

Dr. Richard Harlan visits with Daguerre, March 1839

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FOREIGN CORRESPONDENCE.

LETTER FROM DR. HARLAN.—No. III

Séances of the Royal Academie—Mr. Daguerre's Photogenic Discovery—Mortality among the Prostitutes of Paris—Epidemic among the Cows—Diseases of Silk-Worms—French Surgeons—Mortality after Operations—M. Roux—Dr. Blandin's mode of treating Stumps after Amputation—Professor Breschet's Operation for Varicose Veins—Treatment of Fractures by the Immovable Apparatus—M. Velpeau.

PARIS, April 30, 1839

To the Editors of the Medical Examiner.

GENTLEMEN,—

The Academy of Sciences, the only section of the Institute open to the public, holds its séances every Monday, at 3, P. M. The seats in the area outside those of the members, are always filled with visitors before half past 2, and those who arrive later are not admitted. This would have proved a great barrier to my attendance, had not the urbanity of my friend, Professor Blainville, of the Jardin des Plantes, secured me one of the eight chairs immediately before the President's chair, and devoted to foreign professors. The meetings are always well attended by the members; and more memoirs are usually presented than the Academy can receive, or the perpetual secretaries, M. Arago and M. Flourens, would be able to dispatch. The crowds of savans, both foreign and native, who always claim admittance, shows the general interest that these séances excite.

Among the numerous interesting memoirs to the reading of which I have listened, none has so much riveted my attentions the account of the Photogenic discovery of M. Daguerre—the first annunciation of which was considered as fabulous. M. Daguerre's office, adjoining his splendid diorama near the Boulevard, was daily beset with the curious, demanding to know the truth of this new power of fixing an image,—the inventor was obliged, in self-defence, to close his doors,—this was just before my arrival in Paris, and previously to the reading of the memoir before the Academy of Sciences, where this highly important and interesting discovery occasioned much discussion and debate. I, however, enjoyed the rare opportunity of inspecting the portfolio of M. Daguerre, through the kind attentions of Mr. Walsh, by whom I was introduced. Whilst examining the unique productions of M. D.'s portfolio, and listening to his explanations, I felt as in the presence of a superior power. Among the principal productions of this new

process presented to our admiration, I must mention, 1st, a view of the great gallery joining the Louvre to the Tuilleries; 2d, a view of l'Isle de la Cité, and the Towers of Notre Dame; 3d, views of the Seine, and several of its bridges; 4th, views of some of the Barrières of the Capital; 5th, views on the Boulevards; 6th, interior of the Chambers, with statuary, furniture, &c. These designs were of different epochs, from four years to four weeks, and were done at different seasons, and at various hours of the day, some by the light of the sun; some during a shower of rain, and some within doors, with a moderate light;—nothing could equal the beauty, accuracy, and perfection of the designs, which were equally magnificent when viewed by a magnifying glass, especially all *immovable* objects. The process will not succeed with objects in constant motion; as an example, we observed a pair of carriage horses, in which one of the animals was headless, that part having been in continual motion. In answer to my question, what time was required for the entire process, M. D. stated that he could prepare his sensitive paper in two hours, and complete the design in from five to ten minutes,—or, continued he, “I only prepare the paper, and hold it up to nature, and she executes the drawing.”

The time necessary for the execution of a view, when a great power of tone is expected, varies with the intensity of light, consequently the process is affected by the seasons, and even by the time of day, and by climate; in Egypt, for example, a view could be executed in one-third less time.

The process of M. Daguerre not only exacted the discovery of a substance more sensible to the action of light than any hitherto known to philosophers and chemists, it was also necessary to possess the means of depriving this substance of this new property at will, and M. D. has the merit of accomplishing this also. When his designs are once completed, they may be exposed to the direct rays of the sun, without undergoing any alteration. The extreme sensibility of M. D.'s preparation is not the only character which distinguishes his discovery from those imperfect attempts formerly made to draw profiles on a layer of muriate of silver, which salt being white, is blackened by exposure to light, the white portions of the images becoming black, whilst the black portions, on the contrary, remain white. Upon the prepared screens of M. D., the drawing and the object are both similar—the white corresponding to white, the demi-tints to the demi-tints, and the black to the black.

To demonstrate the extreme sensibility of M. D.'s preparation, he has succeeded in producing an evident white impression from the image of the moon, thrown through the focus of a moderate lens upon one of his prepared screens. A similar experiment was once made with the muriate of silver, without any effect, by MM. Laplace, Arago, and Malus.

The *modus operandi* in producing these designs, when the paper is once prepared, will be readily understood by all who are familiar with the camera obscura originally invented by Porta; every one has admired the neatness, truth of colour, form, and tone, with which exterior objects are reproduced upon the screen placed in the focus of the large lens which constitutes the essential part of this instrument, and have admired only to regret that these beautiful impression could not be preserved. These regrets, together with the poetical expression—“fleeting as a shadow”—are henceforward without an object—M. D. having invented an artificial retina upon which the optical image leaves a perfect and lasting impression; or, in the language of M. Arago, “in the chamber noire of M. Daguerre, light itself reproduces the forms and proportions of exterior objects with a precision almost mathematical,—the photometrical relations of the various white, black,

and gray parts, are exactly preserved,—but the red, yellow, green, &c., represent the demi-tints, for the new method creates designs, and not coloured pictures.”

But, such designs! There is nothing in the arts that bears any analogous approach to them; the water is real water, the sky and clouds represent realities, the perspective and shading are the perfection of nature. The invention of M. Daguerre is the result of the assiduous application and labour of many years, during which he had as collaborator, M. Niépce, of Chalons-sur-Saône, recently dead. Some reclamations as to priority have been published by Mr. Talbot, of London, but he has failed in establishing his priority, and the results of his process are not similar to those of M. D.; in Mr. T.'s impressions the white portions of the image are black, and the black are white.

I regret to add that this inimitable portfolio of M. Daguerre, together with the splendid paintings constituting his diorama, was reduced to a mass of smoking ruins in three days after our visit; the premises took fire at 2 P. M., whilst M. Daguerre was on a visit to Professor Moss's [Morse—ed.], examining his Electro-Magnetic Telegraph, and as M. D.'s property was not insured, his prospects, at present, are ruinous.

My object in the present letter being to communicate results, rather than details, I must not enlarge further on other numerous and interesting memoirs presented to the Academy of Science; there is no subject more or less related to science, that does not, some time or other, come under discussion at its séances.

[End of selected text. All content related to photography herein provided.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Dr. Richard Harlan (of Philadelphia) was a distinguished comparative anatomist who was visiting Europe in 1839. In this letter, Harlan refers to his visit with Daguerre occurring three days prior to the 8 March 1839 Diorama fire. Hence, the likely date of the visit was Tuesday, 5 March 1839. It was Robert Walsh, Jr. (also a Philadelphian) who arranged Harlan's visit with Daguerre. Walsh himself visited Daguerre on March 3, and also suggested the arrangements that enabled the March 7 visit between Samuel F. B. Morse and Daguerre.

This text is one of three accounts written by Americans who visited Daguerre and saw examples of the daguerreotype. Walsh's letter from Paris of 5 March 1839 appeared in the *New-York American*.¹ Morse's letter from Paris of 9 March 1839 appeared in the *New-York Observer*.²

1. See http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390003_WALSH_NY_AMERICAN_1839-05-22.pdf

2. See http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390002_MORSE_NY_OBSERVER_1839-04-20.pdf

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