

BURNING WITH DESIRE

THE CONCEPTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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to the difference between the presence and absence of light. In other words, an image was produced only because of this material's receptivity. In Wedgwood's contact prints, objects had to be removed before their photographic trace (the tracing of a difference) could be seen. Like the maid's repetition of her lover's shadow, the trace marked what was set aside from itself. It marked the space between the object and its image but also the movement (the spacing) of the object's placement and removal.

In this case, the movement that made photography possible had continually to reenact itself. Never fixable, Wedgwood's photographs hovered briefly between life and death before succumbing to their own will to develop. Perversely, the very light needed to make and see them proved fatal to their continued visibility. In a sense, Wedgwood and Davy's struggle to overcome this shortcoming was a struggle with mortality itself. Their photographs were truly palimpsests, an absent inscription that is also present (at least in memory), a presence (a blackened surface) inhabited by absence. In Derrida's terms, these "ruined" photographs, themselves an absent presence within the history of photography, represent the inescapable play of difference that inhabits every point of origin, including photography's own: "In the beginning, at the origin, there was ruin. At the origin comes ruin; ruin comes to the origin, it is what first comes and happens to the origin, in the beginning."³²

PAYSAGE (VIEW FROM A WINDOW)

Claude and Nicéphore Niépce left a number of images that could claim to be their "first photographs." The Niépce brothers' earliest attempts at making light-induced images were inspired by lithography. Accordingly, from 1814 on they worked toward reproducing existing engravings. These were made transparent by the application of wax or oil, then placed in the sun on stones or other surfaces coated with a variety of light-sensitive varnishes. The result was a reversed contact print of the original engraved image on the prepared surface. In July 1822 Nicéphore succeeded in making such a heliographic copy of an engraving of Pope Pius VII on glass coated with bitumen. Over the next five years a number of other engravings were similarly copied, most onto copper or pewter plates. Those that have survived include *Le Cardinal Georges d'Amboise* (1826–27), *Paysage d'après Claude Lorrain* (1826), *Le Christ portant sa croix* (1825–27), *La Sainte Famille* (1826–27), *Un Grec et une Grecque, Moine accompagnant*

un jeune homme, and *Le jouer de cartes*.³³ Particularly interesting is Niépce's heliographic copy of Daguerre's lithograph for the stage set of *Elodie*. However the heliograph of a profile portrait of *Le Cardinal Georges d'Amboise* (fig. 4.3), a minister in the court of Louis XII, is most frequently published in histories of photography. In this case, Niépce soaked the plate in acid and then had it further etched with acid by Augustin Lemaître, a professional engraver. A number of faint but recognizable paper proofs of the print were pulled from the plate, proving the potential of this method for automatically reproducing existing images.

Note the eclectic selection of engravings that Niépce chose to test his process. Portraits, landscapes, religious subjects, and genre scenes were all employed in more or less equal numbers; indeed, it seems as if any available picture would do. The process of reproduction mattered to Niépce, not the subject matter. This was reiterated in a number of exchanges between Niépce and Daguerre about the desirability of multiplicity. On February 2, 1827 Niépce wrote to Lemaître about Daguerre's approaches to him, reporting that Daguerre had denigrated Niépce's own efforts at photogravure. Daguerre had apparently claimed that "he had made researches with another application, tending more towards perfection than to multiplicity."³⁴ In the *Memoir* of December 8, 1827 Niépce repeated Daguerre's own evaluation of this "other application," "which has not, it is true, the advantage of being able to multiply the product, but he regards it as eminently proper for rendering all the details of nature."³⁵ On June 4, 1827 Niépce had sent a heliogravure and paper proof of *La Sainte Famille* (The Holy Family) to Daguerre to demonstrate his process. In the accompanying letter he clarified that he conceived all of his heliographs, whether copies of existing engravings or copies of "views from nature," as but the first step toward an etching and multiple reproduction process.

