

**Henry Hunt Snelling, "The Daguerrean Art," August 1851**

(keywords: Henry Hunt Snelling, Draper, Morse, Wolcott, Anthony, Edwards, Haas, Gurney, Plumbe, Beckers, Brady, Gabriel Harrison, Piard, Burgess, Lawrence, A. Morand, Bronck, Sials Wright Selleck, Gavitt, Whipple, Hale, Chase, Root, Broadbent, Whitehurst, Pratt, Carey, Cook, Barnes, Maguire, Fitzgibbon, Longs, Hesler, Ferris, Hansen, Von Schneideau, Lyons, Davie, Clark, Evans, McDonnell, Moulthrop, nude daguerreotypes, Hillotype, fifty-cent daguerreotypes, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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**THE DAGUERRETYPE: AN ARCHIVE OF SOURCE TEXTS, GRAPHICS, AND EPHEMERA**  
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**THE DAGUERREAN ART; ITS PRESENT STATE AND FUTURE PROSPECTS.**

**BY THE EDITOR.**

IN taking a retrospective view of the Daguerrean art in the United States, we cannot feel otherwise than proud of the high state of perfection to which it has been brought by the American Photographer. The last five years have established the fact all over the world, that the American Daguerreotypes surpass those of all other countries, not only for the beauty of their finish but the taste of their execution.

Although to Daguerre and Niepce we owe the discovery of Photogenic drawing, it is incontestable that the first successful attempts to impress portraits of the human face upon the silver plate were made in New York, and were the result of the experiments of Professors Draper, Morse and Wolcott. All the most practical and valuable improvements except the gilding process, are also due to American discovery ; while many of the most valuable treatise and papers on the art have emanated from the pens of our countrymen.

By slow but steady steps has the art advanced to its present beautiful position, and like the art of sculpture, Americans stand pre-eminent in its practice. From light flitting shadows of former days, we have advanced to the full developed, dark, soft-toned steel-engraving-like picture, defying the criticisms of the most fastidious. From the indistinct image, which could only be seen vaguely when viewed in one position, we have arrived at perfectly bold, sharply-drawn, well-defined outline figures, beautifully filled up by light and shade of most exquisite and elaborate finish. From the awkward, stiff, and unmeaningly staring images of the art in its infancy, we have attained the graceful and poetical pencillings of nature both in their beauty and grandeur. We now catch the most exquisite expression of childhood itself with unfailing truthfulness. The quivering leaf, the impatient horse, and the passing traveler; the demure cow, the active lamb and the barn-yard fowl, are impressed in a landscape upon the Daguerreotype plate with an accuracy unsurpassed. The most minute details in architecture, sculpture, and still life, are most wonderfully drawn by the pencil of the sun's rays, and we are constrained to look with wonder at the perfection to which improvement has brought this beautiful science.

To the French philosophers are we indebted for the first application of this science, but to American operators do we owe the perfection to which it has attained. The experiments of a Morse, a Draper, and a Woolcot [Wolcott—edit.] demonstrated the feasibility of applying the science to portrait taking ; while to Anthony and Edwards—the

former a pupil of Mr. Morse—to Haas, to Gurney, to Plumbe, to Beckers, to Brady, to Gabriel Harrison, to Piard, to Burgess, to Lawrence, to A. Morand, to Bronck, to Selleck, to Gavitt and others of New York; to Whipple, to Hale and Chase of Boston ; Root and Broadbert [Broadbent—edit.] of Philadelphia; Whitehurst of Baltimore ; Pratt of Richmond ; Carey and Cook of Charleston; Barnes of Mobile; M'Guire [Maguire—edit.] of New Orleans ; Fitz Gibbon [Fitzgibbon—edit.] and the Longs of St. Louis; Hesler of Galena; Ferris of Cincinnati ; Hansen and Von Schneideau of Chicago ; Lyons of New London ; Davie of Utica; Clark of Syracuse ; Evans and M'Donell [McDonnell—edit.] of Buffalo; Moulthrop of New Haven, and a host of other American Daguerreotypists are we indebted for various improvements in the art, which has enabled our country to stand pre-eminent in the production of Photographic pictures.

Still the art may be considered as in a questionable state in this country. So many have taken it up as a mere means of obtaining an easy livelihood, who are totally unfitted either by taste, education or inclination, to pursue it with the least degree of ability or success, that considerable disrepute has tainted its former fair fame, and we regret to say, that we have found those Daguerreotypists who were ashamed to be known as such, although they were themselves bright ornaments to the profession. An art, profession, or business, must indeed be in a deplorable state when those engaged in it are unwilling to acknowledge themselves so.

Besides the mere mechanics, dabsters, or whatever you are pleased to call those operators who jump from the stable, the fish-market, the kitchen, or the poultry-yard into the operating room of the Daguerreotypist, and after cleaning two or three plates, and seeing as many images produced upon them—and without even sufficient knowledge of the art to make a judicious purchase of their apparatus—set themselves up for Daguerreans. There is another class who do the art much greater injury. We speak of those who having some claim upon our consideration as men of talent are so devoid of common honesty as to care little about the quality of the pictures they take, so long as they can pocket the dollar in the quickest possible manner.

