

John Werge, "Publicity and Progress / Rambles Among the Studios of America," 1853–1854, (written 1890)

(keywords: John Werge, Jeremiah Gurney, Mathew Brady, Martin Lawrence, Samuel Root, Meade Brothers, Samuel Humphrey, Benjamin and Polson; Marcus A. Root, Dr. Bushnel, George Adams, Thomas Easterly, Platt Babbitt, John A. Whipple, James W. Black, Masury and Silsby, E. and H.T. Anthony & Co, Scovill Manufacturing Company, James A. Cutting, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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SECOND PERIOD.

PUBLICITY AND PROGRESS.

[pp. 47–54]

On leaving Sable Island I was taken to Halifax, where I waited the arrival of the Cunard steamer *Niagara*, to take me on to Boston; thence I proceeded by rail and steamer to New York, where I arrived about the end of June, 1853.

On landing in New York I only knew one individual, and not knowing how far I should have to go to find him I put up at an hotel on Broadway, but soon found that too expensive for my means, and went to a private boarding house as soon as I could.

Visiting all the leading Daguerreotypists on Broadway, I was somewhat astonished at their splendid reception rooms, and the vast number of large and excellent specimens exhibited. Their plain Daguerreotypes were all of fine quality, and free from the "buff lines" so noticeable in English work at that period; but all their attempts at colouring were miserable failures, and when I showed one of my coloured specimens to Mr. Gurney, he said, "Well, if you can colour one of my pictures like that I'll believe you;" which I soon did, and very much to his astonishment. In those days I prepared my own colours, and Mr. Gurney bought a box immediately. The principal Daguerreotypists in New York at that time were Messrs. Brady, Gurney, Kent, Lawrence, Mead [Meade—ed.] Brothers, and Samuel Root, and I called upon them all before I entered into any business arrangements, finally engaging myself to Messrs. Mead Brothers as a colourist and teacher of colouring for six months, and while fulfilling that engagement I gave lessons to several "Daguerreans," and made the acquaintance of men from all parts of the Union, for I soon obtained some notoriety throughout the States in consequence of a man named Humphrey attacking me and my colouring process in a photographic journal which bore his name, as well as in the *New York Tribune*. I replied to his attack in the columns of the *Tribune*, but I saw that he had a friend on the staff, and I did not feel inclined to continue the controversy. Mr. Humphrey knew nothing about my process, but began and continued the discussion on his knowledge of what was known as the "Isinglass Process," which

was not mine. After completing my engagements with Messrs. Mead Brothers, I made arrangements to supply the stock dealers with my prepared colours, and travel the States myself to introduce them to all the Daguerreans residing in the towns and cities I should visit.

In the principal cities I found all the Daguerreans quite equal to the best in New York, and all doing good business, and I gave lessons in colouring to most of them. In Newark I met Messrs. Benjamin and Polson; in Philadelphia, Marcus Root and Dr. Bushnel. I encountered a great many *doctors* and *professors* in the business in America. In Baltimore, Maryland—then a slave State—many of the Daguerrean owned slaves. In Washington D.C., I renewed my acquaintance with Mr. George Adams, one of the best Daguerreans in the City; and while visiting him a very curious thing occurred. One of the representatives of the South came in to have his portrait taken, and the first thing he did was to lay a revolver and a bowie knife on the table beside him. He had just come from the House of Representatives. His excuse for such a proceeding was that he had bought some slaves at the market at Alexandria, and was going to take them home that night. He was a very tall man, and when he stood up against the background his head was above it. As he wanted to be taken standing, this put Mr. Adams into a dilemma, and he asked what he should do. I thought the only thing that could be done was to move the background up and down during exposure, which we did, and so obviated the appearance of a line crossing the head.

