

Burchard, "Martin M. Lawrence and the Daguerrean Art," February 1851

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M. M. Lawrence

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MARTIN M. LAWRENCE AND THE DAGUERREAN ART.

BY THE REV. S. D. BURCHARD.

I am aware that I utter a truism and an exceedingly trite remark, when I say, that we live in an age of invention and progress. The human mind is pressed and stimulated to unwonted energy, and its achievements in science and the arts are amazing to contemplate. The forces of nature—the air, the water, the winds, the waves, the lightning, are all made subservient to the will and happiness of man. The multiplied uses to which these various elements may be applied are fully developed and brought to light. Discovery is one of the characteristic glories of the present age. We live, move and rejoice amid the trophies and the triumphs of mind. The productions of genius—the works of art actually startle us and make us feel that we are living in a world of wonders. Old things are indeed passing away, behold all things are becoming new. New modes of travel, of labor, of intercommunication, of competition and success are our inheritance, and the inheritance of our children. Of all the inventions which have distinguished the past fifty years, none is more wonderful, beautiful and useful, than the art of taking pictures by sunlight—of impressing the landscape, the trees, “the human face divine” on a plate of metal. Invisible they are at first, but none the less real, for by a very simple process are they made to stand out in all the distinctness of their originals.

The world, for six thousand years had rejoiced in the light of heaven, as it spread in loveliness over the earth, painting images of beauty on the clouds and the distant hills, but whoever dreamed that it would delineate, with infallible accuracy, the features of friends, and in lines so permanent that we might preserve them as memorials of their goodness, until the achievements of Daguerre and Niepce? They have left their indelible *Daguerreotypes* on the page of the world’s history. Their names will ever be associated with all that is fascinating and brilliant in the arts. Faint shadows of the art had indeed passed before the vision of man some two centuries before they lived, but they were mere passing shadows. These men by study, by genius, by patient and protracted toil, realized more than the shadows; or rather, they made the shadows stay with them and converted them into substantial realities. *They* labored; but other men have since entered into their labors, and are carrying the art forward to its full perfection and beauty. This new discovery, while yet in its infancy was introduced to this land of genius and home of invention. Many of the votaries of the arts, the sculptor, the painter, the engraver, the etcher, looked doubtingly at first upon this new candidate for emolument and success. But Nature’s artist, *the Light*, soon dispelled their doubts and prejudices, and multitudes, who had dogmatized and ignorantly doubted, now became disciples in this modern school of art. Many indeed fainted in their preparatory studies and forfeited the mead of success. Others graduated with honor, and their diplomas, written by the light, are now hanging on the walls of their studios—an ornament to their genius and the sure tokens of their success. Among the comparatively few who have really excelled is Martin M. Lawrence, whose portrait appears in the present number. Possessed of a mind feelingly alive to all that is beautiful in nature and fascinating in art, he early developed a genius and a taste for mechanical pursuits, and at the age of sixteen was apprenticed to a jeweller and soon became a workman, that needed not to be ashamed in the trade he had chosen. But it was too tame for his genius, he wanted something bolder and more beautiful, and when the Daguerreotype of a friend was put, for the first time, in his hand, and he saw its life like expression, he felt a new inspiration come over him and soon determined to change his

profession—that inspiration never left him. It was both the stimulus and the pledge of his success.

He saw that many of his predecessors had utterly failed—that the art was still in its embryo—that the best operators were groping in comparative mist and darkness—that the results of their operations were always uncertain—their pictures often dim and shadowy, failing in the harmonious blending of light and shade, lacking in the boldness and beauty so essential to perfection in art. He set himself to work to learn the secret cause of failure. If some few had learned it before him, they were exceedingly chary and quite unwilling to communicate without a large reward. Some aspirants for fame freely paid the bounty; and one gave a hundred dollars for simply learning to use pure water in cleansing the plates, instead of acid and water. Others were filched of their money without being forwarded in their knowledge of the art. Mr. Lawrence pursued a more independent and philosophic course. He shut himself up in his laboratory and determined to experiment until he had gained the mastery. He furnished himself with the necessary apparatus, and became a thorough and practical chemist. He analyzed the processes of nature, learned how to combine her elements, so as to produce the most startling and beautiful effects. Nature became ductile in his hands, and her mysterious laws, guided by his skill, worked out the desired results. He had now learned and conquered the difficulties in the chemical department. Generous and free, his mind filled with the floating images of beauty, and anxious to see the art advance, he communicated freely with his brethren of the profession, and many an artist who has acquired an enviable reputation as practical operators are indebted, in no small degree, for their success to the timely suggestions of our friend, Martin M. Lawrence. He withheld no secrets from his pupils. He aimed not merely to make them amateurs, but *artists*. He endeavored to inspire them with his own high sense of the dignity and importance of the art. Excelsior was his motto, and those who left his studio, left with thoughts elevated above the mere grovelling idea of gain. They were to be co-laborers with the silent forces of nature, to hold communion with the light, to guide this subtle element in its sublime mission of love and beauty to man.

