



Joseph Weninger – An Itinerant Photographic Pioneer

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Director of Collections

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(In the Breach of Decorum: Painting between Altar and Gallery, Fig. 9, p. 163).

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Fig. 1 Joseph Weninger (1802–1875), *Unknown Man*. Daguerreotype, 14.2 x 11 cm. Purchase: the gift fund of Gripsholmsföreningen av år 1937 (the Axel Hirsch Fund). Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 4798.



Fig. 2 Joseph Weninger (1802–1875), *Unknown Woman*. Daguerreotype, 14.2 x 11 cm. Purchase: the gift fund of Gripsholmsföreningen av år 1937 (the Axel Hirsch Fund). Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 4799.



Fig. 3 Joseph Weninger (1802–1875), *Helena Sergevna Scherbatova (1826–1855), Russian Princess, Married to the Swedish Diplomat Gustaf af Nordin*, c. 1850. Daguerreotype, 17 x 13.2 x 0.7 cm. Purchase: the Fritz Ottergren Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 5068.

The first foreign itinerant portrait daguerreotypist to come to Sweden was the Austrian Joseph Weninger (1802–1875). He was born in Zellnitz, Untersteiermark (now Selnica in northern Slovenia), and from 1826 he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. In 1841 Weninger travelled to Karlsbad in Bohemia, where he acquired a knowledge of the new daguerreotype technique, probably from Anton Georg Martin.¹ Presumably this meant that he learnt to use the camera and lens refined by Petzval and Voigtländer, which were far more light-sensitive than their French forerunners. With his combination of artistic and scientific training, Weninger subsequently referred to himself as a “Portrait Painter & Chemist” – a description presumably intended to enable him to compete more effectively with conventional portrait painters, and with any dabblers in the new technique. By the autumn of 1841, Weninger was himself working as a daguerreotypist in Prague.² Early the following year, he moved his business to Leipzig, where he became the first itinerant portrait daguerreotypist.³

Via Hamburg, Weninger made his way to Copenhagen, where he advertised in June 1842 that he could produce a daguerreotype in just 15–30 seconds. That was one feature of the technique that was given particular emphasis in his advertisements, along with the fact that the likenesses created surpassed those achieved with other forms of portraiture. It is said that, while in Copenhagen, he had time to take portraits of members of the royal family, although no traces of these have been found. During the year Weninger spent in Denmark, he was often on the move in different parts of the country. He also participated in the Danish Academy of Fine Arts’ exhibition at Charlottenborg.⁴

From Copenhagen, Weninger sailed to Gothenburg in the summer of 1843, continuing via the Göta Canal to Stockholm, where he arrived on 12 June. Just

a fortnight later, Prince Gustaf had his portrait taken by the Austrian daguerreotypist in the gardens of the Royal Palace, although, again, the image has not been found.⁵ In the barely three months Weninger stayed in the Swedish capital, where he was joined by his brother Heinrich, he did not have time to produce very many portraits. Two of the ones he did take, probably representing a married couple, had previously been acquired by the Nationalmuseum (Figs. 1–2).⁶ There is no absolute proof, admittedly, that these portraits of a young man and woman were in fact taken in Stockholm, but in the daguerreotypes of named individuals from Weninger's stay in Sweden we see the same chair with a tall, Baroque-style cane back, of a type conspicuous by its absence in his other known works.⁷ Most of them also have the same rectangular white mount with an upright octagonal window, framed by a gold line, and preprinted with the text "Daguerrotype von Joseph Weninger aus Wien".

As his photographic studio, he used a glazed summer house in the garden of Count Carl De Geer's property on Stora Trädgårdsgatan in Stockholm. This explains why, in his adverts, Weninger stresses that "the portraits are formed in the shade, not in the sunshine as used to be the case, so the weather is of no significance in this regard; work is therefore carried out in every kind of weather".⁸

Why did Weninger content himself with less than three months in Stockholm and Sweden? Presumably because he had quickly become aware that a more lucrative market awaited him in the great empire to the east. What is more, Stockholm already had a native daguerreotypist, Johan Adolf Sevén, who had been active there since as early as 1841.⁹ On 25 August 1843, therefore, the Weninger brothers left the Swedish capital to travel via Finland to Russia and St Petersburg. Josef Weninger opened a studio the same year at Grande Morskoi, Maison Person, No. 37.¹⁰ Here he received the elite of the city, among them



