

“Daguerreotype Gallery of Rogues,” January 1858

(keywords: rogue gallery, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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DAGUERRETYPE GALLERY OF ROGUES.—We observe that the New York Detective Police Office have adopted a very simple method of putting their officers and the public on their guard against men and women, who make the perpetration of crime a regular business. Exact portraits of them are taken and suspended in the office, and thus their features become familiar to the police and the public.

The great obstacle to the success of such an experiment is the facility of disguise. A change in the color of the hair—an excision of the eyebrows—the assumption of a wig or a moustache, or a set of teeth, so completely metamorphoses a face that only a very close and skillful observer could detect the resemblance in the portrait.

We lately heard a gentleman state, that he was called to identify two men whom he had caught in a felonious act. Both culprits were in the dark. One of them he instantly recognized, but of the other he denied any knowledge—was positive that he was not the man,—and was going off the stand with this conviction, when the accused was told to put on his wig. He looked very innocent, as if he did not know what upon earth his Honor meant, but the officer drew the wig from his pocket and put it upon the fellow’s head, when the witness instantly identified him as the veritable rogue!

To meet the new order of things at the police office, a cotemporary print has the boldness to spoil a smooth couplet current in one of the lower spheres of society.

He that steals wot isn’t his’n
When he’s cotch’d must go to prls’n.

by making it read,

He that steals wot is’nt his’n
When he’s cotch’d must go and have
His daguerreotype tak’n.

[End of text.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

The use of the daguerreotype as a tool in law enforcement accompanied the initial announcements of the daguerreotype:

What will become of the poor thieves, when they shall see handed in as evidence against them their own portraits, taken by the room in which they stole, and in the very act of stealing!

"New Discovery," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (Edinburgh and London) 45:281 (March 1839): 384.¹

The idea of deterrence is carried even further:

There will be no safety for rogues. Every apple-orchard, store-house, and coat-pocket, will contain a self-regulating photographic machine faithfully performing *its* functions, while the depredator is executing *his*.

"Picture Pausing II.—Daguerreotypes," *Christian Watchman* (Boston) 27:20 (15 May 1846): 77.²

See also "A Good Idea," *Daily Union* (Sacramento) 1:74 (12 June 1851): n.p. (second page of issue).³

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390016_NEW-DISCOV_BLACKWOODS_1839-03.pdf

2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8460003_DAGS_XIAN-WATCH_1846-05-15.pdf

3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8510019_CRIMINALS_DAILY-UNION_1851-06-12.pdf

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