

“The Pencil of Nature—A New Discovery,” 13 April 1839

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THE PENCIL OF NATURE.

A NEW DISCOVERY.

We know not how it is, but just as we are going to have something good in this world, up starts a mischief to mar it or to vilify it. There is not a real panacea, but has its rival. Engraving, set upon a firm basis, one would have thought might have been supreme. No such a thing—her illegitimate sister, Lithography, sets up her claim, and by means of cheap publications, calls in the masses, who naturally prefer the inferior article; and here commences the democracy of art. Print shops have increased out of number—print auctions are every where; so that, if all the world do not become judges of art, it cannot be for lack of means to make them acquainted with it.

There is no breathing space—all is one great movement. Where are we going? Who can tell? The phantasmagoria of inventions passes rapidly before us—are we to see them no more?—are they to be obliterated? Is the hand of man to be altogether stayed in his work?—the wit active—the fingers idle? Wonderful wonder of wonder!! Vanish aquatints and mezzotints—as chimneys that consume their own smoke, devour yourselves. Steel engravers, copper engravers, and etchers, drink up your aquafortis, and die! There is an end of your black art—“Othello’s occupation’s gone.” The real black art of true magic arises and cries avant. All nature shall paint herself—fields, rivers, trees, houses, plains, mountains, cities, shall all paint themselves at a bidding, and at a few moment’s notice. Towns will no longer have any representatives but themselves. Invention says it. It has found out the one thing new under the sun; that, by virtue of the sun’s patent, all nature, animate and inanimate, shall be henceforth its own painter, engraver, printer, and publisher. Here is a revolution in art; and, that we may not be behindhand in revolutions, for which we have so imitative a taste, no sooner does one start up in Paris, but we must have one in London too. And so Mr. Daguerre’s invention is instantly rivalled by Mr. Fox Talbot’s. The Dagueroscope and the Photogenic revolutions are to keep you all down, ye painters, engravers, and, alas! the harmless race, the sketchers. All ye, before whose unsteady hands towers have toppled down upon the paper, and the pagodas of the East have bowed, hide your heads in holes and corners, and wait there till you are called for. The “mountain in labor” will no more produce a mouse; it will produce itself, with all that is upon it. Ye artists of all denominations that have so vilified nature as her journeymen, see how she rises up against you, and takes the staff into her own hands. Your mistress now, with a vengeance, she will show you what she really is, and that the

cloud is not “very like a whale.” You must positively abscond. Now, as to you, locality painters, with your towns and castles on the Rhine, you will not get the “ready rhino” for them now—and we have no pity for you. Bridges are far too arch now to put up with your false perspective. They will no longer be abridged of their true proportions by you; they will measure themselves and take their own toll. You will no longer be tolerated. You drawers of churches, Britton, Pugin, Mackenzie, beware lest you yourselves be drawn in. Every church will show itself to the world without your help. It will make its wants visible and known on paper; and, though vestry and church warden quash the church rates, every steeple will lift up its head and demand proper repair.

Ye animal painters, go no more to the Zoologicals to stare the lions out of countenance—they do not want your countenance any more. The day is come for every beast to be his own portrait painter. “None but himself shall be his parallel.” Every garden will publish its own *Botanical Magazine*. The true “Forget me not” will banish all others from the earth. Talk no more of “holding the mirror up to nature”—she will hold it up to herself, and present you with a copy of her countenance for a penny. What would you say to looking in a mirror and having the image fastened!! As one looks sometimes, it is really quite frightful to think of it; but such a thing is possible—nay, it is probable—no, it is certain. 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! What wonderful discoveries is this wonderful discovery destined to discover! The telescope is rather an unfair tell-tale; but now every thing and every body may have to encounter his double every where, most inconveniently, and thus every one become his own caricaturist. Any one may walk about with his patent sketch-book—set it to work—and see in a few moments what is doing behind his back! Poor Murphy outdone!—the weather must be its own almanack—the waters keep their own tide-tables. What confusion will there be in autograph signs manual! How difficult to prove the representation a forgery, if nobody has a hand in it!!

Mr. Babbage in his (miscalled ninth Bridgewater) Treatise announces the astounding fact, as a very sublime truth, that every word uttered from the creation of the world has registered itself, and is still speaking, and will speak for ever in vibration. In fact, there is a great album of Babel. But what too, if the great business of the sun be to act registrar likewise, and to give out impressions of our looks, and pictures of our actions; and so, if with Bishop Berkeley’s theory, there be no such thing as any thing, *quoad* matter, for aught we know to the contrary, other worlds of the system may be peopled and conducted with the images of persons and transactions thrown off from this and from each other; the whole universal nature being nothing more than phonetic and photogenic structures. As all readers may not have read the accounts of this singular invention, upon which we have made these comments, we subjoin an extract from the letter of Mr. Talbot to the editor of the *Literary Gazette*.

To the Editor of the Literary Gazette.

“DEAR SIR—I have great pleasure in complying with the wish you have expressed to me, that I would go into some details respecting the invention which I have communicated to the Royal Society, viz., the art of photogenic drawing, or of forming pictures and images of natural objects by means of solar light.

