

“Fine Arts—The Daguerrotype,” 14 September 1839

(keywords: Alexandre Dumas, Charles Chevalier, Susse Frères, Alphonse Giroux, varnish, daguerrotype, history of the daguerrotype, history of photography)

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FINE ARTS.

THE DAGUERROTYPE.

Academy of Science, Sitting of August 26.

M. ARAGO communicated to the Academy the result of some researches, made by M. Dumas, with the view of preserving the impression of the Daguerrotype. The varnish used by that celebrated chemist, and found to succeed better than any other, is composed of one part of *dextrine* to five of water, and is applied hot to the plate. The photogenic impression is thus free from any danger of friction, and may be copied by means of transparent paper, &c.; it, however, loses a good deal of its brilliancy. The varnish may be washed off again with hot water, without the photogenic impression receiving any damage, and the original brilliancy and distinctness of the image is thus restored to it. This statement of M. Dumas, was replied to by M. Sylvester, who shewed that he had long ago used the same varnish himself, and he recommended in its place the following composition:—Dextrine two parts, water six parts, and alcohol one part. He considered it doubtful whether these varnishes, if suffered to remain for any great length of time on the photogenic image, might not in the end injure and alter the chemical combination by which it is formed. It was hinted by M. Arago, that either the copper sheet on which the plating of silver was made might be indefinitely reduced in thickness, or even that *paper* plated with silver might be employed. M. Chevalier, optician in the Palais Royal, making use of M. Daguerre’s method, has succeeded in getting some very fine photogenic drawings. M. Susse, picture-dealer, Place de la Bourse, has advertised Daguerrotypes for sale. The crowd at Giroux’s shop is immense, to see the photogenic apparatus and the impressions obtained by M. Daguerre himself. The unscientific are disappointed at the slate-coloured effect of the image, and many more at the price (about 400 francs) of the apparatus!!

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

EDITOR’S NOTES:

The use of a varnish to protect the fragile surface of the daguerreotype never became a general practice. The earliest extant daguerreotype made in the United States, however, does have a coating of copal varnish. The daguerreotype (ca. 25 September 1839) by Joseph Saxton of the Philadelphia Central High School is reproduced and discussed in William F. Stapp, *Robert Cornelius: Portraits from the Dawn of Photography* (Washington, D. C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1983): 46–47.

Such efforts did continue, however. See “Enamelled Daguerrotypes,” *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 2:1 (July 1851): 61–62; “Varnishing Daguerrotypes,”

Photographic News: a Weekly Record of the Progress of Photography (London) 1:16 (24 December 1859): 192. See also an advertisement by Jeremiah Gurney regarding his arrangements with Solomon N. Carvalho for the production of enameled daguerreotypes, "Transparent Enamelled Daguerreotypes," *Illustrated News* (New York) (2 April 1853).

Regarding the disappointment at the "slate-coloured effect of the image," see "Fine Arts: The New Art," *Literary Gazette; and Journal of the Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.* (London) No. 1150 (2 February 1839): 72–74.

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390017_NEW-ART_LIT-GAZETTE_1839-02-02.pdf

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