*This is not one of my recent results but dates from last spring; since then I have been diverted from my researches by other matters. I shall resume them today, now that the country is in its full splendor, and shall devote myself exclusively to copying views from nature. There is no doubt that this offers the more interesting results, but I am fully aware of the difficulties which it will present in engraving. The enterprise is beyond my powers, and my ambition is limited to being able to show by more or less satisfactory results the possibility of complete success if a skilful and practised hand in the process of aquatinta would subsequently co-operate in this work.*³⁶



| 4.3 | Nicéphore Niépce, *Portrait of Cardinal d'Amboise*, 1826. Paper print from heliograph. Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin

As this letter suggests, Niépce certainly regarded his attempts at “views from nature” as the “more interesting” experiments, even though they employed the same basic chemistry and method already outlined. In an earlier letter to Lemaître, dated February 2, 1827 and accompanied by five helio-engraved plates, Niépce mentioned, “I am busy principally at present, Monsieur, with engraving a view from nature, using the newly perfected camera.”³⁷ Lemaître replied that “I look forward to seeing your examples of images from nature, because this discovery seems most extraordinary to me and at first incomprehensible.”³⁸ This same distinction, the difference between a representation of the real (nature) and a representation of what is already a representation (an engraving), has also transfixed photography’s historians, leading them to downplay Niépce’s heliogravure contact prints in favor of his images “from nature.” Although made by virtually identical chemical processes, only these latter images made with a camera have been classified as potential first photographs in most histories.

The first image reproduced, for example, in Claude Nori’s *French Photography: From its Origins to the Present* is a camera picture credited to Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, titled *Still life* and dated 1822.³⁹ In *The Origins of Photography* Gernsheim reproduces this same image but identifies its source as an 1891 photo-engraving titled *Table prepared for a meal* (fig. 4.4).⁴⁰ This engraving, purporting to be of a heliograph on glass, was first reproduced in A. Davanne’s 1893 *Conférences Publiques sur la Photographie*, where it was claimed to have been made by Nicéphore Niépce in “1823 or 1825.”⁴¹ The image shows a table covered in a tablecloth and laid out as if for a simple meal with crockery, cutlery, and a vase of flowers. Although he included it in the section of the book dealing with Niépce, Gernsheim disputes both its date (which he puts at c. 1829) and its authorship (which he ascribes either to Daguerre or to Nicéphore’s cousin Abel Niépce de Saint-Victor). The original object was smashed in 1909 and only its mysterious ghost remains to haunt the history of photography’s origins.

Apart from Nori, virtually every history of photography reproduces another image by Nicéphore Niépce as the world’s first photograph. It is usually titled *View from the window at Le Gras* or, in French histories, *Paysage à Saint-Loup de Varennes* (fig. 4.5). According to Helmut Gernsheim, this 16.5-by-20.5-centimeter image was probably made sometime between June 4 and July 18, 1827.⁴² It presents a view from Niépce’s studio window, looking out over a courtyard and buildings. From his correspondence,

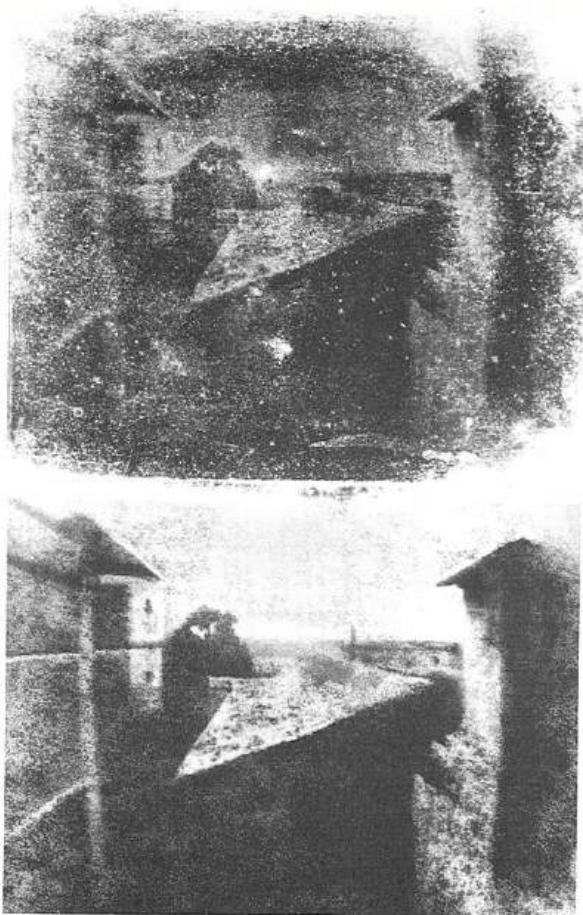


| 4.4 | Photographer unknown, *Table prepared for a meal*, date unknown. Reproduction from photo engraving in A. Davanne & Maurice Bucquet, *Le Musée retrospectif de la photographie à l'Exposition Universelle de 1900* (Paris, 1903). Société Française de Photographie, Paris

it is clear that Niépce had been attempting to make similar views since about April 1816, with varying degrees of success. On May 5, 1816, for example, he reported to his brother that, having pointed his camera obscura out the window of his studio, "I saw on the white paper all that part of the birdhouse that is seen from the window and a faint image of the casement, which was less illuminated than the exterior objects."⁴³ This describes the basic elements of what can be seen of the surviving 1827 heliograph and suggests that Niépce made this image over and over again. How often he must have looked at and for it! Its "magical" reappearance on paper, glass, copper, zinc, or pewter became his template of heliography at work, the standard effect by which photography was to be recognized as such.⁴⁴

