Topic Page: Daguerre, Louis Jacques Mandé (1787 - 1851)

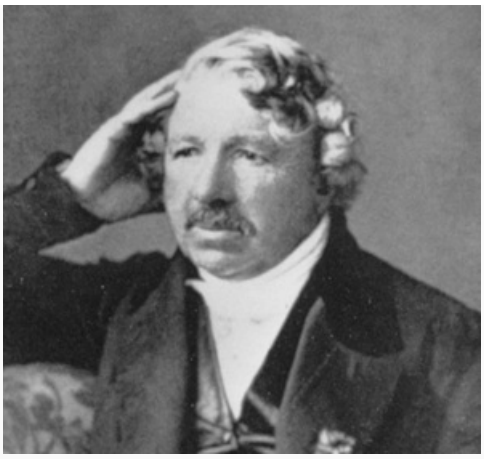
Summary Article: **Daguerre , Louis Jacques Mandé (1787 - 1851)**
from *The Cambridge Dictionary of Scientists*

No other invention in the 19th-c produced as much popular excitement as photography, for which the first practical process was devised by Daguerre. He was trained as a scene painter and stage designer at the Paris opera and in 1822 he devised the Diorama: this was an entertainment based on large (12 × 20 m) semi-transparent painted linen screens, which were hung and ingeniously lit to create illusions of depth and movement. This strange precursor of the cinema was a great popular success and 'Diorama Theatres' opened in Paris, London and other capital cities. Daguerre used a camera obscura (a box with a lens at one end and a small screen at the other end) to assist him in making his design sketches and he soon began experiments to mechanize or capture the image and so avoid the laborious tracing.

In 1826 he met Niépce, who was working on similar lines, and in 1830 they formally became partners. In 1831 after extensive experiments based on the known sensitivity of some silver compounds to light, he began to use a silvered copper plate iodized by exposure to iodine vapour as the lightsensitive surface. This was Niépce's idea; and then in 1835 Daguerre made by chance a momentous discovery. A plate which had been exposed in a camera obscura without any visible result was left in a cupboard; a few days later it was found to bear a visible picture. Amazed, he soon found that this result was due to a latent image being 'developed' by mercury vapour from a broken thermometer. This trick of 'development' allowed a picture to be made after a photographic exposure time as short as 20 minutes.

Further, by 1837 he found that the result could be 'fixed', ie rendered permanent, by washing with common salt in water. Confidently, Daguerre sought publicity, and used his experience as an entrepreneur to seek public and governmental support. He named the scheme 'the daguerrotype process' (although the profits were shared equally with Niépce) and succeeded, through the efforts of Arago, in attracting government praise and finance. Grandly, the French government offered his invention freely to the world on 19 August 1839, although Daguerre had patented his scheme in London 5 days before this. Public interest was intense, even though the invention of the new art was widely held to be blasphemous.

'From today painting is dead' said the artist Delaroche. It was claimed that by 1839 'all Paris was seized with daguerrotypomania'. Cartoons showed engravers hanging themselves. The invention was claimed to be 'a mirror with a memory' and 'the first to conquer the world with lightning rapidity', despite its defects. These were many: the equipment was bulky and exposures took many minutes in strong sunlight. The resulting daguerrotype was difficult to see; it was laterally reversed; and the plate could not be replicated. But despite being a photographic dead-end in a technical sense, it initiated a technique of visual recording using silver which through the efforts of Archer, Talbot and others has progressed ever since. Daguerre's instruction manual appeared in 32 editions in eight languages in 1839 and he retired in 1840 in honour and some glory to a modest estate at Bry-sur-Marne.



L J M Daguerre, from a daguerrotype of 1848.

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS *David Millar, Ian Millar, John Millar, Margaret Millar 1996, 2002*

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