

R. A. C. (Robert A. Carden), "Photography in California," April 1857

(keywords: Robert A. Carden, San Francisco, Sacramento City, Robert H. Vance, James M. Ford, Samuel P. Howes, Charles F. Hamilton, 163 Clay street, Henry W. Bradley, George Robinson Fardon, 203 Clay street, Johnson Brothers, George H. Johnson, Bryan R. Johnson, 185 Clay street, William Shew, 113 Montgomery street, Isadore Deconclois, Hamilton J. May, Charles Pierce Fessenden, Henry Bush, Valentine and Case, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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For the Photographic and Fine Art Journal

PHOTOGRAPHY IN CALIFORNIA.

H. H. SNELLING, Esq.—*Dear Sir:*—Having resided in the Golden State for the past year—and been a close observer of the progress of Photography in that region—I have noted down the present style and condition of the rooms for your consideration. Perhaps they may be found interesting to your numerous readers.

In San Francisco, the Art is of course more generally practiced than in any other city or town of the State.

Mr. R. H. VANCE, corner of Montgomery and Sacramento streets, has long been established there, and has now one of the most extensive galleries in the United States. His Photographs are not in the best style of the Art, as he has devoted more special attention to the Daguerreotype and Ambrotype process. He holds the so-claimed patent for taking that style of photography from Mr. Cutting of Boston. In consequence of this exclusiveness claimed by Mr. Vance, there has been a violent opposition, and many threats of prosecution on his part against his brother Artists for alleged infringements. The recent decision in the New York courts had in the case of Tomlinson agst. Battelle, will serve to quiet the fears of the fraternity in San Francisco. Ambrotypes will there as here, have their full share of public patronage, and attain that perfection which they have in New York and elsewhere.

Mr. VANCE'S Gallery is comprised in a suit of fourteen rooms, which are elegantly and tastefully fitted up with considerable expense. Having been long established, his patronage is at least as much as any other Gallery, if indeed it may not excel all others.

The next Gallery in importance, is the one recently occupied by Mr. J. M. FORD, corner of Clay and Kearney streets, but now just opened by Mr. S. P. HOWES. Mr. Ford has heretofore taken the best Photographs in San Francisco, and his successor will no doubt produce equal specimens of the Art, having been for a long time a successful operator for Mr. Vance. The room are just now being refitted under the immediate supervision of Mr. HOWES, who will no doubt keep up the well deserved credit of the rooms.

Mr. C. F. HAMILTON, whose rooms are located at 163 Clay street, being fitted up with much taste, though small, contains many beautiful specimens of Daguerreotypes and Ambrotypes. He has not yet practised the Photographic process, but intends to enlarge his

rooms or to locate at some other place in the city, and devote his entire attention to Ambrotypes and Photographs, when he will no doubt, with the resources at his command, excel most of the other galleries in San Francisco.

Mr. H. W. BRADLEY, corner of Clay and Kearney streets, has a small Gallery in the second story; he has heretofore sustained a valuable reputation in the Art, and should strive to be at the head of his profession; but he has allowed others with lesser means to outstrip him in the race for excellence. Yet his rooms contains many beautiful specimens of Daguerreotypes and Ambrotypes. The latter, however, have been made by an operator recently arrived from New York.

The Photographs in this Gallery are few, yet those which are exhibited possess much merit. Mr. BRADLEY should look well to his interest, and not allow other to outshine him in all the various departments of the Art.

Mr. C. R. FARDON, 203 Clay street, is engaged almost entirely in taking Photographic views—although a few Daguerreotypes adorn his walls, yet they are not good.

His views, however, of the various localities of interest in San Francisco, are beautiful specimens of the Art, and he has just published an Album, containing a complete series which are well worthy of note and commendation, and will no doubt be sought after in the Eastern cities.

The Messrs, JOHNSON BROTHERS, 185 Clay street, have some fine specimens of Daguerreotypes, which were taken in Washington City of the distinguished men in Congress. Of course those cannot be considered specimens of the Art in California. Those taken in San Francisco were evidently taken by other artists, who have had little or no experience. Their Ambrotypes are very inferior in quality, and are no doubt made by unskilful hands, and they are free to admit that such Ambrotypes are not wanted by their customers.

Mr. SHEW, whose Gallery is at No. 113 Montgomery street, has a small establishment, yet as far as it extends, is fitted up with much taste. He is contented with taking pictures at a low price, and rather may be classed amongst those operators in New York who seek to bring this beautiful Art, down to their own level, by reducing the price lower than is warranted by a due regard to propriety.

