

**C. Edwards Lester, "M. B. Brady and the Photographic Art," January 1851**

(keywords: Mathew B. Brady, Charles Edwards Lester, Gallery of Illustrious Americans, ivorytype, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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*M B Brady* Digitized by Google

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## M. B. BRADY AND THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ART.

BY C. EDWARDS LESTER.

THE DAGUERREOTYPE has now assumed a permanent position among the arts of taste and utility. What was but twelve years ago, regarded as an accidental discovery, which excited the surprise and admiration of mankind, has since been brought, by various stages of progress, to a degree of perfection, which numbers it among the exquisite embellishments of life. It is well known to many of our readers, and they may all adopt it as an assertion which will no longer be disputed, that the Art has been elevated to a higher point in this country, than in the land of its discovery. And, although it is claimed by Daguerre himself, and his disciples on the Continent, that the superiority of our pictures is to be attributed more to the brilliancy of our atmosphere, than to our mechanical and artistic genius; yet, we are compelled to meet the assumption by an argument which cannot be answered, namely, that our own artists in Europe, carrying with them the recent inventions and improvements in the Daguerrean art, made on this side of the Atlantic, have been able to distance all competition, when they have had occasion to test their cleverness, with the artists of the Old World.

In the progress of this Journal, which has been established mainly for the purpose of tracing the development of the Daguerrean Art in this country, we shall have frequent occasions to make honorable mention of those men who have, from time to time, contributed to its progress. We shall begin at the fountain-head, and open our first records, with some account of the eminent artist who stands at the head of this column, and whose portrait we have had engraved for our first embellishment.

Matthew B. Brady, who is now about thirty years of age, has devoted his life chiefly to the cultivation of the arts of taste and design. During his early life, he became extremely attached to Mr. William Page, the celebrated painter, who is now on a visit to Italy; and during his frequent visits to the studio of the painter, received many ideas of art, and tokens of esteem from him, with a number of drawings, which he still preserves as mementos of his friend, and of his own youthful admiration for art.

When the announcement was made in this country, in 1839, that the wonderful discovery of Daguerre had been made; Mr. Brady felt a deep interest in it, and embraced the first opportunities which lay in his power, of acquiring a knowledge on the subject. Although there was, at the time, considerable incredulity in the United States, and it was generally doubted if the alleged discovery of Daguerre could be brought to perfection, and be numbered among the useful arts, yet the fact that the announcement had been made had excited an interest in the mind of the subject of this sketch, which has increased till the present time. His belief in the genuineness and utility of the discovery, was confirmed by the interest which was manifested in it by such men as Professors Draper, Morse, Chilton, Avery, and many others, who, being well known for their scientific attainments, were not likely to be betrayed by a pretended art, which was not based upon principles of science and of nature.

Availing himself of the first chance that came to hand, he got possession of a Daguerrean apparatus, and began experiments. Gifted with a warm, intuitive perception in such matters, and having already had a good deal of practical experience in mechanical and artistic experiments, he at once undertook a series of them for himself, which resulted so satisfactorily, that he resolved to adopt the art as his profession for life. He carried to

the business a resolution which augured the success to which his subsequent and untiring exertions so fully entitled him. It has generally held true that those men who have risen to any considerable degree of eminence, in any calling or profession, have merited and acquired it, chiefly as the reward of long, resolute, and patient labors.

So far as the Daguerreotype art is concerned, we are not aware that any man has devoted himself to it with so much earnestness, or expended upon its development so much time and expense, as Mr. Brady. He has merited the eminence he has acquired; for, from the time he first began to devote himself to it, he has adhered to his early purpose with the firmest resolution, and the most unyielding tenacity. When Daguerreotypes were introduced into the United States, although many improvements were made within a short period, yet, by the public generally, they were regarded only as the results of a mechanical process, by which forms and impressions were left upon the plate, in which likenesses could be traced. They were satisfactory chiefly to persons of crude and uncultivated taste. In a word, they were destitute of every combination of what is usually understood by the word art, in connection with design. They were unsatisfactory in almost all respects, and artists of genius and reputation were, with few exceptions, unwilling to engage in the process. But Mr. Brady resolved to bring the Daguerreotype to perfection, and remove the prejudices which existed against it, by elevating it into the dignity and beauty of an art of taste.

