Neues Licht, the book by Steffen Siegel
A new light in the history of photography

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“...it is one of the most astonishing inventions of our time”, Alexander von Humboldt wrote to his friend Carl Gustav Caros in February 1839.

In our times, 175 years after this admiring comment of von Humboldt looking at the daguerreotype, the first practicable photographic procedure, photography controls our modern media-driven society like no other. According to estimates of the German photographic industry in Germany alone you hear 2,000 “clicks” of cameras of all kind every second! One makes a calculation of how many photos are made per hour, per day, per year around the world!

A recently published new book of Steffen Siegel brings us back to the year 1839. A “back to the roots” to the year of publication of the epoch-making invention of Parisian artist Louis Daguerre. After five years of intensive archival research Siegel, professor of art history at the Friedrich-Schiller University, Jena, found hundreds of early traces of the invention of the new medium. Now he presents an impressive, very well contextualised collection of 132 original sources, documents, letters, press releases and monographs mostly from 1839 in each case in their entirety. Few of these texts, for example by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, Henri Gaucheraud, Jules Janin, Alexander von Humboldt, John Frederick William Herschel and Hippolyte Bayard, to mention only a few, are ever mentioned in the photohistorical literature. Now the reader can study them on 520 pages full of interesting details. The different motives and interests of the keenly competing protagonists, the political and international implications, the euphorical adoption of the new “mirror like pictures, made by nature itself” in Paris and shortly after in the entire world come alive while reading the book.

It is especially noteworthy that 80 percent of the published sources appear for the first time after their original publication 175 years ago. This gives an exceedingly authentic picture of the events of that early period of photo-media history.

The book “Neues Licht” (“New light”) is directed in its present issue initially only to German speaking readers with interests in photohistory. Ninety percent of the foreign language sources were translated here the first time into German! This is on the one hand very helpful; on the other hand it is to be very much wished that the planned publication of Steffen Siegel’s impressive text collection can be published in the English and French languages as well. Thus, this important part of European cultural heritage would be more widely known than it is today.