There is an opposition room so called, being kept by a brother of Mr. VANCE, corner of Clay and Montgomery street. It is in an upper story filled with nothing but new Daguerreotypes; has tried his hand at Ambrotypes, and signally failed, and now in engaged in Daguerreotypes only.

Mr. DECONCLOIS, successor to Mr. Johnston, on Clay street, has some fine specimens of Photographs brought from Whipple and Black of Boston, but his Daguerreotypes and Ambrotypes are very inferior in quality, and such Photographs as were made in San Francisco which are few in number, fall far behind the average of the specimens in other Galleries.

Messrs. MAY & FESSENDEN on Kearney street corner of Sacramento street, have a few Ambrotypes and Daguerreotypes, but they are far from being excellent. Nor do they seem to improve in the Ambrotype process. Yet their Photographs are the best in regard to quality, though they are far behind their fellow laborers in the city.

Mr. H. BUSH, on Washington street, has about five or six frames of Daguerreotypes which were once good specimens of the Art. He has attempted Ambrotypes but failed entirely, and was obliged to abandon the process.

The Photographic Art in Sacramento city, is not in so flourishing a condition as in San Francisco, as most persons who patronize the Art, are those who have friends in the Eastern States, and likenesses are wanted to transmit to these friends. They are generally forwarded by steamers, and it is quite a novelty in all the Photographic Galleries on the day previous to the departure of a steamer, to witness the strife and anxiety to procure these portraits for transshipment to the East. Indeed all the Photographers consider the day following the departure of a steamer, as a general holiday and a day of rest and tranquility.

The energies of the operators are fully taxed, to produce as many as may be wanted on these certain days before the noted event.

The Artists themselves can count with absolute certainty of a visible accession to their business on these days, and they accordingly arrange their rooms for the event. It is therefore not the least interesting portion of the life of Photographic artists in the Golden State these epochs.

The Art in California bids fair to rival the cities of the Eastern States, and it may be said with credit, that there are many who honor the profession in this once far off land.

There are some advantages possessed in that portion of the world at a certain season of the year, viz. the dry season, when a constant succession of clear weather for more than six months, can be depended upon. The peculiar clear and cloudless sky is certainly more advantageous to the practice of the Art than our uncertain weather—now rain and then sunshine. With these advantages it is not strange that there are many specimens well worthy of note, and some indeed are equal to any produced in the large cities of the Atlantic States.

The writer in his travels stopped for a few hours in Panama, when he called at the rooms of two Americans who were pursuing the Photographic Art under difficulties.

Messrs. VALENTINE & CASE were located in a very obscure portion of Panama, and were taking some of the most inferior styles of Ambrotypes ever seen.

They no doubt experienced many difficulties from the climate and water; yet their specimens possessed such a faded look, that it seemed they were about to vanish from the plate entirely. Strange enough though they were selling those miserable impressions and at good prices. There did not appear to be any competition on the Isthmus.

A good operator there would no doubt succeed, if he could withstand the changes of climate, &c., which is prevalent in that portion of the world.

There few observations are written for the special notice of your readers, and I hope no once will feel aggrieved at any remarks which have been passed on any of the rooms, for they are made in all candor and truthfulness, and written from actual observation on the very localities named herein.

Yours, most respectfully,

R. A. C.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

The author of this text is certainly Robert A. Carden, a New York city daguerreotypist who relocated to San Francisco in June 1856 and established a gallery at the corner of Clay and Kearny streets. A portrait of Carden was published in the journal in June 1856:

— OUR ILLUSTRATION.—The sketch of the promising Young Artist, whose portrait illustrates our present number, not having been received, we have to go to press without it. Mr. Carden leaves for San Francisco, Cal., on the 20th inst. We can commend him as a most excellent artist to the good people of that city.¹

Additional information regarding Carden and other daguerreotypists herein mentioned is provided in John S. Craig, *Craig's Daguerreian Registry* vol. 1 [revised edition] (Torrington: John S. Craig, 2003). See also Craig's web site, *Craig's Daguerreian Registry*.²

This text also was reprinted in "Photography in California," *American Journal of Photography* 4:10 (15 April 1857): 229–232.

Fardon's album of photographic views of San Francisco is reproduced and discussed in Rodger C. Birt [et al.], *San Francisco Album: Photographs, 1854-1856*, by George Robinson Fardon (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999).

1. *Photographic and Fine Art Journal* (New York) 9:6 (June 1856): 192.

2. <http://craigcamera.com/dag/>

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