

# Artist with Camera Lucida, Rome and Tivoli, 1830s

*Period drawings in pencil, ink, and wash*

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The camera lucida is an optical device invented by William Hyde Wollaston in 1806 and widely used in the nineteenth century as an aid for drawing from life. It consists of a prism mounted on an adjustable support: by looking through the prism, the artist can see both the real scene and the drawing surface at the same time, allowing for precise tracing of contours and details. William Henry Fox Talbot, a pioneer of photography, used the camera lucida during his trip to Italy in 1833 to make landscape sketches. However, dissatisfied with his results, it was precisely this experience that led him to seek a method for automatically fixing images from reality, which ultimately brought him to invent photography on paper.

# Antonio Canaletto, San Simeone Piccolo, “scarabotto” (preparatory sketch), ca. 1738

*Pigment print from 2025 after a drawing made with a camera obscura*



The camera obscura, or optical chamber, was a scientific instrument known since the Middle Ages and perfected over the centuries. In the eighteenth century, Antonio Canal, known as Canaletto, made it one of the principal tools of Venetian view painters. Canaletto's camera obscura consisted of a wooden box equipped with a lens (a converging lens), a mirror set at a 45° angle, and a ground glass projection surface. The image of the external scene, gathered by the lens, was reflected by the mirror and projected—right side up—onto the ground glass; the artist would then place a sheet of thin or semi-transparent paper on top, allowing him to trace the reflected forms with precision.

Canaletto did not use the camera obscura to slavishly copy reality, but rather to study perspective and the spatial structure of his views, which he would later reinterpret in his final painted compositions. This tool enabled him to achieve a high degree of accuracy in his preparatory sketches, yet the ultimate artwork always bore the mark of his creative reimagining and mastery of perspective.



# Vivant Denon, Costume of the Modern Man, 1795, and Engravings

*Original documents, catalogue from a visual encyclopedia project, 1803*



Vivant Denon (1747-1825) is a prominent figure of the revolutionary and imperial era. He contributed to the dissemination of images alongside the nation's literacy policy. Belonging to a generation prior to Nicéphore Niépce, Denon was nevertheless present at several moments in the life of the inventor of photography. He was Niépce's immediate neighbor: his house in Chalon-sur-Saône was adjacent to that of the Niépce family. The two were in contact; the Maison Niépce in Saint-Loup-de-Varennnes preserves at least one document attesting to a direct relationship between Nicéphore Niépce and Vivant Denon, the latter having been consulted in 1807 to find a warehouse in Paris to house the engine invented by the Niépce brothers. Later, Niépce's son, Isidore, bought and lived in a house owned by Vivant Denon in Lux. Finally, for over a century, Niépce's originals were kept at the Musée Vivant Denon in Chalon.

## Contemporary artist of Daguerre, Gothic interior, ca. 1820

*Oil on canvas from the early nineteenth century (Princess Radziwiłł Collection)*

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This work, created by an artist active during the same years as Louis Daguerre, reflects the romantic fascination with Gothic architecture that characterized European painting between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like other painters of the period, the artist draws inspiration from the effects of light and the evocative atmospheres of monumental interiors, in some respects anticipating Daguerre's own explorations—Daguerre being known not only as a partner of the inventor of photography but also for his famous dioramas and paintings of Gothic interiors. Notably, this includes the interior of Rosslyn Chapel, *Intérieur de Rosslyn Chapel*, 1824 (Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts).



# Henri Coulon, Two Silhouette Portraits, 1837–1838

*Cut paper mounted on colored paper, original period works*

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Silhouette Portrait of Adèle Tamiset, the Artist's Cousin

India ink on cut paper mounted on colored paper, 460 × 340 mm, titled, dated, with pencil inscriptions.

Silhouette of a Boy, probably Alfred Coulon, aged nine, 1837

Cut paper mounted on colored paper, 470 × 370 mm, signed and dated, minor tears.

This type of portrait, widespread from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, involved cutting the sitter's profile from black or dark paper and mounting it on a light or colored background, creating a striking contrast and refined elegance. Silhouettes were valued for their quick execution and affordability compared to painted portraits.

