Origins of Photography*

Daguerreotype – The first published photographic process (1839) invented by Frenchman Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre. It was made freely available to the world. It dominated the American market for nearly 20 years. Due to its chemistry it resulted in a unique metallic image made on a polished copper sheet, plated with silver and suspended over iodine. Its surface is reflective when held at a certain angle creating a mirror effect and reversing the white/dark values. It was unlike the Talbotype that produced multiple paper copies.

The Talbotype was replaced by the collodion wet plate process invented in 1851 in England. This process required the coating of a glass plate with a sticky substance that had to be immediately exposed and then fixed. From this neg. a number of paper positives could be made. The wet collodion process was replaced by the dry collodion process in the 1870s, which allowed the photographer to prepare the plate in advance, however it was slow work and it was replaced by the gelatin silver process, which was faster and more reliable. Gelatin was originally placed on a glass plate also called a dry plate, but eventually it was made into a flexible gelatin coated flexible film which led to roll film and was marketed by Kodak in the 1888.

In the 1850s the Daguerreotype was joined by the ambrotype, a glass backed image also encased and often confused with the Daguerreotype because of its reflective qualities. Tintypes were popular from the 1850s to the early 20th century and consisted of a wet collodion process on a sheet of blackened iron. They were extremely durable and were often sent through the mail during the Civil War.

*taken from Miles Oliver’s American Photography. (Oxford University Press, 2003

See also: London, Barbara Photography (Prentice-Hall), Chap 17 “History of Photography”