

“American Photography,” 12 January 1856

(keywords: landscape views, itinerant daguerreotype wagons, Roger Fenton, Bisson Frères, scioptric camera, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY.

You have no idea of the magnitude of some of the establishments here, or the magnificence, in some few cases, of the furnishings and fittings, where the elite are “taken off,” at prices varying from ten to one hundred dollars, including the trimmings of a gilt frame, &c. Even the places where a Daguerreotype is advertised to be taken for a sixpence sterling, (or a shilling of our New York currency), up to as high as half-a-dollar, are, in many cases, by no means shabby. There are a very great number of places where a real good Daguerreotype can be had in a case for the half-dollar. We are not troubled with any other branch of the art than face-mapping; not that there would be no demand, but it would be requiring too great exertion from our people to have to learn how to do anything requiring a different routine to what they are accustomed to by having everything at hand in their rooms. I infer that there would be a demand for landscapes if any were offered for sale, because in the importing print stores a very large number of actinic pictures are sold, not only of the celebrated localities and buildings, such as those large prints of Bisson Freres, but of numerous unknown scenes, even without an intimation of locality beyond the beauty of the picture itself. I feel certain that prints from Mr. Fenton’s collection would sell here at very high prices, and that a summer exhibition of them in New York, ready to open on the 1st of May, would pay as well if not better than in London or Paris. The number of coloured French lithographs of the Eastern war which have been sold here, is beyond all conception, even although the government sympathy is with Russia, as is also, I am sorry to say, the mercantile. Another characteristic of the art, in this country, is the great number of establishments on wheels, which may be termed itinerarities. They generally bear the name of “saloons,” and are something of the appearance of the waggons of a menagerie in Britain, but much lighter in the wheels. They are plentiful in the thinly peopled districts, and when every body has been “taken” who are within a convenient distance of the saloon, a team of horses, oxen, or mules is hired, and paid for in pictures, as is nearly all their other expenses of living, &c., and the saloon is moved to another neighbourhood, till all the faces in that are also mapped secundum artem, when another move takes place, and the process is repeated. These perambulators are formed so that portions of the sides fall down to form a floor, in addition to the waggon bottom, and the sides-fitted up with sashes, india-rubber cloth, &c., all of which, with the steps and other “fixings,” are packed inside when travelling from one spot to another. As the body is always on springs, it is impossible to stir in one while a face is being mapped; the casual entrance of a visitor at such a time is mentally deprecated, and calls forth sundry efforts of ingenuity to stop the springs by props under

the body to bear it off them. Many of these concerns are very profitable indeed, and their cost originally, (the carriage alone), without any stock of plates, &c., is from £75 to £200 sterling. It is not every one who can manage with such customers as are most numerous at such establishments, and a peculiar tact is required to accommodate them. I made a plan for one such saloon which cost the latter sum, and the owners in two years more than paid for it, his assistants, and his own time, having a considerable sum in the bank besides. He has since sold it at a profit, and is now using a swimming Daguerrean saloon on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, on which are several other floating establishments, from the owners of two of which I have an occasional letter. These saloons also migrate like wild fowls, according to the degree of exhaustion of business in any locality, and in several cases receive their pay in any kind of produce they may require for their own use, or can dispose of. From such as these perambulating establishments many fine views might be procured, were they only to turn their attention to the subject: but the prospect of being paid for their trouble being so remote, and withal rather uncertain, they prefer the usual walk of face mapping as being by far the most available. I have often wished I was rich enough to be able to take a trip round the country on an actinic tour among the fine scenery of America, where everything is on a gigantic scale. I have even designed, or invented, whichever you may call it, a camera for the purpose of taking views on glass, which you may have seen. Three of them will receive the whole visible horizon, or 120 degrees each. I could have arranged it for 150 degrees, as in Martens, but two whole tablets and a fractional one would have been required, whereas, I thought it better to have the whole horizon in three equal parts. I term it the “Scioptric camera,” and have several times, through Humphrey’s Journal, offered to allow any one to inspect it who has ever contributed an article of any description, except an advertisement, to any scientific periodical of any kind, yet you may be assured my visitants were few, only three in all, and of these only one had a right to see it. It has taken a picture of three companies of soldiers extended in a line, and with the same trouble could have taken a regiment; the same arrangement can be adopted to a tent without a camera box, and this was the one adopted for the above view. The impression was a print, and was spoiled in the process of deepening in order to convert it into a transfer for being printed from. The size of the plate was 14 inches by 5, which was the widest the lens would cover, being only six inches focus. As it must be constructed for one lens only, a change of lenses of different foci cannot be attempted, but a camera may be made for a lens of any focal length which may be most convenient.

[End of text.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

The author of this text is not yet determined, although a search of Humphrey’s Journal for the author’s advertisements regarding the “scioptric camera” would likely yield a name. A brief introduction by John Wood accompanies a reprint of this text in *Daguerreian Annual 1993* (Green Bay: The Daguerreian Society, 1993): 158–9.

A daguerreotype of Isaac Wallace Baker and his itinerant daguerreian saloon (in the collection of the Oakland Museum of California) is viewable on the web site of *The Daguerreian Society*.¹

A fictional tale regarding an itinerant daguerreian saloon, with illustration, is found in C. A. Stephens, “That Mysterious Daguerreotype Saloon,” *Youth’s companion* (Boston) 91:19 (10 May 1917): 265–66.²

1. <http://daguerre.org/gallery/oakland/9ca.html>
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P9170002_STEPHENS_DAG-SALOON_1917-05-10.pdf

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