

R. W. Keyes, "Luther Holman Hale and the Daguerrean Art," June 1851

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LUTHER HOLMAN HALE AND THE DAGUERREAN ART.

BY R. W. KEYES.

AMONG the many valuable and astonishing discoveries made in this nineteenth century, that of the great Daguerre takes a very high position. Daguerre was the great originator of the Photographic art; the first who had the boldness and ingenuity to mould the sun-beam into an artist's pencil, and convert the shadow into a substance. The great Photographer won for himself, not only an independent fortune by his discovery, but also an imperishable name; a place on the scroll of fame, among those, "whose names were not born to die." Yet it cannot be said that he perfected the art. This was left to after experimentalists, the majority of whom, we are proud to claim as our countrymen. Still, with all the wonderful improvements in view, that have been made from time to time, we presume that Daguerreotyping is in a comparatively rude state, to what it will be in a few years hence. If a devotedness to the profession; a daily toiling in search of the still partially hidden principles of the art, which is constantly bringing forth some new application from the laboratories of Daguerreans; if a love of the art for its own sake, will not make some new developments, that will be equally astonishing with the discovery itself, then shall we be content in believing that the poet was in fault when he said:

"Attempt the end, and never stand to doubt;
Nothing's so hard, but search will find it out."

Among the many distinguished Daguerreans of our own country, standing out in bold relief, with the names of Brady, Lawrence, Harrison and Morand, is that of the subject of our present sketch.

LUTHER HOLMAN HALE was born in Milbury, Massachusetts, on the 21st of September, 1823. His father was an extensive scythe manufacturer, possessed of ample means, and what is more, a disposition to aid his son in obtaining a good education.

In early life, young Hale showed himself to be possessed of more than ordinary mechanical ingenuity, having at the early age of sixteen, acquired a good practical knowledge of his father's business. Desirous of obtaining a good English education, he entered Hopkinton Academy, where during his Academical course he distinguished himself as being a close student, and a more than ordinary chemist. Having completed his studies, he graduated with the highest honors of the Institution, and with the respect and good will of his class-mates, to whom he had endeared himself by his urbanity and winning manners. The subject of our memoir now sought some occupation more congenial to his tastes, than toiling at the anvil, or tempering steel. He engaged in the "shoe business," and made a tour in the Western country; but, although tolerably successful, the business was not satisfactory to him, and he at once made up his mind to become a Daguerreotypist. He entered the office of his brother in Milk st., Boston; but for some reason, that is unnecessary to explain, after having obtained a very good knowledge of the art, he left the office of his brother, and connected himself with a Dry-goods House. In this business he was not destined to remain long. The occupation was not suited to his taste, and he again became connected with his brother, determined to pursue the profession of his choice, whatever obstacle might oppose. With such enthusiasm and devotion to the art, it is no wonder that our young artist rapidly rose to eminence in his profession. He very soon acquired a distinguished reputation.

The multiplying samples of poor pictures which misrepresented this noble art, in the hands of taste and genius, soon gave place to productions of great merit.

Men may, and do, often rise to exalted stations in life, through influences which they had no hand in creating ; birth, education, noble and distinguished parentage, often give a man position in life, which he never could have attained without them, and at the best, which he can but imperfectly fill.

Not so with the artist. His works are his judges. By his fruits is he known. All the wealth of the Indies cannot purchase the genius and talent, that shall rival in excellence the portrait of an Elliot, the landscape of a Durand, or the historical piece of a Huntington; neither can it make the common daubs, that are daily sold under the hammer, equal the works of the “ Old Masters.”

The Daguerreotypist, equally with all other artists, must rely simply on his own genius and skill; with these, he will succeed; without them he will fail. With this conviction, Mr. Hale commenced his labors in 1842. His thorough knowledge of Philosophy and Chemistry, were now brought into immediate requisition.

Frequent complaints were made that the sittings were too long. From the fact that the countenance of the “human face divine” changes so rapidly and so often, it became a source of perplexity to the real lover of the beautiful, that the long sittings often marred the beauty of the picture, and produced anything but a satisfactory result to a real artist. This hindrance to the perfection of the art, became a special subject of study and reflection. Numerous experiments were made, the best chemicals were procured, new preparations were formed, and our young Daguerrean entered into the business with all the enthusiasm of a real lover.

The art was then in its infancy, and each practitioner was obliged to strike out a path of his own, unaided by the experience of others. Thus relying solely upon his own resources, Mr. Hale, as if by intuition, suggested, brought forth, and carried forward to successful completion, experiment after experiment, until he produced pictures, which for distinctness of feature and outline, brilliancy of color and tone, artistic arrangement and effect, rivalled the finest efforts of the most gifted pencils. Without wishing to detract from the merit of any of Mr. Hale’s numerous cotemporaries, we may safely say, that his pictures are rarely equalled in all the different features that go to make up a good picture, and, are never excelled.

Having now established his reputation on a firm basis, his business increasing with it, our Artist was obliged to obtain more commodious rooms, and having dissolved his connection with his brother, removed his office to Washington street, where he has fitted up one of the most magnificent saloons in Boston,—probably in the United States. All the arrangements have been made, seemingly without regard to cost, and merely at the dictation of a refined taste. The piano-forte, the music-box, the singing of birds; the elegant drapery ; the beautiful pictures; the expensive gallery of portraits; the struggling sun-beam peering through doors of stained glass ; statuary, engravings; all, all seem to impress the visitor with the idea of palace-like magnificence, and serve to soothe the troubled spirit, and calm the anxious brow, preparatory to the obtaining of a good picture.