The 1827 image was made using a pewter plate coated with a solution of bitumen of Judea, exposed for over eight hours in a camera fitted with a biconvex lens, then washed with a solvent (oil of lavender and white petroleum) to remove those parts of the bitumen not hardened by light. The details of the resulting image are difficult to make out. However, its general subject matter and symmetrical composition at least confirm Niépce's stated interest in capturing views of landscape. The picture is framed on the left by the loft of his pigeon house and on the right by a wing of the house. In the center is the sloping roof of a barn, with the top of a pear tree rising above it. Although it is not very exciting to look at, everyone who studies the history of photography is familiar with this image. With Gernsheim calling it "the world's earliest, and the inventor's sole surviving photograph from nature," it is an undisputed icon.⁴⁵

In an article published in 1977 Gernsheim tells how he and his wife Alison rediscovered this sacred object in 1952. It had been lying in a trunk in England, forgotten until their inquiries had drawn attention to its existence. On February 15, 1952 Helmut held the long-missing heliograph for the first time. "Only a historian can understand my feeling at that moment. I had reached the goal of my research and held the foundation stone of photography in my hand." The problem was that this "foundation stone" proved almost impossible to reproduce photographically. The photograph that he himself took of it turned out to be no more than a reflection of the front of his own camera (a mirroring of his own photogenic desire). After the *Times* and the National Gallery in London had also tried and failed to get a satisfactory reproduction, Gernsheim solicited the help of the Kodak Research Laboratory. After three weeks of trials, this laboratory produced what Gernsheim describes as a "greatly distorted image . . .



- 4.5 | Nicéphore Niépce, *View from the window at Le Gras*, 1827. Bitumen of Judea on tin plate. Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Reproduction by Kodak Research Laboratory, England (March 20, 1952)
- 4.6 | Nicéphore Niépce, *View from the window at Le Gras*, 1827. Retouched reproduction of heliograph (watercolor on gelatine silver print). Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin

[which] in no way corresponded with the original . . . a travesty of the truth." Accordingly, Gernsheim then spent two days touching up this copy print with watercolor, eliminating "hundreds of light spots and blotches" and giving the image a "pointillistic effect" that he admits is "completely alien to the medium." Although he confesses that his painted reproduction "was only an approximation of the original," he reassures readers that it "comes rather close to the drawing I had made a month before any reproduction existed."⁴⁶ Gernsheim went on to reproduce this watercolor approximation in *The Photographic Journal* in 1952; it appears as "the world's earliest photograph" in his *The Origins of Photography* (1982). The same reproduction and claim also appear in a vast number of more recent histories of photography.⁴⁷

Here we have another one of those peculiar twists of photographic history. The image that is everywhere propagated as the first photograph, as the foundation stone of photography's history, as the origin of the medium, is in fact a painting after a drawing! The much touted first photograph turns out to be a representation of a representation and therefore, according to photo-history's own definition, not a photograph at all. We have instead a painted version of a reproduction that itself "in no way corresponded with the original." It seems that wherever we look for photography's bottom line, we face this strange economy of deferral, an origin always preceded by another, more original, but never-quite-present photographic instance.

STILL LIFE

About twenty daguerreotypes by Louis Daguerre have survived to the present day, with another seventeen or so mentioned in 1839 by the press or other witnesses. In late 1838 Daguerre himself claimed that he would have "40–50 pictures" ready for an exhibition scheduled to open on January 15 of the following year. The exhibition never took place, and unfortunately, although reportedly saved from the Diorama fire of March 8, 1839, Daguerre's earlier experiments and notes have not come to light. Nevertheless, a fair amount of evidence indicates Daguerre's aspirations as a photographer.

