

“Mr. Bogardus Retires,” 14 November 1887

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MR. BOGARDUS RETIRES.

HE HAS TAKEN A GREAT MANY PICTURES, AND IS TIRED AND RICH.

**Horace Greeley’s Letter Approving of his Daguerreotype—Great Men Who Have
Sat for Their Pictures—Progress of Art.**

Near half a century ago it was learned in this country that Daguerre, a Frenchman, had succeeded by the aid of light and certain chemicals in securing an impression of the human face. It took so long to affect this, however, that the sitter was compelled to keep his eyes closed during the process, which made two fat men or two thin ones look so much like each other that the achievement was not considered a big success. It was enough to arouse some scientific men in this country, and Prof. Draper, Samuel F. B. Morse and Chilton, the chemist went to work, and soon made the old-fashioned daguerreotype a popular institution.

In September, 1846, this process of taking pictures was new and wonderful. It praises were sung all over the country, and the few men who were then engaged in it were looked upon as artists who were worthy of being ranked with the greatest painters of any age. A few men there were who taught the art, but their terms were high. It cost \$50, which was a big sum at that time, to learn the art. This sum guaranteed perfection and a complete set of apparatus, consisting of a quarter-size camera and stand with three legs, two coating boxes, a mercury bath, a hand buff, and a clasp to hold the plate while being buffed. Among the professors at that time was one George W. Prosch, who had as a pupil a tall slim young man. He proved to be an apt scholar, and in two weeks he was pronounced efficient. He started in business for himself, and the sign over his door bore the name of Abraham Bogardus. The name is well known now, for Mr. Bogardus is one of the few men who kept march with the improved methods of taking pictures, and is now on the eve of retiring with much fame and a big fortune.

His first gallery was at Barclay and Greenwich streets, where he began business in 1846. Mr. Bogardus has probably photographed more distinguished Americans than any other man in the business. Among them are Gens, Kilpatrick, Burnside, Scholfield, Butterfield, Dix, and Anderson, whose pictures he took in 1865. Horace Greeley acknowledged his proficiency in this letter, dated May 16, 1872:

“Your imperial photograph, just received, is considered by my friends and regarded by me as one of the best, probably the very best, ever yet made of yours truly.

“HORACE GREELEY.”

Mr. Bogardus's scrap and signature book contains mementoes from these gentlemen, who were among his customers: Senators Hoar, Anthony, and Cameron; Admirals Porter and Farragut; Richard A. Proctor, the astronomer; Chang, the Chinese giant; Tom Thumb and wife, Henry Ward Beecher, Joseph Cook, Ole Bull, Prof. Morse, William Cullen Bryant, Mayor Hewitt, Wendell Phillips, James G. Blaine, Bayard Taylor, Samuel Downing, a veteran of the Revolutionary war, whose picture was taken in April, 1865, when he was 104 years old; James A. Garfield, Chester A. Arthur, P. T. Barnum, Robert G. Ingersoll, Thurlow Weed, Capt. F. Lahrbush, who said he was 107 years old when his picture was taken in 1860; Eng and Chang Bunker, the Siamese twins, and Paul B. Du Chaillu, the famous traveller.

The morning after A. T. Stewart died Mr. Bogardus was sent to take his picture for Bierstadt, the artist, who was engaged to paint his portrait. The undertaker's assistants stood the casket, containing the body, on a steep slant, so that the face was plainly visible and the picture was taken.

Bernard Fiery, a murderer, was photographed in the Tombs three days before he was hanged. He was brought out of his cell and placed in a bar of sunlight that fell through a grated window.

In 1880 Mr. Bogardus photographed J. M. Matthews, who was one of the passengers on the steamboat John Fitch when she labored painfully away from the Battery amid the jeers of a ribald crowd, in order to see whether a vessel really could be propelled by steam. He took the picture of A. R. Norton, an editor of Dallas, Texas, in 1885. Mr. Norton's hair reached his waist, as did his beard, while his moustache was long enough to wrap about his ears. He had made a vow, during the Henry Clay campaign, that he would never again cut his hair or shave until Mr. Clay was President.

