



Spurred by the discovery of gold at a sawmill near present-day Sacramento, the California gold rush was one of America's first historically significant events to be documented by photography. Beginning in 1848, thousands of people migrated to California in hopes of striking it rich. In their wake came daguerreotypists who set up shop offering portraits of miners and other local residents. These early photographers also captured images of the cities, towns, and mining operations that sprang up around them. The images they made serve as an illuminating record of the gold rush, its participants, and the people and places affected by it.

EXHIBITION CONTENTS

This exhibition showcases over 100 cased images including daguerreotypes, which are one-of-a-kind photographic images formed through a process developed by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre in 1839. Also included in the exhibition are several ambrotypes (another form of early photographic image that was cheaper and easier to produce than a daguerreotype) as well as some small artifacts related to the gold rush, such as a portable scale for weighing gold nuggets and a set of gold cuff links.

GOOD TO KNOW

Due to their reflective surface quality, daguerreotypes are best viewed under carefully controlled lighting conditions. Lighting levels within the exhibition are kept low for this reason.

Most daguerreotypes are fairly small, the largest measuring no more than 6 ½ x 8 ½ inches. Their size and reflectivity mean individual daguerreotypes are best viewed by no more than 3-4 students at a time.

Digital images of the many of the photographic works included in this exhibition can be viewed online at art.nelson-atkins.org/mycollections/6157/california-gold-rush-daguerreotypes/objects.

Most of the works on view were created by unknown makers, but a few can be attributed to particular artists living or working in California during the gold rush, such as Robert Vance, George Johnson, and brothers Jacob and William Shew.

The discussion questions in this guide are designed to encourage close looking and historical thinking across the exhibition. A few selected works are reproduced here as examples, but each set of questions can be applied to numerous works within the exhibition.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Have students brush up on the history of the California gold rush. Sites like the ones listed below can introduce students to the causes and consequences of large-scale migration into California and the commercial enterprises that arose following the discovery of gold.

- Digital Public Library of America, *Primary Source Sets: California Gold Rush*
dp.la/primary-source-sets/california-gold-rush
- *American Experience: The Gold Rush*
pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/goldrush/
(DVD available in the Educator Resource Center at the Nelson-Atkins)
- Library of Congress, *California as I Saw It: First-Person Narratives of California's Early Years, 1849 to 1900*
loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/

Practice analyzing a photograph that depicts a particular person or place. Have students find photographs published in current news stories, and ask them to consider:

- Where, when, and by whom was this photo taken? (Refer to caption information or make a reasoned guess.)
- What do I notice first? How was my eye drawn there?
- What people, places, objects, and/or activities are included in the image?
- What might the photographer have left out?
- What can this photograph tell me about the person or place depicted in it?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY THEME



Expanding Cities

The gold rush triggered explosive population growth in the California cities of San Francisco and Sacramento. Daguerreotypes from this period capture these cities in the midst of rapid expansion.

Find one or more daguerreotypes that show a city scene, and consider:

- What kinds of businesses can you see in this image? What goods or services might those businesses provide to miners arriving in the area?
- What evidence can you see that this city is growing and changing?



Life as a Miner

Merchants lived in newly-formed towns near areas where gold had been found, while miners chose to live closer to the mining sites themselves. Housing options in these settlements ranged from canvas tents to communal cabins, where domestic chores like laundry and cooking were shared. Some daguerreotypists visited these remote areas in photographically-outfitted wagons.

Find one or more daguerreotypes that show mining settlements, and consider:

- What materials were used to construct the building or buildings in this scene?
- Describe any people shown in this image. What do you notice about their clothing and appearance?
- Imagine you could step inside this picture – what might you hear? Smell? Feel? What do you see in the image that makes you say that?



Mining and the Natural Environment

From basic techniques involving shovels and pans to resource-intensive practices like hydraulic mining, miners extracted gold from the earth in a variety of ways. In the process, they diverted rivers, felled trees, and introduced mercury into local waterways.

Find one or more daguerreotypes depicting mining activities, and consider:

- What evidence can you see in the image of changes to the natural environment as a result of mining?
- Which does this artist seem more interested in – the human activity of mining or the natural landscape in which it takes place? What do you see that makes you say that?



Interactions and Conflicts

The gold rush brought together a complex mix of races and nationalities. Along with white American fortune-seekers, immigrants from China, South America, and Europe traveled to California, where they encountered Native Americans and Spanish-speaking settlers already living in the area. Some white southerners brought enslaved African Americans with them, and free black men also dug for gold.

While many cultures played important roles in the gold rush—Native Americans used tightly woven baskets to pan for gold, Mexican miners invented ways to extract gold from rock, and Chinese immigrants introduced machinery used in river mining—non-whites frequently faced discrimination by white American miners.

Examine several portraits or other images containing people, and consider:

- What types of people are shown most often in these images? Consider factors like race, gender, and age. Of the groups described above, which are not well represented in these daguerreotypes? What might that tell you about the society of that time and place?



Documenting the Gold Rush

The newly-emerging field of photography allowed for unprecedented documentation of life during the gold rush. Daguerreotypists captured portraits of miners, views of mining operations, and shots of local businesses, providing contemporary and future viewers a valuable perspective on this moment in history.

Considering all the images on view in this exhibition, discuss:

- What overall impression of gold rush-era California do you get from these images?
- What message about the West might they have communicated to Americans living in the eastern part of the country?
- Which image or images do you find particularly compelling? What about the subject or the way that subject has been shown makes the image interesting to you?

IMAGE CREDITS

Robert H. Vance, American (1825–1876). *View of Sacramento Street, San Francisco, California*, ca. 1854–1856. Daguerreotype, half plate. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., 2005.27.39.

Unknown maker, American. *Gold mining camp, California*, ca. 1850–55. Daguerreotype, half plate. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., 2005.27.111.

Attributed to George H. Johnson, American (1823–ca. 1880s). *River mining, North Fork, American River, California*, ca. 1850–55. Daguerreotype, half plate. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., 2005.27.1122005.27.112.

Unknown maker, American. *Portrait of two men*, ca. 1855. Daguerreotype, sixth plate. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2005.37.103.

Unknown maker, American. *Portrait of a California gold miner with tools*, ca. 1850. Daguerreotype, quarter plate. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., 2005.27.115.

AFTER YOUR VISIT:

Explore other daguerreotypes in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins. Have students use the museum's online collection search (art.nelson-atkins.org/advancedsearch), entering "daguerreotype" in the MEDIUM field. Ask students to find images they can compare and contrast with the ones they saw in the exhibition. For example, students might look for:

- Images of cities and businesses from different parts of the United States
- Portraits that show individuals holding tools or attributes of their profession
- American landscape views that contain evidence of humans changing the natural environment

In comparing these images with the gold rush daguerreotypes, what can they learn about mid-19th-century America?

Examine photographs from other historical events or periods that have been documented through photography, such as the Great Depression, World War II, or the Civil Rights Movement. How are images from these different moments in history similar to or different from one another? What changes can you see in the way photographers were approaching their work?
