DRAWING

The Muse of Photography

Daguerre

HANS P. KRAUS JR. FINE PHOTOGRAPHS

1. OSCAR GUSTAVE REJLANDER (English, born in Sweden, 1813–1875)
The First Negative, 1857
Coated salt print from a collodion negative, 22.4 x 15.0 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

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Text by Maria Antonella Pelizzari

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NEW YORK

The gesture of the Corinthian Maid, carefully tracing the outline of her lover, is inspired by the ancient tale of the origin of painting. As Pliny the Elder describes in his *Historia Naturalis*, the Maid captures her lover's shadow, preserving his image before he departs for battle. Such a romantic subject was revisited by the Victorian photographer Oscar Gustave Rejlander in an image staged in 1857, titled *The First Negative* (fig. 1). In this *tableau vivant*, the Maid holds a pencil and traces a shadow cast on the wall, while Rejlander's title suggests the image obtained by the camera, laying claim to photography as a mechanical copy.[1] It is here, between natural light projection and a hand-drawn gesture, that the ambiguity of photography and the writing of its history begin.

In the eighteenth century, when Pliny's narrative was well known among artists, drawing machines became highly fashionable. In particular, the silhouette machine provided a flurry of cutout profiles that were deemed accurate by most. Johann Caspar Lavater, a Swiss philosopher writing on physiognomy, claimed that the human shadow could be an indicator of the inner self. Appropriately, a vignette published in his German treatise illustrated the mechanism that supplied images for this pseudoscience: a draftsman delineating a sitter's profile projected by candlelight (fig. 4). Silhouette rendering was improved in 1784, when Gilles-Louis Chrétien introduced the physiognotrace, a more complex technology that applied a pantograph to a pencil and drew the actual features within the profile, thereby enhancing the likeness (fig. 2). The drawing, reduced in size by the pantograph, was transferred onto a copper plate and etched to obtain a detailed image. Most important, this plate enabled the portrait to be reproduced in multiple copies and sometimes embellished with color.

The physiognotrace thrived at the turn of the eighteenth century. Curiously, it was a member of the French nobility in exile, Charles Balthazar Julien Févret de Saint-Mémin, who introduced this drawing instrument in the United States. Living there between 1793 and 1814, Saint-Mémin rendered and circulated many images of illustrious Americans, assembling a miniature gallery of Federalists in profile (fig. 3).[2]

Photography was propelled by dynamics similar to those that aimed to obtain a spontaneous image that appeared true to life. Significantly, its origins are explained in language that describe the new image as an act of "drawing." Early definitions and public announcements consistently cling to the artist's hand as an analogy for the marvel of nature reproducing itself.

2. GILLES-LOUIS CHRÉTIEN (French, 1754–1811)
Self-portrait, 1792. Physiognotrace, after a drawing by Jean Fouquet, 5.3 cm tondo, after 1811

3. CHARLES BALTHAZAR JULIEN FÉVRET DE SAINT-MÉMIN (French, 1770–1852)
Dr. Michael Leib, Philadelphia, 1802
Physiognotrace, hand-colored, 5.5. x 4.5 cm oval

4. JOHANN CASPAR LAVATER (Swiss, 1741–1801)
Draftsman making a silhouette, 1775?
Engraving from *Physiognomische Fragmente . . .* (Leipzig: 1775–1778)
Typ 765.75.513 v.2, Houghton Library, Harvard University

In a paper presented to the Royal Society on January 31, 1839, William Henry Fox Talbot defined his discovery as the "Art of Photogenic Drawing, or the process by which Natural Objects may be made to delineate themselves, without the aid of the Artist's Pencil." This was emphasized in an article in the *Literary Gazette*, which reported on an earlier viewing of Talbot's images shown by his friend the scientist Michael Faraday to the audience at the library of the Royal Institution in London. "No human hand has hitherto traced such lines as these drawings displayed," observed the article, "and what man may hereafter do, now that dame Nature has become his drawing mistress, it is impossible to predict."[3] This tension between the spontaneous generation of a natural image and the artist's hand in creating that image became paradigmatic in the discourse of early photography—one that had drawing at its core. Curiously, this description preceded the actual viewing of the new pictures. For example, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre's early advertising prospectus emphasized that his process was "not a tool for drawing nature; it is a chemical and physical process that gives nature the facility to reproduce herself."[4] Moreover, this rhetoric was bound to a romantic idea of "Nature" as Godlike, *Natura naturans*, capable of generating pictures of itself from its own substances and chemical reactions.

