

micro PHOTOMECHANICS #2

*Once Modern Words: Liepmann and Daguerre*¹

A momentous event took place in Vienna at the end of August 1839. For the first time, selected members of the local public could witness the existence and quality of Daguerre's invention. Two of Daguerre's works, a Paris view of the Notre Dame and a still life,² sent as gifts to Emperor Ferdinand I (1793–1875) and Chancellor Clemens Metternich (1773–1859), were displayed in the auditorium of the art academy in Annagasse street between 28th and 30th August. Alongside these two pieces was another one: a colour copy of a Rembrandt's self-portrait from the royal collection in Berlin. The picture, on loan from Baron Ludwig Pereira (1803–1858), an entrepreneur, art collector and patron and an occasional painter, was created by the Berlin artist Jacob Liepmann (1803–1865) using a brand new technique – his own invention known as 'Ölgemäldedruck' [the English period press described it as 'oil-painting printing' or 'printing of oil-paintings'].³ The fact that Liepmann-Rembrandt's portrait was part of the exhibition has been largely ignored by the historians of photography, for an obvious reason: it had apparently nothing to do with the reflection of light or photochemical reaction. Nonetheless, in the context of the era and discussions about the daguerreotype as a mechanical image, its incorporation was natural and logical, and shows that the history of the daguerreotype, or photography, should not be strictly observed in terms of "photo-chemistry".

The names of Liepmann and Daguerre were frequently mentioned in the period press from the years 1839–1842, notably in articles written in German, in virtually the same breath. Although their methods were completely different, contemporaries saw a clear analogy between them: both inventions enabled the mechanical reproduction of images, faithfully, accurately, relatively fast, easily and cheaply. Some even saw them as tools of a modern, revitalizing revolution in art, both art *per se* and the general approach to it.⁴ In contrast to the daguerreotype, one substantial benefit of Liepmann's invention was the colour component: his method was able to supply the market with a multitude of colour copies of original artworks, known until then mainly from black-and-white prints. Thanks to Liepmann, the works of Rembrandt and other masters would make their way to bourgeois interiors and municipal museums, as every art lover, in the words of an art critic, "deserves access to

¹ Cf. *Morgenblatt für gebildete Leser* 15 November 1839, no. 274, p. 1096.

² The first is now lost, the second is administered by the Czech National Heritage Institute and permanently displayed at the National Technical Museum in Prague. – Maren Gröning, *Inkunabeln einer neuen Zeit. Pioniere der Daguerreotypie in Österreich*, in Monika Faber – Maren Gröning, *Inkunabeln einer neuen Zeit. Pioniere der Daguerreotypie in Österreich 1839–1850*, Vienna 2006, pp. 17–18. – *Der Adler* 29 August 1839, no. 206, p. 739. – *Wiener Zeitung* 4 September 1839, no. 203, p. 1241. – *Der Oesterreichische Zuschauer* 20 September 1839, no. 113, pp. 1153–1156.

³ The only modern publication on Liepmann's printing experiments is Annik Pietsch, *Bildbesprechung: Ida Meyer und die Notation der Malerei*, in *Bildwelten des Wissens. Kunsthistorisches Jahrbuch für Bildkritik* 4, 1 (Farbstrategie), Berlin 2006, pp. 40–42.

⁴ A. Z., *Ueber die Wirkung des Daguerreotyps und des Liepmann'schen Oelbilderdrucks auf die Kunst – Von einem Münchner Maler*, *Didaskalia* 24 August 1839, XVII, no. 232.

fine, faithful reproductions of famous originals.”⁵ According to another observer, “every town and city will be able to afford a gallery with the very best of art, in copies sufficing to introduce the young audience to art.”⁶

The first reports about Liepmann’s invention appeared in late January 1839.⁷ In all probability this was hardly a coincidence as it occurred shortly after the first reports about Daguerre reached Berlin, and it was even less probably a coincidence given that Liepmann, as he maintained, had been occupied with the development of a new reproduction method for ten years.⁸ The first to break the news of the invention and about the existing copies of the Rembrandt portrait from the royal collection was the local daily *Allgemeine Preußische Staats-Zeitung*, from which it was copied by further German and Austrian newspapers in the weeks to follow. In France, England, Belgium and elsewhere the news only started to circulate in the mid-1839; however, even there the majority of journalists showered the invention with praise, being convinced of its perfection and holding great expectations, especially as regarded the revival of painting. Few were as sceptical and forward as an anonymous writer in the *Zeitung für die elegante Welt*: “I have no idea what people make of Mr. Liepmann’s invention. Personally, I resent any machines in art. Judging by what I have learnt so far, Liepmann appears to be a bad painter, and I gladly believe this, otherwise he would be doing something else, rather than inventing an isochromatic machine [*isochromatische Maschine*].”⁹