Availing himself of everything that was published and known on the subject at the time, and seizing hold of every new discovery and improvement, he multiplied his facilities to such an extent, that he was soon able to produce pictures that were regarded as quite equal, if not superior, to all that had been made before. His first public exhibition was at the annual Fair of the American Institute, in 1844; and even at that early period, with many rivals in the field, he acquired the reputation of being one of the first artists in the country, and received a premium. Encouraged by his success, he made new efforts, which resulted in important improvements. While he offered inducements to the best operators and chemists to enter his studio, he superintended every process himself, and made himself master of every department of the art, sparing no pains or expense by which new effects could be introduced to increase the facilities or embellishments of the art. We do not know who was the first Daguerrean artist to introduce the sky-light, but Mr. Brady was among the first, and probably derived more immediate and decided advantages from it than any other man. There are several large sky-lights in his studio.

We might remark here, that the subject of light is the grand mystery into which the whole art of Daguerre resolves itself. Indeed it has now, by a long series of inventions and improvements, of which the original inventor never dreamed in the beginning, so changed its character, that it is fast assuming another name. Although it will forever shed lustre upon the name of Daguerre, it will soon be known in every part of the world, chiefly by the more euphonious title of Photography, which may be interpreted, *The Art of Light*. In the scale of advancement, many of the grades of progress have been regulated by chemical processes; but they all contemplated the action of light, and in the distribution of this subtle element, and the regulation of its force, the chiefest experiments have depended for their success. A vast amount of time and money has been expended in attempting to guide and control the action of light, but it has been to no purpose, and experiments have been rewarded by startling and beautiful discoveries, only when they have carried out the single idea, that, to bring the Daguerrean art to perfection, it was only necessary so to prepare the plate and screens, and regulate the lenses, in correspondence with the laws of light, that the invisible hand of Nature herself might,

with her own cunning pencil, by her silent and mysterious operations, trace the forms of creation in all their delicacy, witchery, and power. More than any other of the arts of taste and design, here the work is done by Nature herself. With the painter, everything depends upon the genius that guides the hand. In Photography, everything depends upon the skill with which the elements are prepared to make way for the hand of Nature. And although in the ceaseless repetition of the Photographic process it might seem that the charm of the experiment would be lost in the monotony of its repetition, yet it has often occurred to us that none but a man of sensitiveness and of genius would ever have made the remark which Mr. Brady has so frequently expressed, that he has never, after upwards of twenty thousand experiments, grown so familiar with the process of Daguerreotyping, as not to feel a new and tremulous interest in every repeated result, when, after preparing his plate, he stepped aside to wait in silence for Nature to do her work. There is nothing in the whole field of art or nature so impressive to a refined fancy or a sensitive spirit, as to watch and wait, with veneration and hope, to see how the eternal laws of nature shall recognize in our new experiments, some progress in that wisdom which will never grow into perfection, since nature, in her ingenuity, forever eludes and surpasses the genius of man.

We believe that, from the beginning, Mr. Brady's sky-lights have been so perfectly arranged, that his great success in the new experiments he has undertaken, can be attributed in no small degree to this circumstance. He has now reached such a stage in the art, that it seems to make little difference with him what the state of the atmosphere or light may be, since his lenses are so powerful, his camera obscuras are so numerous and varied, and the light shed upon the picture seems to be so entirely under his control, some of his finest pictures that we have seen, have been taken in the darkest and stormiest days.

In the early part of 1845, he formed the project of collecting all the portraits of distinguished individuals he could induce to sit for that purpose, with the intention, if his life was spared, of making in the end a more complete collection than had ever before been made, of the distinguished men of the nation. In 1845, he exhibited his pictures again before the American Institute, and received one of the first prizes for the best plain and colored Daguerreotypes. Artists of every description now generally awarded to him a high position, and the most distinguished and discriminating of the journals of New York complimented him in the warmest terms on his superior skill and taste. In 1846, he again went to the annual exhibition of the Institute, with new specimens of his art, and, contending with competitors from Boston, Philadelphia, Albany, New York, and other cities, he gained the highest prize.

