The year 1989 marks the sesquicentennial of Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre's announcement of the daguerreotype, the extraordinary invention which allowed one to fix a photographic image permanently on a copper plate and enabled humanity to freeze a moment in time.

For 150 years since Daguerre's revelation, Cincinnati has been both a home to, and a subject for, dozens of prominent photographers. In the midst of photography's sesquicentennial anniversary, it is especially fitting to honor and commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Cincinnati photographer Paul Briol, the creator of an unmatched photographic record of the Queen City from the 1920's through the 1950's.

Rich as it is, Cincinnati's place in the history of photography has been somewhat neglected. As one of America's largest and fastest-growing inland cities at the time of Daguerre's announcement in January 1839, Cincinnati quickly established itself as a center for photography. In 1840 daguerreotypist Ezekiel Hawkins opened Cincinnati's first photograph gallery. By 1848 Charles Fontayne and William Southgate Porter created one of the best-known cityscapes of Daguerrian period, the eight-piece “whole plate” panorama of Cincinnati as viewed from Covington. During the 1840's and 1850's, daguerreotypes — nearly all of them portraits — were made in several downtown studios by a number of able daguerrian artists, including Thomas Faris and one of America's earliest black photographers, James P. Ball, proprietor of the lavish Ball's Daguerrian Gallery of the West located on Fourth Street.

With the invention of the albumen printing papers and the collodion wet plate negatives, photographers could make multiple prints of the same image, and perhaps more important, found it possible to take their cameras into the field and out of the studio. The daguerreotype quickly grew outmoded. Nevertheless, Cincinnati remained in the forefront of American cities with active photographic communities. Photographers like Leon Van Loo, H. Rohrer, Charles Waldack, James Landy, J.W. Winder, C.H. Muhrman, and J. Harry Hoover not only operated portrait studios, but also took their cameras into the streets, photographing buildings, businesses, and prominent points of interest. Collectively, these photographers compiled a burgeoning record of Cincinnati, though only a minute body of their work has survived to the present day.

Photographic documentation continued to grow in Cincinnati at the beginning of the twentieth century. Cincinnati newspapers began to print photographic halftones near the turn of the century. In 1888 George Eastman's introduction of the Bullseye No. 1 camera allowed photographs to be taken by anyone who could afford the camera and the processing of flexible roll film and prints. While Eastman's innovation gave the average person the opportunity to record a visual image, it signaled a turn away from the technical mastery and sense of aesthetics formerly required of competent professional photographers.

As a photographic artist, Paul Briol was something of an anomaly among Cincinnati photographers. During the 1930's and 1940's, while most of his contemporaries turned to handheld 35 millimeter and 2-1/4 x 2-1/4 inch cameras, Briol devoted his fullest abilities to portraying Cincinnati, using an awkward wooden 8 x 10 inch view camera, perched atop a tripod. Aside from the fact that he used presensitized sheet film rather than having to coat his own glass plates as photographers did at the time of the Civil War, this choice of techniques could not have been more cumbersome or rigorous.

In the present age of Polaroid instant photography and 35 millimeter autofocus/autoexposure cameras, it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to comprehend fully the care and forethought that characterize the work of Paul Briol. Working under such technical and physical constraints required a special sort of discipline and demanded a deeper way of seeing from him. As is evident in his work, Briol contemplated the scenes before him, choosing his lens, his exposure, and his composition with the utmost care. He combed the city, seeking out vantage points, sensing moods — ultimately finding and sharing great beauty with those of us incapable of seeing and recording it on our own.

Paul Briol was particularly capable of infusing his prints with drama. In the darkroom, Briol was a master of merging two images into a single print. In the Paul Briol Collection at The Cincinnati Historical Society, there are a number of negatives of clouds, which Briol ably printed above
skylines to add power and expression to his photographic images.

While much of Briol's best-known work depicted the beauty of Cincinnati's rivers and hills — steamboats and stevedores on the Ohio River, views of Mt. Adams and the smokey haze over downtown, and the magic of Coney Island, to name just three, Briol made a living for himself and his family through photography. Not surprisingly, the majority of 8 x 10 inch negatives in his collection consists of assignments documenting a wide range of Cincinnati institutions, including the *Cincinnati Times-Star*, Union Terminal, Lunken Airport, Baldwin Piano Company, the University of Cincinnati, various hospitals and charitable organizations, and portraits of affluent Cincinnatians.

Paul Briol could transform a mundane assignment — like documenting buildings and facilities at the University of Cincinnati — into a challenge to create beauty. One example is his photograph of a lab in the University's Physics Department, a beautifully composed image which, intentionally or not, immediately brings to mind the work of the Constructivist painter Kandinsky.

Though he disdained much of the portraiture he did of various Cincinnatians, many of the images which resulted from such assignments reveal a great deal about their subjects, and at times, about Briol and his incisive eye. There are wonderful portraits of a black maid and chauffeur employed by one wealthy family. In another portrait, members of the Pease family appear remote and aloof. While in another portrait an older black couple seems far more comfortable and oblivious to Briol and his camera. Finally, Briol demonstrates his sensitivity for the grief of an elderly woman who has lost a grandson in World War II.

Whether photographing passenger trains leaving Union Terminal, a Reds game at Crosley Field, or pigeons perched on the outstretched arms of the Genius of Waters atop the Tyler Davidson Fountain, the more than 6,000 extant images made by Paul Briol constitute an unequaled photographic record of Cincinnati during the twentieth century.