Article: Poitevin’s Precious Plates: Current Research at the Rijksmuseum (Abstract)
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Abstract: Poitevin’s Precious Plates
Current Research at the Rijksmuseum

Martin Jürgens

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Sixteen small, metal plates were donated to the Print Cabinet of the Rijksmuseum many years ago. The donor vaguely associated them with Alphonse Poitevin, the 19th century engineer who is known for his pioneering work with bichromated gelatin processes, among many other experimental photographic and printing techniques. This intriguing detail sparked an ongoing research project into the plates’ history, materials, and original function. At first glance, the plates are not much to look at; they appear to be experimental rejects: from paper-thin copper sheets to mechanically damaged daguerreotype plates. However, close examination of the plates and extensive research in collections of French institutions has shown that at least two of the Rijksmuseum plates hold partial images, and that precisely these images were used by Poitevin in the 1840s for his experiments on converting daguerreotypes into intaglio printing plates. The plates are currently assumed to stem from one or all three of Poitevin’s early processes: gravure photochimique (1842-48), gelatin transfer (1851), and/or helioplastie (1855). Research to date has included chemical analysis by XRF and SEM-EDX, surface analysis by Hirox microscopy, and study of the literature. More technical analysis is in preparation. The long-term goal of this project is to determine the nature and original function of these plates and then to re-create the processes, thereby gaining the knowledge to accurately identify similar plates in other collections.

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