

Andrew Winter, "Pencil of Nature," 21 November 1846

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THE PENCIL OF NATURE.

BY ANDREW WINTER.

UNDER this title it is our intention to say a few words to our readers upon the sun pictures as produced by Daguerre, and by our own countryman, Mr. Fox Talbot.

Daguerre's process, familiarly known as the Daguerreotype, has been practised so extensively in this country within the last two or three years, that no explanation will here be required as to the general appearance of these pictures. All of us who have achieved immortality for ourselves for seven and twenty shillings (a morocco case included), without laying claim to more than the ordinary share of vanity, have been firmly impressed that, in taking a sitting of the great luminary for our portrait, the artist has looked too much on the dark side of things. The common remark upon showing your sun picture to friends is, "Well, it isn't a flattering portrait, but it must be like, you know!" and to this very candid criticism people have hitherto been obliged to submit; the mighty artist, Phoebus, of course, not being suspected capable of making a mistake.

Like most people who have a character for telling disagreeable truths, however, his company, in an artistic sense, came gradually to be avoided; and, like many others of his mundane brothers, he had nearly, in despair, flung away the pencil of nature. What was the use? His shadows might be more profound and impressive than those of Caravaggio—his details more delicate than those of the best Dutch painter who ever courted the inspection of a magnifying glass; but what signified all this, if the ladies would not sit to be made "such frights of."

In a happy moment, however, Mr. Beard thought of adding colour to the pictures: it was the Promethean touch which at once gave life to what hitherto had been an image, whose dull blackness reminded one of the ghastly lights and shades of an eclipse. The tinting, which is an after process, is accomplished with a brush, as in ordinary painting; the pigments being transparent, and consequently allowing of the shadows showing through them. These shadows, it is true, still retain a blackness which is not to be found in nature, but the advance upon the old system is immense.

As a great deal of the effect of these portraits, as pictures, results from the manner in which people go dressed for a sitting, we wish to give our readers a rule or two, which they would do well to bear in mind.

Avoid pure white as much as possible. Some ladies dress themselves out in snowy berths and spotless wristbands; but many a good picture is spoiled by the spottiness occasioned by the powerful action of this colour upon the plate. Violets have also the same effect upon it. A lady takes her sitting in a purple dress, and is astonished to find

herself in a white book muslin in her portrait; this particular colour acting even more intensely than the pure light upon the prepared silver. The very best kind of dress to wear on such occasions is a satin or a shot silk, or any material, in fact, upon which there is a play of light and shade. Plaids always look well; and an old tartan shawl thrown across the shoulders, and well composed as to folds, would form an admirable drapery: but this is an artistic liberty which ladies are very loath to submit to. At most of the Daguerreotype establishments articles of apparel, suitable as regards form and colour, were at first provided; but nobody would use them. "We wish to be taken as we are," was the invariable remark; and so they were stereotyped to their heart's content in a heap of finery put on merely for effect. We wish ladies would be a little less prim on such occasions. It is quite melancholy to see the care they take to brush their hair, and apply that abomination, fixiture, to make it "look nice;" whereas, if a good breeze had broken it up into a hundred waves, the effect in the Daguerreotype would have been infinitely more beautiful. And let them by all means abjure the system of making up a face for the occasion. The effect is painfully transparent. The mouth, so expressive in all faces, in these portraits is nearly always alike; and for the simple reason that we put its muscles into attitudes which are not at all natural to it—we substitute a voluntary for an involuntary action; and, of course, stiffness is the result. If the ladies, however, must study for a bit of effect, we will give them a recipe for a pretty expression of mouth—let them place it as if they were going to say prunes.

Many people imagine that the Daguerreotype will supersede the labours of the artist. This is a very mistaken idea, the artists who hang out their specimens at the door, labelled "In this style, one guinea," will, without doubt, be entirely swept away by this powerful competitor; but with the province of the true artist it does not interfere. It must be borne in mind that the Daguerreotype does nothing more than copy nature in the most servile manner—it elaborates a pimple as care fully as the most divine expression. It has no power of selecting what is fine and discarding what is mean in its representation of an object, this, Art, in the best sense of the word, is alone capable of doing. As an auxiliary, however, the "Pencil of nature" is of infinite use to the painter. Some of the best portraits we have seen of late have been copies from the Daguerreotype, the portrait of the Duke of Wellington in the white waistcoat, which is seen in every printseller's window, is a glorious example of what use it can be made as a handmaid of Art. In all matters of outline and light and shade, these sun pictures might with great advantage be copied, and we should recommend those who cannot afford to have their portraits painted by first-rate artists to have copies taken from a Daguerreotype. They will be startled at the excellence of the general likeness and picturesque effect which an indifferent painter will thus produce.

