

B. S., “La Daguerreotype,” October 1839

(keywords: Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, Paris Diorama, Alexandre Dumas, Jules Janin, B.S., Bartholomew Stritch, daguerreotype, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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

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LA DAGUERRETYPE.

[Both Chambers have unanimously voted a pension of 400*l.* sterling per annum to MR. DAGUERRE and his Heirs, for his admirable invention of “The Daguerreotype.”]

AT length we have seen with our own eyes, and touched with our own hands, this wonderful invention of Daguerre. His name is popular throughout Europe—he is universally acknowledged a skilful painter, but this art did not suffice him; he laboured to produce something beyond painting—this something was the DIORAMA. By this all-powerful art he enabled us to enter into the interior of pictures, which before we only saw on the surface. By his magical skill we have penetrated into old churches and ruins—we have climbed the mountain, descended the valley, traversed the great rivers and the ocean. The enchanter has led us without fatigue within the most remarkable cities. This clever, ingenious man plays with all the multiplied effects of light and shade, which he commands, one and the other, as if he were their sovereign ruler.

To such sights the public have crowded, amazed, lost in admiration. Painters have said among themselves, “What a loss it is for Daguerre to continue thus to create pictures, *finer* than painting. Daguerre replied but by a smile to these reproaches and praise—he alone knew at what perfection he laboured to arrive.

At last, from persevering study in the sanctuary of his diorama, where he produced so many *chefs-d’oeuvre*—such perfect combination of light and colour—from his facility to command *the sun*, a willing and obedient slave, to cast his rays pale, or vigorous, when and as he pleased,—the inventor of the diorama has arrived at the most extraordinary results. What our short-sighted view considered a merely clever exhibition, Daguerre has, by a severe and complete study, brought to its highest point of perfection. You must recollect the two celebrated pictures of the diorama, “La Vallée de Goldau,” and “La Messe de Minuit,” in the church of St. Etienne du Mont. In both these pictures you recollect the light thus acts:—You see a valley serene and calm, as in a fine Swiss landscape, beneath a soft and tranquil sun, the humble “chalet” is seen on the declivity of the hill—the verdant meadow spread its fine carpet, even to the borders of the wandering stream—all breathes life and peace in this sweet corner of the world—the rustling trees, the browsing goat, the bird singing, the shepherd at his labour, when, suddenly, what a frightful revolution! The summit of the mountain trembles—the green fields are replaced by scattered earth. Succour! Succour! The storm rages—the chalet is swallowed up—the stream becomes a torrent—the trees, torn up by the roots, cast afar their branches and

their ruin! You witness this awful destruction—you exclaim, “What an earthquake!—what a tempest!” The author of this destruction is he who just now spread around you so many fresh and smiling scenes. This terrible picture of universal devastation is the same soft landscape upon which your delighted eye so lately reposed. By a combination of light, shade, and colour, the chalet is suddenly become rock—the meadow newly ploughed—the stream a torrent—the tree a ruin—the living man a corpse.

The vulgar admired these incredible transformations without ever considering *how wrought*. Daguerre alone contemplated and conceived their marvelous extent. It was the same at “La Messe du Minuit.” You entered the ancient church—it was empty; not even an old woman at the foot of the altar—not a priest in the sanctuary—not a boy in the choir. Light alone filled the Gothic arches—it spread, it reached the depths of the sacred edifice; by degrees the light diminished; you saw advancing along the aisle the early pious; a little longer, and the crowd pressed in on all sides, until the church was full. All ready—the tapers lighted, the priests in their stalls, women devoutly kneeling before their favourite shrines, men in the attitude of deep respect, the preacher in the pulpit delivering the sacred word. The service over, the prostrate crowd arise and quit the church; the priests enter the vestry; the preacher descends from the pulpit. The sexton closes the gate of the temple; the dawning of a new day bursts upon the marble pavement, and again the church is empty. Yet it is always the same church, the same picture; nothing has changed. Let me now show you what a mysterious conclusion these persevering efforts conducted Daguerre. By dint of study, this celebrated painter became a scientific chemist; doubtless he observed that such and such shades, vigorous in full day, gradually disappeared as the day closed in; he knew, what we are all aware of, the action of sun and light upon *colour*, and proposed to himself, with that persevering ardour which ever accompanies genius, the solution of the following problem:—To find a colour which the sun, nay more, which light can influence, so as to withdraw *one part*, and leave the other fixed *immoveably*. To force the light to act upon this given shade, as would the divine burin of some invisible Morghen, and throw upon this copper-plate dark and smooth, *both life and form*. To force the sun, the eye of the world, to be no more than an ingenious work man under the orders of a Master! Surely here is the most strange, the most difficult and incredible problem the age has produced! For its *difficulty* we will not say; for its utility, the inventor of steam is only second to Daguerre. By what trials, attempts, researches, and chances of various kinds the author of the Daguerreotype has arrived at the magic results we are about to tell, is still his secret. He will later explain his wonderful invention, now that France, liberal and disinterested as ever, gives to Europe this noble present!

