

“Letter from an Idle Merchant,” New-York Mirror, 20 July 1839

(keywords: daguerroscope, dagueroscope, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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Letter from an idle merchant.—MR. MIRROR—I have recently returned from a flying trip to London. My time was so fully occupied while there, that I had no leisure for memorandums of “Incidents of Travel,” or “Pencilings by the Way.” Now that I am safely home again, I take pleasure in remembering what I heard and saw during my absence—and in recounting it too. But I have related my adventures over and over again to my friends, until they are weary with the recital, and have left me no longer a lion in their estimation, because I can roar no new note. I am a merchant—my account books are all in perfect order, every receipt, letter, and bill filed, and in its appropriate place; few notes to pay this month, no discounts to ask for, a good bank account, and, worst of all, no customers to expect—what shall I do with my leisure hours? How employ them more pleasantly than in giving to the public the thrice-told tale? To be sure, I am not accustomed to writing for the public, except such articles as the printer is sure to send in a bill for inserting; but this shall not deter me from taking this first step to immortality. I shall not trouble you with a tedious description of my voyage, but will commence with a time when—I had seen most of the “great attractions” of the metropolitan city, and was merely gleaning the field from which I had already gathered abundantly, as I one morning espied over a door a small sign with this inscription—“Mental Daguerroscope.” Something new under the sun! Just what I came all the way to London to see—and I immediately walked in. The room which I entered exhibited about equally the appearance of a chemical laboratory, and an ordinary engraver’s office. Here was an electrical machine, and there an engraver’s stone—here a galvanic battery, and there a pile of designs; with a countless number of other things, presenting in itself a sight, no doubt as curious as the workshop of “Jabez Doolittle,” but when compared with the wonderful results of the art which I afterwards saw there, it was nearly forgotten. Upon my making some inquires respecting this art, of which I had never before heard, I was informed that it was a new method of taking impressions of objects, which method had first been suggested to the author by the lunar Daguerroscope. He said they would soon take an impression, in seeing which, I might obtain a better idea of the process than by any description he could give. A sheet of drawing-paper which had received the solution preparatory to taking an impression was first placed in a perpendicular position. In front of this was seated the engraver, for so he was called, in a large arm-chair, covered with a kind of cloth which had rendered it nonconductor of the electric fluid; his dress was of the same material. He was now thrown into a profound “magnetic slumber,” and while in this condition was charged with electric fluid until his eyes flashed open. He immediately fixed them upon me, and that with such an unearthly glowing, that I could think of nothing but his satanic majesty, and began to retreat. Just as I moved, he took his eyes

from me and fixed them upon the paper before him, and I saw in art instant my own likeness there, in its full and perfect proportions. As fast as the impressions were taken, the sheet was removed and a new one substituted, until they became so faint as to be scarcely perceptible. This was the “mental Daguerroscope.” There is no part of it secret except the preparation of the paper previous to being engraved upon. I was now shown several specimens of landscape engravings by the same method, which rivalled everything in that line, as much as nature has heretofore excelled the most bungling productions of art. The lunar Daguerroscope has reached perfection in this establishment, as you will readily believe when I tell you that, in taking a landscape impression a few days since, a perfect human figure, with long, flowing hair, and a fine pair of wings, appeared, flying through the air at a little distance from the earth. Unseen by mortal eyes, unknown his presence; from whence, or whither bound, all a mystery; yet leaving his shadow to gladden our hearts with the belief that good spirits hover over us. Messrs. Editors, if you, or any of you curious readers, would see these wonders, just make a trip to London—not in a steampacket, or a packetship, but as I did, in a—dream. Yours, A.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This fanciful text reflects that few details regarding Daguerre's discovery were available at this time and that the public could only speculate about both the yet-undisclosed process.

This author uses the term “daguerroscope.” The term is not unique to this article, having earlier appeared in *Corsair* (New York) 1:5 (13 April 1839): 70–72. A still earlier appearance of the term is *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D. C.) 27:8131 (7 March 1839) which cites the *Literary Gazette* (London) No. 1150 (2 February 1839): 72: “The French call this instrument by the name of its inventor the Dagueroscope.”

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