

Virginia Penny, "The Employments of Women," 1863

(keywords: Virginia Penny, John William Draper, ivorytype, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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Virginia Penny, *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopaedia of Woman's Work* (Boston: Walker, Wise, & Company, 1863): 53–55, 90–94. The text appears under the header, "Artistic Pursuits, and Employments Connected with the Fine Arts."

44. Daguerreans. The process consists in concentrating the light of the sun on a metal plate, so prepared by chemicals as to retain the impression of an image that falls upon it. The shadow catcher has become almost interwoven with the every-day realities of life. Prof. Draper speaks of daguerreotyping as introducing a beautiful work, in which, "the fair sex may engage without compromising a single delicate quality of woman's nature." Some artists, not content with moving in the ordinary way from place to place, have cars built that roll on wheels and are drawn by horses. The daguerrean sleeps in his little home, and, on the road, far away from a good tavern, can even do his own cooking, or have it done, in his car. The business has also been carried on by men in small boats, floating down rivers and stopping at villages and farm houses. It requires taste and judgment both to make an operator and to color. Colorers of photographs could, if skillful and constantly employed, earn \$30 a week in large cities. An operator, if busy, works from 9 to 5 o'clock in winter. A wonderful improvement has taken place in the daguerrean art since its discovery. A lady daguerrean and photographer writes me: "Ladies are employed in the business as operators, and to superintend; also to repaint and retouch photographs. With care in the use of chemicals, I do not consider it particularly unhealthy; less so, I think, than sewing by hand or machine. No person will do well for himself, herself, or patrons, who commences business without a good knowledge of it. The time of learning will depend upon the individual's knowledge of the sciences bearing of photography, and their talent for the business. It would vary from two weeks to three months. The labor of the learner is usually given while learning, and from \$25 to \$100 besides. Spring and fall are the best seasons, summer the poorest; but there is no time during the year in which there is not something to do. I operate and superintend in my own establishment, and hire a boy only, who does chores. The principal discomforts (being usually and necessarily near the roof), the smell of chemicals (which do not unpleasantly affect any one), and the soiling of clothing, which is more unavoidable with women. The amount of business, and consequently the location, decide the profits of the business. As the business is attended with considerable expense, it is necessary, in order to make it pay, to seek a good location. It is profitable when a person is well established in a desirable location. I think ladies and children usually prefer a lady artist. Upon the whole, I think the business quite as suitable for women as men. There is generally more or less spare time, but a woman is most apt to occupy such time with fancy or reading." A daguerrean writes: "Women are sometimes employed in the reception room to receive ladies—occasionally, in the operating room. They receive from \$3 to \$8, according to

capacity and address. Men generally command better prices, because they can sometimes perform labor out of a woman's sphere, such as unpacking goods, carrying packages, and other jobs, not suitable for women. I think the business as healthy as any indoor business. It requires from six to twelve months to learn the duties of the operating room; for the reception room, from one to three weeks. Industry, patience, perseverance, shrewdness, and suavity of manners, are the necessary qualifications. Prospect for employment poor, as prices are reduced to almost nothing. All seasons are nearly alike. November and June are dull. Our women work in summer from seven A. M. to six P. M. The work averages about eight hours per day the year through. Men are superior in patience(?) and force of character. Women are easily discouraged, and liable to be petulant. In many instances, there is much running up and down stairs, which is harder on women than men. And there is too much standing for a woman's health."

