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Stephen C. Pinson, *Speculating Daguerre*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 424 pages, 36 color plates, 103 halftones, appendices, bibliography and index. \$70.00 U.S. (cl) ISBN 9780226669113.

Review by Janet T. Marquardt, Smith College

Stephen Pinson has written a masterful account of his research into the life and work of Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre. Although known now almost exclusively for his invention of the daguerreotype, Daguerre did much more. Pinson not only rehabilitates his poor artistic reputation, established during the scholarly battle over claims to the “invention” of photography, he also shows us an early nineteenth-century France eager to embrace visual ingenuity and spectacle.

The book is part biography, part analysis of a relatively unknown aspect of innovative painting during the early nineteenth century. Half the volume comprises a catalog reproducing Daguerre’s and related art works along with a complete inventory. The title, *Speculating Daguerre*, is a double entendre referring both to Daguerre as a speculator (explained in the Introduction) and the complicated history of misinformation about Daguerre’s importance in the history of art.

Pinson has uncovered a wealth of information about nineteenth-century practices in theatre scene design and boulevard panorama painting. Although known, they have generally been relegated to the status of poor relations of high art, the bastard cousins of easel painting, and given short shrift for their contributions to the development of modern visual culture. Yet, as Pinson eloquently demonstrates, this large-scale rendering of highly imaginative scenes, which in the first case had to be mentally calculated for distance viewing while covered by scaffolding, and in the second case used the camera obscura, went through a period of rapid and innovative change during Daguerre’s early adulthood and his role in both was significant. Rather than reducing his position as an artist to mere stagehand or huckster, the techniques he learned and developed during his years in the theater and while running his own spectacular diorama enterprise, greatly informed the conception and composition of his lithographs and, eventually, the daguerreotype.

The story of popular scenic entertainment enterprises, set up as stock investments and regulated by the government in the 1820s, is new material in the history of modern French painting. Pinson, in showing its innovative qualities, makes an important contribution to our understanding of the rise of avant-garde art during this period. We learn the political, economic, and social issues inherent in the popular productions of Restoration melodramas and panoramas, along with the way Daguerre negotiated the pitfalls with his Diorama (an improvement upon the popular panorama designs). By often exhibiting paintings at the Salon, many on the same subject matter as those he produced for the Diorama, Daguerre maintained his place in high art even as he attracted the general boulevard spectator. Pinson reproduces a full catalog in this volume of Daguerre’s easel painting and graphic prints. As a result, a picture emerges of Daguerre that is much more complex and complete than heretofore has been known which contextualizes his accomplishment with the daguerreotype.

In fact, Daguerre’s experiments for his Diorama made him intensely aware of the effect light has on paint colors. The interest in optical effects was a contemporary concern, involving mirrors, viewing

boxes/camera devices, and transparent surfaces, which most of the public knew from stage designs. Daguerre had become very familiar with theater conventions in his early work creating sets. He also knew the popular distinctions between nature and representation—following the dictum that painting should reproduce the *illusion* of nature. In order to do that, it was necessary to make artistic adjustments and not just create trompe l’oeil. Pinson explains how the late eighteenth-century theory of optical naturalism developed for garden design—part production and appearance, part display and viewer interaction—informed Daguerre’s inventive work. Contemporary debates over the environment for presenting painted work reached as far as plans for remodeling the Louvre galleries. The growing nineteenth-century use of colored lenses to modify the lighting of painted scenes of course previews the ongoing optical studies in science that would continue to affect artists in the Impressionist movement.