Daguerre has composed a certain black varnish; this varnish spreads itself over a copper-plate; the plate is exposed to a full light, and instantly, whatever may be the shade cast on this plate, the heavens, the earth, running waters, the cathedral lost in the clouds, stones, pavement, nay, the imperceptible grain of sand which floats upon the surface,—all these objects, great or small, which are equally before the sun, *become engraved and PRESERVE* their various impressions in the camera-obscura. The drawing of our most celebrated masters never achieved *such a drawing*. If the mass is admirable, the detail is infinite! To conceive that it is *the sun itself* which is here employed, as the all-powerful agent of a new art which produces these incomparable labours! It is no longer man’s inexact eye which sees in the distance light and shade. It is no longer his trembling uncertain hand which reproduces on moveable paper the changing scene of this world, which Chaos envelops. It is no longer requisite to pass hours and days before the same view, either of earth or heaven. The miracle operates of itself in an instant! Quick as

thought, rapid as the ray darting upon the arid mountain or on the budding flower. We have a fine passage in the Bible, God said, "Let there be light, and light there was." You can say to the towers of Notre-Dame, "Place yourselves there;" the towers obey. Thus have they obeyed Daguerre, who one bright day transported them to his home, from the gigantic foundation-stone upon which they are built, to their thin, light spires, borne into the clouds, and which were never seen before but by Daguerre and—the sun. What we say is strange, is passing strange; but is there any thing so doubtful as certain truths? Napoleon, that man of vast comprehension, would never believe that a light vapour within a tube of iron could lift the world. When the steamboat sailed before him, he called it a "child's toy." However sceptical we may be, we *must believe* in the Daguerreotype, for no human eye can plunge into these floods of light, or penetrate these profound obscurities. Yes, we have seen reproduced the finest monuments of Paris, which, by this art, may well become an "eternal city." We have seen the Louvre, the Institute, the Tuileries, the Pont Neuf, Notre-Dame de Paris; we have seen the Pavement de la Greve, the Seine, the clouds which cast their mantle of Sainte Genevieve, and the same divine perfection in each of these *chef-d'oeuvre*.

Art has nothing to contend with this new rival. Note well. There is no question here of some vulgar mechanical invention, which reproduces at best masses without shade or detail, and with no other result than slight advantage of lessening, by some hours, manual labour; no, we endeavor to describe the most delicate, the most elegant, the most difficult reproduction of the works of God, and the scientific labour of man; and note well again, that this reproduction is far from being one and uniform, as may be supposed; on the contrary, not one of these pictures, executed after the same process, resembles the preceding picture. The hour of the day, the tinge of the sky, the limped air, genial spring, austere winter, the autumnal tints, the reflection of the transparent stream, all these, and all the various changes of the atmosphere, are marvellously reproduced, in the marvelous pictures of the Daguerreotype, as if the fabled genii of the air attended their birth. From a collection of these pictures we saw Paris reproduced by a warm ray of the sun; the sun shone upon its noble walls, and vigorously advanced them from the fantastic shade. We saw Paris reproduced under a veil of clouds, when the rain descended gloomily drop by drop, the sky dull, and lowering as if covered with a crape. This art of reproducing the external world, will add likewise an immense merit to the truth of minute detail, from the incredible fidelity of light itself. You will be enabled at the first *coup-d'oeil* to recognise the drawing reproduced from a pale Parisian sun, from that executed by an ardent Italian sky; you will say, "here is a landscape taken from the frozen vallies of Switzerland; here is another, under the desert aspect of Sahara;" you distinguish the steeple of Florence from the towers of Notre-Dame, and this from the simple observation of the sky under which they rise. Marvellous discovery! which identifies not alone the place, but identifies its sun.

