

“New Discovery,” March 1839

(keywords: William Henry Fox Talbot, Humphry Davy, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, Dagueroscope [Daguerroscope], François Arago, Jean-Baptiste Biot, John Burnet, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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

The research archive of Gary W. Ewer regarding the history of the daguerreotype

<http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org>

EWER ARCHIVE P8390016

Published in:

Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (Edinburgh and London) 45:281 (March 1839): 382–91. For context, the entire article is herein presented.

NEW DISCOVERY—ENGRAVING, AND BURNET'S CARTOONS.

WE WELL recollect many years ago hearing a letter read before the Society at the Adelphi, from a tailor in St Martin's Lane, in which he boasted of an invention to make pictures by patches of cloth. The importance he attached to his scheme was amusing, but more so from the manner in which he insinuated the inconvenience of all other processes of picture making, for his invention was “*to supersede the necessity of painting in oil.*” The Royal Academy has still persevered in oil, and to show their contempt of the tailor and “*Rag Fair,*” have assumed an extraordinary finery; and the purple patch has been adopted without extraneous aid, and so effectually daubed on, as to “supersede the necessity” of being stitched on by the Knight Templar.—

“Purpureus late qui splendeat unus et alter
Assuitur pannus.”

Since the tailor's failure to “supersede,” many have been the inventions to promote arts. A lady has discovered that the old masters did not, after all, paint in oil, but saturated their works with it afterwards, though some of them, before that theory was born, had painted themselves at their easels, and exhibited their cups and brushes, of which, according to her account, there was not the slightest necessity. Still the loyal Academy are obstinate, and artists will perseveringly entitle themselves “painters in oil and water colours.” The art has a little coquetted with encaustic painting, and there have been serious proposals of reviving fresco: while all these great revolutions of art in “posse” are in contemplation, innumerable are the contrivances in “esse,” to render colouring so brilliant, that, if much further progress be made this way, the sun himself will not be able to look at them, and the dilettanti will labour under universal ophthalmia. The “modesty of nature” has been discovered to be a cheat, a coinage of the brain. Varnish predominates—painters crack of their pictures, and their pictures will, in a few years, crack of themselves. But let invention go on, and when it shall happily drive varnishes out of the field, and with it some absurdities and monstrosities, British artists may acquire a lasting fame. While genius is at one time playing the capriccio with discoveries, and at another time goes to sleep, hoping to awake to new and more perfect ones; invention is still busy, and despairing of the permanency of the works themselves, takes pains to make the transcripts of them as multiplied as possible. Great have been the “improvements” in the art of engraving, and in imitation of engraving. First came Lowry's diamond points—

then the sky rulers, shade rulers, and substitution of machinery for the hand. Much more has consequently been done in all that concerns effects and tones; but it must be confessed that this has been attained not without great sacrifice—a sacrifice of that which is, after all, the chief beauty, that free and inexplicable execution, which is, as it were, the sign manual of genius. The handling of the etcher, such as is visible in the works of Wood, Mason, Vivares, men whose merits have been strangely overlooked, is now never seen. For our own part, we would forego all the advantages gained, for the recovery of the old “needle work” which showed so well the mind of the painter; it gave a transcript of the spirit, more than of the tones. But these “improvements” have reflected themselves, as it were, back upon painting; for now artists, seeing the power of the graver’s tools, have become themselves mechanical, and fleece and smoke, velvet and tin, represent or misrepresent, flesh, drapery, air, land, water, and trees. The city-bred and city-inhabiting population, who take their ideas of external nature from our annuals, where white satin buildings, variously shaded, as it were, with cigar smoke, stand for towns, and masses of soot for woods and forests, sent off into proper distance by the most approved jet blacking, must be truly astonished, if they have not already lost their eyes and capability of taste, when they go out to look at nature herself. It is true the steam-boilers by sea and rail-road, may for a while deceive them into a belief that all is right, but they must be unfortunate indeed, if they do not leave the low levels of the “sooty Acheron.” The substitution of steel for copper, the power of multiplying plates as before we did impressions, was another wonderful stride; and with it came a fear that the public would die of a plethora of taste, when good engravings might be sold for little more than the cost of paper, and plates be renewed, *ad libitum*, for ever.—“*Exegi monumentum ære perennius*” verified to the letter. 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 so firm a basis, one would have thought might have been supreme. No such 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. It is somewhat, perhaps, to be feared, that art itself will be held cheap, when all its productions are so; and that the bad will outsell the good. Great, certainly, are the powers of lithography, but it affords a fearful facility of setting forth abundant mediocrity, and engendering bad taste, and ultimately disgust. Few better specimens of lithography are to be seen than those of the Dresden Gallery, yet, in comparison with steel and copper plates, how unsatisfactory are they!