An important part of Liepmann’s story is the image of a poor, diligent but weird genius who, despite his illness and poverty, the ridicule and scepticism of those around him, managed to solve one of the most difficult problems, while his only help came from “an orphan girl, whom he adopted in her infancy, and [who was] the sole depositary of his secret.”¹⁰ The period press features numerous depictions in this spirit: “For several years it was possible to spot in the museum a short, ailing gentleman of scruffy appearance; he rarely missed a day. Yet instead of walking through the rooms looking at the pictures, he remained standing in the room with the Dutch school, in front of one particular painting, a portrait of Rembrandt [fig. 1]. He would spend hours there with hands behind his back and eyes fixed on the canvas. One tended to put his behaviour down to a kind of quiet mania.”¹¹ – “Owing to the strife he had to overcome, illness, hunger and resentment he had to fight against in the last five years, it is hard to say whether one should admire more the ingenuity of the invention, artistic talent or courage and persistence.”¹²

The timing of the first reports, descriptions of Liepmann’s character and appearance in period journals, his decision not to reveal the invention in its entirety, a specimen sent as a gift to King Friedrich Wilhelm, travelling exhibitions of the Rembrandt portrait (with a double signature, “Rembrandt fec. – Liepmann gedruckt 1839”) and further steps and events had a clear aim: financial support or compensation, possibly received directly from the state. Apart from some journalists and art critics, Liepmann found an advocate (like Daguerre in Arago) in Ignaz von Olfers (1793–1871),

⁵ Marotti, (Salon. – Wien.), *Moravia* 12 September 1839, no. 161, p. 644.

⁶ *Didaskalia* 24 August 1839.

⁷ *Allgemeine Preußische Staats-Zeitung* 26 January 1839, no. 26, p. 107.

⁸ *Morgenblatt für gebildete Leser* 3 August 1839, no. 185, p. 740.

⁹ Correspondenz aus Paris, *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* 24 October 1839, no. 208, pp. 831–832.

¹⁰ Foreign Correspondence, *The Athenaeum* 5 October 1839, no. 623, p. 762.

¹¹ *Morgenblatt für gebildete Leser* 3 August 1839, no. 185, p. 740.

¹² *Didaskalia* 7 July 1839, XVII, no. 185.

director of the royal collections who had a considerable influence on the sovereign in art-related matters.¹³ An important part was probably also played by the Prussian-French rivalry, in this case fuelled by the press: shortly after the publishing of the daguerreotype process, an extensive article appeared in Frankfurt's *Didaskalia*; its author expressed a wish that Prussia – “a state whose intelligence needn't be eulogized – or better, joint German governments – would use the opportunity to award [Liepmann's] significant and ingenious invention” like France just did, bestowing a national award on a similarly significant invention albeit – according to the author – of a more material character.¹⁴ The painter's efforts were finally crowned with success in June 1841, when an official declaration for the annuity of 500 thalers was issued, with the condition that the method was to be published in its entirety.¹⁵ The mentioned sum of money was not even remotely close to Daguerre's pension (it was about a third), but in the light of the fact what actual impact Liepmann's invention had, this can be considered a huge success.

The inventor uncovered his secret about a year later, in the manual *Der Ölgemälde-Druck*. He described in detail, though in places not quite comprehensibly, several possible procedures. The core was a matrix made on the principle of a mosaic and a detail drawing schema of the original art work; it was this schema (**fig. 2**) that was the reason for the mentioned visits to the Berlin exhibition from which “he had brought home with him [...] the Rembrandt head he has copied, – hair by hair, hue by hue.”¹⁶ Among the technologies Liepmann had developed, the one that proved most useful for him involved matrices assembled from thin “stems” (*Stängelchen*) of a suitable profile, tone and of identical length, cut out of a substance on the basis of neatsfoot oil. The bold vision of large-scale machine printing which he talked about back in 1839 and which he tried to elucidate in the manual probably never came to fruition (**fig. 3**).

