

In the Spring of 2017, the Geisteswissenschaften International Special Prize has been awarded to

Steffen Siegel, *New Light: Daguerre, Talbot and the Publication of Photography in 1839*

(*Neues Licht. Daguerre, Talbot und die Veröffentlichung der Fotografie im Jahr 1839*, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2014).

This book will come as a pleasant surprise to anyone who thinks the history of photography has already been so thoroughly researched that there are no new discoveries to be made. In *New Light: Daguerre, Talbot and the Publication of Photography in 1839*, cultural historian Steffen Siegel turns his attention to the early days of photography. His research is led by one striking detail: that the news about the invention of photography spread much faster than the technique of photography itself. The general public in England, France and Germany read about the first photographs long before they saw them. A flurry of news reports followed the announcement of the ‘invention of photography’ by the Academy of Sciences in Paris in January 1839. Text preceded image. Siegel points out the paradoxical character of the media-historical events that took place starting in early January 1839: ‘The photographic images under discussion were strangely concealed from public view. For a considerable time, written reports about different photographic methods were the only evidence available to the wider public.’ Only the members of a small and privileged circle had access to what were called ‘daguerreotypes’ or ‘photogenic drawings’.

This realization is Steffen Siegel’s starting point. He builds from there, using original texts to create a panoramic view that is both scholarly and entertaining. His book is divided into two parts. The first, the majority of the book, contains original French, English and German texts from the year 1839. The spectrum ranges from the correspondence of Daguerre or Fox Talbot to comments by the painter Paul Delaroche or to caricatures. The second, complementary part consists of Siegel’s own writing: introductions to the protagonists, commentaries, editorial remarks and finally his brilliant and detailed conclusion. In Siegel’s persuasive summary, these first texts presented the public with interpretations of photography that ‘laid down comprehensive guidelines for an aesthetic of the medium at a very early stage.’

The jury decided to award the prize to *New Light* because it successfully unites two virtues of academic work: Siegel combines original research with clever and surprising analysis, and in doing so throws new light on the history of photography.

The Jury
(Translated by Isabelle Chaize)

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