

“Naked Daguerreotypes,” 27 June 1846

(keywords: Andrew Wemple Van Alstin, nude daguerreotypes, Henry Hunt Snelling, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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National Police Gazette (New-York) 1:42 (27 June 1846): 355.

NAKED DAGUERREOTYPES. — On Monday Mr. A. W. Van Alstin, a daguerreotypist in Lowell, Mass., was arrested and held in bonds of \$600 for his appearance for trial at the Criminal Court, for having “taken daguerreotype likenesses of naked females, full length and in various positions, exhibiting the same and offering them for sale.” A cab driver named Butler, was also arrested, and held in \$300 bonds, for having and exhibiting one of Van Alstin’s pictures.

[End of text.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

The daguerreotypist is Andrew Wemple Van Alstin.

In about 1995, this editor had the opportunity to examine a quarter-plate daguerreotype of a standing, nude female which exhibited every indication as having been of American origin. Lacking an original seal, the plate was removed from the typical American case and was examined bare. It had no indication of ever being in another mat or mount. Additionally, the posing of the figure (or lack thereof) was not typical of a French aesthetic.

Henry Hunt Snelling alludes to the practice of some daguerreotypists in taking daguerreotypes of the nude. See “The Daguerrean Art; its Present State and Future Prospects,” *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 2:2 (August 1851): 99–101.¹ Snelling also makes later comments on the topic (although obviously regarding a different incident):

—We would say to our Syracuse and Utica friends that we cannot lend ourselves to such dirty business as indicated by certain queries. We see no reason why a daguerrean artist should be censured for taking pictures of natural objects as nature made them, any more than the portrait or historical painter, provided he does not overstep the bounds of modesty and descend to obscenity and vulgarity. If he does the latter, the deed will bring about its own punishment; and we consider it an act of equal vulgarity and obscenity for an editor to be continually parading that deed for months before the public, and offending minds polite, by continually referring to a subject so disgusting. This must be our answer to *all* such queries as those to which we allude for *all* future time. We shall also take occasion here to say that we think it very bad taste in an artist to be always reminding his customers of such a lapse in the moral rectitude of a fellow artist. He should leave such matters to be corrected by the good sense of a discriminating and just public.²

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510006_SNELLING_PHOTO-ART-JOURN_1851-08

2. *Photographic and Fine Art Journal* (New York) 7:1 (January 1854): 31.

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