Soon after the publishing of the first reports about Liepmann's printed images on the principle of a mosaic, voices could be heard disputing the invention's originality. The majority of allegations of plagiarism were unfounded; nonetheless, one of the protests appears justified. It is most probable that Liepmann was familiar with the method of the same title developed by Alois Senefelder (1771–1834) towards the end of his life. In contrast to lithography, the technology did not see practical application, yet there is evidence that its inventor let Louis Friedrich Sachse (1798–1877), a Berlin lithographer, daguerreotypist, art dealer and incidentally also the publisher of Liepmann's manual, in on his secret.¹⁷ A possible connection between Senefelder's and Liepmann's inventions was pointed out by the Frankfurt lithographer and photographer Friedrich Carl Vogel (1806–1865),¹⁸ and was

¹³ It was probably Olfers who initiated the Emperor's financial reward for Liepmann in September 1839, as well as his annuity later.

¹⁴ A. Z., Ueber die Wirkung des Daguerreotyps und des Liepmann'schen Oelbilderdrucks auf die Kunst – Von einem Münchner Maler, *Didaskalia* 24 August 1839, XVII, no. 232. – Cf. [Julius] Bachmann, Liepmann's Oelgemälde-Druck, *Allgemeines Wiener polytechnisches Journal* 7 July 1842, no. 81, p. 331.

¹⁵ *Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände* 17 June 1841, p. 208.

¹⁶ Foreign Correspondence, *The Athenaeum* 5 October 1839, no. 623, p. 762.

¹⁷ Anna Ahrens, *Der Pionier: Wie Louis Sachse in Berlin den Kunstmarkt erfand*, Cologne – Weimar – Vienna 2013, pp. 113–114.

¹⁸ [Friedrich Carl] Vogel, Ueber Liepmann'schen Oelbilder-Druck, *Frankfurter Gewerbfreund* 5 December 1839, no. 16, pp. 241–243.

never doubted by the collector of Senefelder's works Franz Maria Ferchl (1792–1862).¹⁹ Liepmann himself in his manual admits a loose inspiration by several earlier technologies but does not mention Senefelder.

The public's excitement gradually worn off as it received neither the promised quantity nor quality. Many probably expected perfect replicas, but inevitably only got printed reproductions, and what's more of varying quality. Even the positive reviews of Liepmann's further pictures, especially self-portraits of Frans van Mieris Sr. (1635–1681) (fig. 4) and Jan Kupecký (Kupetzky) (1666–1740), did not change anything in this respect. Liepmann's swan song was in all likelihood his participation in the Great Exhibition in London in 1851. Apart from several images (along with Kupecký also the picture of Mary Magdalene by Bartolomeo E. Murillo (1617–1682), an unspecified picture of Amor and a portrait of Friedrich the Great) he displayed there the basic working components: a matrix, a frame and a relief plate, as well as a printed bordure, an example of the further application of his printing method (fig. 5).²⁰ Like hundreds of other exhibitors, he took home at least a Honourable mention for "an ingenious mode of producing several impressions from a mass of colour in which the various gradations of tint are an inch or more in thickness, and which, on being moistened with oil, and subjected to pressure, yields a copy of the subject represented."²¹ According to an official report of the organisers, "M. Liepmann's ingenious invention for printing in oil from a mass of solid colours, as a substitute for semifluid printing inks, has attracted the notice of the Jury, and they hope that when it has been sufficiently improved, this may be a valuable adjunct to ornamental printing."²²

Liepmann's experiments with faithful reproduction of paintings were among many emerging in the mid-19th century. Despite the fact that the difference between his prints and daguerreotypes was obvious at a glance, both technologies shared similar aims on the part of the inventors, expectations on the part of the public (which were incidentally sometimes much greater with Liepmann), timing, as well as the basic principle behind them: they both involved mechanically produced images – though this might sound paradoxical, especially in Liepmann's case – in the sense of an automatic, faithful multiplication of the model, with no human interference. In this respect Liepmann's prints went on to become, mainly in the German-speaking milieu, a genuine analogy to the daguerreotype, just like Moritz Jacobi's electrotyping, and in the context of the history of photography his name thus appears much more relevant than, for example, the frequently cited inventions of the railway or the telegraph.

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¹⁹ Franz Maria Ferchl, *Uebersicht der einzig bestehenden, vollständigen Incunabeln-Sammlung der Lithographie und der übrigen Senefelder'schen Erfindungen als Metallographie, Papyrographie, Papierstereotypen und Oelgemälde-Druck (ohne Presse)*, Munich 1856.