Mr. Hale has, until within a year and a half, been connected with Mr. Benjamin French, in preparing artist’s materials, and has established an enviable reputation, in the preparation of his chemicals, which have been pronounced by the most eminent in the profession, if not superior, at least equal to any in use. He is now reaping a rich harvest, consequent upon a ten years devotedness to his profession. He entered upon his duties with a determination to improve, to excel, and nobly have those determinations and hopes

been realized. His history presents a picture worthy of imitation. Generous and free, with an eye single to the advancement of the art which he all but worshipped; his mind filled with the images of beauty and excellence, which he labored hard to imitate; with aspirations elevated above the mere grovelling idea of present gains, he devoted himself to his chosen occupation with an assiduity that would admit of no denial. His motto has always been, "Do one thing at a time, and do it well."

For hours and days even, has he been known to devote himself to the improvement of apparatus, to the perfecting of some change of chemicals, when others would have been content with the remuneration they received in dollars and cents, perfectly satisfied if their customers were. This short sighted policy has prostrated the business of the latter, while that of Mr. Hale has increased, by the constantly extending patronage which he is receiving from a discriminating community; who, although slow to find out, yet will most assuredly detect error and imposition, and finally bestow reward where real merit exists.

Mr. Hale has now reached his twenty-eighth year, and the ninth of his artistic life. His course, though noiseless and unobtrusive, has nevertheless been onward.

Puffery and trumpeting have ever been distasteful to him, and while some may have been engaged in sounding their own praises at the "corners of the streets," he has been at work in his laboratory, testing some new principle. This, we conceive to be the true vocation of an artist; his own works should praise him.

Mr. Hale is universally respected by the profession, and also by the large circle of friends in which he moves, who, from his past life, are encouraged to hope for still better things in the future.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

A description of Hale's gallery, along with a poem, is found in George W. Bungay, "Hale's Picture Gallery" in "American Enterprise – No. XXXVIII," *Waverley Magazine* (Boston) 7:7 (13 August 1853): 116.¹

This article is the sixth of eight biographical sketches of eminent daguerreotypists appearing in the journal's first year of publication. Each profile is accompanied by a full-page lithographic portrait, six of which are by the lithograph artist, Frances D'Avignon. (D'Avignon also provided the lithography for *The Gallery of the Illustrious Americans*.) Other articles in this series are C. Edwards Lester, "M. B. Brady and the Photographic Art," 1:1 (January 1851): 36–40;² S. D. Burchard, "Martin M. Lawrence and the Daguerrean Art," 1:2 (February 1851): 103–106;³ S. J. Burr, "Gabriel Harrison and the Daguerrean Art," 1:3 (March 1851): 169–77;⁴ J. P. Kidder, "Augustus Morand and the Daguerrean Art," 1:4 (April 1851): 237–39;⁵ A. D. Cohen, "George S. Cook and the Daguerrean Art," 1:5 (May 1851): 285–87;⁶ M. Grant, "John A. Whipple and the Daguerrean Art," 2:2 (August 1851) 94–95;⁷ J. W. Tracy, "D. D. T. Davie; First President of the Association of Daguerreotypists," 2:3 (September 1851): 164–65.⁸

An editorial note about the biographies and portraits provides this information:

—To those desiring the publication of their biographies and portraits in the Journal we will state that it will be necessary to communicate with us on the subject as early as possible in order that we may assign to each his month, there generally being several engaged ahead, and we are obliged to adopt the very good practice of serving applicants in the order of their application. We deem it

necessary to state this much that there may not be any misunderstanding in the matter.⁹

A subsequent editorial response to correspondence provides additional information:

—W. T.[William H. Thomas?] of S. C.—In answer to your question we will say that you have been misinformed in regard to the matter. We make no charge for the insertion of portraits and biographies, although it is generally customary, among periodicals, to do so. The reputation of an operator as an artist must be good, in order to secure the privilege of placing his portrait in our Journal, but as it is undoubtedly of far more advantage to the artist than ourselves, we think it not more than right that he furnish the illustration free of expense to us. As to the style and cost of the portrait, we leave that entirely to the judgment and taste of the operator, requiring only, that the work be executed as nearly perfect as possible. Steel plates are decidedly the least trouble, and much preferable, as finer impressions and more uniform printing can be obtained from them. Lithographic drawings will not always print well, and we have had much trouble with them on that account. With one or two exceptions those who have inserted their portraits have purchased one hundred copies of the number containing it.¹⁰

Two daguerreotypes of Hale are viewable on the web site of the American Antiquarian Society.¹¹ Although the two daguerreotypes (part of the "Hale collection") do not have identifying information, a comparison of the daguerreotypes to this lithograph portrait confirms the identity. See the entries:

"Hale, Luther Holman, 1823-1885, Sixth plate. From the Hale Collection. *Clean shaven young man seated with straw top hat on knee.*"

"Hale, Luther Holman, 1823-1885. Taken March 8, 1851. Whole plate. Bequest from Frank L. Hale, August 25, 1945. From the Hale Collection. *Full length portrait of well-dressed young man, leaning on carved upholstered chair at left.*"

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8530009_HALES_WAVERLEY_1853-08-13.pdf
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510010_BRADY_PAJ_1851-01.pdf
3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510013_LAWRENCE_PAJ_1851-02.pdf
4. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510012_HARRISON_PAJ_1851-03.pdf
5. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510014_MORAND_PAJ_1851-04.pdf
6. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510011_COOK_PAJ_1851-05.pdf
7. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510015_WHIPPLE_PAJ_1851-08
8. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510016_DAVIE_PAJ_1851-09
9. *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 1:5 (May 1851): 319
10. *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 2:5 (November 1851): 319.
11. <http://www.americanantiquarian.org/Inventories/daguerreotypes.htm>

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