Approximately three hundred people saw Talbot's early specimens at the Royal Institution. For the most part, these were contact prints of botanical specimens and lace, whose traces had been physically left on paper sensitized with silver and stabilized in a robust solution of salt. "Sciagraphy," or the art of depicting objects through their shadows, was the original word used privately by Talbot to describe these new pictures. News of his experiments immediately inspired followers to produce their own photogenic drawings, such as those by William Thomas Salvin, of Croxdale Hall in County Durham, as early as May 1839 (fig. 5).

Talbot explained that he conceived the idea of "fixing the shadow" of nature while traveling in Italy in October 1833. This particular narrative introduced the plates of his seminal book, *The Pencil of Nature* (fig. 8a), in which he drew a direct connection from his artistic failure to his scientific discovery. It was the frustration with his inability to draw satisfactory views of the scenery by Lake Como that prompted his discovery of a new kind of "drawing" generated solely by the action of light. Describing his own technical struggle with optical devices, William Hyde Wollaston's *camera lucida* (fig. 7) and the *camera obscura* (fig. 15), Talbot envisaged the possibility of immediately recording the scen-

5. WILLIAM THOMAS SALVIN
(English, 1767–1842 or his son, b. 1808–?)
Leaves, May 1839. Photogenic drawing, 10.8 x 7.9 cm

ery. The *camera lucida*, literally "a room of light," consisted of a tiny prism, mounted on a brass stem, which allowed the artist to see the landscape reflected only to his eye, not actually projected onto the drawing paper. The brain merged this virtual image with the sheet of paper below, but "the faithless pencil," wrote Talbot, "had only left traces on the paper melancholy to behold."[5] Similarly, he noted the difficulty of drawing the outlines projected onto a translucent paper laid on the ground glass of the *camera obscura*, filtered through the camera's pinhole lens. Talbot wrote,

> And this led me to reflect on the inimitable beauty of the pictures of nature's painting which the glass lens of the Camera throws upon the paper in its focus—fairy pictures, creations of a moment, and destined as rapidly to fade away.
>
> It was during these thoughts that the idea occurred to me . . . how charming it would be if it were possible to cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably, and remain fixed upon the paper!
>
> And why should it not be possible? I asked myself.[6]

It is essential to situate Talbot within the travel culture of his time. He called himself "a wanderer in classic Italy,"

6. ATTRIBUTED TO CONSTANCE TALBOT (English, 1811–1880)
Villa Melzi, Lago di Como, 1833
Pencil drawing, possibly made with the camera lucida, 18.0 x 27.0 cm
From the Personal Archive of William Henry Fox Talbot,
Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. WHF Talbot 98

7. CORNELIUS VARLEY (English, 1781–1873)
Artist sketching with a Wollaston-style camera lucida
Illustration from Basil Hall's *Description of the Camera Lucida*
(London: George Dollond, 1830)
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

suggesting an earlier Grand Tour tradition of British amateurs and lady sketchers. For these travelers, the use of a drawing instrument was bound to a successful framing of the landscape according to the aesthetics of the "picturesque," theorized by William Gilpin as "the kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture," and later defined by Samuel Prout as "the Art of seeing nature."[7] Talbot's traveling companions, his wife Constance and his half sister Caroline, were masters of the *camera lucida*, obtaining harmonious compositions of the Italian shores that Talbot was otherwise unable to represent (fig. 6). As part of this travel culture, yet failing to contribute to it as an artist, Talbot conceived of a process that had the qualities of immediacy and durability. His view of nature was not merely aesthetic but rather the perception of lights and shadows (what he described as "the picture, divested of the ideas which accompany it, and considered only in its ultimate nature").[8] Embracing Talbot's process, his friend the Reverend Calvert Richard Jones, a successful watercolorist and marine painter from Swansea (fig. 9), produced travel records in the Mediterranean that had a hint of the picturesque, to the point of applying watercolor to his photographic prints.

