



The First Photograph **guide**



HARRY RANSOM
CENTER

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

The First Photograph

View from the Window at Le Gras

Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (French, 1765–1833)

Heliograph on pewter

1826 or 1827

BECAUSE OF ITS UNIQUENESS and its significance to the arts and humanities, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras*—the “First Photograph”—is among the Ransom Center's, and indeed the world's, greatest treasures. Taken by Niépce in either 1826 or 1827, the image depicts the view from an upstairs window at his estate, Le Gras, which is located in the Burgundy region of France. This single photographic plate represents the origin of today's photography, film, and other media arts.

Photographic Process

Niépce began his experiments with photography around 1816, concurrently pursuing two paths of exploration. He invented a new method of printmaking by copying engravings using only light and chemistry. Niépce also sought to capture direct views of nature by using the same process in combination with a *camera obscura*, an optical device used by artists as a drawing aid. After experimenting with paper, glass, and stone supports for various resins that hardened when exposed to light, Niépce began to use pewter plates in 1826. Sometime during that year or the next he coated his pewter plate with bitumen of Judea (an asphalt derivative of petroleum) and loaded it into a *camera obscura* looking out the window of his second-story workroom. After an exposure of at least



eight hours, he removed the plate and washed it with a mixture of white petroleum and oil of lavender to dissolve the areas of bitumen that had not been hardened by the light. It produced the image we see today of the courtyard, trees, and buildings of Niépce's estate. (The highlights in the image are made up of the hardened bitumen, while the darker areas are the pewter plate itself.) Niépce called his invention "heliography," or sun-drawing.

In 1829 Niépce began a collaboration with the Parisian artist Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre to improve the process, but Niépce died in 1833 before it was completed. In 1839, after six more years of independent research and experimentation, Daguerre

announced his improved photographic technique, the “daguerreotype.” Niépce’s role in photography’s invention was overshadowed by Daguerre and by the Englishman William Henry Fox Talbot, who announced his own photographic process in 1839.

Re-Discovery of the Heliograph

After a public display in an exhibition in London in 1898, Niépce’s heliograph lay in obscurity for over 50 years, forgotten by its owners. In 1952 the photography historian Helmut Gernsheim was able to establish the plate’s history and discover where descendants of the heliograph’s last owner had stored it. Through his subsequent publications, Gernsheim returned Niépce to his rightful place as the inventor of photography. When Harry Huntt Ransom purchased Gernsheim’s photography collection in 1963, Gernsheim donated Niépce’s heliograph. Today, *View from the Window at Le Gras*—the world’s earliest successful photograph from nature—is on permanent display at the Ransom Center.

Analysis and Preservation

In collaboration with the Ransom Center in 2002, the Getty Conservation Institute conducted the first scientific study of the heliograph’s material makeup, determined its state of conservation, and repaired the original gilt wood frame. The Getty Conservation Institute also designed and constructed a new protective case for the heliograph, which provides constant monitoring of its condition and environment.

The First Photograph is on permanent display at the Harry Ransom Center.

The Harry Ransom Center is an internationally renowned humanities research library and museum. Its extensive holdings provide a unique record of the creative process of writers and artists, deepening our understanding of literature, photography, film, art, and the performing arts. Thousands of scholars, students, and cultural enthusiasts from around the world study materials from the collections each year. These collections also inspire original exhibitions and programs that offer visitors opportunity for enrichment, discovery, and delight. The Ransom Center advances the study of the arts and humanities and fosters an environment where culture thrives.





Visit www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent/wfp/ to view an online exhibition of the First Photograph and to learn more about the Ransom Center's photography collection.

LEFT: First Photograph on view in the Ransom Center lobby. Photo by Eric Beggs
 FRONT (Detail) & INTERIOR: Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras*, 1826 or 1827. Photo by J. Paul Getty Museum
 ABOVE: Manuscript notations and labels on the verso of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras*

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Admission is free.

Open Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
 with extended Thursday evening hours to 7 p.m.
 Saturday and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m.

Though the Ransom Center's exhibition galleries are closed Mondays, the First Photograph and the Gutenberg Bible are on permanent display in the lobby and can be viewed on Mondays.