Object of the month

Museum Atrium

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At 19 of August 1839, for the first time in history, a photographic process was announced to the world, by the French Academy of Sciences. The process was a daguerreotype, invented by Louis Daguerre, a single, positive image on a copper plate with polished silver. Almost simultaneously, in England, Fox Talbot announced the invention of the negative-positive process, a concept that still prevails today and allows multiple reproductions from the original image.

The negative, initially made of waxed paper, quickly was substituted by a glass plate, which, being more transparent, flat and stable, allowed for a sharper image. In order to reach perfection, gelatin was introduced as a binder of the silver salts to the glass, allowing greater sensitivity to light, making the process more efficient and fast (from minutes of exposure to fragments of second). This process allowed the negatives to be stored after exposure and revealed later, avoiding take the studio to the field. In 1880 the silver plate negatives were already industrialized worldwide.

Between 1907 and 1910, Gago Coutinho headed the East Africa Geodesic Mission, and photographed with silver gelatin glass plates, more than 350 images. This report resulted on a photographic album, printed in 1921, documenting the most significant aspects of this mission. This is the album of this Mission with a photographic print and the correspondent original silver gelatin glass plate negative. In this image, we can see Gago Coutinho during prospection, making observations at distance at the top of a tree, allowing him to see through higher vegetation.

In Portugal, the silver gelatin glass plates were used until the mid-1950s.