

# Musings on Scenic Daguerreotypes

## ABSTRACT

The Daguerreotype evolved quickly in both Europe and America, soon diverging and following rather different paths in the two continents. In both areas it began with scenic and still life subjects, then incorporating portraiture as exposure times were reduced. The imagery produced in each continent had its own unique look and feel. This essay will compare and contrast a selection of American and European scenic daguerreotypes of similar topics, such as scenic images, cityscapes, and outdoor occupational images from private and public collections, and discuss aspects of aesthetics, presentation and content.

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The magic of the daguerreotype visually takes us back to the birth of photography over 150 years ago. The initial progress of photography was very similar all over the world and, as the Daguerreian process was refined and exposure times decreased, there was a transition from still lifes and scenic images to portraiture. However, Europe and America soon followed different evolutionary paths in terms of subject matter, presentation and aesthetics. For example in America, due to issues such as licensing rights, the daguerreotype became the process of choice while the various paper processes steadily grew in popularity in Europe and England.

Each photographer had a unique level of skill, sense of aesthetics, commitment to his craft and sense of adventure. As a result their personal *oeuvres* include images that are relatively consistent with the aesthetic conventions of the time, as well as more unusual images

that transcend the simple classifications and conventions of the era. Some daguerreotypists were itinerant, creating their images while they travelled far and wide, most of whom are now anonymous. Others were prestigious professionals based in studios who created extensive bodies of work. In America a list of such professional daguerreotypists would have to include Albert Southworth and Josiah Hawes in Boston, Platt Babbitt in Niagara Falls, Thomas Easterly in Saint Louis - Missouri, as well as Isaac Baker, Robert Vance, Carleton Watkins and George Howard Johnson in California. In Europe such a list would include Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gros, Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey, Pierre-Ambrose Richebourg, Charles-Marie-Isidore Choiselat and Stanislas Ratel.

The early daguerreotypes that have survived can help researchers to infer patterns and relationships between these images that were created over 150 years ago. The survival of



Ill. 1, Unknown Maker, American. Traveling Daguerreian Studio, ca. 1850. Daguerreotype, sixth plate, 3 ¼ x 2 ¾ inches (8.3 x 7 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., inv. 2005.27.6 © Nelson Gallery Foundation. Photo: Thomas Palmer

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many daguerreotypes through the generations is largely due to serendipity - to sheer luck or chance - as well as our knowledge of their provenance, their correct labeling and description, and their easy availability for purposes of research and scholarship in private or public collections. Additional factors that can influence the ability of a researcher to interpret an image at any given time are its context, the academic background in terms of collateral research, exhibitions, and publications, and the researcher's knowledge and context, all of which tend to evolve over time.

Spectacular collections of daguerreotypes that shape our understanding of the aesthetics of the era have often come down to us due to lucky finds in unlikely places. For example a number of daguerreotypes showing Washington D.C. and the Capitol were found in a California flea market, and a collection of 120 daguerreotype plates of China, India and the East by Jules Alphonse Eugène Itier were discovered by chance in the 1970s. A collection of images by pioneering American landscape photographer Samuel Bemis were discovered in 1980, during work on his mansion in the White Mountains of New Hampshire a century after his death, and more recently a spectacular collection of 188 previously unknown 'Ruskin Daguerreotypes' was acquired by Ken and Jenny Jacobson at a small English country auction in 2006.

Unfortunately, much precious material has also been lost to serendipity, although we still know of its existence thanks to historic records. Two examples of famous missing collections include the 300 daguerreotype scenes of California and the West by Robert Vance that were exhibited in New York City and St. Louis Missouri before disappearing without a trace in Chicago in the 1870s, and the collections of images by John Ross Dix and J. Wesley Jones, the fate or possible whereabouts of which are now unknown.

Before the advent of the Internet, historians of photography had to scour books and publications for images. Textbooks by Eder, Newhall, Gernsheim, Lécouyer and others created a context for developing visual literacy,

within which images were discussed and interpreted. Although some institutions such as the U.S. Library of Congress assembled huge photographic collections in the first century after Daguerre's invention, most collections were assembled by individuals or groups, who often sought donations for purchasing photographic images. These collections, and the exhibitions that often derived from them, were influenced by the classic texts on photographic history and have produced a vocabulary of iconic images, as well as the reputations of the photographers who created them. The flood of publications and exhibitions, in addition to the passion for collecting photographs that emerged in the 1970s, followed by digitally enhanced Internet access to images, have all provided us with resources that even the most optimistic early historians of photography could hardly have imagined. Various online projects such as Daguerreobase have made images and important primary source materials available to historians and researchers, and our understanding of the pioneering photographers and the images that they created continues to evolve.

Since its invention there was a close aesthetic dialogue between photography and painting. European scenic views tend to reflect a more Romantic painterly aesthetic, while many American images exhibit a more documentary approach. American images also tend to have stronger contrasts between light and shade, whereas European images exhibit a broader range of more subtle tonalities. Photographers and painters shared a fascination with travel and with documenting novel and unusual scenes, in addition to creating aesthetically pleasing or 'picturesque' images of cities and towns. A significant feature of English and European photographers, which is much less common in America, consists of individual details of classical architectural elements. For example, details of architecture and rather abstract images, reminiscent of paintings of Turner or Constable, are more common in European daguerreotypes (i.e. Ruskin's images of Switzerland and Rome, Grecian ruins, etc.)



