

Shade, "My First Daguerreotype," 15 January 1859

(keywords: "Shade", "My First Daguerreotype", history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

THE DAGUERRETYPE: AN ARCHIVE OF SOURCE TEXTS, GRAPHICS, AND EPHEMERA

The research archive of Gary W. Ewer regarding the history of the daguerreotype

<http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org>

EWER ARCHIVE P8590003

Published in:

American Journal of Photography (New York) 1:16 (15 January 15 1859): 233–37.

MY FIRST DAGUERREOTYPE.

There never was anything like it. True, a multitude of "types" and "graphs" have been brought out since then, and glass and paper and iron and leather and divers vehicles have been covered with impressions, and I have seen them, but nothing ever filled my eye so completely as that first daguerreotype.

For hours I have held it, carefully noting all the soft minutiae of light and shade; and still the little rough-edged silver tablet was a joy forever, discovering some merit of complete similitude hitherto unnoted; it seemed inexhaustible, yielding new pleasure as often as consulted.

A small and pleasant village in central Indiana was the locus of this primitive achievement; the time I think, the fall of 1842. Seth, my coadjutor and compeer in the enterprise, and myself were denizens of a cosy Law Office, in the second story of an unpretending building, where we tumbled the musty tomes of legal lore, hoping in good time to make lawyers of ourselves. Seth was an artist, that is, he had wielded a pencil in his day and produced some landscapes, and even portraits which were not without merit; at least, so said the knowing ones, who pronounced him a genius undeveloped, and bewailed his aberration in reading law. At one time he had tried his hand at farming, being beguiled by the smell of new-mown hay, or more probably by the per-diem to the harvest hands, (for Seth was poor.) But that was only a temporary expedient, and he did not take kindly to association with those "whose talk was of oxen." I may mention that he afterwards turned up at New Orleans, where he verified the predictions of his quondam friends, by making a sensation in the way of landscapes and of portraits, and so the world lost a poor lawyer and gained a reputable artist.

Having an eye out for the new and curious, I had seen some time before intimations in the public prints of a wonderful French discovery in the art of portraiture, whereby it seemed quite probable there was a royal road to drawing and picture-making; and indeed, that the time was not distant, when one might look in a mirror, and leave his image sticking there. But as greater marvels have in like manner been announced and never heard of afterwards, I was disposed to regard this new wonder as belonging to the same class, until I saw another account of the mystery, and this time coupled with the more tangible statement, that the images of a camera obscura were made permanently visible, and giving a kind of outline of the method.

Seth and I talked over the new discovery for several days, determining, if possible, to verify our deductions by a practical test, and with a view to elicit all the paragraph

contained, and to obtain a more complete clue to the *modus operandi*, we tried our hand on interpretation, and by dint of different emphasis and modulation, we thought we could more completely evolve the seeming mystery. The result of this unfledged exercise of legal acumen was, that silver plates properly exposed to the vapors of iodine, and thus coated with a thin film of a yellow or golden color, became sensitive to the action of light and received the image, which could be made visible by the fumes of mercury, and rendered permanent by a wash of salt and water. There was allusion to the employment of hypo-sulphite of soda, but as this was an unattainable salt in that region, it was not to be thought of. One great obstacle in the accomplishment of this and similar enterprises in an out of the world place like that, lies in the difficulty of obtaining suitable instruments wherewith to operate. The chemicals, the mercury, the iodine and the salt were at our command, but Seth's rather abrupt inquiry as to where in thunder we should find the tools and traps to work with, was quite pertinent. However, genius overcomes all difficulties. After another day's consultation, we brightened up our optics, consulted the authorities with a view, as Seth expressed it, of "understanding the principle on which it works," and set about building a camera obscura. It was easy to see how it might be done if we only had the lens, but a plano or a double convex was scarcely to be hoped for in that locality. The possible union of two watch crystals, with water or alcohol interposed, was debated, but after an examination of a score or two of glasses belonging to a friendly jeweler, we relinquished that idea. Our next endeavor was to obtain a large sized sun glass. The general introduction of lucifer matches had rendered this article obsolete, and so we asked everybody if they knew of anybody who was the owner, in fee simple, of an old-fashioned sun-glass. Here fortune favored us, and after a few inquiries and considerable negotiation, we succeeded in dispossessing a boy of a veritable sun glass, for a sufficient consideration.