²⁰ For the description and illustrations, see *Illustrierte Zeitung* 5 April 1851, XVI (IV), no. 405, pp. 213 and 220.

²¹ *Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851. Reports by the juries on the subjects in the thirty classes into which the exhibition was divided*, London 1852, vol. 1, p. cli.

²² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 992.

fig. 1 – Rembrandt and studio of Rembrandt, Self-portrait with a velvet beret and iron collar, between 1633 and 1636, oil, 56 × 47 cm, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz), inv. no. I.900, <https://rkd.nl/explore/images/34844>

fig. 2 – Jacob Liepmann, *Der Ölgemälde-Druck*, Berlin: L. Sachse & Co., plate I (detail); a digital copy of an original from Getty Research Institute available at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/gri.ark:/13960/t9f54k21z>

- (1) 'Contours of different tints of colours along with numbers corresponding with paint containers.'
(3) 'Description of the thickness of impasto texture.'



fig. 3 – Jacob Liepmann, *Der Ölgemälde-Druck*, Berlin: L. Sachse & Co., plate V (detail): 'Apparatus joining four small printing machines by means of which smaller sheets can be printed particularly fast.'
<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/gri.ark:/13960/t9f54k21z?urlappend=%3Bseq=69>

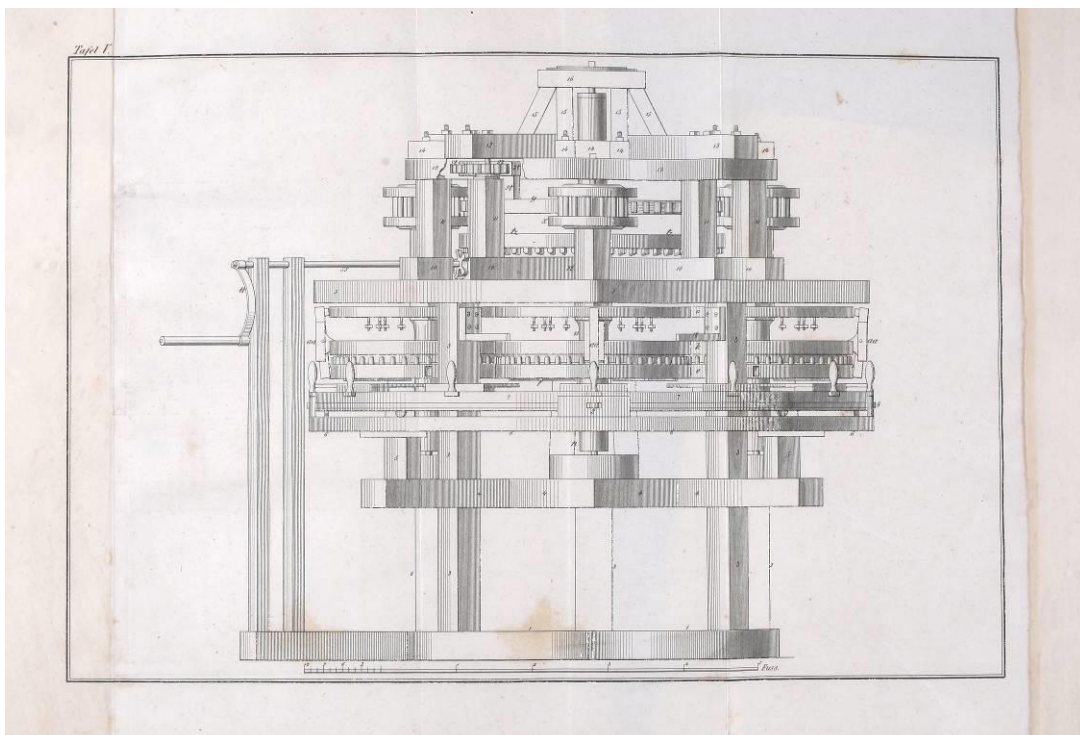


fig. 4 – Frans van Mieris the Elder, Self-portrait, 1655–1660, 12.3 × 9.6 cm, oil, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz), inv. no. 834, <http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=868283&viewType=detailView>

fig. 5 – Die Industrieausstellung, *Illustrirte Zeitung* 5 April 1851, XVI (IV), no. 405, p. 220.