As with Niépce's choice of engravings, Daguerre's work as a daguerreotypist suggests that he was never preoccupied by a single photographic subject. On the con-

trary, he seems to have attempted as wide a range of genres as possible. His photographs include a number of still lifes (composed of casts of sculptures and architectural details, engravings, relief panels, carpets, fossil shells, and other items), several scenes showing buildings (Notre-Dame, the Tuileries, the Palais Royal, the Quai Voltaire) or city streets (especially the view from his studio window), a number of portraits (the earliest taken in 1841), an only partially successful attempt to photograph the moon, and, in one recorded case, an image of a spider taken through a microscope.⁴⁸ This eclecticism is matched by the range of pictures that he proposed in his various publications. In his premature announcement of 1835, for example, he claimed to have “discovered a means of receiving on a plate of his own preparation the images produced by the camera obscura, so that a portrait, a landscape, a view of any kind . . . leaves its imprint there.”⁴⁹ In his 1838 subscription brochure he was equally expansive, pointing out that his discovery is “capable of innumerable applications” and mentioning “the most detailed views, the most picturesque scenery.” Obviously speaking to what he hoped would be wealthy investors, he suggested that people take views of their “castle or country-house” and was daring enough to predict that “even portraits will be made.”⁵⁰

Of all of these pictorial aspirations, landscape alone never fell within the compass of his own camera. Landscape, and this of course meant picturesque landscape, nevertheless continued to be an ideal for his photographic process. Daguerre’s seventy-nine-page instructional *Account*, published in Paris in September 1839, includes six engraved plates detailing how a daguerreotype is to be made. The last contains a figure described as “la plaque de l’épreuve” (the drawing plate), in other words a daguerreotype in the making.⁵¹ The image shown on this mythical plate is a landscape scene, its receding foreground neatly framed by foliage in the prescribed picturesque manner. Ironically enough, this is precisely the kind of scene that one almost never sees in daguerreotypes, certainly not in any examples made by Daguerre himself.

Of the various daguerreotypes by Daguerre that do survive, one in particular is often reproduced in histories of photography as the earliest extant example, as Daguerre’s first photograph. Dated 1837, this full-plate daguerreotype is usually titled *Still life* or *The artist’s studio* (or, in one intriguing instance, *Intérieur d’un Cabinet Curiosité*) (fig. 4.7).⁵² Although frequently published, the image has attracted little close analysis.



It pictures a segment of what must be Daguerre's own studio, showing a section of wall and bench (or perhaps a window ledge) cluttered with various objects typically found in such places. These include the following: plaster casts of the heads of two putti or cupids, complete with small wings; a carved relief panel of a naked nymph holding a branch with one hand and a large paddle with the other, attended by a cupid and with a foot resting on one of two overturned vessels disgorging liquid; a cast of a ram or goat's head hanging on the wall; another cast of what appears to be a sheep's head; a corked wine flask covered in wicker, hanging from the wall by a thin strap; an ornately framed picture of a woman, probably an engraving or lithograph; two hanging pieces of cloth; a shallow bowl and several other small implements sitting on the bench. Each object is shown in tantalizing detail, with the disposition of light producing an aesthetic chiaroscuro. How then are we to read this conglomeration, beyond its ability to demonstrate what the newly perfected process could achieve?

The bas-relief in Daguerre's image recalls the style and iconography of the sixteenth-century French sculptor Jean Goujon, especially the series of five water nymphs carved for the Fountain of the Innocents in about 1547. This fountain was erected at a corner of the Rue Saint-Denis for Henry II's triumphal entry into Paris in 1549. Goujon went on, between 1548 and 1562, to contribute a significant amount of carving to the facade and interior of the Louvre.⁵³ By the early nineteenth century Goujon was regarded as one of the masters of a French Renaissance, which itself had come to be considered the pinnacle of French artistic achievement. In 1820 three of the bas-reliefs from the fountain's base were replaced by copies and the original panels moved to the Louvre. Although similar to these, the panel that appears (inverted) in Daguerre's image is actually a close copy of another bas-relief representing the same theme, a limestone carving held by the Louvre but whose attribution to Goujon is now disputed. This work, of a *divinité fluvial* (*Water nymph*) (fig. 4.8) clutching some bull-rushes along with her oar, has been traced back to the collection of a Monsieur Daval, a "merchant of curiosities." It was acquired by Alexandre Lenoir for the Museum of French Monuments in the early nineteenth century before making its way to the Louvre. According to Pierre du Colombier, one of Goujon's biographers, many copies were made of this particular panel. In casting doubt on its attribution to Goujon, Colombier suggests that the panel itself may have been modeled after an engraving.



| 4.8 | After Jean Goujon, *Nympe fluviale*, date unknown. Stone relief panel. Musée du Louvre, Paris

