

**C. Edwards Lester, "The Origin and Progress of the Daguerreian Art,
August 1850**

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THE ORIGIN AND PROGRESS OF THE DAGUERREAN ART

Although we have no intention of writing a minute or elaborate history of the Daguerrean art, yet we shall devote a little space to the subject on our Fly-Leaf, since it has become one of the most important and best appreciated departments of art and taste. In the exercise of it there has been manifested much of the true spirit which we have always desired to develop and heighten among our readers. It is of recent and modern origin, but has flourished so genially on our own soil, that it occupies a far higher position than even under the eye of the gifted man who made the discovery. During the nine or ten years since its introduction into this country, it has advanced more rapidly towards perfection than any other art or science in existence. We are aware that the same remark will hold true of this as of all other arts, and that there will always be found multitudes of imitators, plodders, and mechanics, where complete triumph can be awarded only to superior genius. It is not to be supposed, however, that every man can have his features limned by the pencil of a master, or that even every nation should possess a Raphael. But it is a misfortune that so many men should enter the pale of these pure and exalted pursuits, for which the only qualifications that will ensure success, are brilliant genius, heroic resolution, and creative fancy. The cause of true art has, at all periods, been retarded by the noisy clamor of pretenders, or the dogged obstinacy of mere mechanics. While these remarks are applicable to all the various spheres of art, there is one that has hitherto been more exempt than any other, and that is Sculpture. In that art inferior men are more often willing to be *workmen*, without aspiring to the higher epithet of artists. Thorvaldsden had two hundred of these men in his studio cutting his statues, and two hundred men in the quarries of Carrara raising his blocks of marble. It is far different, however, with the art of Painting. Raphael came nearer to forming an exception perhaps than any other painter, for he rarely, during the greater portion of his artistic life, executed his works alone. He could borrow the aide of a whole school of pupils, and some of them, among whom Julio Romano was the most distinguished, elaborated large portions of his works in so masterly a manner, that it was even difficult at the time, and it has since become almost impossible, to tell where the pencil of the pupil gave way to the divine touches of his master. But as a rule, painters are obliged to execute their own

pictures, without material aid from other persons; and it has therefore been the case that the great masters have generally executed comparatively few works, while mediocre painters have flooded the world with valueless daubs.

But probably no one of the fine arts, whose object is the representation of the human countenance, has ever had the misfortune to depend for its representatives, upon so incompetent a class of men as the Daguerreotype. Now we have no particular objection to anybody's trying to get a living even by multiplying samples of poor faces except in so far as they misrepresent a beautiful art which, in the hands of men of taste and genius has been carried to great perfection. In this, as in all other arts, the principle holds true, that inferior specimens create misapprehension and disgust for the genuine thing.

And probably now, not one person in a thousand in the United States has the slightest conception how immeasurably superior the pictures of some of the Daguerrean artists in our principal cities are, over the common works which are daily brought to their view. There is as great a comparative difference between them, as there is between a portrait by Elliot, a landscape by Durand, or a historical piece by Huntington, and those common daubs which are daily brought under the hammer in our auction rooms, and gazetted as "works by the Old Masters."

Without pretending to be very minute in details, we believe it was the year 1839, when the world was startled by the announcement, that Daguerre had made a discovery, by which views of scenery could be obtained by a mechanical process in the short space of twenty minutes. Shortly before the arrival of the first pictures taken by this new process, some of our scientific men had gleaned from the Paris journals a little information on the subject, and after discouraging failures, succeeded at last in producing the faint outline of a building. Professors Morse and Draper were engaged at the same time we believe in this experiment, and thus had the honor of taking the first Daguerreotypes in this country. As yet only inanimate, or objects of still life had been shadowed upon the silver plate; but subsequent experiments of these gentlemen led to the taking of likenesses, if such they might be called, for which persons sat twenty minutes in the full blaze of sun light, aided on either side by strong reflectors. Little if any doubt remains, that these were the first daguerreotypes ever taken. The art then in its infancy, has since been more indebted to these Professors for the results that have followed, than to any other men. Under their auspices, those persons received their instructions, who became in turn the teachers of all who are now practising in the art.