84. Photographists and Colorists. Mr. F. says they would employ good lady artists, if they could get them; but ladies do not succeed so well, because they do not have such an efficient course of training—do not go through the same gradations in a preparation for the work. They mostly employ men that are foreigners to color. A colorist of photographic views for stereoscopes says he pays a lady to color for him \$6 a gross. English ladies color best. The firm with which he is connected cannot get their coloring done in New York, so have most of it done in London; and as work is cheaper, it costs them no more with the addition of transportation. At one photographic establishment in Philadelphia, the proprietor told us that several artists now devote their time to the coloring of photographs. He pays one lady at the rate of \$12 a week. She is employed on the low-priced pictures, such as are sold for \$5, exclusive of frame. The portraits range from \$75 up. The lady painter is daughter of an English artist. She works all the hours of daylight, when required—sometimes only six hours. B. has at different times encouraged and employed female artists; has never met with any one who excelled, but does not doubt they might do so if properly trained. He had a lady partner in daguerreotyping and photographing. She was very poor when she commenced, but, while engaged in it, supported herself and children, and educated them, and left \$3,000. He told me of two ladies making a handsome support by coloring photographs. His best pictures are painted by gentlemen artists. He thinks the taking of photographs not so suitable for women, because it is dirty work; that is, the nitrate of silver that gets on the fingers stains them like indelible ink—a small difficulty, I think, in the way of a woman that has a living to make. There are several ladies in Philadelphia who make their living by painting photographs. Some ladies have quitted the profession of teaching to become photographers. Ladies are sometimes employed in photographic galleries, to wait upon company, agree upon prices, deliver the work, and receive pay. For such services they are paid from \$3 to \$5 per week, according to the amount of business done. Photographers work from eight to ten hours. Some think the business unhealthy, because of the gases that arise from the combination of chemicals. Women that have had practice in drawing and painting can give a pretty and delicate touch in the coloring of photographs. L., photographist, employs two ladies to color photographs in water colors. He teaches it for \$10. A good colorist, with constant employment, can earn from \$10 to \$15 a week. He thinks there are openings in the South. Some prefer water coloring to oil, because you can see the pictures in any light. Oils are better for large pictures that you see at a distance. Painting in water colors does not pay the artist so well as painting in oils. Misses K., New

York, are busy all the time. They execute different styles of painting, but have lately found it more profitable to color photographs. They each earn from \$12 to \$15 per week coloring photographs, when busy. Their work is all brought to the house. They have had several offers to go South, and better prices than they receive in New York. Miss E., with whom I talked, thought if any ladies would learn thoroughly, and could not obtain painting to do, they could easily obtain situations as teachers of painting. I saw the wife of an artist who gives instruction in drawing and painting. She told me her husband is very conscientious and will not recommend any one to spend their time and money learning to draw and paint, if he finds they have not talent of that kind. Some people think they possess genius, and can excel in painting, even if they commence when thirty or more years of age; but it is best for an artist to commence early in life. The talent of some is developed in a shorter time than others. One may learn in three months what another could not in six. Her husband can advance an American pupil as far in two years as he did his German pupils in four. He thinks the Americans are more apt, and acquire more rapidly. She thought a lady would not find any difficulty in obtaining constant employment as a painter. Miss J., Philadelphia, has as much to do at coloring photographs as she wishes. It takes her about a day to color a small one, for which she receives \$1. For those pictures on which there is more work, the prices are higher. The painting of ivorytypes is more expensive. An ivorytype the size of a \$1 photograph would cost \$10. Most photographers send their coloring out of the establishment to be done, and pay by the piece. In several States, women have been successfully engaged as daguerreans and photograph colorers. Some have travelled through the country, stopping in various towns to carry on their business. Some knowledge of chemistry is necessary for a photographer. One photographer writes: "Women are employed in every country where there are first-class galleries. It is unhealthy in the operating rooms, on account of the acids and poisons. We pay \$4 a week to ladies to attend the show case and wait upon customers. We pay men \$6 and \$7, because they can do more by one third of the same kind of work than a woman. Any part of the business can be performed by a woman. We pay girls \$4 from the commencement. They spend eight or ten hours at the gallery, but are not employed all the time. They are as comfortable as in their own parlors receiving visitors. Ladies prefer one of their own sex in the reception room. There is always demand for superior work in our line; consequently, a prospect of employment so long as the world stands. In Syracuse, fall and winter are the most busy seasons." Mr. A. says the occupation of portrait and miniature painters is gone since the discovery of the photographer's art. He thinks ladies are as capable of arriving at great excellence as men in painting, if they will only apply themselves as closely. Their knowledge of colors probably makes them excel in that respect. He teaches photographic coloring, charging \$1 a lesson of one hour. A mechanical execution in coloring is gained in a short time, but a good photographer ought to be an experienced artist. Mr. R. told me his girls are engaged in painting and mounting. He pays one \$7 a week, and the other \$5. An individual that is bright, intelligent, and capable of rapid tuition, could learn in six months. They spend from eight to six o'clock in the gallery. They have but a few minutes recess at noon, as that is the most busy time. He prefers women for some parts of the work. Men are more powerful artists, give a better expression; women are more careful, and give a finer finish. I talked with a photographic colorist, who gives instruction to a few ladies in coloring, and employs four. He thinks women are generally better judges of colors than men, but some women never learn the shades. (I think, unless it arises from some physical defect, it is because they are not taught to distinguish colors when

