

“Remarkable Invention,” 23 February 1839

(keywords: Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, Jean-Baptiste Biot, François Arago, Journal des Debats, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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Boston Daily Advertiser (23 February 1839): [first page of issue].

Remarkable Invention.—In the Journal des Debats we find the following:

At a session of the Academy of Sciences, held the 8th of January, M. Arago gave an account of a curious invention lately made by M. Daguerre; for making drawings.

The manner in which the camera obscura produces images of objects, by means of a lens, is well known. The new invention is a method of fixing the image permanently on the paper, or making a permanent drawing, by the agency of the light alone; ten or fifteen minutes being amply sufficient for taking any view, though the time varies with the intensity of the light. By this machine M. Daguerre has made accurate drawings of the gallery of the Louvre and of Notre Dame; any object indeed, or any natural appearance may be copied by it—it reproduces the freshness of morning—the brilliancy of noon—the dim twilight and the dullness of a rainy day. The colours are marked by a gradation of shades similar to aquarelle.[aquatint—ed.]

M. Arago did not give all the details of the invention, but the general principle of it is thus described: One of the substances, discovered by modern chemistry, which changes its color on exposure to the light, is chloride of silver, and it is evident, therefore; that if one part of a sheet of paper, prepared with this substance, is exposed to the light, while the remainder is in the shade, a design will be produced, corresponding to the different intensities of the shades. To carry out this idea, M. Daguerre has labored many years, and has finally attained a result so simple, that any one could imitate it, and a patent, therefore, would be no protection to him. On this account he keeps his discovery secret.

M. Arago announced his intention of applying to the ministry to purchase M. Daguerre’s secret, and the demand will probably be acquiesced in, if the details of the invention prove as satisfactory as stated.

M. Biot expressed his admiration of the invention, which he could only justly praise by comparing it to a kind of physical retina as sensible as the retina of the eye.

[End of text.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

This account—derived from the Parisian publication *Journal des Debats*—is one of four texts (known to this editor) appearing in US press in February 1839. It may be that this text is indeed the first notice published in America. Also appearing during February are three texts based on an account from the Parisian newspaper *Constitutionnel*.¹

It is noted that nowhere in this text appears the term “daguerreotype.” Also noted is the statement in the first paragraph that “M. Daguerre has succeeded in fixing upon paper...”

This confusion is sometimes found in the earliest reports; it must be kept in mind that Daguerre was experimenting with paper processes as well.²

An expanded version from the same source text appears in *Catholic Telegraph* (Cincinnati) 8:15 (21 March 1839): 117.³

This editor would welcome a photocopy of the original article appearing in the 8 January 1839 *Journal des Debats*.

1. See *Boston Mercantile Journal* (26 February 1839):
http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390006_BOST_MERC_JOURN_1839-02-26.pdf
Journal of the American Institute (February 1839):
http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390001_JOURN_AM_INST_1839-02.pdf;
Pittsburgh Daily Gazette (28 February 1839):
<http://www.lifeinwesternpa.org/lifetime01.asp>
2. See http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390012_DAGUERRE-PAPER_RAILWAY-MAG_1839-04.pdf
3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390020_DEBATS_CATHOLIC-TEL_1839-03-21.pdf

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