While staying in Washington I attended one of the levees at the White House, and was introduced to President Pearce. There was no fuss or difficulty in gaining admission. I had only to present my card at the door, and the City Marshall at once led me into the room where the President, surrounded by some of his Cabinet, was waiting to receive, and I was introduced. after a cordial shake of his hand, I passed on to another saloon where there was music and promenading in mixed costumes, for most of the men were dressed as they liked, and some of the ladies wore bonnets. It was the weekly *sans ceremonie* reception. finding many of the people of Washington very agreeable and hospitable, I stayed there a considerable time. When I started on the southern journey I did intend to go on to New Orleans, but I stayed so long in Philadelphia and Washington the summer was too far advanced, and as a rather severe outbreak of yellow fever had occurred, I returned to New York and took a journey northward, visiting Niagara Falls, and going on to Canada. I sailed up the Hudson River, stopping at Albany and Troy. At the latter place I met an Englishman, named Irvine, a Daguerrean who treated me hospitably, and for whom I coloured several Daguerreotypes. He wanted me to stay with him, but that I declined. Thence I proceeded to Rochester, and there found that one of my New York pupils had been before me, representing himself as Werge the colourist, for when I introduced myself to the principal Daguerrean he told me that Werge—a very different man—had been there two or three weeks ago. I discovered who the fellow was, and that he had practised a piece of Yankee smartness for which I had no redress. From Rochester I proceeded to Buffalo, where I met with another instance of Yankee smartness of a different kind. I had sold some colours to a man there who paid me in dollar bills, the usual currency of the country, but when I tendered one of these bills for payment at the hotel, it was refused. I next offered it on board a steamboat, but there it was also declined. When I had an opportunity I returned it to the man who gave it to me, and requested him to send me a good one instead. He was honest enough to do that, and impudent enough to tell me that he knew it was bad when he gave it to me, but as I was a stranger he thought I might pass it off easily.

I next went to Niagara Falls, where it was my good fortune to encounter two very different specimens of American character in the persons of Mr. Easterly and Mr. Babbitt, who held a monopoly from General Porter to Daguerreotype the Falls and visitors. He had a pavilion on the American side of the Falls, under which his camera was in position all day long, and when a group of visitors stood on the shore to survey the Falls from that point, he took the group—without their knowledge—and showed it to the visitors before they left. In almost every instance he sold the picture at a good price; the people were generally delighted to be taken at the Falls. I need hardly say that they were all taken instantaneously, and embraced a good general view, including the American Fall, Goat Island, the Horse Shoe Fall, and the Canadian shore. Many of these views I coloured for Mr. Babbitt, but there was always a beautiful green colour on the brink of the Horse Shoe Fall which I never could match. For many years I possessed one of Mr. Babbitt's Daguerreotype views, as well as others taken by Mr. Easterly and myself, but I had the misfortune to be deprived of them all by fire. Some years after I lent them to an exhibition in Glasgow, which was burnt down, and all the exhibits destroyed. After a delightful sojourn of three weeks at Niagara Falls, I took steamer on the lower Niagara River, sailed down to Lake Ontario, and down the River St. Lawrence, shooting the Lachine Rapids, and on to Montreal.

In the Canadian City I did not find business very lively, so after viewing the fine Cathedral of Notre Dame, the mountain, and other places, I left Montreal and proceeded by rail to Boston. The difference between the two cities was immense. Montreal was dull and sleepy, Boston was all bustle and life, and the people were unlike as the cities. On my arrival in Boston, I put up at the Quincy Adams Hotel, and spent the first few days in looking about the somewhat quaint and interesting old city, hunting up Franklin Associations, and revolutionary landmarks, Bunker Hill, and other places of interest. Having satisfied my appetite for these things, I began to look about me with an eye to business, and called upon the chief Daguerreans and photographers in Boston. Messrs. Southworth and Hawes possessed the largest Daguerreotype establishment, and did an excellent business. In their "Saloon" I saw the largest and finest revolving stereoscope that was ever exhibited. The pictures were all whole-plate Daguerreotypes, and set vertically on the perpendicular drum on which they revolved. The drum was turned by a handle attached to cog wheels, so that a person sitting before it could see the stereoscopic pictures with the utmost ease. It was an expensive instrument, but it was a splendid advertisement, for it drew crowds to their saloon to see it and to sit, and their enterprise met with its reward.

