

Digitizing Daguerreotypes on a Budget

The Situation



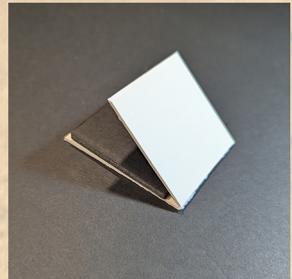
So how can we successfully digitize these “mirrors with memory” without spending a fortune on equipment? A cell phone, black foam core, supplies lying around mixed with a bit of ingenuity can give the final product a professional look without the professional cost. Follow these simple steps and you’ll be at it in no time.

Supplies:

Cell phone
Two sheets black foam core @ \$2.99 each
Scrap piece of mat board
Ruler
Box cutter
LED clip-on easel light @ \$16 and up (I paid \$20)

Beautiful in their appearance, difficult to photograph due to their highly reflective surfaces, photographing Daguerreotypes is a tricky business. In the example above, not only is the light source visible but so too is my phone.

The Set-Up

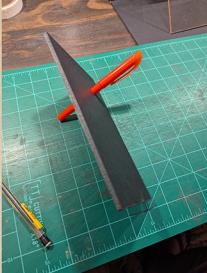


Use one of the sheets of black foam core, score through the middle, and fold to make a surface and backdrop (see third image). Through trial and error, I learned it's best to have the image at an angle. Cutting a piece of mat board into a strip, scoring the middle, and folding it created a platform for the image to rest.

Because of the weight of the image, I cut a small square of foam core as a wedge to keep the angle I wanted. The resting image is now ready for lighting.

Using an LED clip-on easel light I purchased for \$20, I directed the light at the image at different angles and found a lower angle worked best. Be sure that all other lights are off - any ambient light will be reflected in the mirrored surface.

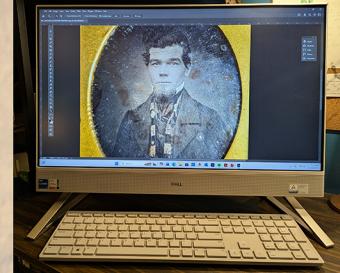
The Technique



Because my phone was reflected in the image, I needed to black it out while making it comfortable to use. Creating a simple holder out of foam core was the solution.

I cut a hole for the lens and the perfect diameter was a highlighter.

The score and fold on the bottom provided a base for the phone to rest thus making it comfortable to use while I photographed the image. I used portrait mode to take the photo as it best kept the true tones of the image.



Make sure that the photo settings on your phone are set to the highest quality possible. Doing so will guarantee a high quality image. Once it was photographed, I transported the image to Photoshop where I converted the image size to meet FADGI guidelines*.

The Final Product



* Use FADGI as a guide. Because PPI (Pixels Per Inch) is proportionate to size, shrinking the image doesn't affect quality. The image was captured at 42" x 56" or 3072 x 4080 pixels @ 72 PPI. It's doubtful the image would ever be printed at that size so it was reduced to better align with FADGI. Reducing it to a reasonable size like 10" x 7" (double the original size) would put the PPI at 408 (the longest pixel size / longest desired image size = PPI: 4080/10 = 408, loosely falling within a 3 star FADGI rating). FADGI recommends the master file be saved as either a TIFF or JPEG2000.

https://www.digitizationguidelines.gov/guidelines/FADGITEchnicalGuidelinesforDigitizingCulturalHeritageMaterials_ThirdEdition_05092023.pdf

Image Size

408 PPI
10" x 7"

Color Mode

RGB Color
8 Bits

Master File Format

JPEG2000