

"New Discovery in the Fine Arts—The Daguerrotype," 20 April 1839

(keywords: Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, François Arago, Jean-Baptiste Biot, Daguerrotype, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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From Blackwood's Magazine for March.

NEW DISCOVERY IN THE FINE ARTS.

THE DAGUERROSCOPE.

Now for some account of the French discovery:

"*French Discovery—Pencil of Nature.*"—Who has not admired the splendid and wonderful representations in the camera obscura?—images so clear, so full of life, so perfectly representing every object in nature. These living pictures, by traversing lens and mirrors, are thrown down with double beauty on the table of the camera obscura by the radiant finger of light. The new art has been discovered to fix these wonderful images, which have hitherto past away volatile—evanescent as a dream—to stop them, at our will, on a substance finely sensible to the immediate action of light, and render them permanent before our eyes, in traces represented by tints in perfect harmony on each point with different degrees of intensity. We must not, however, believe, as has been erroneously reported to the public with respect to these (Parisian) experiments, that the proper colors of objects are represented in these images by colors: they are only represented, with extreme truth, by light, and in every gradation of shade; as an oil painting is given by a perfect engraving, consisting of black lines; or, perhaps, more akin to a design made with mathematical accuracy, and in aqua-tinta; for there are no crossings of lines in the designs by the pencil of nature: red, blue, yellow, green, &c., are rendered by combinations of light and shade by demi-tints, more or less clear or obscure, according to the quantity of light in each color. But, in these copies, the delicacy of the design—the purity of the forms—the truth and harmony of the tone—the aerial perspective—the high finish of the details, are all expressed with the highest perfection.

The formidable lens, which often betrays monstrosities in the most delicate and aerial of our masterpieces, may here search for defects in vain. The creations of nature triumph. Far from betraying any defect, the highest magnifier only tends to show more clearly its vast superiority. At each step we find new objects to admire, revealing to us the existence of exquisite details, which escape the naked eye, even in reality. Nor can this astonish us when the radiant light, which can only act according to the immutable laws of nature, substitutes its rays for the hesitating pencil of the artist. M. Daguerre has represented, from the Pont des Arts, and in a very small space, the whole bank of the Seine, including that part of the Louvre containing the grand gallery of pictures. Each line, each point, is rendered with a perfection quite unattainable by all means hitherto used: he has also

reproduced the darkness of Notre Dame, with its immense draperies and Gothic Sculpture. He has also taken the view of a building in the morning at eight o'clock, at mid-day, and at four o'clock in the afternoon, during rain and in sunshine. Eight or ten minutes at most, in the climate of Paris, is sufficient; but under a more ardent sun, such as that of Egypt, one minute will suffice. To artists and savans, who travel, and who often find it impossible to prolong their stay at interesting places, this process must be most welcome. The French journals, and reports of proceedings, however, admit that these admirable representations still leave something to be desired as to effect, when regarded as works of art. It is singular, they observe, that the power which created them seems to have abandoned them, and that *these works of light want light*. Even in those parts the most lighted, there is an absence of vivacity and effect; and it is to be allowed that, amidst all the harmony of their forms, these views appear subjected to the sober and heavy tone of color imparted by a dull Northern sky. It would appear that, by passing through the glasses of the optical arrangements of M. Daguerre, all the views are uniformly clothed with a melancholy aspect, like that given to the horizon by the approach of evening. Motion, it is obvious, can never be copied; and the attempt to represent animals and shoe-blacks in action, consequently failed. Statuary is said to have been well defined, but, hitherto, M. Daguerre has not succeeded in copying the living physiognomy in a satisfactory manner, though he does not despair of success. It could not have escaped chemists that various chemical products are sensibly affected by light. Some gases may remain together in the dark without any effect, but a ray of light will cause instant explosion. Other bodies, such as the chloruret of silver, are modified in color. It at first takes a violet tint, afterwards becomes black. This property would doubtless have suggested the idea of applying it to the art of design. But, by this method, the most brilliant parts of the object become discolored, and the darker parts remain white. This produces an effect contrary to fact; and, again, the continued action of light tends to render the whole dark. Mr. Talbot's method would seem to be based on the use of the salts of silver, with the addition of some substance or covering to present the further action of light after the design was complete. This discovery will doubtless make a great revolution in the arts of design, and, in a multitude of cases, will supersede old methods altogether inferior. The temporary interest of many may at first be affected; but whatever has the true character of good, cannot essentially do mischief. The invention of printing soon gave employment to many more than were employed as copyists. Even in our own time, the substitution of steel plates for engraving, instead of copper, although fifty times as many copies may be taken from them, has, by the substitution of good engravings for indifferent ones, so extended the demand, that more steel plates are now required than were formerly used of copper.