## Circle of Daguerre, Gothic Interiors and “Dessins-Fumées,” ca. 1830

*Period ink wash drawings, probably executed by Daguerre’s students or assistants*



Stephen Pinson produced the first reasonably comprehensive catalogue raisonné of Daguerre’s works and was surprised to find that it contains very few actual photographs. Daguerre’s most significant works are, in fact, the so-called “dessins-fumées”: ink wash drawings on a printed or lithographically reproduced background, often characterized by striking chiaroscuro effects and evocative atmospheres. These small creations, similar to the two drawings displayed on the right, were especially appreciated by Niépce, who received them as gifts from Daguerre himself. This gesture marked the beginning of the first contacts between the two inventors, laying the groundwork for their future collaboration.



# Victor Adam. Lithographic Panorama, 1831

*Hand-colored period lithograph, image with pull-tab mechanism to change the scene*

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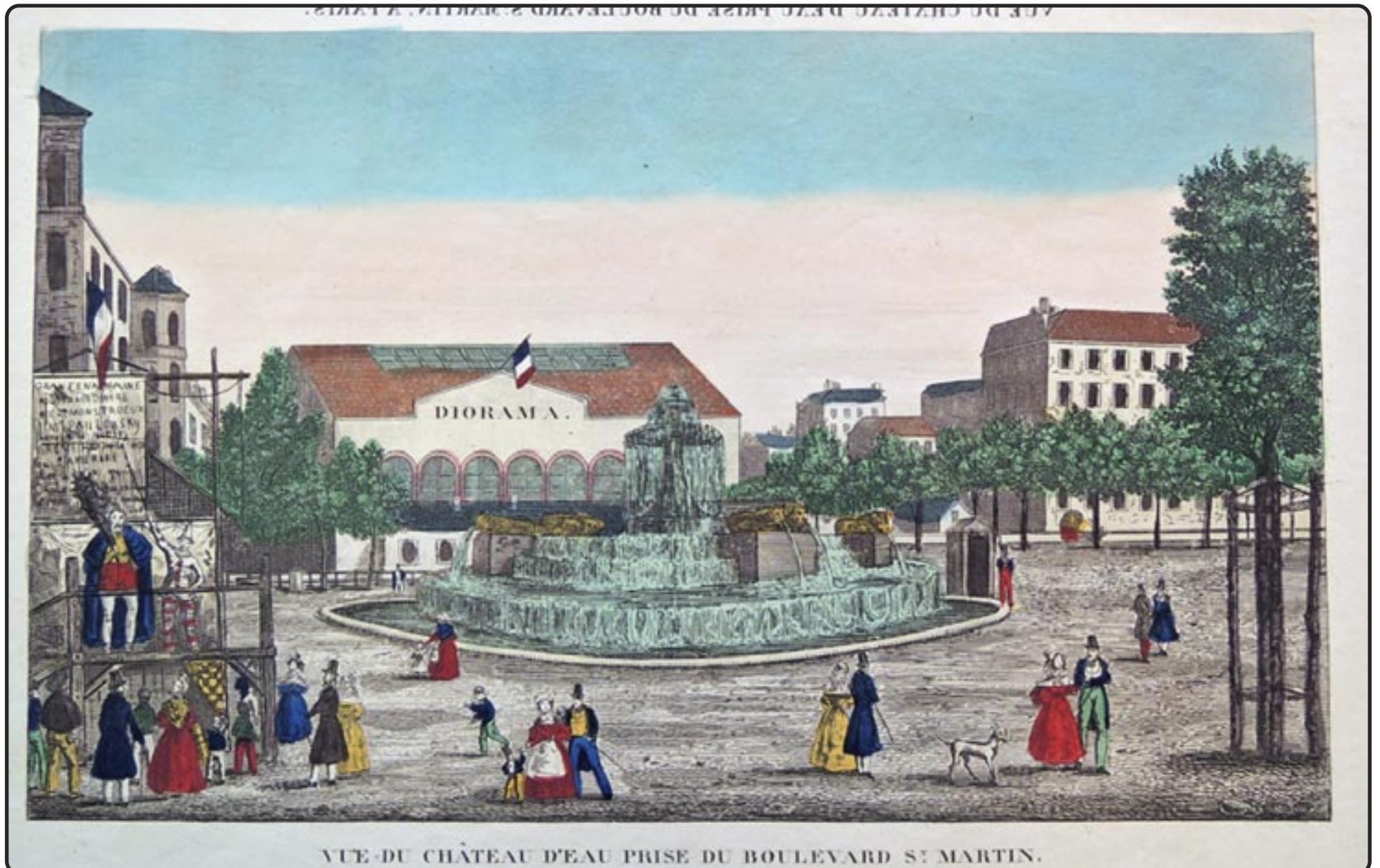
A significant example of a mechanical lithograph, a format developed from the early nineteenth century alongside the rise of lithographic printing. During this period, the number of image publishers increased dramatically and production costs fell across Europe. In Paris in particular, there was a surge of curiosity for images: visual theaters (known as Panorama and Diorama) enjoyed enormous public success, fueling interest in new forms of viewing and entertainment.



