

**“Une découverte qui tient du miracle,” (a miraculous discovery,  
February 1839**

(keywords: Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, Jules Pelletan, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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M. Daguerre vient de faire une découverte qui tient du miracle. Vous connaissez, sans doute, mesdemoiselles, l'appareil d'optique appelé *chambre obscure*, ou *chambre noire*, vous savez avec quelle netteté, quelle vérité de forme, de couleur, tous les objets extérieurs se reproduisent sur la toile placée au foyer de la grande lentille qui constitue la partie essentielle de cet instrument, et vous avez sans doute aussi désiré que ces reproductions fidèles pussent être fixées à l'instant sur la toile qui ne les reflète que d'une manière passagère... Eh bien, ce désir est en partie exaucé. M. Daguerre a découvert un enduit, dont une couche mince, étendue sur des planches de cuivre, a l'admirable propriété de fixer à leur surface l'empreinte parfaite de l'image obtenue par l'instrument d'optique, et avec une telle perfection, que tout ce que l'image renfermait se trouve reproduit dans ses plus minutieux détails; mais dans ces copies il n'y a que du blanc, du noir et du gris; que de la lumière, de l'obscurité et des demi-teintes: ce ne sont pas des tableaux, ce ne sont que des dessins.

Je vais essayer de vous faire comprendre le procédé de M. Daguerre, d'après l'explication que M. Jules Pelletan en a donnée dans *la Presse*.

Supposez que M. Daguerre ait trouvé une substance qui ait la propriété de blanchir par l'action de la lumière, et cela d'autant plus complètement et d'autant plus vite que la lumière est plus intense; supposez que cette substance, mise en pâte, forme un enduit sur une planche de cuivre; n'est-il pas vrai que cette couche sera influencée diversement dans chacun de ses points, suivant le degré de lumière, d'ombre, ou de demi-teinte qui viendra la frapper? Dans un point trèsclairé du tableau, la lumière arrivant en abondance, l'enduit blanchira plus que dans un autre point moins éclairé; toutes les décroissances et toutes les augmentations de lumière seront ainsi reproduites sur la planche, dans un rapport fidèle et exact: le rouge, le jaune, le vert, etc., seront rendus; suivant leur degré de lumière, par des demi-teintes plus ou moins foncées; et de cette manière, l'observateur qui aura vu, sur la planche, un tableau avec ses couleurs pendant toute la durée de l'opération dans la chambre noire, ne trouvera plus, en emportant cette planche au dehors, qu'un dessin tout-à-fait semblable à nos gravures à l'aqua-tinta.

L'utilité de cette découverte est admirable. Quelle perte de temps elle évitera aux artistes et aux gens du monde! que de matériaux ils pourront recueillir et enfouir dans leur portefeuille!

A translation of the text is kindly provided by Gregory Popovitch:

Mr. Daguerre has just made a miraculous discovery. You probably know, young ladies, the optical device called *camera obscura*, or *dark room*. You know the precision of shape and color with which outside objects are reproduced on the cloth situated at the focal point of the great lens, which forms the essential part of this instrument. And you probably have wished that these faithful reproductions could be instantly fixed upon the cloth which only temporarily reflects them... Well this wish has been partially fulfilled. Mr. Daguerre has discovered a compound, of which a small layer when spread on copper plates has the admirable property to fix on their surfaces the perfect print of the image produced by the optical instrument, and with such a perfection that everything which was held in the image is reproduced in its most minute details; but these copies contain only white, black and gray; only light, darkness and medium tones: these are not paintings, but merely drawings.

I will try to make you understand Mr. Daguerre's process, following the explanation by Mr. Jules Pelletan in *la Presse*.

Suppose that Mr. Daguerre has found a substance which has the property of whitening under the action of light, and that it does so more completely and faster as the light is more intense; suppose that this substance, formed into a paste, is spread on a copper plate; isn't it true that this layer will be influenced differently in each of its points, according to the degree of light, shadow or half tone hitting it? In a very bright point of the picture, the light coming in abundance, the varnish will whiten more than in a less lit point; all the decreases and all the augmentations of light will therefore be reproduced on the board, in a faithful and precise ratio: the red, the yellow, the green, etc., will be rendered, according to their amount of light, with more or less dark half-tones; and in this manner, the observer, who had seen on the board a painting with all its colors during the whole operation in the dark room, will only find after taking the board outside a drawing fully similar to an aquatint engraving.

The usefulness of this discovery is admirable. What terrible waste of time it will spare our artists and gentlemen! What material they will be able to gather and bury in their wallets!

**[End of text.]**

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