Early in 1843, the practicability of painting or coloring Daguerreotypes was ascertained, by whom we certainly do not know; but one of its earliest applications was made by Mr. Washington Chilton of New York, and the first colored daguerreotypes were made we are informed by Anthony, Edwards & Chilton, at that time a very popular and successful house in this city. This constituted what may be called a new era in the art, as the chief objection of many, that daguerreotypes wanted the life-like hue of a miniature, was obviated. From that time till the present, rapid progress has been made by a few men of science, taste and industry, in every department connected with the daguerreotype; and pictures are now produced, which for distinctness of feature and outline, brilliancy of tone and color, artistic arrangement and effect, rival the finest efforts of the most gifted pencil; while, as likenesses they are doubtless more perfect than ever can be traced by the human eye, or the human hand. Without wishing to detract from the merit of any man who is justly entitled to it, we may pay a well deserved tribute to those gentlemen who from the beginning have been sooner or later connected with the Chiltons in the improvement and perfection of the Daguerrean art. Mr. Edwards who was at one time an efficient member of the firm of Anthony, Edwards & Chilton, and, afterwards Anthony, Edwards & Clark, rendered great services to this cause; and, in his intense application to the pursuit, may be said to have fallen a victim. Laboring for many years

with a disease of the heart, which was doubtless inflamed by the intensity of his studies, and labors, he died prematurely in the winter of 1846–7. Mr. Clark and Mr. Anthony continued for some time their connection, and the latter after withdrawing from the practice of his art, established the department of furnishing all the materials required by the Daguerrean artists. He brought to his business as complete a knowledge of the necessary instruments, if not more so, than any other man living. His establishment furnishes, we believe, a very large portion of the best operators in this country and in South America with their materials. He is respected and esteemed as a gentleman of integrity, and the fullest confidence is entertained by all who know him, in his capacity and knowledge of the business.—While this firm were together, they conceived the plan of collecting a national portrait gallery, and after many years of assiduous attention and great expense they published the United States Senate Chamber, a mezzotint engraving on a plate forty-two by thirty inches. It embraced accurate and strong likenesses of all the Senate, as well as the portraits of the most distinguished person of both sexes in the nation. The moment chosen for the representation, was the farewell speech of Mr. Clay in the Senate; and little doubts exist that in many respects, it was the noblest work of art which had ever been produced in America. It was not only the largest engraving on steel which had ever been made in the world, but it grouped together the most accurate and impressive portraits of celebrated Americans which had ever been seen. Every picture in the collection had been taken expressly for this purpose. The arrangement, the position, the distribution, the accessories were all managed with great skill and taste, and the effect of the whole was entirely satisfactory. The plate was made by Mr. Doney. Its publication was hailed with applause among men of taste throughout the nation, and exquisite and valuable memorials, and attestations of regard, were forwarded to the proprietors by many of the sovereigns, the princes, the artists, and the learned societies of Europe. It was a very important step in the progress of art and taste among us, and in the accomplishment of so great an undertaking, more time, money, talent, and perseverance were called into requisition, than in the production of any work which had preceded it. Mr. Anthony, to whom no small portion of the credit is due, has still on hand a few of the original impressions from this great plate; and they are exceedingly valuable, since the plate itself is too much worn, we believe, to admit of again being used, without incurring in its restoration an expense which no one would now probably be willing to sustain.

Among the most prominent of those artists who have dedicated themselves entirely to the daguerreotype, few have met with such brilliant success as Mr. Brady, from whose pictures chiefly the portraits in this work are engraved. It is our impression that no other man in the world has devoted himself to the art so entirely, and with so much earnestness, and probably no other man has met with so much success. From the beginning it is supposed that it has been a profitable pursuit to him, and he has well deserved his success, for he has pursued it with an earnestness and singleness of purpose, which will ensure success in any thing. He has, however, it is understood, expended a very large portion of his receipts in bringing the art to perfection; and although we have seen many extremely beautiful pictures, taken by other artists, yet, in some respects, we think Mr. Brady has hardly a rival. He allows no unsatisfactory picture to leave his gallery, and often incurs a much greater expense, in abiding by this rule, on a single picture, than the profit he receives in taking a hundred. Steadily adhering to the rule to make his last picture his best, we believe that the general average of his pictures has never been excelled. In another respect, too, we have been struck with his superiority, and that is the naturalness of the flesh-tints, and the extreme fidelity with which the prevailing expression of the face, and the distinguishing hue of the complexion, are brought out. The best illustrations in his gallery of this we conceive to be, the portraits which were taken by him for this work, and which are to be seen in his rooms. Mr. Calhoun's portrait

