
Seeing the Negative: Display Techniques for French Calotypes in Real/Ideal: Photography in France, 1847-1860

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Résumé

In 2016, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, mounted an exhibition on early French photography entitled *Real/Ideal: Photography in France, 1847-1860*. In addition to including key international loans, it highlighted the Getty's strong holdings of work by such French masters as Gustave Le Gray, Édouard Baldus, Henri Le Secq and Charles Nègre. A crucial aspect that the exhibition and accompanying catalogue aimed to illuminate was one that, historically and materially, is often overlooked: the paper negative. A close collaboration between curator and conservator, along with expertise from specialized staff, led to the development of a dedicated gallery within the exhibition on the positive/negative process. Calotypes and matching positives were displayed with customized mounts and lighting designed to highlight the double-sided nature of the negative and its unique qualities. Visitors were given a rare opportunity to appreciate and understand the multifaceted qualities-aesthetic and technical-of the paper negative. This presentation will provide some insights into the decisions that led to making these fragile yet beautiful objects accessible to the public.

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