

“The Daguerrotype,” 6 April 1839

(keywords: Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, daguerrotype, history of the daguerrotype, history of photography.)

THE DAGUERROTYPE: AN ARCHIVE OF SOURCE TEXTS, GRAPHICS, AND EPHEMERA

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THE DAGUERROTYPE.

M. Daguerre is a man of talent, for he is an excellent artist; he is a man of genius, he invented the Diorama; but he is an ambitious man, he created the Daguerrotype; and his name and his fame will be European, and will be handed down to posterity as belonging to a man of transcendent genius, who by unexampled industry, power of analyzation, and of synthetical combination, has created a new art. It is not a discovery, it is a brilliant creation!

What then is the Daguerrotype? We will explain. You paint a picture, there is a mass of colour on the canvass, as if it had been laid on by a Martin! it is a brilliant colour; it is seen by daylight. You throw the light produced by the admixture of hydrogen and oxygen gas upon it. The picture vanishes; the canvass is as it were bleached. You paint another picture; it is composed of various colours; the colours are of equal depth; you manage to distribute the light thrown upon it in various intensities. The picture is perfect; all the lighter tints appear as if you had painted it with ten thousand shades of colour. Is this the Daguerrotype? No! You take a metal plate, with a block substance; you apply a prism, so that any object will be cast upon it; you take the prism away; the object remains as if had been engraved by the most delicate *burin*. This is the Daguerrotype. What is the substance spread upon the plate? It is a secret known only to M. Daguerre.

Such is this wonderful creation. The light of the sun or moon becomes an engraver, which makes no mistakes; every line is in undeniable proportion, a microscope of the highest power can discover no error; you see your face reflected in a glass, you retire, the reflection vanishes; your face is reflected on a blackened plate, the reflection remains. This is the Daguerrotype. The fleecy cloud, riding high in the heavens, in all its fantastic forms, “ever changing, ever new,” becomes indelibly engraved by the Daguerrotype. A butterfly flutters from flower to flower, you cannot catch it; had it the swiftness of light itself the Daguerrotype has a more rapid flight; its pencil draws with unerring fidelity every hue, every flutter of its wings. You want a sketch—an index to your imagination; the Daguerrotype gives you it. You want every line, every dot, every shade, you cannot trust to your own fancy; the Daguerrotype perfects the work!

M. Daguerre is no monopolist, he will make known his secret; he wants means to carry on his chemical researches—they must be afforded him. Mechanics have done much for art. We can copy statues and medallions; we can represent solid bodies on superficial planes, by wheels and levers, instead of the human hand. Chemistry has done

more. A black pigment will do all these things *perfectly in a moment*, which expensive machinery can only accomplish in time, and imperfectly.

Honour then to M. Daguerre! He is to the Fine Arts what Bacon was to Science. The Daguerrotype is the *novum organum* of Art.

[End of text. Variant spelling of “daguerrotype” (daguerreotype) is per original text.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

The stilted language of the text indicates that it is a translation from a foreign-language source. The editor would welcome information regarding the original source text.

This text previously appears, minus some portions of text and differences in punctuation, in “The Daguerrotype,” *Expositor: a Weekly Journal of Foreign and Domestic Intelligence, Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts* (New York) 1:15 (30 March 1839): 179.¹

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390019_DAGUERRE_EXPOSITOR_1839-03-30.pdf

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