“M. Daguerre,” (with a wood engraving portrait) 26 July 1851
(keywords: Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, Joseph Niépce, Francis Bauer, Isidore Niepce, Vincent Chevalier, Diorama, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

THE DAGUERREOTYPE: AN ARCHIVE OF SOURCE TEXTS, GRAPHICS, AND EPHEMERA
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Published in:

caption: THE LATE M. DAGUERRE,—FROM A DAGUERREOTYPE BY CLAUDET. —(SEE NEXT PAGE.)
[from a daguerreotype by Meade—Edi]
M. DAGUERRE.

LOUIS JACQUES MAUDE DAGUERRE, whose name is for ever associated with the Photograph process, of which he was the discoverer, died on the 10th instant, in Paris, in the sixty-second year of his age. He was a man of extreme modesty and great personal worth, and devoted to his profession, that of an artist.

Daguerre was favourably known to the world before the announcement of his discovery of the Daguerrotype. His attempts to improve panoramic painting, and the production of dioramic effects, were crowned with the most eminent success. The following pictures attracted much attention at the times of their exhibition:—"The Midnight Mass," "Land-slip in the valley of Goldau," "The Temple of Solomon," and the "Cathedral of Sainte Marie de Montreal." In these, the alternate effects of night and day—of storm and sunshine—were beautifully produced. To these effects of light were added others, arising from the decomposition of form by means of which, for example in the "Midnight Mass," figures appeared where the spectators had just beheld seats, altars, &c; or again, as in "The Valley of Goldau," in which rocks tumbling from the mountains replaced the prospect of a smiling valley. The methods adopted in these pictures were published at the same time with the process of the Daguerrotype, by order of the French Government who awarded an annual pension of 10,000 francs to Daguerre and M. Niepce, jun, whose father had contributed towards the discovery of the Daguerrotype.

It would appear that Daguerre was led to make some experiments on the chemical changes produced by the solar radiations, with the hope of being enabled to apply the curious phenomena to the production of peculiar effects in his dioramic paintings. As the question of the real part taken by Daguerre, in the process to which he has given his name, has been from time to time discussed, and sometimes to his disadvantage, it appears important that the position should be correctly determined.

In 1802, Wedgwood, of Etruria, the celebrated potter, made the first recorded experiments in photography; and these, with some additional ones by Sir Humphry Davy, were published in the journals of the Royal Institution.

In 1814, Mr. Joseph Nicephore Niepce was engaged in experiments to determine the possibility of fixing the images obtained in the camera obscura; but there does not appear any evidence of publication of any kind previously to 1827, when Niepce was in England, residing at Kew. He then wrote several letters to Mr. Bauer, the celebrated microscopic observer, which are preserved and printed in Hunt's "Researches on Light," he also sent specimens of results obtained to the Royal Society, and furnished some to the cabinets of the curious, a few of which are yet in existence. These were pictures on metallic plates, covered with a fine film of resin.

In 1824 Daguerre commenced his researches, starting from that point at which Wedgwood left the process. He soon abandoned the employment of the nitrate and chloride of silver, and proceeded with his inquiry-using plates of metal and glass to receive his sensitive coatings.

In 1829 M. Vincent Chevalier brought Niepce and Daguerre together, when they entered into partnership to prosecute the subject in common.

For a long time, they appear to have used the resinous surfaces only, when the contrast between the resin and the metal plates not being sufficiently great to give a good picture, endeavours were made to blacken that part of the plate from which the resin was removed in the process of heliography (sun-drawing), as it was most happily called. Amongst other materials, iodine was employed; and Daguerre certainly was the first to
notice the property possessed by the iodine coating of changing under the influence of the sun's rays. The following letter from Niepce to Daguerre on this subject will be read with interest:—

"81, LOUP DE VARENNES, June 24, 1831.

