

Morse, "A great revolution in art," 24 April 1840 (published 1864)

(keywords: Samuel F. B. Morse, Marcus A. Root, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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Selected text published in:

M. A. Root, *The Camera and The Pencil: or the Heliographic Art* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1864): 390–92.

The following are extracts from the speech of Professor S. F. B. Morse, at the annual supper of the National Academy of Design, April 24th, 1840:—

“Gentlemen:—I have been requested to give my opinion of the probable effects to be produced, by the discovery of Daguerre, on the Arts of Design. It is known to most of you, that, for many months, I have been engaged in experiments with the daguerreotype, more particularly for the purpose of forming an intelligent judgment on this point.

“The daguerreotype is undoubtedly destined to produce a *great revolution* in art, and we, as artists, should be aware of it and rightly understand its influence. This influence, both on ourselves and the public generally, will, I think, be in the highest degree *favorable* to the character of art.

“Its influence on the artist must be great. By a simple and easily portable apparatus, he can now furnish his studio with *fac-simile* sketches of nature, landscapes, buildings, groups of figures, &c., scenes selected in accordance with his own peculiarities of taste; but not, as heretofore, subjected to his imperfect, sketchy translations into crayon or Indian ink drawings, and occupying days, and even weeks, in their execution; but painted by Nature’s self with a minuteness of detail, which the pencil of light in her hands alone can trace, and with a rapidity, too, which will enable him to enrich his collection with a superabundance of materials and not *copies*;—*they cannot be called copies of nature, but portions of nature herself.*

“Must not such a collection modify, of necessity, the artist’s productions? Think how perspective, and, as a consequence, proportion also, are illustrated by these results. How the problems of optics are, for the first time, confirmed and sealed by nature’s own stamp! See, also, what lessons of light and shade are brought under the closest scrutiny of the artist!

“To the architect it offers the means of collecting the finest remains of ancient, as well as the finest productions of modern architecture, with their proportions and details of ornament, executed in a space of time, and with an exactness, which it is impossible to compress in the ordinary modes of an architect’s study.

“I have but a moment to speak of the effect of the daguerreotype on the *public taste*. Can these lessons of *nature’s art* (if I may be allowed the seeming paradox), read every day by thousands charmed with their beauty, fail of producing a juster estimate of the artist’s studies and labors, with a better and sounder criticism of his works? Will not the artist, who has been educated in Nature’s school of truth, now stand forth pre-eminent,

while he, who has sought his models of style among fleeting fashions and corrupted tastes, will be left to merited neglect?

“I should feel, gentlemen, that I had been greatly deficient if I did not add a few words attesting my admiration for the genius of the great discoverer of this photogenic process.

I have for months been occupied with experiments, repeating those of Daguerre, and modifying both the apparatus and the process, by my own experience and the suggestions of scientific friends, and, as the result of all, I must say that, at every step of my progress, my admiration for his genius and perseverance has increased. I could not but constantly reflect, if, with the details fully revealed, of a process, whereby a *sure result* could be obtained, so much to discourage be encountered, what must have been *his* discouragement, who, when one experiment after another failed, had only darkness, uncertainty, and doubt for his comforters! And yet he triumphed over all, and in the lists of fame the name of Daguerre will deservedly stand by the side of Columbus and Galileo, and Papin and Fulton.

“Gentlemen, in closing, I offer you the following sentiment:—Honor to Daguerre, who has first introduced Nature to us, in the character of *Painter*.”

[End of selected text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This passage is from chapter 29, “History of the Heliographic Art in the United States.”

See also “The Daguerreotype,” in Samuel Irenaeus Prime, *The Life of Samuel F. B. Morse, LL. D.: Inventor of the Electro-Magnetic Recording Telegraph* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1875). 400–409.¹

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8750001_PRIME_MORSE_1875.pdf

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