Whatever its origins, this sort of nymph was, claims Colombier, a very popular image during the romantic era.⁵⁴

This becomes relevant to the present discussion when one realizes that Daguerre at some point presented his *Still life* image, complete with its sidelong reference to Goujon and the Louvre, to Alphonse de Cailleux, who in 1836 had been appointed adjunct director of this same museum. Could Daguerre, in making this particular image, have been deliberately courting the attention and recognition of the artistic and political power brokers of his time?⁵⁵

Julia Ballerini has also pointed to the association of wine and women in Daguerre's arrangement, its hedonist theme reinforced by the presence of the ram, "a common sign of the male ardent, vital force that reassures the return of the regenerative cycle in spring." Whether by accident or intention, "In its doubling of past/present joined with symbols of love and sensuality this picture more than hints at a continuing pagan image of sexuality and reproduction." Similar arrangements of sculptural reproductions inhabit other examples of Daguerre's pictures, as they do early photographs by Eugène Hubert, Hippolyte Bayard, and Henry Talbot. Ballerini points to a historical context in which increasing numbers of people, including Daguerre and Bayard, were being displaced from the provinces to the city, with all of the dislocating social and personal effects such moves entail. With this in mind, she proposes a general narrative frame for these early still lifes. "Again and again these first photographs staged scenarios concerning ancestry, both personal and social, a theme that integrated them into the mainstream of contemporary debates around the positioning and significance of both an individual and a collective lineage in a new era of changing sociopolitical structures."⁵⁶

Be that as it may, Daguerre's earliest extant daguerreotype also demonstrates the potential usefulness of daguerreotypy to professional artists like himself. As a source of faithful copies of the classical canon, it amply illustrates the claim made in his own subscription brochure that "it will also give a new impulse to the arts, and far from damaging those who practise them, it will prove a great boon to them."⁵⁷ Successfully mimicking an already established genre of art practice, these still lifes (and Daguerre made at least eleven of them) perhaps even imply that photography itself was capable of artistic expression. More than that, however, Daguerre presented this image (to an

art museum no less) as a demonstration of daguerreotypy as a whole; on the back of the plate is inscribed “épreuve ayant servi à constater la découverte du Daguerreotype, offerte à Monsieur de Cailleux par son très dévoué serviteur Daguerre” (proof [as in engraver’s trial impression] having served to verify the discovery of Daguerreotype, offered to M. de Cailleux by his very devoted servant Daguerre).⁵⁸ *Still life*, then, is a manifesto of photography intended to certify its conceptual and pictorial identity. As such, Daguerre’s image once again represents photography as a reproduction of what are all already reproductions (in the case of the bas-relief, perhaps even a reproduction of a three-dimensional copy of an engraving after a sculpture by Goujon). Photographs, this image seems to be saying, are the equivalent of those fossilized shells lined up in another of Daguerre’s early efforts at still life: precise but fragmentary impressions supplied by a nature already at one remove from itself.⁵⁹

Daguerre produced one other type of daguerreotype image a number of times. In about 1838 he made two views of the Boulevard du Temple from the window of his studio in the Diorama building, one at eight in the morning and the other at about midday. These were later sent to Ludwig I of Bavaria, having been described by their maker in now familiar terms: “épreuve ayant servi à constater la découverte du Daguerreotype, offertes à sa Majesté le Roi de Bavière par son très humble et très obéissant serviteur Daguerre.”⁶⁰ Daguerre made at least one more of these same views of the Boulevard du Temple, this time taken late in the afternoon and showing horses that have moved during the exposure. Early in 1839 he repeated the exercise in another location. A journalist writing for *The Spectator* reported in the February 2, 1839 issue that Daguerre made views of the Luxor obelisk in the Place de la Concorde by morning, noon, and evening light.⁶¹ Around the same time he also took a series of views of the Tuileries Palace, “taken at three different times of the day in the summer: in the morning at five, in the afternoon at two, and at sundown.”⁶² Daguerre was apparently interested (as were Bayard and Talbot, who also made multiple versions of the same object under different lighting conditions) not just in capturing a particular view but in representing photography as a peculiar articulation of time itself.