Their rooms are frequently the resort of the low and depraved, and they delight in nothing more than desecrating the sabbath by daguerreotyping these characters in the most obscene positions. Their rooms become a by-word and a reproach, and alas! there are too many who are ever ready to attribute to all the follies and foibles of the few. We may here be met by the question; why is a daguerreotypist more culpable in this respect than the painter, who frequently resorts to nude life models in the practice of his art? We will answer, there are two reasons: in the first place, the painter and the sculptor are, from the very nature of their art, obliged to make the anatomical proportions of the body a close study, in order to depict upon their canvas or to chisel from the stone, nature as it truly exists. Every line, every muscle, every vein, and all the most minute details in the composition of the human form are necessarily subjects of earnest scrutiny. To the Daguerreotypist this is not absolutely necessary; all he requires is a perfect knowledge of the general outline of the figure before him in order to be enabled to sit his subject in the most attractive and graceful attitude. In the second place the motive of the two is widely different, the painter has a noble, glorious object in view; he aims at the elevation of his art, and the improvement of the public taste; while the class of Daguerreotypists to whom we allude are actuated by the desire to pander to a vitiated and gross appetite, to accomplish which the most obscene positions are required from the degraded characters obtained for the purpose. Another reason against this practice is the fact, that the Daguerrean room is a more public place of resort, than the painter's, and every act within

its walls is more publicly commented upon, and its reputation is more apt to be injured by such comments.

There is still another class who in a great measure tend to depreciate the art. Among these we have some friends, and in speaking of them we wish to be understood as warring against their measures only, for we hold them personally, in respect. They are those who, holding their talents and skill less estimable than they really deserve, stoop to a level with the second class by taking pictures at a mere nominal price, in the hopes of drawing customers who are really not worth the time thrown away upon them. There are not a few of this class, but we hope that ere long many of them will change their policy; already do we know of those who look back with bitterness upon the day when they first took a picture for fifty cents.

There is but one remedy against all these evils, namely; the formation of a National Photographic Society, the objects of which shall be, not only to establish a fixed scale of prices for the finest productions of the art, but to elevate the character of those engaged in the business, by frequent reunions, interchange of sentiments and improvements, and to establish a moral influence that must be both felt and appreciated. The first steps have been taken towards this great measure. A meeting, as we have before noticed, of the Daguerreotypists of New York—with the exception of the city—was held at the city of Syracuse on the 12th of July, and after passing a series of resolutions—which will be found under our “Gossip”—adjourned to the 20th of August in order to secure a larger attendance from all parts of the Union. This convention, if not interrupted by sectional jealousies or arrogant assumption on the part of those, who coming into the measure at the eleventh hour, wish to deprive the originators of their just laurels, will be one of the most grand and important acts of our Daguerreotypists since the discovery of the art.

We have already given our views on this subject, and we shall content ourselves with but a few observations on the course we think should be pursued; we do not ask their adoption, nor that they will be taken into consideration at the convention, but we should wish that they may be considered by every individual who attends, and acted upon as may be thought most advisable.

In the formation of a *National Society* it must be borne in mind that many States compose this nation, each containing many Daguerreotypists, and that they are all entitled to be heard and consulted in the organization. No class of men from any particular State or city have any right to assemble, organise a National Society, elect a president, vice-president and secretary in each State, without consulting the members of the profession in those States. It is an assumption of power in direct opposition both to justice and the common usages of civilization. All cliques formed for the express purpose of dictating to the majority the course to be pursued should be unhesitatingly silenced, and made to find its proper position in the ranks of that majority. This should be accomplished with perfect grace, and good fellowship; with out harsh or resentful feelings, quietly but decidedly.

Such States as are not represented in the convention should be called upon to form local societies, and appoint delegates to the next National Convention, at which time they may solicit to be enrolled as members of the parent institution, and have a vice-president appointed for their State.

The constitution and by-laws should be formed on the broadest platform of equity and democracy, making provision for the admission of all honorable men who may subscribe to the terms of membership. Like the Heliographic society of France it may not be confined to practical Daguerreotypists alone, but include amateurs and other artists, for it must be conceded that the Photographic will eventually establish an influence of great

importance, over other arts. Some of the minor arts must eventually give way entirely to that of Photography, while the more elevated will be greatly benefitted.

We look forward to the future career of Photography with pride. The promulgation of the secrets of the Hillotype, when made, will create a new era in the art, and if Mr. Hill keeps steadfast in his resolution in its disposition—and we see no reason now to doubt it—the elevation of the art to the highest pinnacle of fame will be more than half gained. Instead of the fishmongers and horse jockeys that now fill its ranks, Photography will enlist men of taste, talent, and refinement. Our first artists now in the business will no longer fear to be called Photographers, and a new order of things will obtain.

A society composed of such men will not be guided by the interests of the pocket, or the private envy and prejudice of disappointed and scheming men. All will be harmony and unity. The strife will be for the elevation of the art itself, and not so much for the enrichment of self. May we live to see that day. We may resume this subject hereafter.

**[End of text.]**

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**EDITOR'S NOTES:**

Henry Hunt Snelling began the Photographic Art-Journal in January 1851. He also authored the book, *The History and Practice of the Art of Photography, or, The Production of Pictures through the Agency of Light* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1849).

Regarding the cheapening of the process by “fifty cent” operators, see “Cheap Daguerreotypes,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 10:92 (18 April 1851): n.p. (third page of issue).<sup>1</sup>

The editor is aware of one American daguerreotypist, Andrew Wemple Van Alstin (Lowell, Massachusetts), who was arrested for the taking of daguerreotypes of naked females. See “Naked Daguerreotypes,” *National Police Gazette* 1:42 (27 June 1846): 355.<sup>2</sup>

1. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8510039\\_CHEAP\\_BROOK-EAGLE\\_1851-04-18.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8510039_CHEAP_BROOK-EAGLE_1851-04-18.pdf)
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