
Differentiating – not competing – the contributions of Talbot and Daguerre

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Résumé

In 1852, the editor of *Cosmos*, l'abbé Moigno, responded to William Henry Fox Talbot, that "En proclamant vos droits incontestables à la découverte de la Photographie sur papier, je n'ai rempli qu'un devoir de justice." He went on to observe that "je vous engage fortement à publier dans un court délai l'histoire en français de la découverte de la Talbotypie; elle est complètement inconnue parmi nous."

Too often Daguerre and Talbot have been considered as rivals, locked into an international competition for supremacy in photography. Talbot certainly never felt this, for he understood right from the beginning that each man had a unique and highly differentiated approach to capturing the images in the camera obscura. Daguerre's metal plates were mesmerizing and captured the public imagination. Talbot's negatives, however, were to define the whole future course of photography, for not only did they take advantage of the versatility of the medium of paper, but also they allowed for replication of the image in quantity.

Henry Talbot's connections with France were longstanding, deep and personal, and in fact he gained much of his support from friends within France. Even if poorly recognized at the time, Talbot set the stage for the extraordinarily accomplished and creative explosion of French paper photography starting in the latter part of the 1840s.

Today, Daguerre is remembered primarily by the tribute of the hundreds of thousands of Daguerreotypes produced throughout the world by other practitioners. However, the amount of documentation on Daguerre as a person or on his experiments and thinking is extremely sparse. We are fortunate that the case of Talbot is almost the complete opposite, with hundreds of his personal notebooks, thousands of his letters and even more thousands of his photographs surviving. From these we are beginning to form a detailed map of his process of invention and his vision for photography.

This talk will present a short history of Talbot's relation to the discovery and exploitation of the negative and especially emphasize his connections with French colleagues and the photographs that he took in France. Many of the negative that he took there survive and will be shown.

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