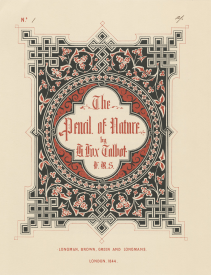
Talbot's own trajectory moved parallel to that of the British scientist Sir John Herschel, who recognized no boundaries between artistic and scientific pursuits. Herschel made numerous *camera lucida* drawings between 1816 and 1865, and used this instrument with "extreme care and precision," as his handwritten annotations on some of them tell us (fig. 10).[9] What is striking about these drawings, especially the largest group, made during his continental trip in 1824, is the precise topographical delineation of nature and the built landscape, where geometrical lines supersede the rendition of trees and vegetation, with a few rare figures. Herschel chose a unique expression for these pencil sketches, "eye draft," clarifying that the *camera lucida* drawing was "made from sight," in one sitting, keeping the same vantage point and exposure. Capable of reaching such precision, Herschel had neither the desire nor the need to practice photography, but he decisively contributed to its chemistry and terminology. His correspondence with Talbot was ongoing as he supported the research on photogenic drawings. In 1839 he presented Talbot with a new chemical fixing agent, sodium thiosulphate (or "hypo," based on its original name, hyposulphite of soda), which stopped the action of light on the silver much more effectively than Talbot's previously applied salt solution. Herschel also introduced a new chemical process, the cyanotype or blueprint, which was successfully used by the botanist Anna Atkins to create distinct photograms of natural specimens: algae, ferns, flowers, and feathers (fig. 11).

What is perhaps most critical is Herschel's analysis of photography as a "copy" of nature and his linguistic unraveling of terms that defined the "first transfer" as a "negative." Primarily, Herschel introduced the word "photography" in a paper that was presented at the Royal Society on March 14, 1839. The choice of wording is connected to a quest for identity. Herschel coined "photography" in preference to Talbot's "photogenic drawing," suggesting parallels with other printmaking processes such as lithography and chalcography (copper engraving).[10] Herschel understood that "photography" contributed to a larger vocabulary of image reproduction. Not surprisingly, he made mention of "the great development" that he foresaw in the application of photography "to the art of Copying Engravings, lithographs, mezzotints, or original drawings."[11]

Undoubtedly in these early years, confusion prevailed among the public in the reception of photographs as prints. This was substantiated by a disclaimer included in *The Pencil of Nature* (fig. 8b). Talbot's mother, Lady Elisabeth Feilding, complained to her son that, "it would have saved me a world of trouble if you had appended an explanation . . . and had made use of the word representations instead of Plates which misleads 'that ineffable Goose the Public' most woefully."[12]

The reception and acceptance of photography within a familiar framework of other printed media was remarkable not only in the context of Talbot's work. It resonated in the press reporting on Daguerre's process as well. "Now, with this coating spread over a copper plate, M. Daguerre is replacing the drawing and the engraving," commented Jules Janin in his enthusiastic review in *L'Artiste*.[13] Similarly, the journalist for *La Presse* wrote, "At first sight, all these drawings, created simply by the action of light, are reminiscent of India ink wash paintings, or . . . an aquatint etching."[14]

A wide range of photographic processes merged the light-sensitive surface with the artist's sketch. Photogenic etching, *cliché-verre*, heliography, and photoglyphic engraving are some of the processes that closely associated photographic experimentation with printing techniques. Furthermore, their interconnectedness proves that experiments in printing technologies and light-sensitive surfaces were transnational, and that the primacy of one process over another was not yet established. For example, in autumn 1834, Talbot began experimenting with the *cliché-verre* process, a technique that would be practiced by later French artists like Camille Corot. This was a hybrid technique that covered a sheet of glass with "a solution of resin in turpentine." Exposing it to the smoke of a candle produced a darkened surface onto which an artist could draw with a needle's point.[15] Such a plate, "engraved," so to speak, was sandwiched with light-sensitive paper and exposed to sunlight, producing an image of the kind Talbot was able to obtain from his natural specimens.



Notice to the Reader.

The plates of the present work are impressed by the agency of Light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil. They are the sun-pictures themselves, and not, as some persons have imagined, engravings in imitation.