Having now accomplished, in this respect, the highest of his ambition, he devoted himself with more earnestness to the carrying out of his favorite project, viz., to augment the number of his national collection, and embellish it with still rarer and choicer portraits. He visited the seat of Government, and opened a branch of his establishment there, where he was treated with courtesy and attention by the most distinguished men. We believe he is the only Daguerreotypist in America who has been honored by a visit at his studio from the President, and his Cabinet. Mr. Polk, and all the heads of departments; General Taylor and his Cabinet, with the new President and most of his Cabinet, have given him sittings at his Gallery, and at the President's mansion. In 1849, he brought out his large picture of General Taylor and his Cabinet, which won for Mr. Brady no little honor; since it was the first work of the kind published in this country. With a branch of his studio in Washington, he has obtained the portrait of almost every man of distinction among our countrymen, and those of ambassadors and celebrated men from foreign

nations. Senators, Members of the House of Representatives, Judges of the Supreme Court, distinguished diplomatists and visitors, with the most distinguished men of the army, of the navy, and the learned and liberal professions of every description, with those of the President's Lady, and other distinguished women, now adorn his collection.

In the year 1849, he made his last exhibition before the Institute, and his pictures were regarded as so far superior to all others, that there was awarded to him the first and only gold medal ever given to Daguerreotypes in this country.

The mere enumeration of the distinguished names which adorn his collection would occupy a larger space than we can devote even to the purpose of this sketch. Among them, however, we will enumerate General Jackson, John Quincy Adams, Mr. Tyler, Mr. Van Buren, Mr. Polk, Gen. Taylor, Mr. Fillmore, with every member, we believe, of their Cabinets, Webster, Clay, Calhoun, Benton, Cass, Foote, Fremont, Dickinson, and every member of the U. S. Senate, for a considerable number of years past; all the Judges of the Supreme Court, most of the members of the lower House of Congress, nearly all the foreign ambassadors, the generals of the army, the commodores of the navy, the governors of states, and nearly all those men who have acquired influence in the departments of literature, science, and public life. We should be glad to specify, if we could, some of these portraits, upon which we have looked with the deepest interest, and we should instance among them those of the venerable Mrs. Alexander Hamilton, Mrs. Madison, Mrs. Polk, &c.; but those we should speak of more particularly, are, J. C. Calhoun and General Taylor. These, with others which have been engraved for the *Gallery of Illustrious Americans*, are not only superior to all that ever have been taken in this country by other artists, but they are probably the best which Mr. Brady has taken himself. The one of Mr. Calhoun was the last ever taken of that illustrious Senator. So perfect was it regarded by the family, that several copies of it have been made at their request, as also in the case of General Taylor, of whom the same remark may be made.

This gives us an occasion to speak of the most magnificent publication which has ever been brought out in this country, and which has seldom been equalled, and never surpassed, in the Old World; for Mr. Brady is one of the proprietors of the *Gallery of Illustrious Americans*. This great work was regarded in the beginning as an enterprize too formidable to excite the interest of any American publisher, and in the successful accomplishment of it more genius and exertion have been called into requisition than have ever been displayed in any other American work. It has given to Mr. Brady, as an artist in the Daguerreotype, a reputation which belongs to no other man. There had been National Galleries undertaken before this, but they had either failed for lack of encouragement, or been abandoned mid-way in their progress; or if completed, the portraits themselves had been copied from unsatisfactory paintings, in which few traces could be discovered of resemblance to their originals. Hence the mere announcement that another National Gallery was begun, failed to excite that interest which was soon after manifested in that enterprize. We would not wish to be understood as using unkind or ungenerous language towards those men who attempted to furnish the nation with works of this class; for, before the Daguerrean art was discovered, it is all useless to say that it was within the power of any publisher in the world, or any artist in the world, to execute such faithful, life-like, and strikingly beautiful portraits of our public men. At best, the engravings had to be made from drawings and portraits executed for the most part by artists of no great talent, and where the original paintings were, as a rule, so unsatisfactory, it could not be supposed that engravers, who had generally never seen the subjects of the painting, could be expected to trace the likenesses with much facility,