We have omitted to speak of Mezzotinto, which has been likewise greatly improved—the cheap “gems of art” supplied the public with some very beautiful things; in these, the fault of mezzotinto, the opaque blackness, was much remedied, and a transparency given to the shades and reflected lights very gratifying to the eye. It is, however, better adapted to subjects of deep tones than of light; and in those extraordinary illumination fails. It is a pity this method was adopted for the engraving the beautiful subject of Salvator Rosa’s *Jacob’s Dream*. The picture is too light for it,—the bold clouds that require outline (more particularly as suitable to the free execution of Salvator), inundated as they are with preternatural, with heavenly light, bearing their radiation from the very seat of Divine intelligence, look in mezzotint as if emitted from a manufactory furnace, and the angels appear as if they came out with the smoky volumes.

In the picture, the whole ground, not dark, is evidently high and under a clear atmosphere, and, besides, seems in some degree itself pierced by the heavenly vision. But the print is altogether too dark, and yet the contrast with the high lights does not give brilliancy. We are sorry to say this in the teeth of a most able engraver; and who, after all, if he has failed in giving the full beauty of the original, has yet added to the public stock a good and valuable print. We wish to see that picture and its companion, as they were exhibited at the British Gallery, Pall Mall, well etched and engraved—to see the needle and the graver throw out the bold execution of Salvator Rosa's hand. The character he has thus given to the clouds is very important; they communicate with the angels ascending and descending; they allure them and accompany them in their heavenly and earthly mission. Here ends our digression on this particular specimen of mezzotint. There is no breathing space—all is one great movement. Where are we going? Who can tell? The phantasmagoria of inventions parses 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 wonders!! 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 is no more.” The real black art of true magic arises and cries avaunt. All nature shall paint herself—fields, rivers, trees, houses, plains, mountains, cities, shall all paint themselves at a bidding, and at a few moments' 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, by whom the “*Flumen Rhenum, aut pluvius discubitur arcus,*” 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 labour” will no more produce a mouse; it will reproduce 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 due proportions by you; they will measure themselves and take their own toll. You will no longer be tolerated. You drawers of churches, Britton, Pugrin, 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 churchwarden quash the church rates, every steeple will lift up its head and demand proper repair.

“Mox reficit rates
Quassas, indocilis pauperiem pati.”

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 “Forgetmenot” 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 almanac—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 vibrations. 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 anything, *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 the letter of Mr Talbot to the editor of the *Literary Gazette*, in which valuable periodical we first saw the announcement of the discovery in France, to which we will add, from the same source, the French account of M. Daguerre’s invention. The extreme modesty of Mr Fox Talbot’s will be very striking. Specimens have been exhibited at the Royal Institution and before the Royal Society.

“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. I do this the more readily, on account of the interest with which the scientific public have read the accounts which have recently appeared respecting the discoveries of M. Daguerre, of Paris, in some respects identical with mine; in others, I think, materially different. Although I am very far indeed from being of the opinion, that

‘Chance rules supreme in the affairs of men;’

