

Horace Greeley, "Daguerreotypes," (at the New York Crystal Palace) 1853

(keywords: Horace Greeley, Voigtlander, Levi L. Hill, Martin M. Lawrence, "The Three Ages", Gabriel Harrison, Mathew B. Brady, Jeremiah Gurney, Charles R. Meade, Henry W. M. Meade, Meade Brothers, "portrait of Daguerre", Marcus A. Root, John H. Fitzgibbon, Ezekiel Hawkins, Jesse H. Whitehurst, Edward Z. Webster, John V. Polycarp Von Schneideau, David Clark, Eliphalet M. Brown, Jr., Philip Haas, Alexander Hesler, "Driving a Trade", Thomas J. Dobyms, V. L. Richardson, Samuel Masury, George M. Silsbee, McDonnell & Co., Charles C. Harrison, G. W. Hill, W. C. North, Albert Bisbee, Enoch Long, Alonzo J. Drummond, crystallotypes, crystalotypes, hyalotypes, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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Selected text published in:

Horace Greeley, *Art and Industry as Represented in the Exhibition at the Crystal Palace New York—1853–4* (New York: Redfield, 1853): 171–77. The entire chapter is herein presented.

XVII.

DAGUERREOTYPES.

If there be any one department in the whole building which is peculiarly American, and in which the country shines preeminent, it is in that of Daguerreotypes which are exhibited below stairs; and the collection, which is an extensive one, is made up of contributions from almost every section of the Union where the art is practised. In contrasting the specimens of art which are taken here with those taken in European countries, the excellence of American pictures is evident, which is to be accounted for by several reasons. In the first place, American skies are freer from fogs and clouds—from bituminous coal not being much used, the atmosphere of our cities is free from smoke, at least upon the Atlantic coasts. Then the chemicals and processes are, generally speaking, of a more sensitive character, and the apparatus is more convenient and suitable than that of Europe. Our little inventions come into play and aid in saving time and developing a good picture; and last, though perhaps not least, our people are readier in picking up processes and acquiring the mastery of the art than our trans-Atlantic rivals. Not that we understand the science better, but the details of the art are acquired in a shorter time by us, while the enormous practice which our operators enjoy combines to render the daguerreotype a necessary contributor to the comforts of life. Does a child start on the journey of existence, and leave his "father's halls;" forthwith the little image is produced to keep his memory green. Does the daughter accept the new duties of matron, or does the venerated parent descend into the grave, what means so ready to revive their recollection? Does the lover or the husband go to Australia or California, and not exchange with the beloved one the image of what afforded so much delight to gaze upon? The readiness with which a likeness may be obtained, the truthfulness of the image, and the smallness of cost, render it the current pledge of friendship; and the immense number of operators who are supported by the art, in this country, shows how widely the love of sun-pictures is diffused. Several thousand industrious artists and artisans are occupied in the preparation of very pure chemicals, as bromine, iodine, gold salts, hyperphosphate of

soda. Another class prepare silvered plates, cases, buffs, gilding, cut glass, and a hundred little addenda. Then the manufacture of cameras and the grinding of good lenses is an important branch of the business; for without a camera having good lenses, the best operator would fail to produce an image which would be distinct or saleable; and even with a good Voigtlander or Harrison camera, it requires great skill to focus the image; for, strange as it may appear, the point where a good view of the sitter is obtained is not the point best adapted for bringing out a good picture. In other words, the focus of vision and the focus of chemical action are not the same; and hence, when we have the one we lose the other. This is owing to the fact that it is not the rays of color on the solar spectrum which produce the image, but a different set of rays, viz., those of chemical action; and since this is the case, we submit the opinion that it is not possible to obtain a daguerreotype in its *natural colors*, as Mr. Hill and others have been trying to delude our operators into believing, and leading themselves and others by the ignis fatuus of plates tortured into iridescent colors by chemical oxydation. But we are getting discursive upon this beautiful art, which was intended to subserve many other useful purposes than that of portrait-painting.

Everybody knows how difficult it is to keep silver from tarnishing, and that the action of light tends to destroy all preparations of silver. Some of these are more readily acted on by light than others—are more *sensitive*, as it is termed. Such are the iodide, bromide, and chloride of silver. These salts cannot be kept exposed to the light for any, even a very short time, without undergoing some change; and when a plate of silver has a thin layer of iodine and bromine on its surface, and is placed in a camera, so soon as the screen is raised the image of the sitter falls on the plate. The silver plate is acted on unequally, producing the effects of light and shade when *brought out*, as it is termed, by exposure to the vapor of quicksilver. It is then fixed, or prevented from undergoing further change, by washing it with a solution of gold.