Time had of course long been a central problem for all experimenting with photography. As Comte Tannegui Duchâtel, the Minister of the Interior, explained in his speech of June 15, 1839 to the Chamber of Deputies, “The possibility of fixing tran-



- | 4.9 | Louis Daguerre, *View of Boulevard du Temple* (with human figures), 1838–39. Daguerreotype. Bavarian National Museum, Munich
- | 4.10 | Louis Daguerre, *View of Boulevard du Temple*, 1838–39. Daguerreotype. Bavarian National Museum, Munich. Reproduction courtesy of Museum of Modern Art, New York

siently the objects reflected in a camera obscura, was ascertained as early as the last century.”⁶³ However it wasn’t until the efforts of Niépce and Daguerre that this transience could be fixed permanently, that the inexorable passing of time could be stopped in its tracks. In fact, as journalists were quick to point out, the actual passing of time was one thing that Daguerre could not reproduce on any one of his otherwise marvelous photographic plates; “Motion escapes him, or leaves only indefinite and vague traces”:⁶⁴ “Nature in motion cannot be represented. . . . In one of the views of the boulevards of which I have spoken, all that was walking or moving does not appear in the picture; of two horses of a hackney coach on the stand, one unfortunately moved its head during the exposure and so the animal appears without a head in the picture.”⁶⁵ Samuel Morse, commenting on his own viewing of one of Daguerre’s photographs of the Boulevard du Temple, affirmed this limitation: “Objects moving are not impressed. The boulevard, so constantly filled with a moving throng of pedestrians and carriages, was perfectly solitary, except an individual who was having his boots brushed. His feet were compelled, of course, to be stationary for some time, one being on the box of the bootblack, and the other on the ground. Consequently, his boots and legs are well defined, but he is without body or head, because these were in motion.”⁶⁶

The daguerreotype’s inability to represent motion was a direct result of the extended exposure time necessary to make a successful photograph. For while photographs may have been “spontaneous,” they were by no means immediate. In June 1840 a rough table of exposure times prepared by Daguerre’s assistant Hubert was published, and these times ranged, depending on the season and quality of light, from four and a half to sixty minutes (and, Hubert warned, even “this last is often not sufficient”).⁶⁷ The year before, on September 7, Daguerre had given his first public demonstrations of the daguerreotype process, making several pictures of the Louvre with exposure times of between thirteen and twenty minutes.⁶⁸ His earlier series of views of the Boulevard du Temple, the Tuileries, and the Place de la Concorde further indicated the connection between appearance, exposure time, and time of day. These series not only calibrated the passing of time in the form of changing shadows and degrees of legibility but presented time itself as a linear sequence of discrete but related moments. Daguerre showed, in other words, that photography was able to bring the present and the past together in the one viewing experience, that photography could fold time back on itself.

One of these photographs, mentioned by Morse and usually titled simply *Boulevard du Temple* (1839), is commonly referred to as the first to show a human being.⁶⁹

This claim, which invariably centers on the standing man, conveniently ignores the fact that the photo actually shows two people, the bending boot black and his standing customer. More than the first photo to show people, it is also the first to illustrate both labor and class difference, and in a particularly graphic fashion (standing middle/upper-class being served by kneeling worker). Given the political turmoil that beset Paris in the nineteenth century, this image therefore continues to have a considerable historical resonance, albeit a resonance rarely mentioned by photography's various historians.

According to many historians, photography was born of the apparently coinciding demands of science and art for a transparent and unmediating form of representation. The daguerreotype is often mentioned as exemplifying this demand. It is certainly true that when daguerreotypes were first shown to the public in 1839, their ability faithfully to reproduce detail and accurately to replicate how things looked to the eye was greeted with the highest acclaim. Samuel Morse emphasized this quality on first sighting some of Daguerre's images on March 7, 1839.

They are produced on a metallic surface, the principal pieces, about seven inches by five, and they resemble aquatint engravings, for they are in simple chiaro-oscuro and not in colors. But the exquisite minuteness of the delineation cannot be conceived. No painting or engraving ever approached it. For example: in a view up the street a distant sign would be perceived, and the eye could just discern that there were lines of letters upon it, but so minute as not to be read with the naked eye. By the assistance of a powerful lens, which magnified fifty times, applied to the delineation, every letter was clearly and distinctly legible, and so also were the minutest breaks and lines in the walls of the buildings and the pavements of the streets. The effect of the lens upon the picture was in a great degree like that of the telescope in nature. . . .

The impressions of interior views are Rembrandt perfected. One of Mr. D's plates is an impression of a spider. The spider was not bigger than the head of a large pin, but the image, magnified by the solar microscope to the size of the palm of the hand, having been impressed on the plate, and examined through a lens, was further magnified, and showed a minuteness of organization hitherto not seen to exist. You perceive how this discovery is, therefore, about to open a new field of research