Whatever credit may be due to others—and others there are who have acquired a just and honorable fame—it must be admitted by all unprejudiced observers, that the subject of this brief sketch is not a whit behind the chiefest of his brethren in the photographic art—that his zeal, energy and perseverance are excelled by none, and that his success is placed beyond all reasonable peradventure or doubt. At one time, it was feared that he would become a martyr to his own devotion of the art. His confinement to his laboratory was so constant, his application to study so intense, and the vapors arising from his chemicals so hurtful, that his health became seriously impaired, and his physician suggested that he would probably be obliged to abandon his favorite pursuit. He had now conquered the most subtle difficulties, and the broad field of honorable competition and success was open before him and the thought of yielding the laurel, and quitting an art so fascinating and all absorbing was too painful to endure. He now left the laboratory, committed the combinations of chemicals and the preparation of the plates to other hands. But still his work was not done; and though he had gained a reputation inferior to none in the rooms he had occupied in the years that were past, he felt that some improvements might be made in the arrangement of the light—this wizard *artist* in painting the Daguerreotypes of man.

He perceived, by varied experiments, that plates coated with the same chemical compound and apparently alike in quality, produced pictures of a very different character, both as to tone and boldness. His rooms were large and commodious, his patrons numerous and enthusiastic, but still he was persuaded that improvements could be made, in the way of light, by a removal. After diligent search, he, at length, found rooms which might be fitted up to his liking. They happened to be in the vicinity of some of his brethren of the art. But with a generous good will, he said, "Let there be no strife between us; we are devotees of the same art, and worship at the same shrine—the field is the world, and wide enough for us all." He nobly spurned anything like envy or jealousy and even rejoiced in the successes of his brethren. Again he devoted himself to his favorite pursuit with untiring assiduity. He studied especially the mysterious phenomena of light, learned some laws of refrangibility and color, which had hitherto perplexed the votaries of the photographic art. He constructed, in harmony with these laws, a sky-light 16 ft. by 16, and with such admirable arrangement, as to exclude all reflected, collateral or antagonistic rays (without the aid of inside screens) so that light from the heavens above should fall precisely at an angle of 45 degrees on the subject or sitter. Thus was the way prepared for Nature to do her own work, in all her breadth and beauty, producing pictures so perfect, characteristic and life-like as to charm every beholder. Such results however can only be produced by the greatest care in manipulation. By a failure here, many artists have been fretted and wearied with disappointment, attributing their want of success to bad chemicals or the state of the weather. More patience and skill have effectually overcome these difficulties and we are prepared to say, that any one, who visits Mr. Lawrence on a cloudy day will meet with a sunny reception and retire with a reflection of himself, so perfect, that he will be convinced that clouds and storms have little or no effect upon the operations of a good artist. His light, rooms, camera and apparatus in general are such, that groups of forty or fifty may be taken with ease, and yet each retaining that beautiful gradation of light and shade, that richness of tone and breadth of effect, which characterize the best *isolated* specimen of the art. He has in his rooms some portraits nearly the size of life. The one of Gen. James Watson Webb, prepared on a mammoth plate, for the World's Fair is truly magnificent. It would seem that such portraits might supercede the pencil and the brush. Color alone is wanting and yet there is an earnest and life like expression, a delicacy and decision of character, a glowing beauty in the soft and mellow blending of light and shade which have always given to the creations of the best artists their peculiar power to charm all the lovers of beauty and art. Mr. Lawrence's pictures have been regarded so perfect, that the application of the brush, for the purpose of adding more delicate tints, would seem rather to detract from than add to the essential merits of his portraits; and yet he has recently colored some with such exquisite delicacy and skill that they have been pronounced by the most eminent artists as equal to the finest miniature painting on ivory. The process of daguerreotyping on ivory has been referred to in a previous number of this journal as a higher development of the art. It may be so; we have examined some specimens, and confess that they are beautiful, wondrously true and life like; but we are persuaded that their beauty and expression are rather the product of the painter's skill, than the effect of any new discovery in the Daguerrean art. Still the dim and shadowy outlines drawn by the infallible hand of Nature, do, to say the least, facilitate the work of the painter, and he may well afford to welcome *this* as a handmaid to his divine art. Mr. Lawrence has made arrangements with one of the best artists in this country, and those who prefer can be accommodated with pictures combining the skill of the Daguerrean and the painter. As to the comparative

skill, genius, and taste requisite to success in the two professions, we would say, that neither can hope to rise above a tame and unenviable mediocrity who is not gifted by nature with a love, a *high enthusiasm* for the fine arts. No plodder, no mere mechanist, will excel as a Daguerreotypist. He must have an eye for color and a heart that responds to the poetic and beautiful, both in nature and art. He must feel the inspiration and possess the skill and acute discernment of the limner and the sculptor. In a word, he must be a *genius*, or be doomed to move in the wake of the lofty votaries of the art. It is enough to say, that Mr. Lawrence has succeeded, has *excelled*. It ought to be mentioned to his credit, that he was the first, we believe, to introduce the copying box, by which pictures may be copied as large or larger than their originals, a desideratum especially to those who wish duplicate Daguerreotypes of their deceased or absent friends.