children. It is difficult to teach a person the careful use of any of the senses if they are neglected in childhood.) The work requires some artistic taste. A knowledge of drawing and colors, and a good education, are essential to success. A young lady in the business should be social in her nature, and of pleasing address. I would think an artist of any kind would need the talent of drawing to the surface the soul of his or her sitter, for much of the beauty of a picture depends upon expression. Mr. G. thinks water colors neater for ladies than oil. The employment is now in its infancy. The taste for photographs is increasing. There are now one hundred engaged in the business where fifteen years ago there was but one. Photographists are usually employed from nine to six, or from eight to five. The remuneration is good when constant employment can be had. The best locality is a growing place. The business would grow up with the place. The prices paid enable ladies to obtain boarding in houses that possess the comforts, and even the luxuries of life. Summer is the dullest season, but much depends on weather. French women generally succeed well in coloring. Some English ladies, also, do well. Mr. G. gives a lady colorer \$12 a week. Mr. B., a photographer, writes: "Women are employed in my branch of art in England. I would like to find competent assistance, but have been unable to do so. The work is not unhealthy, but it is very trying to the eyes. I should think that in many respects the work would be well adapted to females, but think, from trials that I have made, that the mathematical precision of the work is a feature unfavorable to the feminine mind. Were I to find such assistance as I would be satisfied with, I would pay according to capacity and work. Thorough artistic education and natural talents are essential. In point of taste, as regards color and elegance, I think women might be superior; as regards precision and firmness of minute work, I am uncertain. It would require considerable time and patience to learn the art." One of the proprietors of a photographic establishment in Philadelphia writes: "I employ from two to four ladies in painting photographic pictures, and pay by the week from \$3 to \$6. They work eight hours a day. I pay men about twice as much, because the men, being longer at the business, work better and quicker. It requires several years' practice to gain a moderate acquaintance with this branch. It is our opinion, that women are well adapted for most branches of photographing, and for some they would be superior to men, provided always, that they bring to the work a certain degree of education, and some natural talent. We suppose the reason they are not more employed in this and similar pursuits, is, that young women of a certain degree of education, are seldom eager for any sort of employment. Besides, in this business, it requires years of earnest application to master it, and before this is accomplished, many marry. The employer feels little security in retaining a woman at the business after going through years of instruction, because in many, or most cases, they marry, and must attend to their domestic duties. With a man the reverse takes place. He becomes a better and more steady worker after marriage." "We have a great improvement in photography by its combination with lithography. By the process adopted, the object to be represented is photographed at once on the stone, and thus the intermediate operations are avoided." In times of excitement, like the present, when soldiers are going from their homes, there is much for the artists to do.

[End of selected text. The question mark (enclosed in parentheses) in the first paragraph is per original text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

By 1863 (the date of this text), few daguerreotypes were being made as other processes had come into vogue. The term, "daguerrean," continued to be used for some time and was applied to those generally in the photographic business.

See also "More Work for the Ladies," *Household Words: A Weekly Journal* (London) 6:130 (18 September 1852): 18–22.¹

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8530012_MORE-WORK_1853-09-18.pdf

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