At Mr. Whipple's gallery, in Washington Street, a dual photography was carried on, for he made both Daguerreotypes and what he called "crystalotypes," which were simply plain silver prints obtained from collodion negatives. Mr. Whipple was the first American photographer who saw the great commercial advantages of the collodion process over the daguerreotype, and he grafted it on the elder branch of photography almost as soon as it was introduced. Indeed, Mr. Whipple's establishment may be considered the very cradle of American photography as far as collodion negatives and silver prints are concerned, for he was the very first to take hold of it with spirit, and as early as 1853 he was doing a large business in photographs, and teaching the art to others. Although I had taken collodion negatives in England with Mawson's collodion in 1852, I paid Mr. Whipple fifty dollars to be shown how he made his collodion, silver bath, developer, printing, &c., &c., for which purpose he handed me over to his active and intelligent assistant and newly-made partner, Mr. Black. This gave me the run of the establishment, and I was

somewhat surprised to find how vast and varied were his mechanical appliances for reducing labour and expediting work. The successful practice of the Daguerreotype art greatly depended on the cleanness and highly polished surface of the silvered plates, and to secure these necessary conditions, Mr. Whipple had, with characteristic and Yankee-like ingenuity, obtained the assistance of a stem engine which not only “drove” all the circular cleaning and buffing wheels, but an immense circular fan which kept the studio and sitters delightfully cool. Machinery and ingenuity did a great many things in Mr. Whipple’s establishment in the early days of photography. Long before the Ambrotype days, pictures were taken on glass and thrown upon canvas by means of the oxyhydrogen light for the use of artists. At that early period of the history of photography, Messrs. Whipple and Black did an immense “printing and publishing” trade, and their facilities were “something considerable.” Their toning, fixing, and washing baths were almost worthy the name of vats.

Messrs. Masury and Silsby were also early producers of photographs in Boston, and in 1854 employed a very clever operator, Mr. Turner, who obtained beautiful and brilliant negatives by iron development. On the whole, I think Boston was ahead of New York for enterprise and the use of mechanical appliances in connection with photography. I sold my colours to most of the Daguerreotypists, and entered into business relations with two of the dealers, Messrs. French and Cramer, to stock them, and then started for New York to make arrangements for my return to England.

When I returned to New York the season was over, and everyone was supposed to be away at Saratoga Springs, Niagara Falls, Rockaway, and other fashionable resorts; but I found the Daguerreotype galleries all open and doing a considerable stroke of business among the cotton planters and slave holders, who had left the sultry south for the cooler atmosphere of the more northern States. The Daguerreotype process was then in the zenith of its perfection and popularity, and largely patronised by gentlemen from the south, especially for large or double whole-plates, about 16 by 12 inches, for which they paid fifty dollars each. It was only the best houses that made a feature of these large pictures, for it was not many of the Daguerreans that possessed a “mammoth tube and box”—*i.e.*, lens and camera—or the necessary machinery to “get up” such large surfaces, but all employed the best mechanical means for cleaning and polishing their plates, and it was this that enabled the Americans to produce more brilliant pictures than we did. Many people used to say it was the climate, but it was nothing of the kind. the superiority of the American Daguerreotype was entirely due to mechanical appliances. Having completed my business arrangements and left my colours on sale with the principal stock dealers, including the Scovill Manufacturing Company, Messrs. Anthony, and Levi Chapman

I sailed from New York in October 1854 and arrived in England . . .

RAMBLES AMONG THE STUDIOS OF AMERICA.

BOSTON.

[pp. 196–203]

MY impressions of America, from a photographic point of observation, were taken at two distinct periods—which I might call the two epochs of photographic history—the dry and

the wet; the first being the Daguerreotype, and the second what may be termed the present era of photography, which includes the processes now known and practised.

