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Complicating Objectivity in Photographic Representations of Syphilis in *Fin-de-Siècle* France

In early-twentieth-century France, syphilis and its controversial status as a hereditary disease reigned as a chief concern for physicians and public health officials. As syphilis primarily presented visually on the surface of the skin, its study fell within the realms of both dermatologists and venereologists, who relied heavily on visual evidence in their detection, diagnosis, and treatment of the disease. Thus in educational textbooks, atlases, and medical models, accurately reproducing the visible signposts of syphilis—the color, texture, and patterns of primary chancre or secondary rashes—was of preeminent importance. Photography, with its potential claims to mechanical objectivity, would seem to provide the logical tool for such representations; recent scholarship on objectivity, most notably by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, would support such a claim.

Yet photography’s relationship to *syphilographie* warrants further unpacking. Despite the rise of mechanical objectivity charted in the late nineteenth century, artist-produced, three-dimensional medical moulages co-existed with photographs as significant educational tools for dermatologists; at times, they were further mediated through photographic reproduction in texts. Additionally, the rise of phototherapy complicated this relationship by fostering the clinical equation of the light-sensitive photographic plate with the patient’s skin, which became the photographic record of disease and successful treatment. My project explores these complexities to delineate a
more nuanced understanding of objectivity vis-à-vis photography and syphilis: rather than a desire to produce an unbiased image, physicians marshaled photography to exploit the verbal and visual rhetoric of objectivity, authority and persuasion inextricably linked to culturally-constructed understandings of the photograph.