We must add a few words with reference to science. This newly discovered substance, so easily acted upon by the rays of light, opens a wide field for photometric experiments which hitherto have been hopeless, more particularly on the light of the moon. M. Arago calls to our attention some experiments made by himself, jointly with other philosophers, by which the light of the moon (300,000 times less than that of the sun) concentrated by the most powerful glasses, gave no indication of chemical action on the chloruret of silver, nor any sign of heat on the most delicate thermometer. We should be glad to know if any experiments have yet been made with the concentrated light of the moon on thermo-electrical apparatus, which may be constructed of extreme delicacy. The substance used by M. Daguerre is evidently sensible to the action of lunar light, since, in

twenty minutes, he can represent, under the form of a white spot, the exact image of this luminary.

M. Biot, who, from the nature of his labors in the fields of science, takes a lively interest in the discovery in question, anticipates much from the means afforded by it to carry out the analysis of some of the most delicate phenomena of nature. M. Daguerre has, it is asserted, already discovered some new properties of light, and is still carrying on the investigation.

Here, in truth, is a discovery launched upon the world, that must make a revolution in art. It is impossible, at first view, not to be amused at the sundry whimsical views the coming changes present. But, to speak more seriously, in what way, in what degree, will art be affected by it? Art is of two kinds, or more properly speaking, has two walks, the imaginative and the imitative; the latter may, indeed, greatly assist the former, but, in the strictly imitative, imagination may not enter but to do mischief. They may be considered therefore, as the two only proper walks. It must be evident that the higher, the imaginative, cannot immediately be affected by the new discovery—it is not tangible to its power—the poetry of the mind cannot be submitted to this material process; but there is a point of view in which it may be highly detrimental to genius, which, being but a power over materials, must collect with pains and labor, and acquire a facility of drawing. Now, it is manifest that, if the artist can lay up a store of objects without the (at first very tedious) process of correct drawing, both his mind and his hand will fail him; the mind will not readily supply what it does not know practically and familiarly, and the hand must be crippled when brought to execute what it has not previously supplied as a sketch. Who will make elaborate drawings from statues or from life, if he can be supplied in a more perfect, a more true manner, and in the space of a few minutes, either with the most simple or the most complicated forms? How very few will apply themselves to a drudgery, the benefits of which are to be so remote, as an ultimate improvement, and will forego for that hope, which genius may be most inclined to doubt, immediate possession? But if genius could really be schooled to severe discipline, the new discovery by new and most accurate forms, might greatly aid conception. If this view be correct, we may have fewer artists; but those few, who will ‘spurn delights and live laborious days,’ will arrive at an eminence which no modern, and possibly no ancient master has reached.