# Vue du Château d'Eau, View of Daguerre's Diorama, ca. 1835

*Optical view published by Basset, hand-colored at the time with brushwork*

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Hand-colored optical view depicting the Place du Château d'Eau in Paris, where several groups of people gather around the tiered fountain, the “château d’eau.” In the background stands Louis Daguerre’s Diorama, adorned with a French flag. On the left, a street performer stands on a wooden platform, attracting the attention of passersby. To his right is a man wrapped in a long cloak, resting a club on his shoulder. A sign behind him claims he can eat stones:

“GRAN FENAUMAINE / AIQSTRAORDINERE / NEZ MONSTRUEUX / MR PAILLONSKY / ARRIVEN DE RUCIE / BREVETE LE ROI / DE L’AMERIKE / NE CE NOURI QUE DE / CAILIOU GRAPHIQUE / IL PESE 85 QUINTAUX”

(Great phenomenon / extraordinary / Monstrous nose / Monsieur Paillonsky / Arrived from Russia / Patented by the King of America / Feeds only on graphic stones / Weighs 85 quintals)



# Ex-Diorama of Daguerre, Prince-Eugène Barracks Construction Site

*Salt print photograph, 1854*

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This photograph documents the construction of the Château d'Eau (military barracks), known as the Prince Eugène Barracks (later Caserne Vérines), built in 1854 on the site formerly occupied by the Wauxhall d'Été and Daguerre's famous Diorama. It was here that Daguerre staged his spectacular light shows. The Diorama was suddenly destroyed by fire on March 7, 1839, at the very moment Daguerre was visiting the American Samuel Morse—an emblematic episode in the history of photography and nineteenth-century Paris.

Most historians of photography, as well as Daguerre's contemporaries, have described the event as an unfortunate coincidence, with no suggestion of criminal or fraudulent intent on Daguerre's part. After the fire, Daguerre was granted a lifetime pension by the French state and withdrew from public life, but no contemporary documents indicate that he was ever publicly or officially accused of causing the disaster.



# Eugène Thiésson, Daguerreian Portrait of Daguerre, 1844

Pigment print, 2025

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Daguerre chose a rather unusual photographer for his portrait: Eugène Thiésson, a career military officer known for his volatile temperament and reputation for violence. A supporter of the Prince-President, Thiésson served as mayor of La Bazoche-Gouet (Eure-et-Loir) from October 7, 1850. His repressive approach to local administration made him so unpopular that he eventually ventured out only while armed, before being replaced on August 9, 1860.



# Painted and Sculpted Portraits Reproduced with the Daguerreotype

*Original daguerreotype plates from the 1840s*

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In this display case are several elegant plates reproducing paintings and busts. This is an opportunity to recall how difficult it was, in the early years of photography, to capture a portrait from life. In fact, Europeans were surpassed by Americans: it was in New York and Philadelphia that the first true life portraits were made. What is now considered the first photographic self-portrait was created by Robert Cornelius around November 1839 in Philadelphia.