

## PHOTOGRAPHY

# Candid camera

A new exhibition provides an intimate look at a pioneer of modern photography

By **Andrew Robinson**

**T**he credit for inventing photography is complicated and contested. Nicéphore Niépce, Louis Daguerre, Henry Fox Talbot, and the scientific polymath John Herschel each have a claim. The term itself (from the Greek for “drawing with light”) seems to have been coined in 1839 by Herschel. However, there can be little doubt that Fox Talbot—the subject of a new exhibition at London’s Science Museum—was the key pioneer.

In 1835, Fox Talbot produced the first photograph on paper: an image showing a latticed window of his country home at Lacock Abbey, which he termed a “photogenic drawing.” Then, in 1840–1841, he discovered and patented a process for producing negatives from which he could make prints, which he termed a “calotype” (Greek for “beautiful impressions”). Various improvements to this basic method, beginning with the invention of the wet collodion process and the adoption of a glass negative invented by Frederick Scott Archer, would dominate the field until the arrival of commercial digital photography in the 1990s.

*Fox Talbot: Dawn of the Photograph* is, surprisingly, the first major London exhibition about the British inventor. A thought-provoking mixture of technology and art, the exhibition displays numerous images taken by Fox Talbot and several contemporary photographers who adopted his calotype process. The photos range from portraits of family members to a fascinating shot from 1844 of Nelson’s Column, then under construction in London’s Trafalgar Square, in which the quotidian words “NO BILLS TO BE STUCK” are plainly visible near the base. About 100 of these images appear in the well-produced and informative companion book, *William Henry Fox Talbot: Dawn of the Photograph*, compiled by the exhibition’s cocurators, Greg Hobson and Russell Roberts.

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Fox Talbot revealed his photogenic drawings in public at London’s Royal Institution in 1839, in a rapid response to the debut of the “daguerreotype”—a photographic image made on a copper plate—in Paris less than 3 weeks earlier. They immediately intrigued Michael Faraday. “No human hand has hitherto traced such lines as these drawings display; and what man may hereafter do, now that Dame Nature has become his drawing mistress, it is impossible to predict,” he presciently remarked. Echoing Faraday’s pronouncement, Fox Talbot entitled the earliest book to be illustrated by actual photographic prints *The Pencil of Nature* when



Nelson’s Column under construction, Trafalgar Square, London, April 1844.

he published its initial volume in 1844. In a note to the reader, he emphasized that the plates had been “impressed by the agency of Light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist’s pencil.” He called them “sun pictures” rather than “engravings in imitation,” as some people had thought them to be. The new name was better suited, given the astonishing immediacy of certain of the images. One, which showed lace, famously fooled the photographer’s friends into thinking that they were looking at the real thing.

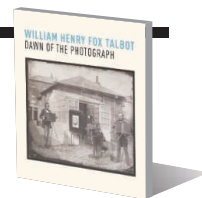
Daguerre was a considerable painter and was led to the daguerreotype by his interest in dioramas. By contrast, despite publishing with distinction in fields ranging from mathematics to Assyriology, Fox Talbot was keenly aware that he possessed no artistic

## William Henry Fox Talbot Dawn of the Photograph

Russell Roberts and

Greg Hobson

Scala Arts & Heritage  
Publishers, 2016. 176 pp.



## Fox Talbot: Dawn of the Photograph

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ability. In fact, he was led to photogenic drawing precisely as a result of his frustration with his lack of artistic skill. As he noted in 1839, the first inkling of photography struck him while visiting Lake Como in Italy on his honeymoon in 1833. Using a camera lucida, a tricky drawing aid that allowed an artist to see both the subject and the paper simultaneously, he attempted to draw the view from his villa. His tracing was “melancholy to behold,” as can be verified from its appearance in the exhibition. This failure, and the fleeting images Fox Talbot had seen using another aid to drawing, a camera obscura, provoked his keen desire to “cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably, and remain fixed upon the paper!”

Daguerreotypes enjoyed a boom in the 1840s due to the amazing clarity of their images. One of the earliest to survive, “Les Coquillages” (shells), taken in 1839, has been borrowed from France for the exhibition. Others on display include portraits of Faraday and Fox Talbot. But each daguerreotype was unique, whereas the calotype process permitted multiple reproductions.

After London’s Great Exhibition in 1851, an estimated 20,000 calotype prints were made for the 137 presentation sets of the show’s jury reports (also on display). The prints included images such as “Steam Engine,” “Large Anchor,” “Glass Fountain,” “Collection of Feathers,” “Nymph Preparing for the Bath,” and “Cholera”—scenes that depict a panorama of Victorian British life and industry.

Today, anyone can take color photographs with minimum effort and expense. After viewing the devoted labors of the pioneers in *Dawn of the Photograph*, it is hard to avoid feeling that we have both lost something and gained enormously from the total democratization of photography.

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Editor's Summary

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