“Many instruments have been devised, at various times, for abridging the labor of the artist in copying natural objects, and for insuring greater accuracy in the design than can be readily attained without such assistance. Among these may be more particularly mentioned the camera obscura and the camera lucida, which are familiar to most persons;

certainly very ingenious and beautiful instruments, and in many circumstances eminently useful, especially the latter. Yet are there many persons who do not succeed in using them, and, I believe, few are able to do so with great success, except those who, in other respects, are skilled in drawing. Up to a certain point, these inventions are excellent; beyond that point they do not go. They assist the artist in his work, they do not *work for him*. They do not dispense with his time, nor with his skill, nor with his attention. All they do is to guide his eye and correct his judgment; but the actual performance of the drawing must be his own. From all these prior ones, the present invention differs totally in this respect (which may be explained in a single sentence,) viz. that by means of this contrivance, it is not the artist who makes the picture, but the picture which makes *itself*. All that the artist does is to dispose the apparatus before the object whose image he requires; he then leaves it for a certain time, greater or less, according to circumstances. At the end of the time he returns, takes out his picture, and finds it finished. The agent in this operation is solar light, which being thrown by a lens upon a sheet of prepared paper, stamps upon it the image of the object, whatever that may be, which is placed before it. The very foundation of the art, therefore, consists in this eminently curious natural fact, viz., that there exists a substance so sensitive of light, as to be capable of receiving even its faint impressions. The whole possibility of the process depends upon this; for if no such substance existed in *rerum natura*, the notion of thus copying objects would be nothing more than a scientific dream. Moreover, it is not sufficient that the paper should be so sensitive as to receive the impressions of external objects; it is requisite also, that, having *received*, it should retain *them*; and, moreover, that it should be *insensible* with regard to other objects to which it may be subsequently exposed. The necessity of this is obvious, for otherwise, new impressions would be received, which would confuse and efface the former ones. But it is easier to perceive the necessity of the thing required than to attain to its realization.

“In 1834 I undertook a course of experiments with this object in view. I know not what good star seconded my efforts. After various trials, I succeeded in hitting upon a method of obtaining this desideratum. By this process it is possible to destroy the sensibility of the paper, and to render it quite insensible. After this change it may be exposed with safety to the light of day; it may even be placed in the sunshine; indeed I have specimens which have been left an hour in the sun without having received any apparent deterioration.

The specimens of this art, which I exhibited at the Royal Institution, though consisting only of what I happened to have with me in town, are yet sufficient to give a general idea of it, and to show the wide range of its applicability. Among them were pictures of flowers and leaves; a pattern of lace; figures taken from painted glass; a view of Venice, copied from an engraving; some images formed by the solar microscope, viz. a slice of wood very highly magnified, exhibiting the pores of two kinds, one set much smaller than the other, and more numerous. Another microscope sketch, exhibiting the reticulations on the wing of an insect. Finally, various pictures, representing the architecture of my house in the country; all these made with the camera obscura, in the summer of 1835. And this I believe to be the first instance on record of a house having painted its own portrait. A person unacquainted with the process, if told that nothing of all this was executed by the hand, must imagine that one has at one’s call the genius of Aladdin’s lamp. And, indeed, it may almost be said that this is something of the same kind. It is a little bit of magic realized—of natural magic. You make the powers of nature work for you, and no wonder that your work is well and quickly done. No matter whether

the subject be large or small, simple or complicated; whether the flower branch which you wish to copy contains one blossom or one thousand; you set the instrument in action, the allotted time elapses, and you find the picture finished, in every part and in every minute particular. There is something in this rapidity and perfection of execution which is very wonderful. But, after all, what *is* Nature but one great field of wonders past our comprehension? Those, indeed, which are of every-day occurrence do not habitually strike us, on account of their familiarity; but they are not the less, on that account, essential portions of the same wonderful whole. I hope it will be borne in mind by those who take an interest in this subject, that, in what I have hitherto done, I do not profess to have perfected an art, but to have *commenced* one, the limits of which it is not possible at present exactly to ascertain. I only claim to have based this new art upon a secure foundation: it will be for more skilful hands than mine to rear the superstructure.

I remain, dear sir, yours," &c.,

"H. FOX TALBOT."

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 tastes, 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.

[End of text.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

This text is one of the first lengthy texts appearing in US press regarding the recent announcements by Talbot, Daguerre, and others.

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. Portions of Talbot’s letter also are omitted. The *Blackwood’s* text includes a section, “French Discovery,” which is entirely omitted here. Other reprints from *Blackwood’s* are “The Daguerroscope,” *Hesperian: a Monthly Miscellany of General Literature* (Cincinnati) 3:1 (June 1839): 82–83; “New Discovery in the Fine Arts,” *New-Yorker* 7:4 (13 April 1839): 49–51;² “The Daguerroscope,” *Richmond County Mirror: a Weekly Paper, Printed on Staten Island* (New Brighton) 3:14 (4 May 1839): 115–16.

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

2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390015_PENCIL_CORSAIR_1839-04-13.pdf

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