The Talbotype, as the process is called by the friends of its inventor, Mr. Fox Talbot, only differs from that of the Daguerreotype in the material on which the sun picture is drawn. In the latter, as is well known, a copper plate covered with a preparation of silver is employed; in the former, simple paper washed with a chemical preparation receives the picture. We wish to draw attention to this latter process, more particularly as it is one which all travellers in search of the picturesque should avail themselves of, if they would wish to bring home with them faithful copies of striking scenes. A little *camera obscura* (which might be made to fold up and put in the pocket), and a quire or so of this prepared paper, and he is set up with materials for the production of a series of pictures, whose beauty of detail Gerard Dow would have despaired to have accomplished, combined with a most artistic breadth of effect. Any person might produce these "sun pictures;" and to ladies in particular, the art would be peculiarly fitted. All that the operator has to do is

place the *camera* opposite the object to be copied at the proper focal distance—slip in a sheet of the prepared paper—let it stop a few seconds (experience alone will teach the exact time)—and he draws forth a perfect image; which, however, like the tune in Munchausen's horn, is at first latent, and requires warming, &c., to draw it forth. As many of our readers might like to make themselves acquainted with this art, we give them the recipe for the preparation of the photographic paper as communicated to the Royal Society. It is as follows:—

Preparation of the Paper.—Take a sheet of the best writing-paper, having a smooth surface, and a close and even texture.

The water-mark, if any, should be cut off, lest it should injure the appearance of the picture. Dissolve 100 grains of crystallised nitrate of silver in six ounces of distilled water. Wash the paper with this solution with a soft brush, on one side, and put a mark on that side whereby to know it again. Dry the paper cautiously at a distant fire, or else let it dry spontaneously in a dark room. When dry, or nearly so, dip it into a solution of iodide of potassium containing 500 grains of that salt dissolved in one pint of water, and let it stay two or three minutes in this solution. Then dip it into a vessel of water, dry it lightly with blotting-paper, and finish drying it at a fire, which will not injure it, even if held pretty near; or else it may be left to dry spontaneously.

All this is best done in the evening, by candlelight. The paper so far prepared I call *iodized paper*, because it has a uniform pale yellow coating of iodide of silver. It is scarcely sensitive to light, but, nevertheless, it ought to be kept in a portfolio or a drawer, until wanted for use. It may be kept for any length of time without spoiling or undergoing any change, if protected from the light. This is the first part of the preparation of Talbotype paper, and may be performed at any time. The remaining part is best deferred until shortly before the paper is wanted for use.

When that time is arrived, take a sheet of the iodized paper, and was it with a liquid prepared in the following manner:—

Dissolve 100 grains of crystallised nitrate of silver in tow ounces of distilled water; add to this solution one-sixth of its volume of strong acetic acid. Let this mixture be called A.

Make a saturated solution of crystallised gallic acid in cold distilled water. The quantity dissolved is very small. Call this solution B.

When a sheet of paper is wanted for use, mix together the liquids A and B in equal volumes, but only mix a small quantity of them at a time, because the mixture does not keep long without spoiling. I shall call this mixture the *gallo-nitrate of silver*.

Then take a sheet of iodized paper, and was it over with this gall-nitrate of silver, with a soft brush, taking care to wash it on the side which has been previously marked. This operation should be performed by candlelight. Let the paper rest half a minute, and then dip it into water. Then dry it light with blotting-paper, and, finally, dry it cautiously at a fire, holding it at a considerable distance therefrom. When dry, the paper is fit for use.

As we have said before, the images produced upon the paper are at first invisible; they are brought out, however, by washing the paper again with the gall-nitrate of silver, and then warming it before the fire. The artist should watch the picture as it developes itself; and when it has obtained the required degree of strength and clearness, he should stop further progress with the fixing liquid.

The fixing process.—To fix the picture, it should first be washed with water, then lightly dried with blotting paper, and then washed with a solution of *bromide of potassium*, containing one hundred grains of that salt dissolved in eight or ten ounces of water. After a minute or two, it should be again dipped in water, and then finally dried. The picture in this manner is very strongly fixed, and with this great advantage—that it remains transparent; and, therefore, there is no difficulty in obtaining a copy from it. The Talbotype picture, it should be remembered, is a *negative* one, in which the light of nature are represented by shades; but the copies are *positive*—having the lights

conformable to nature. The copies are taken by placing the picture upon the prepared paper, with a board below and a sheet of glass above it, and pressing the papers into close contact, with screws. A great number of pictures might thus be obtained from the original; a fact of much importance, as they might be used as illustrations to books of travel with the greatest success, binding up with the letter-press like ordinary engravings. After a little time, the original, it is true, grows faint; but it can be renewed at will, by washing it again with the gall-nitrate of silver, and then warming it.

May our readers profit from the perusal of this article. It is in the power of any of them to secure for ever many a dear association—many an old shady nook in the garden, where dear parents used to sit—many a social group caught in a happy moment—many a dear face now buried in the grave what would we not give, when these have disappeared—their vague echoes still dwelling in our hearts—that we might snatch them from the great tide of oblivion to which they have drifted? We would gladly, then, see this art become general; that each family might thereby have its inner life chronicled by an artist so faithful and so expeditious, and whose charges come within the compass of the great mass of the people.

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