

# Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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Pinson, Stephen C. *Speculating Daguerre: Art and Enterprise in the Work of J. L. M. Daguerre*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. Pp. 424. ISBN: 978-0226669113

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Stephen C. Pinson's *Speculating Daguerre* is the first book-length academic study of Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre since the publication of Helmut and Alison Gernsheim's work on the diorama and daguerreotype in 1956, revised in 1968. The book investigates a broader scope of Daguerre's prephotographic work, including his theater decorations and Salon pieces, and thus corrects the Gernsheims' inattention to his career as a painter. Pinson details Daguerre's artistic and commercial ventures, an "objective understanding" of which, he argues, is crucial to both a reconsideration of Daguerre's place in the histories of art and photography, and an eventual reevaluation of how these fields are and are not connected. One caveat: the reader searching for an in-depth history of the daguerreotype and its relation to modern photography will not find it here. This is by design. Pinson's study aims to break the "discursive bind that for the past hundred years has tied the daguerreotype to the tenets of modern photography" (10). A goal of the work is to show that photographic principles such as mechanical reproduction and the multiplication of exact images have little in common with the process of the daguerreotype, which produces a unique image, unlike negative-positive photographic processes. And, crucially, these aspects of photography do not align with Daguerre's point of view as an artist. Pinson thus studies Daguerre's non-photographic work in the context within which it was created and received—not as the poor relation of the daguerreotype.

The book's introduction offers an overview of the state of Daguerre studies today and a brief history of the invention of the daguerreotype. The first chapter, "The Reign of Speculation," discusses the theatrical precursors to the diorama, as well as the economic and political climate that influenced Daguerre's decision to organize his Diorama as a limited stock company. The second chapter, "Optical Naturalism," examines the aesthetics of Daguerre's landscape paintings and diorama paintings. What Pinson terms "optical naturalism" is a mode of representation and visuality where a painting's "imitation of nature" is "judged not only by what one sees with the naked eye, but also according to the effects of nature seen through optical instruments" (56). The third chapter, "An Artist's Fortune," recounts Daguerre's efforts to become an officially recognized and pensioned artist while indefatigably producing paintings for his Diorama and the Salon, managing the Diorama and experimenting with various photographic processes. The fourth chapter, "Speculating Daguerre," investigates the artist's complex relationship to the reproduction and multiplication of images through an analysis of Daguerre's experiments with artistic processes that valued variation between prints over the creation of identical copies.

The title of the work, a play on the French terms *spéculation*, *spéculaire*, and *spéculateur*, conveys the richness of Pinson's study—detailed histories of late-eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century theatrical decorations, popular spectacles and optical devices, and the economic and state regulations governing such enterprises—and it also hints at the tome's wealth of illustrations, ranging from architectural plans for the Diorama to sketches and lithographs of stage decorations, and culminating in a catalogue of works attributed to Daguerre (but not, it must be noted, a definitive *catalogue raisonné*). Throughout much of the book Pinson writes as a cultural historian-cum-biographer, drawing on nineteenth-century newspapers, governmental reports, Salon reviews, and personal correspondence. In the final

chapter, however, Pinson engages in some “theoretical speculation” about Daguerre’s still life arrangements to bolster his argument against using the rhetoric of modern photography to understand the daguerreotype. A biography of Daguerre as an artist, businessman, and inventor, *Speculating Daguerre* is also a history of the culture of economic and artistic speculation in nineteenth-century France. Even those with little concern for Daguerre and his invention will find passages of interest here. Interspersed throughout the book are traces of an aesthetic history of the term “illusion” in the nineteenth century, especially as it relates to popular spectacle and the use of optical instruments in the drafting and painting of landscapes. Priceless anecdotes reveal what happens when these aesthetic concerns meet with political and economic forces: in 1800 the *Institut de France* formed a committee to study which specific qualities of the panorama lead spectators to question whether they were viewing nature or its representation, and found it in the sudden “passage from the aspect of nature to that of its image” (32-33). While it certainly did not concede that the panorama’s imitation of nature was as perfect as nature itself, the *Institut* issued support of the panorama as “an object of instruction and utility” for the lighting and exhibition of paintings (33).