approaches, in our judgment, nearer to the counterpart of that great man's countenance, than almost anything we have ever seen, either in oil or in daguerreotype. There is a depth, and earnestness, an intensity, and spiritualism which so eminently distinguished him from almost all other men, and which drew from one of the most critical of our journals, the expression that "his face looked more like that of a seer than of an ordinary man." Without indulging in too many specifications, we believe that the portraits of this Gallery will, in the opinion of the public, sustain us in this high encomium upon the artist, although too much credit cannot be awarded to the genius of D'Avignon, for reproducing them on stone with such inimitable truthfulness and effect. Perhaps the portrait of Fremont, which has been received with so much delight by his friends, will in some respects be considered superior to that of Calhoun, and probably by many, that of Mr. Prescott, the historian, which accompanies this No., will be thought to equal or surpass both. At all events, we are entirely satisfied that, in the portraits Mr. Brady has taken for our Gallery, he has afforded striking illustrations of the highest style to which the daguerrean art has hitherto been brought, and we believe that the part of D'Avignon will hereafter be considered as having been sustained with the utmost perfection to which the art of engraving on stone, had been brought during the year 1850.

Some of our readers may accuse us of a spirit of egotism in awarding so much praise to the two artists to whose combined talents and efforts our success is so mainly due; but we believe it will be generally thought that we have, in all soberness, claimed no more than has been universally accorded to us by the best critics and judges; and while our Phonographic writer, Mr. Leland, Professor of the art, has his magical pencil in hand recording our words, we thought we might as well "go through," and say all that we had to say on this subject at once and make an end of it, on the principle which is as old as the earliest sheep-stealer, that, if death be the question, you may as well die for an old sheep as a lamb.

But soberly, in closing; there are other views of the Daguerreotype art, in its application to the exigencies of the present time. This art seems to have accomplished for the mass of mankind, in such matters, what was achieved for them in another way by the printing press. It has brought one of the great luxuries and embellishments of life within the reach of everybody. The time was when no man but a prince or a priest could own a Bible; now the blessed Word of God may lie upon the table of the poorest laborer. Once artists confined their labors to opulent patrons, and no man could be expected to transmit to his children his own picture, unless by incurring a large expense. Friends at a distance could not send to each other their likenesses, as memorials of affection except under peculiar circumstances. Now the poorest man can have the portraits of his children taken, and they become invaluable the moment they are dead. Friends, at their parting, to go on distant and perilous expeditions, can, in an hour, and at a trifling expense, multiply their portraits, and leave them to be gazed on by those whom they have left behind. Travellers and scientific explorers through new and unknown regions can bring back with them, by means of the daguerreotype, truthful illustrations of the architecture, the scenery, and the natives of foreign countries; wherever men wander over the face of the earth, it is possible, nay easy, to copy any scene which strikes the eye as new, grand or beautiful, almost with the rapidity of lightning. The Daguerrean art has already, in this manner, achieved much for science, and still more for society. And although there are but few comparatively among those who prosecute it who are worthy of the name of artists, yet there are many in this country who are now taking better pictures than are taken even in London or Paris. Two years ago we saw a very large collection of Daguerre's best works, and we have no hesitation in saying that none of them were equal to the best daguerreotypes taken in America; and the collection, as a collection, was far inferior to many in this city; while Brady, Gurney, Haas, Lawrence, and many others, have made far

better pictures than Daguerre ever dreamed of. Indeed there are in the galleries of all these artists we have mentioned, and others in Boston, Philadelphia, &c., pictures which are so extremely beautiful, faithful, artistic, and effective, that we rejoice in the great success they seem to be meeting with wherever talent, efficiency, perseverance and science are combined.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This publication accompanies the individual issues of Mathew Brady and Francis D'Avignon, *The Gallery of Illustrious Americans* (G. P. Putnam, D. Appleton & Co., C. S. Francis & Co., 1850). The number eight issue features the lithograph portrait and biographical text for the historian, William H. Prescott. Notice of publication of the number eight issue appears in *Emancipator & Republican* (Boston) 15:14 (1 August 1850): n.p. (second page of issue).

An abbreviated version of this text appears in "The Daguerrean Art—Its Origin and Present State," *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 1:3 (March 1851): 136–37. The latter text is cited from the periodical, *American Artisan*. This editor is unable to locate a copy of *American Artisan* for examination.

Additional information regarding Edward Anthony is found in William Marder and Estelle Marder, *Anthony: the Man the Company the Cameras* (Plantation: Pine Ridge Publishing Co., 1982).

Additional information regarding Brady is found in C. Edwards Lester, "M. B. Brady and the Photographic Art," *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 1:1 (January 1851): 36–40.¹

The Thomas Doney engraving, "United States Senate Chamber," is viewable on the Library of Congress web site, *Prints & Photographs Online Catalogue*.²

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510010_BRADY_PAJ_1851-01.pdf

2. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.08980>

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