yet, I cannot help thinking that a very singular chance (or mischance) has happened to myself, viz. that, after having devoted much labour and attention to the perfecting of this invention, and having now brought it, as I think, to a point in which it deserves the notice of the scientific world—that exactly at the moment when I was engaged in drawing up an account of it to be presented to the Royal Society, the same invention should be announced in France. Under these circumstances, by the advice of my scientific friends, I immediately collected together such specimens of my process as I had with me in town, and exhibited them to public view at a meeting of the Royal Institution. My written communication to the Royal Society was, from its length, necessarily deferred to the week following. These steps I took, not with the intention of rivalizing with M. Daguerre in the perfection of his processes (of which I know nothing, but am ready to believe all that Biot and Arago have stated in their praise), but to preclude the possibility of its being said that I had borrowed the idea from him, or was indebted to him, or any one, for the means of overcoming the principal difficulties. As the process of M. Daguerre is at present a profound secret, even at Paris, it is evident that no one could imitate him here, or exhibit pictures formed in the same way, or depending on the same optical principles, who was not already fully acquainted with a secret, not indeed the same, but similar or tantamount to his. That M. Daguerre's pictures will stand the effect of time, is, I suppose, the fact, though I do not find it expressly mentioned in the report of M. Arago, (*Comptes Rendus*, 7th January). My own have stood between three and four years; I therefore consider that the principles of the art are firmly laid. Many instruments have been devised, at various times, for abridging the labour 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 can 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 chance to 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 them, 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. And this has hitherto proved a most serious obstacle to those who have experimented with this object in view. This was one of the few scientific enquiries in which Sir Humphry Davy engaged, upon which fortune did not smile. Either his enquiries took a wrong direction, or else, perhaps, the property sought for was of so singular a nature, that there was nothing to guide the search; or, perhaps, he despaired of it too soon. However this may be, the result undoubtedly was, that the attempt proved unsuccessful, and it was abandoned. As Sir Humphry Davy himself informs us, “no attempts have as yet been successful.” These words are quoted from his own account, in the *Journal of the Royal Institution*, 1802. The subject then dropped, and appears to have been no more spoken of for upwards of thirty years; when, in 1834, unaware of Davy’s researches, I undertook a course of experiments with the same 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. A fact, therefore, is thus established, which is not without its importance in a theoretical point of view, besides its more immediate application to purposes of utility. With this kind of paper, eminently susceptible of being acted upon by light, and yet capable of losing that property when required, a great number of curious performances may readily be accomplished. The most remarkable of these is undoubtedly the copying the portrait of a distant object, as the *façade* of a building, by fixing its image in the camera obscura; but one, perhaps, more calculated for universal use, is the power of depicting exact fac-similes of smaller objects, which are in the vicinity of the operator, such as flowers, leaves, engravings, &c., which may be accomplished with great facility, and often with a degree of rapidity that is almost marvellous. 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 microscopic 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.”

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 passed 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 colours of objects are represented in these images by colours: 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 colour. But, in these copies, the delicacy of the design—the purity of the forms—the truth and harmony of 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 midday, 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 colour 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 shoeblacks 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 colour. 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 discoloured, 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 prevent 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 recalls 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 labours 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 labour, 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 colouring representations made by the new instruments—for it is not presumed that colour 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 neighbour” 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 colour, of Raphael and Correggio, one cannot but dread, in the midst of hope of the rich possession, the diminution of so admirable an art. We should not have written this paper at all, had we not been led to it by the contemplation of the effects of this new discovery on engraving, though we have not come very direct to our object. We had been disgusted beyond measure, with the vile, trashy, flashy, and presuming things, so impudently staring out of our printsellers' windows, and had retired home to refresh our eyes and taste with a recent purchase, Burnet's cartoons. We began to speculate on what would be the difference between these and transcripts from the new invention. If we are to have the true handling of Raphael, we must be satisfied—but it is difficult to persuade ourselves that we have it not in these prints of Burnet. Their freedom is delightful—no further finish is wanted; we could not look at the elaborate hair-splitting engravings of these cartoons, after these bold expressive plates; and here, the world may have before them for a few shillings excellent representations of the finest things by the best of masters—so cheap, and, at the same time, so very good, that to be without them, having seen them, will argue a lack of feeling of the best art. Now, that no one may think this a puff for the benefit of Mr Burnet, we positively declare it is not, that we know not, and never saw that eminent engraver in our lives; but we have long known his works, and valued his knowledge of art, which he has indefatigably endeavoured to engraft upon the public; we have often purposed to review his works, and probably to question some of his theories, rather as imperfect, however, than wrong. But that is little to the purpose; we thank him for these fine specimens of his art, and think the public greatly indebted to him. The four plates are now before us: *Christ's Charge to Peter, Elymas the Sorcerer struck Blind, Paul Preaching at Athens,* and the *Miraculous Draught of Fishes*.