William H. Vanderbilt wanted a picture taken in order to secure an engraving for his bank checks, and Mr. Bogardus took it for him. The friends of Jay Gould were anxious to have a photograph of him, but the little man always said he was too busy to spare the time. He was finally induced to visit Mr. Bogardus's gallery by his son George, and his photograph was taken.

The photograph taken by Mr. Bogardus of Gen. Hancock was such an excellent one that it was chosen for the engraving on the new two-dollar bills.

Mr. Bogardus is a tall, stoutly built man, with a long white beard and a philanthropic expression. He is modest about his own ability, but talked freely regarding the difficulties that beset the path of those who started in the business during the days of the daguerreotype. He explained how the work was done, and the rapidity of the improvements that have finally crowded all of the old-style methods out of existence.

The daguerreotype was a fickle jade and turned rusty the minute the sun grew dim or was flirting with a cloud. The brightest light was necessary, and frequently a patient customer sat stiff and prim in his chair with his head wedged in the iron rest, and his eyes staring hard and fast at the camera for several minutes, only to learn that there wasn't the faintest impression on the plate and that he would have to do it all over again. Sometimes three or four trials failed to produce any result, and the customer was sent away with orders to call again some other day. All the work was done with side lights, for there was only one building in the city that had a skylight. The necessity of an upper light soon grew apparent, and in a few years every daguerreotypist had one. The work was done by the aid of a plate with a silver surface that had to be subjected to the vapors of iodine and bromine. They were developed over heated mercury. If the weather was not just right the chemicals refused to work, and business had to be suspended while the daguerreotypers

held a conference, and after a heated discussion solemnly resolved that something was the matter with the chemicals. It took nearly two years to work them into a more faithful mood, and it was in the latter part of 1848 before any person could be certain of getting a picture of himself on the first trial.

The question of taking pictures in colors was started at this time by a man named Hill, and it has been agitating the profession ever since without advancing an inch. The business soon spread out, and a brisk rivalry ensued between the men engaged in it. The man who hadn't a skylight displayed a very small picture of two men sparring, and over it in big letters was the legend, "Skylark Pictures." Few of the daguerreotypers were proficient, and the art was so little known that almost any excuse was valid for a poor picture. A picture of one man had a big streak across it, and he wanted to know what that was. He was pacified by the statement that it was the impression of a wire out in the street.

"When the announcement was made," said Mr. Bogardus, "that impressions could be taken on glass and copies made to an unlimited number, everybody was astounded. One by one the daguerreotypers attempted the paper picture, but they were sorry looking things as compared with the work of to-day. A friend of mine showed me a carte-de-visite. It represented the full figure of a man standing by a fluted column, with the head about twice the size of the head of a pin. I laughed at that, little suspecting that they would soon be printed at the rate of a thousand a day."

Mr. Bogardus spoke of the time when a stamp had to be affixed to every picture, and the extra cost and work it entailed. This law was finally fought and repealed.

"In the old daguerreotyping days," said Mr. Bogardus, "we heard very few of the complaints that are habitual now. The people understood that the picture must of necessity be an exact impression of the object. A homely woman didn't expect to come out a beauty in the picture. The positions assumed by the sitters in those days were vastly different from what is considered the proper thing now. To have a daguerreotype taken was the ambition of every aspiring man. A black suit, a white vest and a thumb in the armhole of the vest, the other hand holding an open book, was considered the proper thing, because it showed a spirit and aplomb that could be obtained in no other way. We had a great deal of trouble with shirt collars, and the difficulties of satisfactorily representing a shirt collar was a source of infinite trouble."

Mr. Bogardus said that while the outfit with which he started in the business cost only \$50, the one which takes its place now is worth \$1,000.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

A portion of this text was reprinted in "Mr. Bogardus Retires," *Photographic Times and American Photographer* (New York) 17:324 (2 December 1887): 603-4.

Regarding the aged appearance of Bogardus:

The mirth of the company was stirred up by happy allusions to early experiences in photography. Mr. Bogardus said it had been claimed that he was growing old, because he had become somewhat bald. This was not a sign of old age. The wonder should be that his head was not as bald as a billiard ball, when it was considered how much of his life had been spent with his head under a focusing cloth.¹

1. "Annual Excursion of the Photographic Section of the American Institute," *Photographic Times and American Photographer* (New York) 13:153 (September 1883): 495.

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