

**Sir John Robison, "Notes on Daguerre's Photography," (1 June 1839)
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Notes on Daguerre's Photography. By Sir JOHN ROBISON, Secretary to Royal Society of Edinburgh, &c. &c. (Communicated by the Society of Arts).

Sir—In compliance with the request that I should commit to writing and put into your hands the substance of what I communicated to the Society of Arts in reply to the questions put to me at the last meeting, I beg to state, that circumstances having led to my being included in a small party of English gentlemen who were lately invited to visit the studio of M. Daguerre, to see the results of his discovery, I had an opportunity of satisfying myself, that the pictures produced by his process have no resemblance to any thing which, as far as I know, has yet been produced in this country; and that, excepting in the absence of color, they are as perfect images of the objects they represent, as are those which are seen by reflection from a highly polished surface. The perfection and fidelity of the pictures are such, that, on examining them by microscopic power, details are discovered which are not perceivable to the naked eye in the original objects, but which, when searched for there by the aid of optical instruments, are found in perfect accordance: a crack in plaster, a withered leaf lying on a projecting cornice, or an accumulation of dust in a hollow moulding of a distant building, when they exist in the original, are faithfully copied in these wonderful pictures.

The subjects of most of the numerous specimens which I saw, were views of streets, boulevards, and buildings, with a considerable number of what may be termed interiors with still life; among the latter were various groups made up of plaster-casts and other works of art. It is difficult to express intelligibly a reason for the charm which is felt in beholding these pictures; but I think it must arise, in some measure, from finding that so much of the effect which we attribute to color, is preserved in the picture, although it consist only in light and shade; these, however, are given with such accuracy, that, in consequence of different materials reflecting light differently, it is easy to recognize those of which the different objects in the groups are formed. A work in white marble is at once distinguished from one in plaster-of-Paris by the translucency of the edges of the one, and the opacity of the other. Among the views of buildings, the following were remarkable: A set of three pictures of the same group of houses, one taken soon after sunrise, one at noon, and one in the evening; in these the change of aspect produced by the variations in the distribution of light, was exemplified in a way which art could never attain to.

One specimen was remarkable from its showing the progress made by light in producing the picture. A plate having been exposed during 30 seconds to the action of the light and then removed, the appearance of the view was that of the earliest dawn of day;

there was a grey sky, and a few corners of buildings and other objects beginning to be visible through the deep black in which all the rest of the picture was involved.

The absence of figures from the streets, and the perfect way in which the stones of the causeway and the foot-pavements are rendered, is, at first sight, rather puzzling, though a little reflection satisfies one that passing objects do not remain long enough to make any perceptible impression, and that (interfering only for a moment with the light reflected from the road,) they do not prevent a nearly accurate picture of it being produced.

Vacillating objects make indistinct pictures, *e.g.* a person getting his boot cleaned by a decrotteur gave a good picture, except that having moved his head in speaking to the shoe-black, his hat was out of shape, and the decrotteur's right arm and brush were represented by a half-tinted blot, through which the foot of the gentleman was partially visible.

There can be no doubt that, when M. Daguerre's process is known to the public, it will be immediately applied to numberless useful purposes, as, by means of it, accurate views of architecture, machinery, &c., may be taken, which, being transferred to copper or to stone, may be disseminated at a cheap rate; and useful books on many subjects may be got up with copious illustrations, which are now too costly to be attainable: even the fine arts will gain, for the eyes accustomed to the accuracy of Daguerreotype pictures, will no longer be satisfied with bad drawing, however splendidly it may be colored. In one department, it will give valuable facility. Anatomical and surgical drawings, so difficult to make with the fidelity which it is desirable they should possess, will then be easily produced by a little skill and practice in the disposition of the subjects and of the lights.

It is a curious circumstance that, at the same time that M. Daguerre has made this beautiful and useful discovery in the art of delineation, another Parisian artist* has discovered a process by which he makes solid casts in plaster of small animals or other objects, without seams or repairs, and without destroying the model, (*Moulage d'une seule pièce, sans couture ni reparage, et avec conservation parfaite du modele*). I am in possession of several specimens of his work, among which are casts of the hand of an infant of six months, so delicately executed, that the skin shows evident marks of being affected by some slight eruptive disease. I am, dear Sir, very faithfully yours,

JOHN ROBISON.

Edinburgh, 1st, June 1839

JAMES TOD, Esq., Secretary to the Society of Arts.

* Hippolyte Vincent, Mouleur, Rue Neuve St. Francois No. 14 (au Marai).

