

AHRC Techne / Smithsonian Virtual Placements:

William Constable (1783-1861) Brighton Daguerreotypes research and cataloguing

William Constable opened his Brighton daguerreotype studio, called 'The Photographic Institution', in 1841 on the seafront street Marine Parade, just two years after photography's invention had been announced. An intelligent and charismatic man, his photographic studio was the first in Brighton. It welcomed nobility and locals who posed for portraits in the 'The Blue Room' with its rotating platform to be seen in the best light.

The research project invites AHRC Techne Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) to research and contribute to the cataloguing of 129 Constable daguerreotypes held by the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (Washington, D.C. USA). Albert Boni purchased the Constable Collection from Parke-Bernet auction house in 1970, then donated them to the museum in 1972 as part of a large group of photographic materials.

Placement PGRs will work with an American curator (Shannon Perich, National Museum of American History) and an English academic (Annebella Pollen, University of Brighton) to research the photographer's history, his contributions to the field and to Brighton, to improve museum's catalogue records. Along the way, placement PGRs will learn about museum work, curation, interdisciplinary research, and writing for the public.

Scope: Placement PGRs will collaborate with Perich and Pollen in a virtual environment. Online meetings will provide onboarding and training, check-ins and reviews of work, and contact with experts. Independent research and writing will be required.

Candidate eligibility: The placements are voluntary positions open to PGRs who are in receipt of AHRC funding and who have the availability to undertake the placement within their registered period of study.

Candidate requirements: The PGRs should be independent researchers with strong organisational and time management skills who work well in a virtual team environment.

Study areas include: nineteenth century photography, Brighton history, visual culture, technology, consumer culture, urban development, curatorial and museum studies.

Content Research:

1. Research named individuals depicted in daguerreotypes.
2. Augment William Constable's biography and research his photographic practices (these include a rotating platform for lighting, hand colouring, posing and postures, studio apparatus and tools).
3. Contextualize visual tropes and other image content.

4. Identify possible relationships to other businesses / activities that brought individuals to Constable's studio, and the role of his studio in the local economy.

Outcomes:

1. Learn how museums research objects and form robust database records.
2. Work with museum professionals to write for the public and produce written content to be uploaded to museum database.
3. Enrich interdisciplinary historical approaches for researching and writing about the nineteenth century and photography.
4. Depending on research quality, additional products such as presentations or publications could be possible.

Total number of hours (required meeting and independent research hours)

For two students: c.20 hours per week for 13 weeks (one semester, February-June 2026).

This includes monthly 3-hour meetings comprising time with Perich and Pollen for training, check-ins, reviews, and progress reports, as well as presentations and conversations with invited guests, such as historians, conservators, collections managers, and other experts to deepen and augment photographic history, museum knowledge and research skills.

Project coordinator biographies:

Shannon Thomas Perich is the curator in the Photographic History Collection at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History where she has worked for almost three decades. The scope of her work covers daguerreotype to digital, and can be seen in exhibitions, essays, books, blogs, and collaborative conservation projects. Her research interests include the relationship between photography and gun culture, snapshots as data sets, and the circulation of images with particular interest in post-WWII magazines and real photo postcards.

Annebella Pollen is Professor of Visual and Material Culture at University of Brighton, where she has been based for more than two decades. She is widely published in the history of photography from the nineteenth century to the present. Her photography projects include the examination of mass, amateur and popular practices, and photography and obscenity.

To apply: Please send an Expression of Interest, max 500 words, outlining eligibility and experience, plus a two-page CV, to a.pollen@brighton.ac.uk by 5th January 2026.

Appointments will be made in January 2026, and the project will start in February 2026.