To produce a daguerreotype picture, there are five operations necessary. The first is cleaning the plate. This is the stumbling-block of most operators. They are not cleanly enough. Several views in this Exhibition show that the plates were not well enough cleaned. Never was a maxim more true than the old one, that “cleanliness is a virtue”—when it has reference to daguerreotyping. The second is the formation of the sensitive iodide of silver over the surface of the plate. The third is the adjusting the plate in the camera obscura, for the purpose of receiving the impression. The fourth is the bringing out the photographic picture, which is invisible when the plate is taken from the camera. The fifth, and last, is to remove the excess of sensitive coating, and thus prevent that susceptibility to change under luminous influence which would otherwise exist and ultimately efface the picture. The second operation is that which gives tone and warmth to the picture, and when performed by skillful hands, makes a daguerreotype a beautiful piece of art. The clearness and distinctness of the image is produced by the third process, when carefully conducted, and the whole picture should be distinct over the whole plate. These remarks will serve to illustrate the subjoined notes upon the collections in the Exhibition.

Mr. Lawrence exhibits a case in which softness of tone and distinctness of image are united with artistic arrangement. The latter quality is specially noticeable in “The Three Ages.” The mechanical execution of these pictures is unexcelled. These pictures of Mr. L. were exhibited in London. Mr. Brady’s collection is not very large, but there are a few very good pictures exhibited by him. In Gurney’s collection the coloring of the background has a fine effect; there are some very well executed portraits, among which is one

of Mr. Forrest, worth notice as a work of art; taken as a whole, there is less softness and more distinctness in this collection than in that of Lawrence. The picture of Ware and his sister is an instance of a picture well developed when the chemical action extends to the margin of the plate. The collection of Meade Brothers, taken as a whole, is fair, there being great variety in the display, and some pictures of merit. The portrait of Daguerre, in this collection, is the only one of the kind in this country, having been taken by one of the exhibitors when in France, in 1848. Shakespeare's "Seven Ages" are illustrated on as many plates, taken from life. The earlier pictures of this series are better conceived than the later ones, especially those representing the Soldier and the Lover. The Meades have also a number of heads on the largest-sized plates; some Daguerreotypes colored to resemble miniatures on ivory; and what are termed by them Instantaneous Daguerreotypes. These do not possess any remarkable merit. We perceive in Brady's collection some well-selected heads, among which are two of President Pierce and one of Lieut. Maury. M. A. Root has a large and respectable collection now on view, among which are many specimens of his Crayon Daguerreotypes.

D. Clark, New-Brunswick, N. J., has four pictures of merit; and Van Schneidan [Von Schneideau—ed.] a small collection of well selected heads. J. Brown [Eliphalet M. Brown, Jr.?—ed.] has a collection of portraits of Commodore Perry and the officers of the squadron of the Japan Expedition, in half-sized plates; the interest of this collection is much marred by the names of the officers not being attached underneath the plate; it is not too late to rectify this omission. Haas has a whole-plate allegorical figure of a family man reading the paper at home—an excellent idea and well executed. Besides this, he has a couple of other pictures, though on the whole his show is mediocre. In the cases of Harrison & Hill there is displayed excellent artistic arrangement with very indifferent mechanical execution. In the mammoth plates occupied by allegorical designs, the background is wretchedly brought out—the plates were not properly cleaned, and are full of scratches; there are a few half and whole-sized pictures set in gaudy frames.

Webster, of Louisville, Ky., has twenty-three pictures, possessing clearness. They have, however, been exposed a little too much to the camera; they lack warmth, but are otherwise well developed, and exhibit good mechanical execution. Alexander Hesler has a collection of whole plates handsomely executed, possessing a nice arrangement of the drapery, which has the effect of throwing the head out in good relief. There is artistic arrangement in this collection, especially evinced in the picture "Driving a Trade," one of a series illustrating character and passion. The panoramic views of Galena, Ill., show that city to advantage; and the three views of the Falls of St. Anthony possess great merit. Mr. North, of Cleveland, O., has a case of pretty fair likenesses, perhaps exhibiting the lights too strongly. Bisbee, of Dayton, O., exhibits a panoramic view of Cincinnati from Newport, upon six large plates. This view is, without exception, the finest thing in the whole room; we might even go further, and say that it is the finest view by the Daguerrean process ever exhibited. The mechanical execution is excellent, the perspective good, and the development unsurpassed. The effect of the smoke over the southern part of the city is very finely given. The distinctness of the letter-signs, three-quarters of a mile distant and across the Ohio river, is well brought out. The rest of the collection is fair, possessing no peculiar merit. Williamson exhibits a poor collection. Dobyn [Dobyns—ed.], Richardson & Co. have several whole-size, well-executed specimens, in which the mechanical part, the artistic arrangement, and the chemical effect, are good. The "Cupid Reposing" is a very ungraceful posture of an ill-formed

child, and the coloring is bad. That of the Bateman Children, in character, is a good picture. There are some exceedingly well-executed heads in this collection.