But in the merely imitative walk, and that chiefly for scientific purposes, draughts of machinery, and objects of natural history, the practice of art, as it now exists, will be nearly annihilated—it will be chiefly confined to the coloring representations made by the new instruments—for it is not presumed that color will be produced by the new process. Our mere painters of views will be superseded, for our artists have strangely dropped the wings of their genius, and perched themselves, as if without permission to enter, before the walls of every town and city in Christendom, and of some out of it; so much so, that after-generations, judging of us from our views in annuals and other productions, may pronounce us to have been a proscribed race, not allowed to enter within gates; pictorial lepers, committed to perform quarantine without, and in the face of the broad sun, if possible, to purify us. These mere view-makers will be superseded; for who, that really values views, will not prefer the real representation to the less to be depended upon? We have so little taste for these things, that we shall say so much the better, if it does not throw many worthy and industrious men out of employment. Yet who is allowed to think of that in these days, when the great, the universal game of ‘beggar my neighbor’ is played and encouraged with such avidity? Then it remains to be

considered—will taste be enlarged by this invention? Do we not despise what is too easily attained? Is not the admiration of the world at once the incitement and the reward? Has it not greatly, mainly, a reference to ourselves? It is what man can do by his extraordinary manual dexterity that we are so prone to admire.

People prefer a poor representation of an object made by a human hand to the beauty of the thing itself. They will throw away a leaf, a flower, of exquisite beauty, and treasure up the veriest daub, that shall have the slightest resemblance to it. We suspect our love—our admiration of art arises, in the first place, because it is art, and of man's hand. This is a natural prejudice, and one designed, probably, to bring the hands nature has given us to their utmost power. There are things so exquisitely beautiful, and at first sight acknowledged to be so by all, that it is surprising they are not in common use. For instance, the *camera obscura*—how perfectly fascinating it is! Yet, how unsatisfied are people with it, because it is not of a human hand, and how seldom do people, even of taste, return, as it might have been expected they would, to the exhibition of it? We are afraid something of this indifference will arise from the new invention. However beautiful may be the work produced, there will be no friend to be magnified, no great artist for the amateurs to worship with all the idolatry of their taste, or of their lack of it. The love of imitation, innate though it be, and so determinate in infant genius as it has ever shown itself, will undoubtedly be checked as mere idleness; and, in lieu of improvement by practice, the young genius will be surfeited with amusements which he has had no share in creating, and for whose excellence he has had no praise. If this view be correct, it may be presumed that the number of artists will be greatly lessened, and that a few will attain greater excellence.

Another question arises, will painters and engravers be equally affected? In the present view of the matter, for we have not seen any announcement of a power of making impressions ad infinitum, though in certain cases of fixed objects, and with fixed light and shade something of this kind may be looked to; yet, for practical purposes, it is probable that the engraver will even more than ever be in demand. We hope it may be so, for it is in this way practice in drawing will still be required; and without practice in drawing, we can have no painters. Yet, when one thinks of the possible power of copying pictures—in having fac-similes, in all but color, of Raphael and Correggio, one cannot but dread, in the midst of hope of the rich possession, the diminution of so admirable an art.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

The text is derived entirely from the article, "New Discovery—Engraving, and Burnet's Cartoons," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (Edinburgh and London) 45:281 (March 1839): 382–91.¹ Substantial portions of the *Blackwood's* text are omitted in the present text including a letter from H. Fox Talbot. Other reprints from *Blackwood's* are "The Daguerroscope," *Hesperian: a Monthly Miscellany of General Literature* (Cincinnati) 3:1 (June 1839): 82–83; "Pencil of Nature—A New Discovery," *Corsair: A Gazette of Literature, Art, Dramatic Criticism, Fashion and Novelty* (New York) 1:5 (13 April 1839): 70–72;² "The Daguerroscope," *Richmond County Mirror: a Weekly Paper, Printed on Staten Island* (New Brighton) 3:14 (4 May 1839): 115–16.

In its description of the daguerreotype's quality of imagery, this commentary does reflect some bias against Daguerre. Herschel, however, upon seeing Daguerre's pictures,

wrote to Talbot, "It is hardly saying too much to call them miraculous."⁴ Nonetheless, the commentator's phrase, "these works of light want light," is a reasonable description of some early daguerreotypes when compared to the later, brilliant examples of a matured process.

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390016_NEW-DISCOV_BLACKWOODS_1839-03.pdf
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390017_NEW-ART_LIT-GAZETTE_1839-02-02.pdf

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