I take Boston as my starting point for several reasons. First, because it was the first American city I visited; secondly, it was in Boston that the change first came over photography which wrought such a revolution in the art all over the United States; thirdly and severally, in Boston I noticed many things in connection with photography which differed widely from what I had known and practised in England.

Visiting the gallery of Mr. Whipple, then in Washington Street, the busiest thoroughfare in Boston, I was struck with the very large collection of Daguerreotype portraits there exhibited, but particularly with a large display of Daguerreotypes of the moon in various aspects. I had heard of Mr. Whipple's success in Daguerreotyping the moon before I left Europe, but had no idea that so much had been achieved in lunar photography at that early date until I saw Mr. Whipple's case of photographs of the moon in many phases. Those Daguerreotypes were remarkable for their sharpness and delicacy, and the many trying conditions under which they were taken. They were all obtained at Cambridge College under the superintendance of Professor Bond, but in what manner I had better allow Mr. Whipple to speak for himself, by making an extract from a letter of his, published in *The Photographic Art Journal of America*, July, 1853. Mr. Whipple says: "My first attempt at Daguerreotyping the moon was with a reflecting telescope; the mirror was five feet focus, and seven inches diameter. By putting the prepared plate directly in the focus of the reflector, and giving it an exposure of from three to five seconds, I obtained quite distinct impressions; but owing the smallness of the image, which was only about five-eighths of an inch in diameter, and the want of clock-work to regulate the motion of the telescope, the results were very far from satisfactory.

"Having obtained permission of Professor Bond to use the large Cambridge reflector for that purpose, I renewed my experiments with high hopes of success, but soon found it no easy matter to obtain a clear, well-defined, beautiful Daguerreotype of the moon. Nothing could be more interesting than its appearance through that *magnificent* instrument: but to transfer it to the silver plate, to make something tangible of it, was quite a different thing. The "governor," that regulates the motion of the telescope, although sufficiently accurate for observing purposes, was entirely unsuitable for Daguerreotyping; as when the plate is exposed to the moon's image, if the instrument does not follow exactly to counteract the earth's motion, even to the nicety of a hair's-breadth, the beauty of the impression is much injured, or entirely spoiled. The governor had a tendency to move the instrument a little too fast, then to fall slightly behind. By closely noticing its motion, and by exposing my plates those few seconds that it exactly followed between the accelerated and retarded motion, I might obtain on or two perfect proofs in the trial of a dozen plates, other things being right. But a more serious obstacle to my success was the usual state of the atmosphere in the locality—the sea breeze, the hot and cold air commingling, although its effects were not visible to the eye; but when the moon was viewed through the telescope it had the same appearance as objects when seen through the heated air from a chimney, in a constant tremor, precluding the possibility of successful Daguerreotyping. This state of the atmosphere often continued week after week in a greater or less degree, so that an evening of perfect quiet was hailed with the greatest delight. After oft-repeated failures, I finally obtained the Daguerreotype from which the crystalotypes I send for your journal were copies; it was taken in March, 1851. The object glass only of the telescope was used. It is fifteen inches in diameter, and about

twenty-three feet focal length; the image it gives of the moon varies but little from three inches, and the prepared plate had an exposure of thirteen seconds.”

Copies of several of these “crystalotypes” of the moon I afterwards obtained and exhibited at the Photographic Exhibition in connection with the British Association which met in Glasgow in 1855. The “crystalotypes” were simply enlarged photographs, about eight or nine inches in diameter, and conveyed to the mind an excellent idea of the moon’s surface. The orange-like form and the principal craters were distinctly marked. Indeed, so much were they admired as portraits of the moon, that one of the savans bought the set at the close of the exhibition.