Fig. 4 Joseph Weninger (1802–1875), *Helena Sergevna Scherbatova* (1826–1855), *Russian Princess, Married to the Swedish Diplomat Gustaf af Nordin*, c. 1850. Daguerreotype, 10 x 7,5 cm. Purchase: the gift fund of Gripsholmsföreningen av år 1937 (the Axel Hirsch Fund). Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 5169.

the newly married Princess Helena Sergevna Shcherbatova. At the age of barely 20, she had married the Swedish minister to Russia, Major General Gustaf af Nordin, a man more than 25 years her senior.¹¹ At some point in connection with this, Weninger took two daguerreotype portraits of the young Helena. One of them shows her wearing a bonnet and looking to the left (Fig. 3).¹² In the other, she is wearing more or less the same clothes, but has removed her headgear and meets the viewer's gaze (Fig. 4).¹³

The first of these portraits is the better preserved. Its technical quality is very high. The carefully balanced composition betrays Joseph Weninger's training as a portrait painter. In Sweden, his only real rival in artistic and technical skill was Johan Vilhelm Bergström. The Austrian pioneer successfully operated his business in St Petersburg until 1860.¹⁴

The young Princess Shcherbatova only lived to the age of 28. She is buried in the Alexander Nevsky Cemetery in her native St Petersburg. The year after his wife's death, 1856, the widower Gustaf af Nordin asked to be recalled as Sweden's minister. He took with him the couple's only child, their 9-year-old daughter Olga. It was from the estate of her descendants that the Nationalmuseum was able to acquire the two daguerreotypes. At the auction sales in question, though, neither of the portraits was correctly identified.¹⁵ By a happy coincidence, and based on the provenance of the images, it was finally possible to establish the identity of the sitter as Princess Helena Sergevna Shcherbatova, portrayed soon after her twentieth birthday.

Notes:

1. Uwe Steen, "Joseph und Heinrich Weninger: Reisende Daguerreotypisten aus Österreich", in *Fotogeschichte*, Heft 70, Jg. 18, 1998, pp. 3–19.
2. <http://www.scheufler.cz/en-CZ/photohistory/chronology,1841,04-daguerreotypist-josef-weninger-in-prague,50.html>
3. Helmer Bäckström, "Wienaren Joseph Weningers fotografiska verksamhet i Stockholm sommaren 1843", *Nordisk Tidskrift för Fotografi*

1922, h. 2, nr 57, pp. 17 ff. Cf. Solfrid Söderlind, *Porträttbruk i Sverige 1840–1865*, diss., p. 176.

4. Bjørn Ochsner, *Fotografer i og fra Danmark til og med år 1920*, I–II, Ballerup 1986, pp. 844–845.

5. Söderlind 1993, p. 290.

6. NMGrh 4798–4799 (purchased in 2011 with funds from the gift fund of Gripsholmsföreningen av år 1937).

7. Moderna Museet FM 1983 031 003 (Count Patrick Lewenhaupt, County Governor, with his sons Charles-Emil and Adolf Otto); FM 1985 043 001 (Hedvig Maria Stjerncreutz with her son Herman Rudolf Stenberij); Nordiska Museet NM.0240206 (Carl Gustaf Lindberg and his wife Aurore Mathilde, née Oudar).

8. Helmer Bäckström, "Daguerreotypien i Sverige", *Daedalus*, vol. 13, 1943, p. 75.

9. Söderlind 1993, p. 177.

10. See note 12.

11. Gustaf Elgenstierna, *Den introducerade svenska adelns ättartavlor*, vol. V, Stockholm 1930, p. 510.

12. NMGrh 5068. Hidden on the back of this portrait, as on the other one (NMGrh 5169), was Weninger's business label, with the wording "J. Weninger Atelier Grande Morskoi, Maison Person No. 37".

13. NMGrh 5169.

14. Unto Käyhkö, *Painted and Photographed Portraits in Finland 1839–1870*, Jyväskylä 1995, p. 25.

15. Stockholms Auktionsverk Online, 6 Jan. 2015, no. 285171; 12 Dec. 2018, no. 548002.