No one, we are persuaded, can visit his palace-like rooms, without being fascinated with the brilliant specimens both of genius and taste, without being impressed with the beauty and utility of this most mysterious art; without an expression of gratitude for this sublime discovery, by means of which the shadows of our friends may be made to linger with us, and speak in silent and monitory tones, though the stout heart is still and the lip of affection is closed for ever. The patriotic, the good, and the brave, are there. The eloquent statesman, whose voice, like the clarion, has often hushed the clamors of the populace and gained the victory over his compeers of the Senate, is there. There is the great Apostle of Temperance from the Emerald Isle, in his white neckcloth and long black surtout, with his eye beaming benevolence. There, too, are the ablest divines of this favored land, and a whole army of missionaries, some venerable in years, covered with the scars of a hard and protracted warfare; others, glowing in the fervor of a youthful and unexhausted enthusiasm, looking down upon you with earnest eyes and seeming to speak with eloquent voices in behalf of the thronging millions of other lands, perishing for lack of vision and a voice divine to guide them in the way of life. If the galleries of other artists are adorned with the portraits of "*Illustrious Americans*" who have figured sublimely and successfully in the Senate and on the field; in addition to these, the Gallery of Mr. Lawrence is adorned with the real and life like portraiture of men, who are illustrious champions on the moral arena, and are battling hard and hero-like for the recovery of a world! No one can view them, with their companions by their side, with all the earnest love and piety of woman expressed in a face hallowed by prayer, without a fresh impulse to usefulness and virtue.

Mr. Lawrence has now reached his 43d year and the 9th of his artistic life. His course has been onward and upward, yet noiseless and unobtrusive. He has never sounded a trumpet before him, as have others, in the corners of the streets to attract the ears of men; but his success has been the result of his own quiet genius, blended with great application and energy of character.

When frequently asked, why he did not advertise? his uniform reply has been, "I prefer to write my own advertisements on well-prepared and polished plates." This has been his undeviating course—a course in beautiful harmony with his natural modesty and diffidence of character—a course, too, which has secured for him a reputation more durable than the plates of metal which reflect alike the genius of the artist, and the exact portraiture of his myriad patrons and friends.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This article is the second 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;¹ S. J. Burr, "Gabriel Harrison and the Daguerrean Art," 1:3 (March 1851): 169–77;² J. P. Kidder, "Augustus Morand and the Daguerrean Art," 1:4 (April 1851): 237–39;³ A. D. Cohen, "George S. Cook and the Daguerrean Art," 1:5 (May 1851): 285–87;⁴ R. W. Keyes, "Luther Holman Hale and the Daguerrean Art," 1:6 (June 1851): 357–59;⁵ M. Grant, "John A. Whipple and the Daguerrean Art," 2:2 (August 1851) 94–95;⁶ J. W. Tracy, "D. D. T. Davie; First President of the Association of Daguerreotypists," 2:3 (September 1851): 164–65.⁷

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.⁸

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.⁹

The author refers to Lawrence having "made arrangements with one of the best artists in this country." In 1849, Gabriel Harrison became Lawrence's principal operator.¹⁰ It was Harrison's "descriptive" daguerreotype, "Past, Present, and Future," that won a prize for Lawrence at the 1851 London Crystal Palace. See also Gabriel Harrison, "Crystal Palace Daguerreotypes vs: The New York Tribune," *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 6:3 (September 1853): 194–5.¹¹

The last paragraph of the text infers that Lawrence never advertised. Lawrence indeed advertised in newspapers, periodicals, and other publications. See various advertisements in A. D. Jones, *The Illustrated American Biography; containing Correct Portraits and Brief Notices of the Principal Actors in American History* (New York: J. Milton Emerson & Co., 1853, 1854, 1855).¹²

With reasonable certainty, Lawrence (wearing a short hat) is part of the ensemble in the well-known tableaux daguerreotype, "California News."¹³ Gabriel Harrison, Harrison's son, and a fourth sitter are also featured.¹⁴

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510010_BRADY_PAJ_1851-01.pdf
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510012_HARRISON_PAJ_1851-03.pdf
3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510014_MORAND_PAJ_1851-04.pdf
4. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510011_COOK_PAJ_1851-05.pdf
5. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510009_HALE_PAJ_1851-06
6. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510015_WHIPPLE_PAJ_1851-08
7. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510016_DAVIE_PAJ_1851-09
8. *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 1:5 (May 1851): 319
9. *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 2:5 (November 1851): 319.
10. S. J. Burr, "Gabriel Harrison and the Daguerrean Art," *Photographic Art-Journal* 1:3 (March 1851): 175. (http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510012_HARRISON_PAJ_1851-03.pdf)
11. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8530001_HARRISON_PHOTO_ART-JOURNAL_1853-09.pdf
12. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/research/R0080001_RESEARCH_ILLUST_ADVERT_ANNUALS.pdf
13. <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/286059>
14. See blog dated 1 February 2015. <http://antiquecameras.net/blog.html>

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