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

An editor of *Gardener's Magazine* wrote in 1839 of Robison that he was "the first English gentleman to foresee the importance of this invention, and to give an intelligent account of it." The editor additionally references a letter received from Robison in which Robison observes that M. Daguerre's discovery will be:

a precious gift to publishers, as it enables them to procure accurate drawings of the most complex objects at a trifling expense, for the use of their engravers. A dozen exquisite views of York or Westminster cathedral, under different effects of light, may

be obtained at less expense than an inaccurate sketch of a cottage can be got for at present: even your *Arboretum* may benefit by occasional dead calms enabling you to get identical portraits of fine trees.—J. R. *Edinburgh*, June 12. 1839.¹

Preceding Robison's article in this issue is the article by Andrew Fyfe, "On Photography," (pp. 144–55) in which is discussed various photographic experiments and processes other than daguerreotypy. (Fyfe would later address the daguerreotype in his article, "On Daguerreotype," *Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal* [Edinburgh] 28:56 [March 1840]: 205–10.)

Both the Robison and the Fyfe articles are reprinted (along with an unsigned article, "Photogenic Drawings," from *Foreign Quarterly Review*²) in *American Journal of Science and Arts* (New Haven) 37:1 (July 1839): 169–85. Robison's article is given the header, "Perfection of the Art, as stated in Notes on Daguerre's Photography." Both articles are also reprinted in *Transactions of the Royal Scottish Society of Art* (Edinburgh) vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Printed for the Society by Neill & Co., 1841): 319–32. Robison's article is reprinted in *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* 8:395 (24 August 1839): 243–44; *Magazine of Science, and School of Arts* (London) 1:15 (issues not dated, 1842): 116–17; *Daguerreian Journal* (New York) 2:7 (15 August 1851): 202–4.

Robison's visit with Daguerre is mentioned—along with a citation from his text—in "On Photogenic Drawing. No. II.—The Daguerreotype," *Saturday Magazine* (London) 16:490 (22 February 1840): 71–72.

Robison writes of "being included in a small party of English gentlemen who were lately invited to visit the studio of M. Daguerre." The present editor has always been curious about this "small party." Arago includes Robison when reciting a list of scholars having visited Daguerre:

»J'ai profité de séjour à Paris de plusieurs savants anglais, pour leur faire voir divers tableaux que M. Daguerre a exécutés d'après ses procédés photogéniques.

»Ces savants, au nombre desquels je citerai MM. Herschel, Forbes, Robison, général Brisbane, Watt, Murchison, Pentland, ont déclaré que les produits de la découverte de M. Daguerre dépassaient toutes leurs prévisions.³

It should not be assumed that Arago's list of individuals constituted the "small party" referenced by Robison. A letter from Forbes to Herschel dated 9 July 1839 indicates that their respective visits with Daguerre occurred at least a week apart: Forbes' visit with Daguerre occurred 16 May 1839; Herschel's visit with Daguerre occurred 9 May 1839.⁴ It is likely that Robison and Forbes were part of the same group of visitors of 16 May 1839, although Forbes refers to the group as "a large party of us."

Daguerre and Robison had subsequent communication. In June 1840 it was noted that, "M. Daguerre recently informed Sir John Robison that he had nearly completed an improved process."⁵

Additional information regarding Robison (1778–1843) is found in a memoir of Robison by James David Forbes, "Biographical Notice of the late Sir John Robison, K.H., Sec. R. S. Ed.," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Society, [publication date not available]): 68–78. In the memoir, Forbes mentions "No likeness had, I believe, been preserved of him, except a daguerreotype and some calotypes, done shortly before his death. One of these is an admirable portrait."

1. "Daguerre's Photography," *Gardener's Magazine and Register of Rural & Domestic Improvement* (London) 15:113 (August 1839): 473.

2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390025_FOREIGN-QUART-REV_1839-04.pdf

3. *Compte Rendu des Séances de L'Académie des Sciences* (Session 27 May 1839), compiled in *Comptes Rendus Hebdomadaires des Séances de L'Académie des Sciences* (Paris, Bachelier, Imprimeur-Libraire, 1839): 838.

4. See letter to Miss Forbes dated 20 May 1839 and journal entry for 17 May 1839 in John Campbell Shairp, Peter Guthrie Tait, A Adams-Reilly, *Life and Letters of James David Forbes, F.R.S.* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1873): 241–43. For Herschell's visit with Daguerre, see John Frederick William Herschell to William Henry Fox Talbot, letter dated 9 May 1839. A transcript of the letter is available from the web site, *The Correspondence of William Henry Fox Talbot*. (<http://foxtalbot.dmu.ac.uk/letters/transcriptDocnum.php?docnum=3875>). See also Larry Schaaf, *Out of the Shadows: Herschel, Talbot & the Invention of Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992): 177, FN 4.
5. "Notes and Notices.—M. Daguerre's Latest Improvement," *Mechanics' Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal, and Gazette* (London) 33:880 (20 June 1840): 48.

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