much less to infuse into their transfers the vital energy and living truth which are so conspicuous in works that are produced in our times. It will not be disputed that such a work as the *Gallery of Illustrious Americans* could not have been made before the art of Daguerre was discovered. Who, for instance, could measure the value of a collection of faithful Daguerreotypes, if they were only in existence, of the Fathers of the Republic. True, Stuart, Trumbull, and other celebrated portrait painters, did their best to transmit to us the forms of those venerable founders of our empire, and in some instances they were undoubtedly fortunate or skillful enough to seize with some degree of accuracy upon the features, and in a few cases probably, to transmit to us the prevailing expression of the countenance, but we have, after all, no idea, with all the services these artists rendered to the nation by their labors, that we are at this period familiar with the habitual characteristic expression worn in the cabinet, in the field, and around the fire-side, by the patriarchs of the Revolution.

We would not depreciate any of the arts, and least of all the art of painting to which the world was indebted almost exclusively, for a knowledge of the faces and the forms of great men until the time of Daguerre; but we do rejoice that in our age, facilities exist by this new art, which will make posterity as familiar with the faces and forms of distinguished men, as are their own contemporaries.

The first part of the *Gallery of Illustrious Americans* being now complete, and embracing as it does the portraits and biographical sketches of twelve of our most illustrious citizens, may well afford occasion for these brief remarks in reference to the artist to whom the world is indebted for these remarkable portraits from which they have been engraved. There is about them a naturalness of flesh tint, and the extreme fidelity with which the prevailing expression of the face and the distinguishing hue of the complexion are brought out. In Mr. Calhoun's portrait, for instance, we find a nearer counterpart to that great man's countenance than almost any thing we ever saw, either in oil, or in Daguerreotype. There is depth, and earnestness, and intensity, and spiritualism, which so eminently distinguish him from almost all other men, and which drew from the most critical of our journals the expression that "his face looked more like that of a seer than of an ordinary man." But these remarks are applicable to all the other portraits which have been engraved for the *Gallery of Illustrious Americans*. In no one instance out of the twelve portraits, can we conceive it possible that the likenesses could be improved. They were all taken expressly for this *Gallery*, and in doing it Mr. Brady brought out the fullest capacity of the Daguerrean art. So perfect have these likenesses been regarded, that there have been requests proffered from families, from societies, from publishers and engravers, and even from the committees of both Houses of Congress, as in the case of General Taylor, for permission to copy them in getting up memorials of those distinguished men after their death.

Before closing this brief sketch, however, we should remark that Mr. Brady's last improvement in the Photogenic art has been the production of miniatures on ivory, which combine all the truthfulness and extreme fidelity of the finished Daguerreotype with the exquisite coloring of the finest miniatures. It is a progressive art, and we believe that Mr. Brady himself still regards it, with all these improvements, only in its infancy. We may adopt this idea and say that we too believe it, because we are told so by the artist himself; but those of our readers who will visit Mr. Brady's *Gallery*, and look upon those oil colored Daguerrean miniatures, will probably find as much difficulty as we do ourselves in imagining a higher degree of perfection to which the art will ever be carried.

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**EDITOR'S NOTES:**

This article is the first of eight biographical sketches of eminent daguerreotypists appearing in the journal's first year of publication. Each profile is accompanied by a full-page lithographic portrait, six of which are by the lithograph artist, Frances D'Avignon. (D'Avignon also provided the lithography for *The Gallery of the Illustrious Americans*.) Other articles in this series are S. D. Burchard, "Martin M. Lawrence and the Daguerrean Art," 1:2 (February 1851): 103–106;<sup>1</sup> S. J. Burr, "Gabriel Harrison and the Daguerrean Art," 1:3 (March 1851): 169–77;<sup>2</sup> J. P. Kidder, "Augustus Morand and the Daguerrean Art," 1:4 (April 1851): 237–39;<sup>3</sup> A. D. Cohen, "George S. Cook and the Daguerrean Art," 1:5 (May 1851): 285–87;<sup>4</sup> R. W. Keyes, "Luther Holman Hale and the Daguerrean Art," 1:6 (June 1851): 357–59;<sup>5</sup> M. Grant, "John A. Whipple and the Daguerrean Art," 2:2 (August 1851) 94–95;<sup>6</sup> J. W. Tracy, "D. D. T. Davie; First President of the Association of Daguerreotypists," 2:3 (September 1851): 164–65.<sup>7</sup>

