Robert Walsh visits with Daguerre, 3 March 1839

I will pass to another strife of a very different nature, which occupies a portion of the Paris public. You may recollect what I have written to you of Daguerre’s admirable copies of objects and scenes, by the simple action of light upon paper chemically prepared for the purpose. A competition for the honor of this beautiful and important discovery has appeared in England—Henry Fox Talbot, eminent in natural philosophy. You have probably remarked in the British journal, the Athenaeum, and the London Literary Gazette, the Memoir on his Photogenic Drawings, which he read to the Royal Society. His statements and pretensions have been earnestly canvassed at nearly every weekly meeting of the French Academy of Sciences, since they were received. Arago has been the chief and very able champion of both the priority and superiority of Daguerre’s processes; and the subject has drawn a larger number of auditors to each sitting, than any other had done for a long time. National sensibility is particularly excited. You will find in the London Literary Gazette of the 3rd instant, under the head The New Art, some fresh and interesting representations, which certainly throw Mr. Talbot out of the lists. It is established, I think, by the discussions on both sides of the Channel, that if Daguerre did not first conceive heliography, or make the first progress in the art, he took up the design when it was no longer pursued, and, with full scientific intelligence and practical skill, gradually achieved the present wonderful and pregnant results.

The French assert for their Denis Passin the credit of Steam Navigation; yet, they claim, and justly, for Daguerre, that of Photogenic Drawing, upon the same grounds as we use in behalf of Fulton for the other achievement. “The man of genius, the virtual discoverer,” do they argue, “is not he who merely has a prolific idea, but he who makes himself master of it; who follows it out understandingly and perseveringly; who realizes it in complete material action for the lasting fruition of the world.”

On the 3d instant, by special favor, I was admitted to M. Daguerre’s laboratory, and passed an hour in contemplating his drawings. It would be impossible for me to express the admiration which they produced. I can convey to you no idea of the exquisite perfection of the copies of objects and scenes, effected in ten minutes by the action of simple solar light upon his papiers sensibles. There is one view of the river Seine, bridges, quays, great edifices, etc., taken under a rainy sky, the graphic truth of which
astonished and delighted me beyond measure. No human hand ever did or could trace such a copy. The time required for this work was nearly an hour—that is, proportionable to the difference of light.

Daguerre is a gentleman of middle stature, robust frame, and highly expressive countenance. He explained the progression of his experiments, and vindicated his exclusive property in the development and successful application of the idea, with a voluble and clear detail of facts and arguments. To the suggestion, that the exhibition in the United States, of a collection of his drawings, might yield “a handsome sum,” he answered that the French government would soon, probably, buy his secret from him, and thus gratify his wish—the unlimited diffusion and employment of his discovery. The sum which the Academy of Sciences ask for him, is 200,000 francs. He had already acquired great fame as the painter of the Diorama.