Daguerre’s paintings of landscape views for his Diorama coincided with a French reevaluation of the historic built environment during the July Monarchy (1830-1848) and fit Minister Guizot’s plans to document and rehabilitate buildings neglected since the Revolution. Daguerre had already worked for Baron Taylor, making drawings and helping with the subsequent lithographs published in twenty-four volumes of the *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l’ancienne France*, realized between 1820 and 1878, that visualized the romantic ruins of post-Revolutionary France and established a vogue for historical patrimony. Because the boulevard panorama and especially Daguerre’s Diorama exhibited views of contemporary cities rather than more traditional painting subjects from history or literature, their scenes came into the same genre as the drawings and prints being used as visual documentation before the photographers made their survey. The Diorama also responded to the growing popularity of travel, bringing views of foreign cities and picturesque sites to Paris (and later taking views of Paris abroad). Similar establishments followed where other academic painters exhibited landscape scenes. Even as Daguerre was inventing the daguerreotype, Guizot’s Commission des monuments historiques engaged five photographers for the *Mission héliographique* (1851), an undertaking meant to record the condition of historic sites and determine the urgency of preservation work. (They used a type of photography, developed by Niépce, that utilized sunshine for plate development—thus the name “heliography”).

Pinson makes an important distinction between daguerreotypes and early photography—methods merged in most photography histories and confused by early biographers of Daguerre and other contemporary pioneers like Niépce and Talbot. Daguerre worked closely with Niépce and encouraged the latter’s research, but Daguerre’s eventual results were single, unique prints. There was no negative or reusable plate with a daguerreotype, Daguerre being more interested in visual effect than in multiplicity. Even when he experimented in other graphic arts, he was only using them to test the possibility of creating more permanent records of his paintings and to experiment with effects of rendering light; each print represented a variation. Early photography aimed, rather, to achieve a reproducible image and there are multiple identical editions, like printmaking, of early photographs. For this reason, the two are not entirely part of the same development.

Pinson shows us the development of Daguerre’s interest in illusion and with the accurate representation of nature, beginning with scene design and the Diorama (for which he received the *légion d’honneur*) and informing his invention of the daguerreotype. The latter grew out of his two-sided painted canvases for the Diorama showing scenes transitioning between night and day through the manipulation of color and light with variations of painting media (called the “double-effect” diorama). The daguerreotype was essentially a process that controlled the way silver and mercury react differently to light and Daguerre also exhibited the fixed images on easels that were carefully situated to take best advantage of the ambient light in his studio.

The fact that a chemical process was paramount in the daguerreotype method led to accusations of mechanization, linked to distrust of the camera obscura in the first place, and contrasted by none other than the architectural restorer Viollet-le-Duc with artists like David whose illusion of nature was achieved through an imprecise execution in a painterly style. The irony is not lost on Pinson that

Daguerre in fact believed his daguerreotype would seal his reputation for refining illusionistic technique as high art even as he sat on commissions that negatively reviewed devices designed to reduce dependence upon artistic skills. In fact, in a descriptive prospectus, Daguerre himself emphasized the ease of the daguerreotype technique and lack of artistic training necessary to achieve an accurate rendition of nature. It was the scientific process that impressed members of the government and allowed Daguerre to sell the method to the state in return for a national pension. The Academy of Fine Arts subsequently rejected its artistic value, beginning a long debate about the place of photography between industry and the visual arts.

After two chapters outlining the role of visual speculative enterprises and the rise of optical naturalism, Pinson devotes all of chapter three to a biographical sketch of Daguerre which contextualizes his artistic efforts in terms of the changing political and economic circumstances of his life and the place his inventions had in the development of nineteenth-century painting and popular taste. He ends chapter four by reassessing Daguerre's role in the development of photography, centering round the contemporary concern with the "copy," and the documentation of French national heritage. Daguerre's daguerreotypes of sculptural still lifes, until now hardly known, are considered in light of their contemporary symbolic messages during the controversies over historical museums and his own artistic subjectivity.

Demonstrating Daguerre's interest in creating a permanent rendition of the image from the camera obscura and not in creating a graphic reproduction process, Pinson distinguishes Daguerre's accomplishments from those of early photographic goals and lays out the complexities of his career and technical skills. He thus greatly enhances our appreciation of nineteenth-century culture and artistic production.

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