Goal: Find a more efficient process for digitizing a collection of fragile, unique cased photographs.

Motivation
Digitizing 40 nineteenth-century cased photos from the Ohio State University Libraries’ Special Collections in time for a September 2017 exhibit of early photography. While the work was successfully completed on schedule, the experience showed that our process was inefficient. It needed to be improved before digitizing the rest of the collection.

The Collection
The Floyd and Marion Rinhart Collection of Daguerreian Art is part of the OSU Libraries’ holdings. Housed in the Thompson Library Special Collections vault, it includes 2,100 cased daguerreotypes, tintypes, and ambrotypes collected by the Rinharts during the second half of the twentieth century.

Problems
Several factors worked against efficiency in digitization:

- The Digital Imaging and Conservation units are located 1.5 miles away from Thompson Library, where the materials are stored. Packing and transport added to the project time.
- Photography had to be interspersed between conservation treatments.
- Multiple shots of each piece were requested: case exteriors, plates in cases before and after treatment, plates outside of cases, and empty case interiors. Multiple photography setups were required.
- Materials of varying types, sizes, and features were in the batch, requiring further customization of photography setups.

Digitizing 40 items took 69 hours. The collection’s curator proposed that we digitize the remaining 2,000+ items.

Pilot project to test improvements
Treatment and digitization of the 40 exhibit pieces had followed an organized workflow across four departments, but it was clear that there were several opportunities to improve the digitization process. During the project, I kept detailed notes and documented photography setups. Afterward, I combined these into a project review, with recommendations for a more efficient approach. Working with the collection curator, I designed a pilot project to be tested with 10 cased photographs, timing the work to determine whether the new guidelines would result in a more efficient digitization process.

New guidelines to make the digitization process more efficient

1. Standardize the batches
   - Group by type: daguerreotype, tintype, or ambrotype
     - Eliminates the need to adjust lighting for differences in surface reflectivity
   - Group by plate size: whole, 1/2, 1/4, 1/6, 1/9, or 1/16
     - Eliminates the need to move and refocus the camera
   - Group by photograph case type
     - Wood or plastic: high relief decoration
     - Leather or fabric: low relief decoration
     - Eliminates the need to switch between setups 1 and 2.

2. Standardize the photography setups
   - Software profiles were created with white balance set for each type of light modifier.
   - Setup 1: Case exterior, high relief
   - Setup 2: Case exterior, low relief
   - Setup 3: Case exterior, clasp and hinge sides
   - Setup 4: Plate in case, before and after conservation work
   - Setup 5: Plate out of case
   - Setup 6: Empty case interior

Result of the pilot project
Digitization of the 10 pieces in the pilot project was timed, and compared to the time taken to digitize the exhibit items in 2017. (Time tracked in the 2017 effort included only setup, capture, quality checking, and processing: initial time spent testing lighting setups was not included.)

The 40 cased photos for the exhibit had taken 69 hours, or about 17 hours and 15 minutes for 10 items. In the follow-up pilot project, digitizing 10 items took 13 hours.

Time saved was 4 hours and 15 minutes, a 25% reduction in digitization time.

References & Acknowledgements


Thanks to Tricia Zigmund and Matt Pearson for advice shared during digitization of cased photographs for the early photography exhibit.