An editorial note about the biographies and portraits provides this information:

—To those desiring the publication of their biographies and portraits in the Journal we will state that it will be necessary to communicate with us on the subject as early as possible in order that we may assign to each his month, there generally being several engaged ahead, and we are obliged to adopt the very good practice of serving applicants in the order of their application. We deem it necessary to state this much that there may not be any misunderstanding in the matter.<sup>8</sup>

A subsequent editorial response to correspondence provides additional information:

—W. T. [William H. Thomas?] of S. C.—In answer to your question we will say that you have been misinformed in regard to the matter. We make no charge for the insertion of portraits and biographies, although it is generally customary, among periodicals, to do so. The reputation of an operator as an artist must be good, in order to secure the privilege of placing his portrait in our Journal, but as it is undoubtedly of far more advantage to the artist than ourselves, we think it not more than right that he furnish the illustration free of expense to us. As to the style and cost of the portrait, we leave that entirely to the judgment and taste of the operator, requiring only, that the work be executed as nearly perfect as possible. Steel plates are decidedly the least trouble, and much preferable, as finer impressions and more uniform printing can be obtained from them. Lithographic drawings will not always print well, and we have had much trouble with them on that account. With one or two exceptions those who have inserted their portraits have purchased one hundred copies of the number containing it.<sup>9</sup>

The author of this article, Charles Edwards Lester (1815–1890), was an author, lawyer, ordained minister, and diplomat. His close association with Brady is evidenced in his role as editor of *The Gallery of Illustrious Americans*. A whole-plate daguerreotype of Lester (by the Brady gallery) is in the collection of the Library of Congress.<sup>9</sup>

This article omits mentioning Brady's earlier occupation as a case manufacturer. For a brief discussion of this endeavor (and a reproduction of a wood engraving of the exterior of his operation,) see Gary W. Ewer, "Doing Business at 187 Broadway, New York: 'Mathew B. Brady, Case Manufacturer'," *Daguerreian Society Newsletter* 19:3 (July–September 2007): 25–26.<sup>11</sup>

The article mentions a daguerreotype and a "large picture" of Taylor and his cabinet. This "large picture,"—a lithograph by D'Avignon—is viewable on the web site of the

Library of Congress.<sup>12</sup> A related daguerreotype of Taylor and his cabinet is also in the collection of the Library of Congress.<sup>13</sup>

For a view of the exterior of Brady's gallery, see *EWER INDEX P850002: Brady's National Gallery of Daguerreotypes*, (advertisement) 1850.<sup>14</sup>

The last paragraph in the article describes the process known as the ivorytype. The present editor has examined some examples from the Brady gallery that indeed exhibit "exquisite coloring."

1. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510013\\_LAWRENCE\\_PAJ\\_1851-02.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510013_LAWRENCE_PAJ_1851-02.pdf)
2. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510012\\_HARRISON\\_PAJ\\_1851-03.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510012_HARRISON_PAJ_1851-03.pdf)
3. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510014\\_MORAND\\_PAJ\\_1851-04.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510014_MORAND_PAJ_1851-04.pdf)
4. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510011\\_COOK\\_PAJ\\_1851-05.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510011_COOK_PAJ_1851-05.pdf)
5. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510009\\_HALE\\_PAJ\\_1851-06](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510009_HALE_PAJ_1851-06)
6. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510015\\_WHIPPLE\\_PAJ\\_1851-08](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510015_WHIPPLE_PAJ_1851-08)
7. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510016\\_DAVIE\\_PAJ\\_1851-09](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510016_DAVIE_PAJ_1851-09)
8. *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 1:5 (May 1851): 319
9. *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 2:5 (November 1851): 319.
10. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c10207>
11. [http://daguerre.org/society/newsletters/newsletter\\_2007\\_3.pdf](http://daguerre.org/society/newsletters/newsletter_2007_3.pdf)
12. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a07351>
13. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a13387>
14. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/advert/P8500002\\_BRADY-AD\\_DOGGETTS\\_1850.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/advert/P8500002_BRADY-AD_DOGGETTS_1850.pdf)

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