Remark that man remains always master of the light he wishes to act upon; a second, more or less, devoted to this, does much. Keep to the minutiae, instead of to the mass; in two minutes you have a drawing, all veiled in poetic confusion, such as Martin delights in, through which the eye guesses more than it really sees. Do you desire, on the contrary, as the architect, to make the monument appear in relief, free from any surrounding object which may lessen its noble effect. The sun obeys; your monument stands forth, and isolated as the column in the Place Vendôme, you obtain, by the same admirable process, all the various effects you desire to create from the earliest dawn to twilight's close. The work, once accomplished by the sun, or light, the sun and light have no more influence

upon it. This slight varnish, upon which the least ray had full empire awhile ago, you can now expose in vain to the great light of day. It is durable—imperishable as an engraving upon steel. Is it possible to command more imperiously? 'Tis saying to the light, "Thou goest no farther." We have all, doubtless, seen the effect of a camera-obscura. In the ordinary camera-obscura are reflected external objects with perfect accuracy, but it produces nothing of itself. It is a mirror upon which no object rests; imagine then that this mirror has preserved the impression, indelibly, of all the objects which are there reflected, and you have an idea, nearly complete, of the Daguerreotype—equally extraordinary. The moon, pale reflection of the sun, from which she is distant millions of leagues—the moon, with moving, uncertain light, acts also upon this colour. We have seen this changing star reflected in the mirror of Daguerre to the unmingled admiration of the illustrious Arago, who was not aware of the power of his favourite star. Submit to the solar microscope the wing of a fly, the Daguerreotype, as powerful as the microscope, reproduces the wing in all its countless dimensions. You think we borrow from a fairy tale.

From this recital, will it be necessary to tell you all the endless applications of this marvellous discovery, which, in all probability, will be the honour of the age. The Daguerreotype is destined to reproduce the finest views from nature and from art, as printing produces the *chef-d'oeuvre* of the human mind. It is a matchless engraving. It is an obedient pencil to fond remembrance. It is the faithful memorial of the finest monuments and painting in the universe. The spontaneous, incessant, indefatigable reproducer of those *chefs d'oeuvre* immortalised by genius and by time, The Daguerreotype will be the indispensable companion of the traveller ignorant of the art of painting; of the artist who has not time to paint. It is destined, at a small expense, to circulate in our country the finest works of art, of which we have only had hitherto costly and unfaithful copies.

We shall shortly have only to send our boy to the Musée, and bid him in three hours bring back a picture of Raphael and of Murillo; we write to Rome for the cupola of St. Peter; by the next courier the cupola arrives. At Antwerp, you admire the house of Rubens—you can send your architect a faithful drawing—he will find, one by one, the ornaments become lace from stone, by the chisel of the sculptor; you can take yourself a copy of the portrait by Ingres of the fine head of the noble writer who is an honour to the European press. You cease to regret that there had never been an engraving. By the aid of the beautiful mirror it will be unnecessary to travel over desert lands, as Coombes; or traverse, as Count Demidoff, the plains of Southern Russia with an army of savans and of artists. If, an humble individual, we are forced to roam abroad, la Daguerreotype will give us enjoyments full of home, and keep alive the tender feelings of our youth and manhood. We can have the grandfather's easy chair, our infant's cradle, the old man's tomb, the neat beloved retreat of "the bosom friend dearer than all."

Daguerre rests not here—he hopes shortly to succeed in obtaining *the portrait* without the previous portrait of Ingres. He is in the course of inventing a machine by which the subject remains perfectly immovable; for such is the inimitable accuracy and power of this ardent reproducer, the Daguerreotype. You have at once the *coup d'oeil*, the frown, the lightest curl of the hair. Take the magnifying glass; do you perceive on this even sand a *something* darker than the rest? It is a bird which passes in the sky.

We live at a singular epoch—steam has increased five-fold the number of our labourers. The rail-roads double that fugitive capital called life—gas replaces the sun—innumerable are the experiments to travel through the air.

It is but a short time since the invention of the Diagraphé-Gavard—obedient to its command the ceilings of the palace at Versailles descend upon the paper, guided by the hand of an inexperienced child. The other day, another man of genius—the same who discovered the means to reproduce en-relief, all the ancient and modern medals, Mr. Colas, invented a wheel, by which he reproduced, with admirable fidelity. La Venus de Milo; and here is Daguerre, with a simply composition spread over a copper-plate, who replaces painting and engraving! Onwards ye men of genius! May equal success ever crown your toils.