"Sir, and dear Partner,—I had long expected to hear from you with too much impatience not to receive and read, with the greatest pleasure, your letters of the 10th and 21st of last May. I shall confine myself in this reply to yours of the 21st, because having been engaged ever since it reached me in your experiments on iodine, I hasten to communicate to you the results which I have obtained. I had given my attention to similar researches previous to our connexion, but without hope of success, from the impossibility, or nearly so, in my opinion, of fixing in any durable manner the images received on iodine, even supposing the difficulty surmounted of replacing the lights and shadows in their natural order. My results in this respect have been entirely similar to those which the oxide of silver gave me; and promptitude of operation was the sole advantage which these substances appeared to offer. Nevertheless, last year, after you left this, I subjected iodine to new trials but by a different mode of application. I informed you of the results, and your answer, not at all encouraging, decided me to carry these experiments no further. It appears that you have since viewed the question under a less desperate aspect, and I do not hesitate to reply to the appeal which you have made.

"J. N. NIEPCE."

From the above and other letters, it is evident that Niepce had used iodine, and abandoned it on account of the difficulty of reversing the lights and shadows. Daguerre employed it also; and, as it appears, with far more promise of success than any obtained by M. Niepce. On the 5th of July, 1833, Niepce died; in 1837 Daguerre and Isidore Niepce, the son and heir of Nicephore Niepce, entered into a definite agreement; and, in a letter written on the 1st November, 1837, to Daguerre, Isidore Niepce says, "What a difference, also, between the method which you employ and the one by which I toil on! While I require almost a whole day to make one design, you ask only four minutes! What an enormous advantage! It is so great, indeed, that no person, knowing both methods, would employ the old one."

From this time it is established, that, although both Niepce and Daguerre used iodine, the latter alone employed it with any degree of success, and the discovery of the use of mercurial vapour to produce the positive image clearly belongs to Daguerre. In January, 1839, the Daguerreotype pictures were first shown to the scientific and artistic public of Paris. The sensation they created was great, and the highest hopes of its utility were entertained.

On the 15th June, M. Duchatel, Minister of the Interior, presented a bill to the Chamber of Deputies relative to the purchase of the process of M. Daguerre, for fixing the images of the camera. A commission appointed by the Chamber, consisting of Arago, Etienne, Carl, Vatout, de Beaumont, Tournorer, Delessert, (Francois). Combarel do Leyval, and Vitet, made their report on the 3rd of July, and a special commission was appointed by the Chamber of Peers, composed of the following peers:—Barons Athalin, Besson, Gay Lussac, the Marquis de Laplace, Vicomte Simeon, Baron Thenard, and the Comte do Noe, who reported favourably on the 30th July, 1839, and recommended unanimously that the bill be adopted simply and without alteration.

On the 19th of August the secret was for the first time publicly announced in the Institute by M. Arago, the English patent having been completed a few days before, in
open defiance and contradiction of the statement of M. Duchatel to the Chamber of Deputies, who used these words "Unfortunately for the authors of this beautiful discovery it is impossible for them to bring their labours into the market, and thus indemnify themselves for the sacrifices incurred, by so many attempts so long fruitless. This invention does not admit of being secured by patent." In conclusion, the Minister of the Interior said, "You will concur in a sentiment which has already awakened universal sympathy; you will never suffer us to leave to foreign nations the glory of endowing the world of science and of art with one of the most wonderful discoveries that honour our native land.

Daguerre never did much towards the improvement of his process. The high degree of sensibility which has been attained has been due to the experiments of others, principally Englishmen. But this sensibility is now far exceeded by Mr. Fox Talbot, by his preparation of glass plates, which are susceptible of receiving absolutely instantaneous impressions

M. Daguerre was a member of the French Academy of Fine Arts, of the Academy of St. Luke; and many of his pictures are highly valued by his countrymen.

Our Portrait is from a Daguerreotype by Claudet, for which M. Daguerre sat in 1846.

[End of text.]

The graphic is also available in JPG format:

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This text—less the last three sentences—subsequently appeared in the International Magazine (New York) 4:2 (1 September 1851): 283–85. From that version arose various permutations of the text in US press. Also, in that presentation, another of the Meade portraits of Daguerre was used for the illustration.


EWER ARCHIVE P8510007
Document author: Gary W. Ewer
Creation date: 2009-01-12 / Last revision: 2016-06-29
Graphic details:
  wood engraving: 12.3 x 10.8 cm
  sheet: 39.0 x 27.0 cm.
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