Mr. Whipple is still a successful practitioner of our delightful art in the “Athens of the Western World,” and has reaped the reward of his continuity and devotion to his favourite art. The late decision of the American law courts on the validity of Mr. Cutting’s patent for the use of bromides in collodion must have laid Mr. Whipple under serious liabilities, for he used bromo-iodized negative collodion for iron development as far back as 1853.

There were many other professional photographers in the chief city of Massachusetts; but I have described the characteristics of the principal and oldest concerns. Doubtless there are many new ones since I visited the city where Benjamin Franklin served his apprenticeship as a printer; where the “colonists” in 1773, rather than pay the obnoxious “tea tax,” pitched all the tea out of the ships into the waters of Boston Bay, and commenced that long struggle against oppression and unjust taxation which eventually ended in severing the North American Colonies from the mother country. With the knowledge of all this, it is the more surprising that they should now so quietly submit to what must be an obnoxious and troublesome system of taxation; for, not only have photographers to pay an annual licence of about two guineas for carrying on their trade, but also to affix a government stamp on each picture sent out, which is a further tax of about one penny on each. Surely the patience of our brother photographers on the other side of the Atlantic must be sorely tried, what with the troubles of their business, the whims and eccentricities of their sitters, Mr. Cutting’s unkind cut, and the prowling visitation of the tax-collector.

NEW YORK

WHAT a wonderful place New York is for photographic galleries! Their number is legion, and their size is mammoth. Everything is “mammoth.” Their saloons” are mammoth. Their “skylights” are mammoth. Their “tubes,” or lenses, are mammoth. Their “boxes,” or cameras, are mammoth; and *mammoth* is the amount of business that is done in some of those “galleries.” The “stores” of the dealers in photographic “stock” are mammoth; and the most mammoth of all is the “store” of Messrs. E. & H. T. Anthony, on Broadway. This establishment is one of the many palaces of commerce on that splendid thoroughfare. The building is of iron, tall and graceful, of the Corinthian order, with Corinthian pilasters, pillars, and capitals. It is five storeys high, with a frontage of about thirty feet, and a depth of two hundred feet, running right through the “block” from Broadway to the next street on the west side of it. This is the largest store of the kind in New York; I think I may safely say, in either of the two continents, east or west, containing a stock of all sorts of photographic goods, from “sixpenny slides” to “mammoth tubes,” varying in aggregate value from one-hundred-and-fifty thousand to two hundred thousand dollars. The heads of the firm are most enterprising, one taking the

direction of the commercial department, and the other the scientific and experimental. Nearly all novelties in apparatus and photographic requisites pass through this house into the hands of our American *confreres* of the camera, and not unfrequently find their way to the realms of Queen Victoria on both sides of the Atlantic.

When the *carte-de-visite* pictures were introduced, the oldest and largest houses held aloof from them, and only reluctantly, and under pressure, took hold of them at last. Why, it is difficult to say, unless their very small size was too violent a contrast to the mammoth pictures they were accustomed to handle. Messrs. Rockwood and Co., of Broadway, were the first to make a great feature of the *carte-de-visite* in New York. They also introduced the "Funnygraph," but the latter had a very short life.

