

## **Samuel F. B. Morse visits with Daguerre, 9 March 1839**

(keywords: Louis J. M. Daguerre, Robert Walsh, Jr., Samuel F. B. Morse, Benjamin Silliman, daguerreotype, Paris diorama, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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### **THE DAGUERRETYPE: AN ARCHIVE OF SOURCE TEXTS, GRAPHICS, AND EPHEMERA**

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### **THE DAGUERROTIPE.**

The following is an extract from a private letter of Professor S. F. B. Morse to the editor of the *Observer*, dated, Paris, March 9th.

“You have perhaps heard of the Daguerrotipe, so called from the discoverer, M. Daguerre. It is one of the most beautiful discoveries of the age. I don’t know if you recollect some experiments of mine in New Haven, many years ago, when I had my painting room next to Prof. Silliman’s, experiments to ascertain if it were possible to fix the image of the Camera Obscura. I was able to produce different degrees of shade on paper, dipped into a solution of nitrate of silver, by means of different degrees of light; but finding that light produced dark, and dark light, I presumed the production of a true image to be impracticable, and gave up the attempt. M. Daguerre has realized in the most exquisite manner this idea.

“A few days ago I addressed a note to Mr. D. requesting, as a stranger, the favor to see his results, and inviting him in turn to see my Telegraph. I was politely invited to see them under these circumstances, for he had determined not to show them again, until the Chambers had passed definitely on a proposition for the Government to purchase the secret of the discovery, and make it public. The day before yesterday, the 7th, I called on M. Daguerre, at his rooms in the Diorama, to see these admirable results.

“They are produced on a metallic surface, the principal pieces about 7 inches by 5, and they resemble aquatint engravings, for they are in simple chiaro oscuro, and not in colors. But the exquisite minuteness of the delineation cannot be conceived. No painting or engraving ever approached it. For example: In a view up the street, a distant sign would be perceived, and the eye could just discern that there were lines of letters upon it, but so minute as not to be read with the naked eye. By the assistance of a powerful lens, which magnified 50 times, applied to the delineation, every letter was clearly and distinctly legible, and also were the minutest breaks and lines in the walls of the buildings, and the pavements of the street. The effect of the lens upon the picture was in a great degree like that of the telescope in nature.

“Objects moving are not impressed. The Boulevard, so constantly filled with a moving throng of pedestrians and carriages, was perfectly solitary, except an individual who was having his boots brushed. His feet were compelled, of course, to be stationary for some time, one being on the box of the boot-black, and the other on the ground. Consequently, his boots and legs are well defined, but he is without body or head because these were in motion.

“The impressions of interior views are Rembrandt perfected. One of Mr. D.’s plates is an impression of a spider. The spider was not bigger than the head of a large pin, but the image, magnified by the solar microscope to the size of the palm of the hand, having been impressed on the plate, and examined through a lens, was further magnified, and showed a minuteness of organization hitherto not seen to exist. You perceive how this discovery is, therefore, about to open a new field of research in the depths of microscopic nature. We are soon to see if the minute has discoverable limits. The naturalist is to have a new kingdom to explore, as much beyond the microscope as the microscope is beyond the naked eye.

“But I am near the end of my paper, and I have unhappily to give a melancholy close to my account of this ingenious discovery. M. Daguerre appointed yesterday at noon to see my telegraph. He came, and passed more than an hour with me, expressing himself highly gratified at its operation. But while he was thus employed, the great building of the Diorama, with his own house, all his beautiful works, his valuable notes and papers, the labor of years of experiment, were, unknown to him, at that moment becoming the prey of the flames. His secret indeed is still safe with him, but the steps of his progress in the discovery, and his valuable researches in science are lost to the scientific world. I learn that his Diorama was insured, but to what extent I know not. I am sure all friends of science and improvement will unite in expressing the deepest sympathy in M. Daguerre’s loss, and the sincere hope that such a liberal sum will be awarded him by his Government, as shall enable him in some degree at least, to recover from his loss.”

In the same vessel which brought the above letter, the writer himself arrived. From him we have received some additional information respecting this very interesting discovery, which we cannot at present communicate. We have only room to say, that we are even more impressed with the value of the invention as a means of procuring, without labor or expense, perfect and satisfactory panoramas of all the most interesting places and scenery on the globe, and, if we apprehend its power correctly, perfect representations of the human countenance, than with its power to reveal the secrets of “microscopic nature.” With what delight will the eye dwell on the panoramas of Jerusalem, Thebes, Constantinople, Rome, and other cities of the old world, delineated with the unerring fidelity of the Daguerrotipe? With what interest shall we visit the gallery of portraits of distinguished men of all countries, drawn, not with man’s feeble, false, and flattering pencil, but with the power and truth of light from heaven! It may not be long before we shall witness in this city the exhibition of such panoramas and such portraits.

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

**EDITOR’S NOTES:**

This article is one of the most notable in the annals of photographic history and was widely reprinted and cited in other contemporary publications. Samuel Morse’s brother, Sidney, was at this time editor of the *New-York Observer*.

In a later account, Morse credits Robert Walsh Jr. with suggesting a successful plan that enabled Morse’s visit with Daguerre (which occurred four days after Walsh’s visit.)<sup>1</sup>

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 appears in the *New-York American*.<sup>2</sup> Richard Harlan’s letter from Paris of 30 April 1839 appears in the *Medical Examiner*.<sup>3</sup>

1. See Abraham Bogardus, "The Lost Art of the Daguerreotype":  
<http://daguerre.org/resource/texts/bogardus/bogardus.html>
2. See [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390003\\_WALSH\\_NY\\_AMERICAN\\_1839-05-22.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390003_WALSH_NY_AMERICAN_1839-05-22.pdf)
3. See [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390001\\_HARLAN\\_MED\\_EXAMINER\\_1839-06-15.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390001_HARLAN_MED_EXAMINER_1839-06-15.pdf)

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