The rest was easy of accomplishment, and with the judicious employment of pocket knives, tacks, paste, and the division of labor, a cigar box was soon transformed into a camera. Our sun glass was mounted in a paste-board tube, and made adjustable. The rear end of the cigar box being left open, we made a frame to fit, over which we pasted a paper rendered semi-transparent by an artistical application of a tallow candle. This was our "ground glass." Another frame, or rather a combination of frame-work and a flat piece of cigar box, served for a "plate holder," and was nicely adapted to take the place of the ground glass when removed. A "slide" was not thought of, and as to the "chemical focus," we let that take care of itself, for the excellent reason we did not know of its existence. With a quill and the contents of the ink bottle, we blackened the inside of the camera, tube and all. So far, all was right. After a few trials, we succeeded in so adjusting our tube as to obtain quite a respectable view on the ground glass. Now for a plate. This, which we had deemed to be a matter of small moment, proved to be most difficult.

From preliminary experiments on small pieces, we felt certain we could precipitate a metallic coating of silver from the nitrate, on a copper plate, by the use of moist cream of tartar. But after preparing a copper plate of suitable dimensions, we found we could not produce a coating thick enough to bear the required polishing. A day of repeated trials and failures settled that. We therefore, at the suggestion of our friend, the jeweler, undertook to beat out a five-franc piece. This time we had the tools, and by repeated annealing and persistent hammering, we ultimately succeeded in obtaining the wished for platitude, and the head of the citizen king was extended to hydrocephalic dimensions. Then the polishing was long and tedious: but pumice, scotch gray and rouge did the business. So, after two or three days' labor, we were the proprietors of a complete

daguerreotype apparatus—that is to say, of a camera obscura, plate, the requisite chemicals, and two tin cups, to be used respectively for the iodine and mercury.

On the morning of a clear, cloudless day, we set about the first experiment. We called into requisition all the old coats, pantaloons, cloaks, &c. about the establishment, to darken the three windows of our office, leaving an accessible place in one corner of the single back window, whence we proposed to aim our camera. We were much pleased to observe that, the picture on our ground glass was much more distinct than before, though Seth still objected to its being upside down. Our plate being well polished, and affixed to the plate-holder by a few tacks, we inverted it over tin cup No. 1, containing the iodine. Not daring to admit sufficient light to determine when the gold color was produced, we concluded to make it a question of time. We accordingly exposed it five minutes, and then carefully removing the greased paper frame from the camera previously adjusted, we placed our plate in proper position in its stead, at the same time removing the blacking box cover from the end of the tube. Then came an anxious consultation as to the time required for exposure. Seth thought ten minutes sufficient; I, fifteen; and we finally compromised on twelve, and at the expiration of that time we removed it (carefully covering it with a hat to preserve it from any light,) and placed it over tin cup No. 2, containing the scrapings of a piece of looking-glass, gradually heated on the stove. After the plate had “stewed” as long as we thought best, we admitted a little light; Seth, raising it up cautiously, took a judicious peep, and protested the picture was there. Well, we removed it—took out the tacks, placed it in the salt and water a few moments, let in more light—when lo! our plate was as clean and well-polished as at first, without a trace of anything. This was a great disappointment, but we immediately set about a new trial, and with no better success. The third time we substituted real quicksilver for our looking-glass scrapings, and warmed the iodine that it might vaporize more readily. Hitherto our great anxiety had been to exclude all light, presuming very naturally that a plate sufficiently sensitive to receive the impression, must necessarily be destroyed by contact with any light, however feeble. Entertaining strong suspicion that hitherto we had had no iodine on the plate, we ventured this time to admit sufficient light to show us that we had succeeded in producing the desired golden hue. Once more the plate was in the camera, and for twenty minutes we sat down and calculated chances. It was a long twenty minutes, but it ended—our tin cup was again heated up with the real mercury, and iodine on the plate to a certainty.