In the Daguerreotype days there was a "portrait factory" on Broadway, where likenesses were turned out as fast as coining, for the small charge of twenty-five cents a head. The arrangements for such rapid work were very complete. I had a dollar's worth of these "factory" portraits. At the desk I paid my money, and received four tickets, which entitled me to as many sittings when my turn came. I was shown into a waiting room crowded with people. The customers were seated on forms placed round the room, sliding their way to the entrance of the operating room, and answering the cry of "the next" in much the same manner that people do at our public baths. I being "the next," at last went into the operating room, where I found the operator stationed at the camera, which he never left all day long, except occasionally to adjust a stupid sitter. He told the next to "Sit down" and "Look thar," focussed, and, putting his hand into a hole in the wall which communicated with the "coating room," he found a dark slide ready filled with a sensitised plate, and putting it into the camera, "exposed," and saying "That will dew," took the dark slide out of the camera, and shoved it through another hole in the wall communicating with the mercury or developing room. This was repeated as many times as I wanted sittings, which he knew by the number of tickets I had given to a boy in the room, whose duty it was to look out for "the next," and collect the tickets. The operator had nothing to do with the preparation of the plates, developing, fixing, or finishing of the picture. He was responsible only for the "pose" and "time," the "developer," checking and correcting the latter occasionally by crying out "Short" or "Long" as the case might be. Having had my number of "sittings," I was requested to leave the operating room by another door which opened into a passage that led me to the "delivery desk," where, in a few minutes, I got all my four portraits fitted up in "matt, glass, and preserver,"—the pictures having been passed from the developing room to the "gilding" room, thence to the "fitting room" and the "delivery desk," where I received them. Thus they were all finished and carried away without the camera operator ever having seen them. Three of the four portraits were as fine Daguerreotypes as could be produced anywhere. Ambrotypes, or "Daguerreotypes on glass," as some called them, were afterwards produced in much the same manufacturing manner.

There were many other galleries on Broadway: Canal Street; the Bowery; the Avenues, 1, 2 and 3; A. B. and C, Water Street; Hudson Street, by the shipping, &c. the proprietors of which conducted their business in the style most suited to their "location" and the class of customers they had to deal with; but in no case was there any attempt at that "old clothesman"—that "Petticoat Lane"—style of touting and dragging customers in by the collar. All sorts of legitimate modes of advertising were resorted to—flags glyng out of windows and from the roofs of houses; handsome show cases at the doors; glowing advertisements in the newspapers, in prose and verse; circulars freely distributed among

the hotels, &c; but none of that “have your picture taken” annoying, and disreputable style adopted by the cheap and common establishments in London.”

Unhappily, “Sunday trading” is practiced more extensively in New York than in London. Nearly all but the most respectable galleries are open on Sundays, and evidently do a thriving trade. The authorities endeavoured to stop it frequently, by summoning parties and inflicting fines, but it was no use. The fines were paid, and Sunday photography continued.

The “glass houses” of America differ entirely from what we understand by the name here; indeed, I never saw such a thing there, either by chance, accident, or design—for chance has no “glass houses” in America, only an agency; there are no accidental glass houses, and the operating rooms built by design are not “glass houses” at all.

The majority of the houses in New York and other American cities are built with nearly flat roofs, and many of them with lessening storeys from front to back, resembling a flight of two or three steps. In one of these roofs, according to circumstances, a large “skylight” is fixed, and pitched usually at an angle of 45°, and the rooms, as a rule, are large enough to allow the sitter to be placed anywhere within the radius of the light, so that any effect or any view of the face can easily be obtained.

[End of selected text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

In a review of this title in *Popular Science Monthly* (New York) 39:21 (July 1891): 415–16, the reviewer comments that “the recollections and sketches are sprightly.”

A variant of this text was published previously as a two part article. See J. Werge, “Rambles Among the Studios of America.—Boston,” *Photographic News: A Weekly Record of the Progress of Photography* (London) 10: 391 (2 March 1866): 101–103; “Rambles Among the Studios of America.—New York,” 10:397 (13 April 1866): 171–73.

An earlier, briefer summary by Werge is found in John Werge, *Photography: Its Origin, Progress and Practice. A Lecture Delivered before the Lewisham and Blackheath Scientific Association* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, & Co., 1880).

The “portrait factory” on Broadway refers to the gallery of Silas Holmes / Rees & Co. which occupied the space at 289 Broadway. A promotional pamphlet for Rees & Co. provides a similar description of the gallery operation.¹

1. *Daguerreotype Directory, Reese & Co's German system of Photography and picture Making, No. 289 Broadway, New York* (New York: Oliver & Brother, Steam Job Printers, 1854): 22. (Please note the incorrect spelling of the last name, which is correctly spelled “Rees.”)

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