica, Oceania, and South America in particular. In addition to its archaeological and ethnographic holdings, the Museum's photographic archives, one of the largest of its kind, hold more than 500,000 historical photographs, dating from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the present and chronicling anthropology, archaeology, and world culture.

**Location:** *The Peabody Museum is located at 11 Divinity Avenue in Cambridge. The Museum is a short walk from the Harvard Square MBTA station.*

**Hours:** 9 A.M. to 5 P.M., seven days a week. The Museum is closed on Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day. Admission is \$9 for adults, \$7 for students and seniors, \$6 for children, 3–18. Free with Harvard ID or Museum membership. The Museum is free to Massachusetts residents Sundays, 9 A.M. to noon, year round, and Wednesdays from 3 P.M. to 5 P.M. (September to May). Admission includes admission to the Harvard Museum of Natural History. For more information call 617-496-1027 or go online to: [www.peabody.harvard.edu](http://www.peabody.harvard.edu).

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