

**Thomas Cole, remarks on the daguerreotype, 26 February 1840**

(keywords: Thomas Cole, William Althorpe Adams, Benjamin Silliman, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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Manuscript letter:

*Thomas Cole to William Althorpe Adams* dated 26 February 1840.

(Transcription by this editor. Original line breaks preserved. Entire three-page letter herein provided. Letter addressed to "Wlm A Adams Esqr; Zanesville Ohio" and is postmarked Feb 26; Catskill N.Y.)

Catskill Feb<sup>y</sup> 26 1840

My dear Sir

I received yours of the 21<sup>st</sup> Jan<sup>y</sup> informing me of the battle that was waging between the Goths & the vandals of yourself. I was glad to hear that you are not vanquished though the enemies numbers are so great — I hope you may yet come — quick — I am concerned what great difficulty you have to encounter & I shall be very agreeably surprised if you come off Conqueror. It is almost too good a thing to expect in these times.—

Perhaps you have forgotten my request that you would send me in a letter a small plan of the building according to my last design — but more probably your business with not permit you to spend so much time in the matter. I would not wish to impress a task which would require a sacrifice. So let it be at your convenience — If you can send it let it be soon as we are now preparing for Exhibition. I wish you could come & see our Exhibition not that I expect any thing extraordinary; but that I should like to see you in it. Next to yourself a picture of yours. Do lend one. I am very desirous indeed of seeing something of yours. With respect to the Voyage of Life the fictitious one is going on slowly, but the real one rapidly.

I suppose you have read a great deal about the Daguerrotype & if you believe everything the newspapers say (which by the by would require an enormous bump of marvellousness) you would be led to suppose that the poor craft of painting was knocked in the head by this new machinery

for making Nature take her own likeness &  
we poueri diavoli [pueri diavoli ("children of the devil")?—edit.] have nothing to do but to give  
up the ghost. But thank goodness those newspapers  
are great liars & I intend to launch a little boat  
of an adage that fool the public ear, it is,  
when you hear anybody speaking falsely to say  
"He lies like an Editor." The old saying "He lies  
like a pickpocket" is quite out of date for pick-  
-pockets are become pious of late & are total  
Temperance men. They "gave it up" finding the Edi-  
-tor unapproachable. But I was saying  
something about Daguerrotype matters, this  
the conclusion, that the Art of painting is a  
creative as well as an imitative art & is in no danger  
of being superseded by any mechanical contrivance.  
"What fine chisel did ever yet cut breath?"

The little I have seen of the Daguerrotyped produc-  
-tions did not astound me — the drawings of  
drawing they can be called were extremely faint  
& ghost-like; but wonderfully beautiful in  
detail — The invention will undoubtedly be one  
of great value — To the Artist a means  
of accumulating material and it will con-  
-found all false & lying pictures — On Thurs I go  
to N-York again I hope to see some more per-  
-fect specimens than I have yet seen —

I have been closely housed in Catskill all  
winter, but the river has opened uncommon-  
-ly early & New-York is now only a few  
hours sail from here, but perhaps I am too  
hasty — to night may come a killing frost &  
another winter commence.

Mrs C is well & the young ones she d[esires]  
to join me in best regards to you —  
I have not heard that Mr Silliman has yet  
received the fossils —

You desired me to write when I had no-  
-thing to say — so I have filled the sheet  
with nothing — if you find it difficult to  
comprehend, light your cigar with it — it  
will then become smoke which is a little  
heavier than nothing— Write soon —

Yours very truly  
Thomas Cole —

[End of text. Original spelling of "daguerrotype" ("daguerreotype") maintained.]



FIGURE 1  
Mathew Brady studio  
Thomas Cole  
Half-plate daguerreotype  
Courtesy of the Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-USZC4-8981  
Persistent link: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3g08981>

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**EDITOR'S NOTES:**

Thomas Cole was an artist, poet and founder of the Hudson River School style of landscape painting. Cole's papers are held at the New York State Library; a finding aid describing the collection is online.<sup>1</sup> The recipient of this letter is fellow artist, William Althorpe Adams. The "Mr. Silliman" referenced in the letter is likely Benjamin Silliman, scientist and professor of chemistry at Yale University who was also founder and editor of the *American Journal of Science and Arts* (New Haven, 1820–1879).

The graphic of Thomas Cole (Figure 1) is from a daguerreotype provided by the Library of Congress web site, *Prints & Photographics Online Catalogue*.<sup>2</sup> The daguerreotype of Cole is also provided (and discussed) in Harold F. Pfister, *Facing the Light: Historic American Portraits* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978): 308.

An abbreviated transcript of this text is provided in Louis L. Noble, *The Course of Empire, Voyage of Life, and Other Pictures of Thomas Cole, N. A.* (New York: Lamporn, Blakeman & Law, 1853): 281–82; also in Louis L Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman and Company, 1856): 281–82. The abbreviated transcript also appears page 210 in an edition of the same title (with additional notes): Elliot S. Vesell, edit., (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1964).

1. <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/msscfa/sc10635.htm>
2. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/pphome.html>

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Cole Papers, 1821–1863, SC 10635, Box 1, Folder 4, Adams, 26 Feb 1840 by Thomas Cole.

Original spelling/punctuation/grammar generally maintained without correction. Any in-text corrections are bracketed.

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