The Cartoons are too well known to require description or criticism at any length. There is nothing more remarkable about them than their simplicity. They are so perfectly unassuming in themselves, so destitute of all pretension of art, and yet so full of all its reality, that you look at them long, without thinking anything can be said concerning

them. They have the most matter-of-fact air—yet is their arrangement, notwithstanding, of wondrously artful accomplishment. The perfect union of part with part, and preservation of the whole as one subject (we speak of each separate picture), shows the highest skill; but were this visible at first, the naturalness would have been injured. Here is *Christ's Charge to Peter*. It is one subject; the charge to Peter, and the other disciples are included in the group as in the injunction. There are two parties in this command, Christ and his sheep—Peter and his brother disciples. They are accordingly so grouped, that there can be no mistaking their separateness, and yet the oneness of the subject is preserved. On one extremity are the sheep, the heavenly charge; on the other extremity, the boat and water, the worldly and present occupation of the disciples. There is a peculiar sanctity in Christ standing apart; the pointing of one hand to the sheep connects them with him; the other hand and extended arm, nearly touching the key in St Peter's hand, connects our Lord with the disciples. The arrangement, even in minutiae, is more nice and artificial than one could at first suppose; for instance, if (omitting even the consideration of the subject) the hand of Christ, in dark shade, was not so distinctly extended over the sheep, the whole figure would be isolated, and the whole passage from the figure to the end, including the sheep, superfluous; and so at the other extremity of the picture, were there a too marked and abrupt outline of the terminating figure, the picture would, somewhat hardly, end there; but the group must be connected with their employment, and that is artificially done by the drapery of that figure breaking the line which would otherwise terminate it, and carried beyond and immediately over the projection of the boat. And this not only answers the purpose in either case, but by the very sameness, almost repetition of the manner of doing it, even when the art is discovered, impresses the mind with the simplicity of the whole. Another very striking thing in the arrangement is, the distance from Christ to St Peter, being as if measured from Christ to the end of the picture, which includes the sheep; so that (if we may so speak) the two parts in the covenant are clearly, at first view, set forth; and then, that the whole of the disciples may be one group, and equally connected with Peter, their head in this instance, and Christ, the larger mass, those pressing forward, are admirably united with the rest, by the upright central figure, and one of that part of the group mentioned, with the head turned towards him. Even in the very back-ground, the parts are not without object; the tall building over the heads of the last-mentioned figures directs the eye to them, and from them to either side, and so to them jointly as a whole. Du Bos has been censured, for too easily, in this picture, distinguishing the character of Judas, who had hanged himself and could not have been present, and there are certainly but eleven disciples,—yet the character of the figure, evidently alluded to, must, we think, strike every one as of a sinister cast, and it is remarkable that the figure is grasping a bag.

The same clear arrangement is made in that of *Paul Preaching at Athens*. St Paul perfectly stands alone, although the figures are all about him,—and so his audience, though of several parts, are one group. The figure standing up, facing St Paul, is the key of that whole group; and the figure behind him, and those in the opposite corner, bring the whole subject, as it were, round in a circle, and make it one, by connecting all its parts. We could dwell at great length on these sort of arrangements, which are infinite, to show that, though they appear so simple, there is in them the most consummate skill. Here, again, is *Elymas the Sorcerer*. Nothing can be more distinct than the two parts—even as in a court of justice: on the one side Paul, on the other Elymas,—you see nothing at first but these two—the one to utter the awful punishment from God, the other at the same instant to feel it. The accessaries are but accessaries, and attest it. And mark how

they are connected with the principal figures. The effect upon Sergius Paulus was to be told; how open, then, is the space between him and Saul and Elymas—and how very remarkably are all the hands in this picture connected, and all finally tend to the denunciation, or rather the marking the instant effect of the denunciation, on the sorcerer. The hand of Saul uttering the curse is in strong light, it reaches, not in perspective but in fact, to the right hand of Sergius Paulus, whose left is towards Elymas, and thence all the hands are directed to the sorcerer but one, that of a woman, whose finger points to Saul—and thus, here again, one extremity of the picture communicates with the other: nor are the hands of the sorcerer himself to be forgotten, which connect the proconsul with the apostle. There is precisely the same complicated arrangement and apparent simplicity in the *Miraculous Draught of Fishes*. Christ is still apart—the worker of the miracle. The group, though in separate boats, is still one group, they are connected by one figure, which, in the arrangement belongs to both; the very light and shade is made subservient to this object, and hence the great simplicity. We know these remarks may be considered technical, and do not reach the greater merits of these wonderful pictures—they are intended to be so, because, if they are technically true, they are of value to those who may not have made similar observations; and may lead them to make others of the kind, by which we are quite sure their admiration will be increased. And we cannot but add, that, in the prints of the day, beautifully executed and very costly, you will scarcely ever see this art of arrangement practised. It is often hard to say what is the subject—what the principal figure, where there are many claimants—what is the character of beauty designed, where the stern and the meretricious are blended in confusion.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Talbot's letter and the "account of the French discovery" are cited from "Fine Arts—The New Art," *Literary Gazette: and Journal of the Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.* (London) No. 1150 (2 February 1839): 72–75.¹