“A regular built picture, by jingo!” said Seth, as we slipped it into the salt water and admitted the light. Sure enough, there it was. The iodine was slowly clearing off; and as more light was admitted we saw our miniature landscape—that old shed, with its water-stained shingles in the fore-ground, the barn yard and its carts and wagons, and even those horses—a little misty, to be sure—but that white horse was unmistakable. The building in the distance—the church and its steeple, and the leafless trees. There was a dim, hazy look about the horizon, and a sad want of what I have since learned to denominate “aerial perspective;” but Seth said that softening down of the harsh lines was decidedly artistic. To me, it seemed a realization of what I suppose everybody has thought of—the skilful combination of all the elements of that delicate frost work which we see on the windows of a cold morning into the perfect semblance of a real and familiar scene.

After repeated rinsings we dried it on the stove. I confess there was quite a crystalization of salt on the surface, and some streaks, but still there was a picture—to me an inexhaustible source of wonder and admiration. Afterwards I progressed somewhat in

the art; adopted new improvements, and took likenesses of learned lawyers, with numberless imposing looking volumes piled on the table beside them; sentimental young ladies with guitars in their hands, and beautiful boquets in the back ground; matronly ladies, with pocket handkerchiefs of table-cloth dimensions; children, with staring eyes and cork-screw faces, and love-sick swains who persisted in sitting with a huge hand placed over the region of the heart, and who brought back the picture after a few days because the heart was on the wrong side.

All these, of course, I admired exceedingly—but still, I repeat, there never was anything like that first daguerreotype!

SHADE.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

The identity of this author is unknown to this editor.

In the second paragraph, that author comments about the daguerreotype's ability in "yielding new pleasure as often as consulted." This quality of a daguerreotype is appreciated by a later writer:

Good artists hate good photographs, where every object on the field is reproduced with wonderful distinctness; but will go into raptures over an under-timed one, in which the high lights break weirdly out from broad masses of shadow; or an over-timed one wherein light and atmosphere have saturated everything to grayness. In their weariness of the perfect photograph, we have even known them to suggest a return to the old daguerreotype, which does not tell all it knows at once.

—Harry L. A. Culmer, "Mountain Art," *Overland Monthly* (San Francisco) 24:142 (October 1894): 345–346.

EWER ARCHIVE P8590003

URL: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8590003_SHADE_FIRST-DAG_AM-JOURN-PHOT_1859-01-15.pdf

Document author: Gary W. Ewer

Creation date: 2009-04-20 / Last revision (proofread/edit): 2010-07-19

Citation information: *American Journal of Photography* (New York) 1:16 (15 January 15 1859): 233–37.

Prepared from: photocopy from microfilm.

Original spelling/punctuation/grammar generally maintained without correction. Any in-text corrections are bracketed.

The *source text* is Public Domain and may be freely quoted. As noted below, this document is copyright.

If citing directly from this document, please reference the Ewer Archive number and provide the following citation credit:

Gary W. Ewer, ed., *The Daguerreotype: an Archive of Source Texts, Graphics, and Ephemera*, <http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org>

THE NECESSARY DISCLAIMERS:

The document creator has made every effort to insure the accuracy of the transcription. However, the information provided in this document is provided without warranty, either express or implied. The document creator will not be liable for any damages caused or alleged to be caused directly, indirectly, incidentally, or consequentially by the information provided by this text.

The document creator assumes no responsibility for accuracy of fact; the text is prepared "as found." Factual inaccuracies of the original text are generally **not** noted by the document creator. If this text is used in academic papers, accuracy should be confirmed by consulting original sources.

The document creator also assumes no responsibility regarding the correctness, suitability, or safety of any chemical or photographic processes that may be described by this text. Many of the chemicals used in early photographic processes are extremely toxic and should not be handled without a *thorough* knowledge of safe use.

The opinions expressed in this text are solely those of the original author and are not necessarily those of the Archive editor. Some texts may contain derogatory words. Any such word is certainly one that would not be used today. The words remain in the transcription, however, to maintain truthfulness to the original text.

© 2009, Gary W. Ewer. <http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org>
