

M. Grant, "John A. Whipple and the Daguerrean Art," August 1851

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ENGRAVED EXPRESSLY FOR THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ART JOURNAL.

J. A. WHIPPLE. Digitized by Google

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JOHN A. WHIPPLE AND THE DAGUERREAN ART.

BY M GRANT.

WE are unable to present more than a brief sketch of the life of this young and talented Daguerreotypist, to the readers of the Art-Journal. It is rather a delicate matter to handle such subjects while the individual thus designated is still alive among us. Yet the eminent success which has attended the efforts of this gentleman in his profession, and the world-wide reputation he has attained in a few years as a chemist and artist is so truly surprising, that it would be doing injustice both to him and the glorious art to which he has devoted himself, did we not record to the world his indefatigable exertions toward the success of the Daguerreotype. Mr. Whipple is a native of Grafton, Mass., and is now in the twenty-eighth year of his age. At school, in early youth, nothing delighted him more than the study of chemistry. Instead of spending his money—as most boys do—in toys and marbles, it was employed in procuring materials for chemical experiments; and this much to the annoyance of his family, who considered it foolishly thrown away. But far from it. Natural genius prompted him to investigation, and natural genius (whatever the learned blacksmith may say to the contrary) produced a glorious result. When the first account of the Daguerrean discovery reached this country, but a short time elapsed before he tested it. The greatest proof of genius, is said to be, “doing things with nothing to do with.” With a sun glass for a lens, a candle box for a camera, and the handle of a silver spoon as a substitute for a plate, the work was accomplished—the first Daguerreotype produced that the sun broke upon in that part of the country.

At the age of eighteen, he left his country home, to seek his fortune in the city—being quite young and not overburdened with fortunes’ favors. One day, calling at a philosophical instrument makers, he met a gentleman inquiring for Chloride of Iodine, for which he had in vain searched the city: no one seeming to know anything about it. Mr. Whipple immediately proposed to make him some; an offer which was gladly accepted. The use of this article was then thought to be a great discovery in the art. In a few hours it was prepared and delivered. The money paid was the first received for chemical knowledge. From this time he manufactured for the Daguerreotype artists all the chemicals used in the art—making good profits; but finding his health suffering from the fumes of the various chemicals, he now devoted his time entirely to taking miniatures—with this very great advantage, an intimate knowledge of all the substances used, which soon appeared in his productions—always giving his visitors such portraits as he would have been willing, to present to his own personal friends. Very soon the names “Whipple and Daguerreotype” were associated with all that was excellent in the art. Not satisfied with the vast amount of manual labor expended in the mere mechanical part, viz: the preparation of the silver surface to receive the impressions, the idea suggested itself, “Why not apply power to this as well as other branches of business?” A small steam engine was purchased, and put in operation with complete success. One person to attend the machinery was required, and any number of plates could be prepared at the shortest notice, with more uniformity than by hand; for large plates it was found almost indispensable. With the steam he brings out his pictures, heats his rooms in winter, and cools them in summer by means of an ingeniously constructed fan.

With this great acquisition, a sufficient supply of plates that could be depended upon, he was enabled to apply all his energy to that interesting and most difficult feature of the art, grouping; which is the true test of the artists skill,—and with what success his works show. It is admitted by all who have an opportunity for judging, that in this branch, he unquestionably stands at the head of his profession.

The beautiful and popular crayon Daguerreotypes (showing the head and bust only) which bids fair, with persons of taste, to supercede all others; owes its origin to Mr. Whipple. He devoted many months of close study and experiment to produce it, but finally it was accomplished by the most simple means. A patent was granted him, for this, by the U. S. Commissioner; also another for taking Daguerreotypes on Glass.

But Mr. Whipple has not confined himself alone to Daguerreotyping the “human face divine.” He has applied his favorite art to reveal the wonders of the world around us, and the beauties of the celestial hemisphere. By his skill, the microscope is made to print the most delicate tissue of the tiniest animalculae upon the silver plate, so that what was before so fleeting and uncertain, has become a fixed fact for the naturalist to study at his leisure.

After encountering great difficulties, he finally succeeded in daguerreotyping the moon, through the large Equatorial telescope at the Cambridge Observatory. These daguerreotypes are now exciting great interest in Europe. The Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences has highly complimented Mr. Whipple for his great skill shown in these wonderful productions. With a person of such indomitable energy of character—such perseverance and innate talent as Mr. Whipple, nothing is impossible which the mind of man is capable of attaining.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Additional information regarding Whipple is found in Sally Pierce, *Whipple and Black: Commercial Photographers in Boston* (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1987). See also a contemporary account regarding Whipple in John Werge, *The Evolution of Photography* (London: Piper & Carter, 1890): 52–53.¹

This article is the seventh 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 R. W. Keyes, “Luther Holman Hale and the Daguerrean Art,” 1:6 (June 1851): 357–59;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

Regarding Whipple's use of steam, see J. A. Whipple, "Preparing Plates by Steam," *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) Vol. 3, No. 5 (May 1852): 271–272.¹¹

Whipple's daguerreotype of the moon won a prize medal at the 1851 "Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations." See *Reports by the Juries* (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1852): 277.

1. http://daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8900001_WERGE_EVOL_PHOTOG_1890.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
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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://daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8520001_WHIPPLE-STEAM_PAJ_1852-05.pdf

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