8a. & 8b. WILLIAM HENRY FOX TALBOT (English, 1800–1877)
The Pencil of Nature
London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844–1846

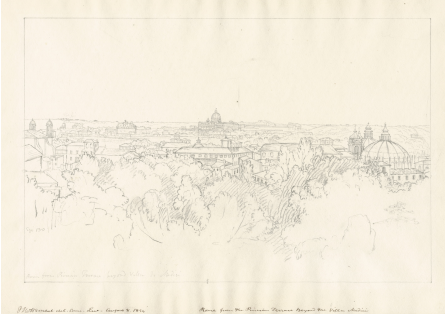
One can draw a direct line connecting Talbot's photographic printing of these early *clichés-verres*, his copies of engravings and lithographs, and his invention of a photogravure process, photoglyphic engraving (fig. 12), which combined high fidelity to the subject with proven permanence. Talbot understood photography in concert with book publishing.[16] This might explain his recurrent practice of reducing large format art reproductions, hence facilitating their inclusion in books. One example is a photographic reproduction of a lithograph, published as Plate XI in *The Pencil of Nature*. Here, Talbot pointed out that photography "enables us at pleasure to alter the scale, and to make the copies as much larger or smaller than the originals as we

9. REV. CALVERT RICHARD JONES (Welsh, 1802–1877)
Sailing vessels, 1850
Watercolor, 16.3 x 20.4 cm

may desire." Similarly, he reproduced a very large engraving, Luigi Rossini's image of a Roman arch at Cora, obtaining a detailed result with a manageable size (fig. 13).

From these early days photography thrived as a form of art reproduction, not only commercially, but also as an art form in its own right. Gustave Le Gray's art reproductions, for example, were directly informed by printmaking. Le Gray's photograph of the *Mona Lisa* was made from an Aimé Millet drawing commissioned by the French government (fig. 14). It was common practice for photographers, as well as engravers, to work with intermediary drawings due to poor lighting conditions and difficulty accessing the original artworks. Hence Le Gray adapted his practice to that of his predecessors by photographing a perfectly smooth copy of a national art treasure and contributing to its wide circulation.[17] Photography asserted its significance as a reproductive technology, transforming what Walter Benjamin would later define as "the cult value" of the artwork into a modern "exhibition value"—a copy that could be disseminated.

There was yet another approach to the copying of art and nature. In 1827, Daguerre contrived his own unique process, the *dessin-fumée* or "smoke drawing." It combined the art of drawing with printmaking and with a special kind of transfer process, possibly from a glass plate, that allowed him to obtain a range of images from the same motif, calibrating the effects of light and chiaroscuro, to resemble miniature stage sets (cover). When his collaborator, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, received one of these works, he remained skeptical about the process and observed that clearly "the brush had intervened."[18] Blurring the boundaries between the hand-drawn and the mechanically projected, Daguerre turned Pliny's legend on its head, conceiving of photography as research on light, smudged with soot, scratched in the bright areas, and irregularly covered with smoke vapors. This technique was on the path to his discovery of the daguerreotype in the following decade, a new photographic process that required knowledge and understanding of the other drawing and printmaking experiments to appreciate what the new image was all about.



10. SIR JOHN HERSCHEL (English, 1792–1871)
Rome from the Pincian Terrace beyond the Villa Medici, 8 August 1824
Camera lucida drawing in pencil on 25.2 x 38.7 cm paper

11. ANNA ATKINS (English, 1799–1871)
Onoclea sensibilis (Sensitive Fern) N. Jersey, 1851–1854
Cyanotype photogram, 24.9 x 19.7 cm

12. WILLIAM HENRY FOX TALBOT (English, 1800–1877)
Truncated fern, probably 1858 or later
Photoglyphic engraving, 10.2 x 12.5 cm

13. WILLIAM HENRY FOX TALBOT (English, 1800–1877)
Copy of a large Italian print, reduced in the camera, circa 1844
Salt print from a calotype negative, 17.8 x 15.4 cm

14. GUSTAVE LE GRAY (French, 1820–1884)
La Joconde, d'après un dessin d'Aimé Millet, 1854–1855
Coated salt or albumen print, 28.7 x 19.2 cm

Notes

[1] Rejlander's source was David Allan's 1775 *The Origin of Painting*, one of many eighteenth-century canvases inspired by Pliny the Elder's legend. See Lori Pauli, *Oscar Gustave Rejlander* (1998), pp. 27–29; Larry J. Schaaf, *Sun Pictures Catalogue Thirteen: A Twentieth Anniversary Selection* (2004), pl. 17.