Long, of St. Louis, has four frames of one hundred and eighty heads of Wyman's School, in that city, with the edifice and principal; they possess no merit. A likeness of Prof. Mitchell, Cincinnati, is well executed. Some of the pictures in this collection are invested with papier mache frames inlaid with mother-of-pearl and tinsel. As this style of frame appears in a few other collections, we may as well here express our dissent from the use of this material, as being too gaudy and wholly unsuitable for daguerreotype plates. These latter are difficult to be viewed except in one light, and from the brightness of their surface, are much set off by deadened color on the frames, while the glare and iridescence of the papier mache add to the difficulty of discerning the picture; the use of such implies bad taste in the artist. We felt this opinion growing upon us as we looked at them, and felt our view corroborated by a boarding-school miss, who whisked alongside of us, and, caught by the colors, exclaimed, "Oh my! aint those *frames* beautiful!" Fitzgibbon has the richest exposition in the Fair—the most expensive frames, with a large and passable collection. The mammoth plate of Judge Colt is very good—that of Jenny Lind the best in the Exhibition—those of McAllister, Julia Dean, Kate Hayes, and Kossuth, are good pictures. His collection of Indian Warriors is a very fine one, which we understand is to be forwarded to the Ethnological Society of London, to have copies and busts made from them. Masury and Silsbee, Boston, exhibit twelve very pretty and tasteful plates, with good arrangement, and well finished. The collections of Kelsey [Kelsey?—ed.], Beals, and Howe, do not require notice. Whitehurst has a few good pictures in a large and passable collection; he has ten pictures illustrating the Falls of Niagara, which are very well executed. Some of his large heads have their features out of all proportion. Whipple, of Boston, has a collection of photographic pictures, which he calls Crystallotypes, taken from hyalotypes; there are a plate of the moon daguerreotyped, and one of the spots on the sun. McDonnell & Co., Buffalo, have a very poor collection—so poor as not to deserve a place in the Exhibition; the views of Niagara are fine. Hawkins exhibits photographs on paper. Drummond, eight plates of the Order of Freemasons in their lodge dress. Fitzgibbon (already noticed) exhibits a very interesting case, which is a frame of electrotype copies from daguerreotype plates, very beautifully executed. It should not be looked upon as a mere curiosity to place a daguerreotype plate in a copper solution and take a copper cast from its surface by means of electricity: the copper cast looks much warmer in tone than the original. It is to be regretted that Fitzgibbon did not complete this frame by the insertion of a third plate, by taking a second copy from the copper copy. This would be in relief, like the original silver-plate, and is susceptible of being treated like an engraved plate, yielding, when inked, prints resembling mezzotint. Beside the above collection of daguerreotypes, there is an assortment of cameras, lenses, stereoscopes, and photographic paper, which are of interest to those practicing these beautiful arts.

[End of selected text. In-text corrections provided for misspelled names.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This text was first serialized in *New-York Tribune* in or before September 1853; the specific date is not known to this editor; Clarifying information is welcome. This text is reprinted (with an introduction criticizing the comments) in *Photographic Art-Journal* 6:3 (September 1853): 191–94.

As the principal operator for Martin Lawrence's gallery, Gabriel Harrison executed the referenced daguerreotype, "The Three Ages." Harrison responded to Greeley's review in *Photographic Art-Journal* 6:3 (September 1853): 194–95.¹ (The reprinted *Tribune* text appears immediately prior to Harrison's response.)

Additional name information for the individuals referenced in the article follows: Levi L. Hill, Martin M. Lawrence, Gabriel Harrison, Mathew B. Brady, Jeremiah Gurney, Charles R. Meade, Henry W. M. Meade, Marcus A. Root, John H. Fitzgibbon, Ezekiel Hawkins, Jesse H. Whitehurst, Edward Z. Webster, John V. Polycarp Von Schneideau, David Clark, Eliphalet M. Brown, Jr. (misstated as "J. Brown"?), Philip Haas, Alexander Hesler, Thomas J. Dobyms, V. L. Richardson, Samuel Masury, George M. Silsbee, McDonnell & Co., Charles C. Harrison, G. W. Hill, W. C. North, Albert Bisbee, Enoch Long, Alonzo J. Drummond. (Information derived primarily from John Craig, *Craig's Daguerreian Registry*.²)

For another review of the daguerreotypes, see William C. Richard, *A Day in the New York Crystal Palace, and How to Make the Most of It* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Co., 1853): 95–98.

Additional information about the New York Crystal Palace is found in Charles Hirschfeld, "America on Exhibition: The New York Crystal Palace," *American Quarterly* 9:2 (Summer 1957): 101–16.

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8530001_HARRISON_PHOTO_ART-JOURNAL_1853-09.pdf

2. <http://www.daguerreotype.com>

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URL: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8530001_GREELEY_ART_INDUSTRY_1853.pdf

Document author: Gary W. Ewer

Creation date: 2008-10-07 / Last revision: 2012-05-11

Citation information: Horace Greeley, *Art and Industry as Represented in the Exhibition at the Crystal Palace New York—1853–4* (New York: Redfield, 1853): 171–77.

Prepared from: original volume in the collection of Gary W. Ewer. Also available from *Google Books*. (http://books.google.com/books?id=xV7dljvg_r4C)

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