Who will be surprised if one of the days we have machines, which will repeat to us the comedies of Moliere, and make verses like the great Corneille.

B. S.

[The *Athenaeum*, in speaking of this extraordinary process, says, “That one great obstacle presenting itself to the use of M. Daguerre’s photogenic process, is in the difficulty of preserving the pictures when completed, because they are of so delicate a nature, and so easily injured, that the slightest touch effaces them; even M. Daguerre himself has always found it necessary to protect them with a plate of glass, which is both inconvenient and troublesome; and it has, in consequence, been suggested, that if a varnish could be discovered, which easily might be applied to the surface of the plates after the completion of the pictures, and which, while it protected them from injury, should not impair their delicacy, it would considerably add to the value and usefulness of the process; we are happy, therefore, to hear, that M. Dumas has discovered that a liquid, composed of one part of dextrine and five parts of water forms a varnish of the desired nature. It is said to be well adapted for the purpose, and further possesses the advantage of being easily removed from the surface of the picture, by immersing the whole in boiling water. Time, however, will be required to ascertain whether this varnish has any action on the peculiar mercurial compound of which the image is formed.”]

[End of text. Bracketed opening sentence and closing paragraph is as per original text presentation.—ed.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

The monthly’s extended subtitle tells us that the publication is “under the distinguished patronage of her Royal Highness the Duchess of Kent.” This then is the mother of Queen Victoria, formerly Princess (Mary Louise) Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld.

Despite the appearance of the closing initials, “B. S.” (perhaps for Bartholomew Stritch¹) the text is indeed a translation of Jules Janin, “Le Daguerotype,” *L’Artiste, Journal de la Littérature et des Beaux-Arts* (Paris) 2nd series, 2:11 (27 January 1839): 145-48.²

This translation omits the last paragraph of the original text.

The Getty’s biographical entry for Janin is descriptive:

Often referred to as the prince of critics, theater critic, novelist, and literary historian Jules Janin was an amazingly prolific French writer of the mid-1800s, now all but forgotten. In conversation he attributed his forty-year success to his having changed his mind every fifteen days, thus continuing to surprise the attentive audience of his weekly theatrical reviews.³

Janin was one of the fortunate few to see first-hand, during the month of January, Daguerre’s successes. His report of the daguerreotype may be the first perspective from

someone other than the circle of scientists attending Daguerre's announcement and the subsequent purchase of the invention by the French government.

Janin notably asserts that the daguerreotype was a logical extension of what Daguerre invented with his Diorama; i.e., his endeavor "to command the sun," and that the technology required to create the Diorama informed (in part) the direction of the research resulting in the daguerreotype process.

My thanks to the observant visual artist and writer, Sheona Beaumont of the UK,⁴ who kindly informed me of the fact of Janin's authorship of this text.

The bracketed opening sentence refers to the 2 August 1839 pension authorization by both chambers.⁵

The addendum paragraph is cited from the *Athenaeum* (London) No. 620 (14 September 1839): 708.

1. Stritch's obituary states that he was "for many years a correspondent in Paris, Spain, and Italy for the London Journals." See the online (subscription) resource, *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824–1900*. Also see the obituary notice for Stritch in *Gentleman's Magazine* (London) Vol. 32 (September 1849): 327.
2. <http://books.google.com/books?id=xlwGAAAQAAJ>. R. Derek Wood provides the specific date of Janin's article. See R. Derek Wood, "Ste Croix in London, 1839" *History of Photography* 17:1 (Spring 1993): 101--107. (http://www.midley.co.uk/midley_pdfs/SteCroix_London.pdf) The text also appears in Jules Janin, *Les Catacombes: Romans, Contes, Nouvelles et Mélanges Littéraires par Jules Janin* Vol. 6 (Paris: Werdet, Libraire-Éditeur, 1839): 95–148. (<http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb30645126d>)
3. <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=45548>
4. <http://www.shospace.co.uk/>
5. See R. Derek Wood, "A State Pension for L. J. M. Daguerre for the Secret of his Daguerreotype Technique," *Midley Essays on the History of Early Photography*, <http://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20100311230213/http://www.midley.co.uk/>

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