

Robert Walsh visits with Daguerre, 3 March 1839

(keywords: Louis J. M. Daguerre, Robert Walsh, Jr., François Arago, William Henry Fox Talbot, Paris diorama, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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[*European Correspondence of N. Y. American.*]

PARIS, March 5, 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 3d 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.

[End of selected text.. All content related to photography herein provided. Bracketed text, “European Correspondence of N. Y. American” is per original text presentation.—Ed.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

This correspondent is Robert Walsh Jr., an American man of letters and influence then living in Paris. (Walsh later became Consul General of the United States in Paris, 1844-1851.) Also noteworthy is that S. F. B. Morse mentions Walsh when recounting the arrangements for Morse’s visit with Daguerre (occurring four days after Walsh’s visit.)¹

This text is one of three accounts written by Americans who visited Daguerre and saw examples of the daguerreotype. Morse’s letter from Paris of March 9, 1839 appeared in the *New-York Observer*.² Richard Harlan’s letter from Paris of April 30, 1839 appeared in *Medical Examiner*.³

Another brief mention of Walsh appears in the *Springfield Daily Republican* (Springfield, MA) 1:21 (19 December 1844): 3: “It is mentioned by Mr. Walsh, the Paris correspondent of the National Intelligencer, that an invention like the Daguerreotype was known to the Chinese several centuries ago!” This editor was unable to locate any article by Walsh regarding this in the *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC.) (The *Weekly National Intelligencer* is not readily available to this editor.)

Most of the last two paragraphs of this text were reprinted in the *New-York Mirror* 16:50 (8 June 1839): 398.

1. See Abraham Bogardus, “The Lost Art of the Daguerreotype”:
<http://daguerre.org/resource/texts/bogardus/bogardus.html>
2. See http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390002_MORSE_NY_OBSERVER_1839-04-20.pdf
3. See http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390001_HARLAN_MED_EXAMINER_1839-06-15.pdf

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