[2] See Wendy Bellion, "Heads of State: Profiles and Politics in Jeffersonian America," in Gitelman and Pingree, *New Media, 1740–1915* (2003), pp. 31–60.

[3] These photogenic drawings were shown on 25 January 1839. See Larry J. Schaaf: https://talbot.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/2016/01/25/25-january-1839-dame-nature-has-become-his-drawing-mistress/

[4] Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, "Daguerreotype," in Siegel, *First Exposures* (2017), p. 15. See also Douglas R. Nickel, "Nature's Supernaturalism: William Henry Fox Talbot and Botanical Illustration," in Kathleen Stewart Howe, *Intersections* (1998), pp. 15–23; Herta Wolf, "Nature as Drawing Mistress," in Brusius, Dean, and Ramalingam, *Talbot: Beyond Photography* (2021), pp. 119–142.

[5] William Henry Fox Talbot, "Brief Historical Sketch," *The Pencil of Nature* (1844), p. [6]. See Larry J. Schaaf, *Tracings of Light: Sir John Herschel and the Camera Lucida* (1989), p. 12.

[6] Talbot, "Brief Historical Sketch." See also Joel Snyder, "Enabling Confusion" (2002).

[7] See Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw* (2000), pp. 93–96; Martin Kemp, "Talbot and the Picturesque View: Henry, Caroline, and Constance" (1997); Steve Edwards, "The Dialectics of Skill in Talbot's Dream World" (2002).

[8] Talbot, "Brief Historical Sketch."

[9] See Schaaf, *Tracings of Light*, and Brian Warner and John Rourke, *Flora Herschelianae: Sir John and Lady Herschel at the Cape 1834 to 1838* (1998).

[10] See I. M. and A. Barclay, "The Origin of the Word 'Photography,'" *The Photographic Journal* (September 1937), 328.

[11] Larry J. Schaaf, "Sir John Herschel's 1839 Royal Society Paper on Photography" (1979), *History of Photography*, 3:1, 58.

[12] Larry J. Schaaf, *Introductory Volume to the Anniversary Facsimile of H. Fox Talbot's "The Pencil of Nature"* (1989), p. 28. Letter, Lady Elisabeth Feilding to Talbot, 29 July 1845. LA 49-109. *The Correspondence of William Henry Fox Talbot* http://foxtalbot.dmu.ac.uk, *Document no.* 05339.

[13] Jules Janin, "The Daguerreotype," *L'Artiste: Journal de la littérature et des beaux-arts*, 28 January 1839, in Siegel, *First Exposures*, p. 64

[14] Jules Pelletan, "Discovery by M. Daguerre," *La Presse*, 24 January 1839, in Siegel, *First Exposures*, p. 15.

[15] See Larry J. Schaaf, *The Photographic Art of William Henry Fox Talbot* (2000), pl. 2.

[16] Larry J. Schaaf, "'The Caxton of Photography': Talbot's Etchings of Light," in Brusius, Dean, and Ramalingam, *Talbot: Beyond Photography* (2021), pp. 161–189.

[17] See Henri Zerner, "Gustave Le Gray, Heliographer-Artist," in *Gustave Le Gray, 1820–1884*, ed. Sylvie Aubenas, pp 209–231.

[18] Stephen Pinson, *Speculating Daguerre: Art and Enterprise in the Works of L. J. M. Daguerre* (2012), p. 162.

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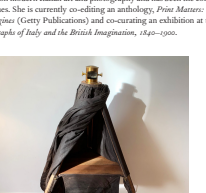

15. *Camera Obscura*
Lacquered brass tent camera obscura with rotating meniscus prism, mounted on a walnut tripod with detachable drawing bench, dark cloth and original wooden case
Labeled E. Mary & Fils, Paris

front cover: LOUIS JACQUES MANDÉ DAGUERRE (French, 1787–1851)
Fantaisie, circa 1827. Dessin-fumée, 7.9 x 6.1 cm

back cover: WILLIAM HENRY FOX TALBOT (English, 1800–1877)
Leaf study, probably 1841. Photogenic drawing negative, 22.9 x 18.6 cm

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