III. 2, Marie-Charles-Isidore Choiselat. The Pavillon de Flore and the Tuileries Garden, ca. 1849. Daguerreotype 15.2 x 18.7 cm © The Metropolitan Museum of Art Gilman Collection, Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2005, inv. 2005.100.29

III. 3, Unidentified Daguerreotypist. Seneca Falls, New York looking upstream, ca. 1850. Half plate daguerreotype © Smithsonian American Art Museum inv. 1994.91.232



Many American, English and European images focus on the beauty of panoramic views of towns or cities, often looking down scenic avenues and boulevards. At first scenic daguerreotypes depicted major cities, such as Paris, London, New York City, Boston and Philadelphia, where the wealthy scientists, artists and amateur experimenters who took these pictures actually lived. Later on emerging metropolitan areas in America such as St. Louis, San Francisco, Portland, New Orleans and Richmond generated substantial bodies of work. Itinerant daguerreotypists soon documented even the smallest towns and villages, and explored the scenic beauty of the natural environment.

European photographers generally used larger whole or half plate formats for scenic daguerreotypes, while smaller half, quarter, and sixth plate sizes were more common in

America. Leather cases similar to those used for painted portrait miniatures were more popular in England than on the continent, and this also became the presentation of choice for most American photographers. Decorations or inscriptions were occasionally imprinted or embossed on the cloth pads inside the cover, or embossed gilding was added to the case to identify the studio or the photographer. The large European images were also framed for display, with more elaborate, ornate *passe-partout* mounts and frames than were typically adopted in America.

Rivers and watercourses are often central to the composition in daguerreotype images of major cities, such as Paris, Venice and Philadelphia. European images often incorporate the reflections in their waters in a more painterly manner, with a strong aesthetic emphasis, while many American images feature ships,

Ill. 4, Horatio B. King. Seth Eastman at Dighton Rock, July 7, 1853. Quarter plate daguerreotype © J. Paul Getty Museum inv. 03877101 Object 84.XT.182

steamboats or waterfalls as metaphors of power and prosperity that emphasize the importance of waterways in manufacturing, commerce, industrial growth and the passion of the era for Westward expansion. Though relatively long exposure times made it difficult to capture moving subjects, American and European daguerreotypists also strove to document events such as meetings, protests, ceremonies and other public gatherings, initially shooting the streets below from the windows of their studios, and later taking their photographic equipment into the field. Some scenes gain in emotional impact from the blurred moving figures that contrast with the detailed buildings and objects in the background. Others, in which the motion was successfully frozen, seem to be genuine press photos from a bygone era.

Another shared theme consisted of images of strange, exotic and foreign lands. Pioneering European photographers traveled to the Alps, Italy, Greece, Turkey and the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific Islands, while the fascination with westward expansion on the American continent led to many images of life along the

Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, in California and on the West Coast. Images of gold mining in California were made to satisfy public demand, and showed Eastern investors the camps and mines they underwrote. Adventurous traveling daguerreotypists created spectacular images of foreign lands. Examples include Alexander Ellis' photographs of Venice taken in May 1841 and the pictures of Pozzuoli, Naples, Pompei, Rome, Assisi, Pisa and Florence that were published in Noël Marie Paymal Lerebours' *Excursions Daguerriennes*. German photographer Adolph Schaefer traveled to Indonesia in 1843 and made the daguerreotypes of temples and cultural artifacts that are now kept at the University of Leiden. The famous artist, diplomat and daguerreotypist Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gros (Baron Gros) travelled to Greece and Egypt, followed by Columbia, Venezuela, and Argentina. Another famous daguerreotypist, Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey, photographed in Egypt, Syria, Constantinople and Greece in 1843-44.

Triggered by the discovery of gold in January 1848, thousands of prospectors, as well as many daguerreotypists, traveled around Cape



Ill. 5, Rev. G. Bridges. View of the Areopagus - Mars Hill at Athens, ca. 1847. Daguerreotype 5.5cm x 7.5cm © National Media Museum, United Kingdom inv. 1970-333\_0006

Horn to San Francisco and into the mountains of California. Some, like Carleton Watkins, Robert Vance, and Charles Fredericks stopped en route, making images of Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela. Scores of images document the California gold mines, as well as the camps and small towns that sprang up around them. Some share certain aesthetic qualities with European scenic images, such as views of the Alps emphasizing the graphic patterns of light and shadow with no human presence. Others document the rapidly growing businesses catering for the miners, or portraits of miners, and occasionally their families, who joined them to start new lives far from their homes in the East.

Finally, native populations and unusual fauna and flora were a shared fascination. Images of Native Americans and indigenous populations in Asia documented the 'other'. An example of the shared passion for the 'odd and unusual' are two images, one by Thomas Easterly of St.

Louis in the Nelson Atkins Museum in Kansas City, the other attributed to Faustino Curlo, which is now in the collection of the *Archivio Storico della Città di Torino*, in Turin, Italy. The unusual subject is an elephant posed with its human handlers to give a sense of scale for viewers who had never seen one of these animals in real life.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the pioneer photographers who created such wonderful images, and who have left us a rich visual legacy. Masterpieces were created in both Europe and America and each reflects a certain view of life in the mid nineteenth century. Apart from the various differences in style and aesthetic sensibilities, a common theme that unites all of these images is the shared sense of awe and enthusiasm for the new possibilities of capturing light and documenting the world. This was all encapsulated in the daguerreotype: the latest wonder of the modern world.



*Ills. 9*, Faustino Curlo [attr.]. The Stupinigi Castle near Turin was home to an Indian elephant named Fritz, 1850. Daguerreotype 21 cm X 17 cm © Archivio Storico Città di Torino, Italy inv. ASCT\_C4400

*Ills. 10*, Thomas Martin Easterly, American (1809-1882). Man with Elephant, ca. 1850. Daguerreotype, 3 ¼ x 4 ¼ inches (8.3 x 10.8 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., inv. 2005.27.37 © Nelson Gallery Foundation. Photo: Thomas Palmer

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