The article also appears in the "New American edition" of this publication: (New York): vol. 8 (March 1839): 382–91

Portions of this important text are reproduced in "The Pencil of Nature," *Corsair: A Gazette of Literature, Art Dramatic Criticism, Fashion and Novelty* (New York) 1:5 (13 April 1839): 70–72;² "New Discovery in the Fine Arts—The Daguerroscope," *New-Yorker: a Weekly Journal of Literature, Politics, Statistics, and General Information* (New York) 7:5 (20 April 1839): 70–71.³ "The Daguerroscope," *Richmond County Mirror: a Weekly Paper, Printed on Staten Island* (New Brighton) 3:14 (4 May 1839): 115–16; "The Daguerroscope," *Hesperian: a Monthly Miscellany of General Literature* (Cincinnati) 3:1 (June 1839): 82–83.

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.

The author appears to be unaware that the John Burnet cartoons discussed in this article were based on works by Raphael. The Raphael cartoons are in the Royal collection are on loan to the Victoria & Albert Museum. They are viewable on the museum's web

site.⁵ The Raphael cartoons are also discussed in Herbert Fry, *London in 1880: Illustrated with Bird's-eye Views of the Principal Streets* (London: David Bogue, 1880): 160–61.

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390017_NEW-ART_LIT-GAZETTE_1839-02-02.pdf
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390015_PENCIL_CORSAIR_1839-04-13.pdf
3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390028_NEW-YORKER_1839-04-13.pdf
4. <http://www.foxtalbot.dmu.ac.uk/letters/docno.php?number=3875>
5. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/paintings/features/raphael/cartoons/index.html>

EWER ARCHIVE P8390016

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

Document author: Gary W. Ewer

Creation date: 2010-05-21 / Last revision (proofread/edit): 2010-05-25

Citation information: *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (Edinburgh and London) 45:281 (March 1839): 383–90.

Prepared from: original volume in the collection of Gary W. Ewer. Also available from *Google Books*. (<http://books.google.com/books?id=vrcCAAAIAAJ>)

Original spelling/punctuation/grammar generally maintained without correction. Any in-text corrections are bracketed.

The *source text* is Public Domain and may be freely quoted. As noted below, this document is copyright.

If citing directly from this document, please reference the Ewer Archive number and provide the following citation credit:

Gary W. Ewer, ed., *The Daguerreotype: an Archive of Source Texts, Graphics, and Ephemera*, <http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org>

THE NECESSARY DISCLAIMERS:

The document creator has made every effort to insure the accuracy of the transcription. However, the information provided in this document is provided without warranty, either express or implied. The document creator will not be liable for any damages caused or alleged to be caused directly, indirectly, incidentally, or consequentially by the information provided by this text.

The document creator assumes no responsibility for accuracy of fact; the text is prepared “as found.” Factual inaccuracies of the original text are generally **not** noted by the document creator. If this text is used in academic papers, accuracy should be confirmed by consulting original sources.

The document creator also assumes no responsibility regarding the correctness, suitability, or safety of any chemical or photographic processes that may be described by this text. Many of the chemicals used in early photographic processes are extremely toxic and should not be handled without a *thorough* knowledge of safe use.

The opinions expressed in this text are solely those of the original author and are not necessarily those of the Archive editor. Some texts may contain derogatory words. Any such word is certainly one that would not be used today. The words remain in the transcription, however, to maintain truthfulness to the original text.

© 2010, Gary W. Ewer. <http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org>
