

Walt Whitman, "Visit to Plumbe's Gallery," 2 July 1846

(keywords: John Plumbe Jr., Walt Whitman, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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VISIT TO PLUMBE'S GALLERY

AMONG the 'lions' of the great American metropolis, New York City, is the Picture Gallery at the upper corner of Murray street and Broadway, commonly known as *Plumbe's Daguerreotype establishment*. Puffs, etc., out of the question, this is certainly a great establishment! You will see more *life* there—more variety, more human nature, more artistic beauty, (for what created thing can surpass that masterpiece of physical perfection, the human face?) than in any spot we know of. The crowds continually coming and going—the fashionable belle, the many distinguished men, the idler, the children—these alone are enough to occupy a curious train of attention. But they are not the first thing. To us, *the pictures* address themselves before all else.

What a spectacle! In whatever direction you turn your peering gaze, you see naught but human faces! There they stretch, from floor to ceiling—hundreds of them. Ah! what tales might those pictures tell if their mute lips had the power of speech! How romance then, would be infinitely outdone by *fact*. Here is one now—a handsome female, apparently in a bridal dress. She was then, perhaps, just married. Her husband has brought her to get her likeness; and a fine one he must have had, if this is a correct duplicate of it. Is he *yet* the same tender husband? Another, near by, is the miniature of an aged matron, on whose head many winters have deposited their snowy semblance. But what a calm serene bearing! How graceful she looks in her old age!

Even as you go in by the door, you see the withered features of a man who has occupied the proudest place on earth: you see the bald head of John Quincy Adams, and those eyes of dimmed but still quenchless fire. There too, is the youngest of the Presidents, Mr. Polk. From the same case looks out the massive face of Senator Benton. Who is one of his nearest neighbors? No one less than the Storm-King of the piano, De Meyer. Likewise Chancellor Kent and Alexander H. Everett.

Persico's statuary of the drooping Indian girl, and the male figure up-bearing a globe, is in an adjoining frame, true as the marble itself. Thence, too, beams down the Napoleon-looking oval face of Ole Bull, with his great dreamy eyes. Among the others in the same connection, (and an *odd* connection, enough!) are Mrs. Polk, her niece Miss Walker, Marble the comedian, Mayor Mickle, George Vandenhoff, Mrs. Tyler, and Mr. Buen, a most venerable white-haired ancient, (we understand, just dead!) On another part of the wall, you may see Mrs. J. C. Calhoun, the venerable Mesdames Hamilton and Madison, and Miss Alice Tyler. There, also, are Mike Walsh—Robert Owen, with his shrewd Scotch face, but benevolent look—Horace Greeley—the "pirate" Babe—Grant

Thorborn—Audubon, the ornithologist, a fiery-eyed old man and Mr. Plumbe himself. Besides these, of course, are hundreds of others. Indeed, it is little else on all sides of you, than a great legion of human faces—human eyes gazing silently but fixedly upon you, and creating the impression of an immense Phantom concourse—speechless and motionless, but yet *realities*. You are indeed in a new world—a peopled world, though mute as the grave. We don't know how it is with others, but we could spend days in that collection, and find enough enjoyment in the thousand human histories, involved in those daguerreotypes.

There is always, to us, a strange fascination, in portraits. We love to dwell long upon them—to infer many things, from the text they preach—to pursue the current of thoughts running riot about them. It is singular what a peculiar influence is possessed by the *eye* of a well-painted miniature or portrait.—It has a sort of magnetism. We have miniatures in our possession, which we have often held, and gazed upon the eyes in them for the half-hour! An electric chain seems to vibrate, as it were, between our brain and him or her preserved there so well by the limner's cunning. Time, space, both are annihilated, and we identify the semblance with the reality.—And even more than that. For the strange fascination of looking at the eyes of a portrait, sometimes goes beyond what comes from the real orbs themselves.

Plumbe's beautiful and multifarious pictures all strike you, (whatever their various peculiarities) with their *naturalness*, and the *life-look* of the eye—that soul of the face! In all his vast collection, many of them thrown hap-hazard, we notice not one that has a dead eye. Of course this is a surpassing merit. Nor is it unworthy of notice, that the building is fitted up by him in *many ranges of rooms*, each with a daguerrian operator; and not merely as one single room, with one operator, like other places have. The greatest emulation is excited; and persons or parties having portraits taken, retain exclusive possession of one room, during the time.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This text is commonly attributed to Walt Whitman, then-editor of the paper. Also cited in Cleveland Rodgers and John Black, edit., *The Gathering of The Forces by Walt Whitman*, vol. 2, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920): 113–7.

Available on the NYPL Digital Gallery web site is quarter-plate daguerreotype of Whitman.¹ Usually attributed to Gabriel Harrison, this portrait has long been oft called Whitman's "Christ" portrait.²

Also available on the NYPL Digital Gallery web site is a steel engraving by Hollyer after a daguerreotype by Gabriel Harrison, with hand notation: "W W from life one hot July forenoon 1855 Brooklyn NY." This portrait of Whitman serves as the frontispiece to the 1855 (first) edition of *Leaves of Grass*.³

A self-portrait of Plumbe is included in John Plumbe, Jr., *The National Plumbeotype Gallery* (Philadelphia, National Publishing Co., 1847). The portrait is viewable on the website of The Smithsonian Institute's National Portrait Gallery.⁴

Additional information regarding Plumbe is found in John Hannavy, edit., *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography* vol. 2, (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008): 1138–9; Davis Hudson and Marvin Bergman, *The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008).

1. <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?427882>

2. Henry Bryan Binns, *A Life of Walt Whitman* (London: Methuen & Co., 1905): 67.
3. <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?427866>
4. <http://npgportraits.si.edu/> (portrait accessed via CAP Portrait Search using the reference number NPG.78.84.A)

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