

Rev. A. D. Cohen, "George S. Cook and the Daguerrean Art," May 1851

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GEORGE S. COOK AND THE DAGUERREAN ART.
BY REV A. D. COHEN

IN giving to the public, a sketch of the life of the distinguished Southern Daguerreotypist, whose portrait adorns the present number of this Journal, we may date the commencement of his career in the city of New Orleans.

After several years of mercantile pursuits, in which he was unsuccessful, owing to the want of congeniality of taste, in the year 1843 he visited the "Crescent City," and while there, became intimately acquainted with several artists. As he watched the canvas glowing into life by the magic touch of the pencil, there arose in his breast a strong desire to imitate their efforts, and he determined to be an artist. He began to paint, and had the happiness to see his first effort succeed, which was praised and admired by those who examined it. All looked upon this maiden-piece as the promise of future honor and reward in his profession.

Among his intimate friends in New Orleans were Mr ———, since more extensively known from his connexion with "The Ladies' Wreath," published in New York, and Dr. B. ——— now an eminent physician in Mississippi. These gentlemen had been operating for some time together in New Orleans in the Daguerreotype art, and with considerable success. Mr. Cook often visited their gallery to observe the effect of light in their pictures, and to receive a few lessons from the hand of Nature as her delicate pencil portrayed the beautiful folds of drapery in all its rolling richness, so difficult to fix upon the canvas with any degree of truth. At this period he changed his mind in reference to painting; not that he had lost his desire to become an artist, which still burns in his bosom, or that he had not met with sufficient encouragement by his success, for this was unabated, and that was flattering in the extreme, but from a want of means to enable him to prosecute his studies for a sufficient length of time to perfect himself.

Having been favorably struck with the beauty of Daguerreotypes, his idea was to undertake the practice of this art in connexion with the other. This he suggested to Mr. and Dr. who encouraged him, and he began to operate in their rooms. The rapid progress he made realized their anticipations, and bringing to his aid the best taste in the arrangement and position of his *sitters* (?) it was evident to them that he must soon take an elevated position among his brethren. An arrangement was at once entered into, by which Mr. Cook assumed the entire charge of their rooms, and this gallery immediately took its stand at the head of the profession in that city.

The great object which Mr. Cook now contemplated was to bring the art as near perfection as the then limited knowledge of Photography made it possible. He determined to push onward and bend all his energies to the accomplishment of his design. He felt that this beautiful art *could* be elevated to the high standard of its sister arts; and by his indefatigable exertions and innumerable experiments he soon had the pleasure to realize the reward which Patience, Perseverance, and Energy, always bestow upon their faithful votaries.

After operating in New Orleans for several years with the greatest credit to himself and giving general satisfaction to the numerous patrons who thronged his rooms, he determined, if possible, to establish a gallery of the highest order and on the most extensive plan in connexion with a gallery of the best paintings of the best artists of this and other countries. Accordingly he entered into a negotiation for Mr. Cook's celebrated

gallery of paintings then established in New Orleans, but having failed in consummating his arrangements to his satisfaction, he determined upon a tour through the country.

With characteristic energy, the plan was no sooner conceived than preparations were made to enter upon its accomplishment. He travelled through the States of Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Missouri and Georgia, operating, as he went, with his usual success and establishing galleries in many of the principal cities and towns of these States, teaching pupils, and when they were sufficiently advanced leaving them in charge of these rooms, thus spreading his fame throughout all the Southern cities, towns and villages. As we glance at his career we are compelled to believe that he deserves all that patronage which a discriminating public has bestowed, as well as the thanks of the profession, for having, in these sections of the country raised the art to its proper elevation, for it has been the policy of Mr. Cook, since he began to impart to others a knowledge of art, to refuse all whose connexion and character did not warrant him to hope that they would be an ornament to the profession. Thus he numbers among his pupils many young men from the first families; some pursuing the practice of the art from mere desire to be occupied in some useful employment, and others choosing this as the profession best adapted to their taste and circumstances.

While Mr. Cook has been thus particular in choosing his pupils and thus guarding the profession from unworthy characters, he has never turned from his studio the *poor* young man who has brought with him a good character and promising talents, and there are many such through the country who reflect much credit upon their preceptor by their success in the art, and who gain for their families *that* support which they could not otherwise obtain. It is true there have been some disappointments, as will happen in every sphere of industrial and professional pursuits, but upon the whole he can point to many, who, benefited by his instructions and encouraged by his patronage, bid fair to take their stand among those who occupy the most elevated position. We feel confident, that the public in the South will sustain the assertion, that no man has added more influence to the elevation of this art to its true dignity and beauty than Mr. Cook. The character he sustains for urbanity of manners and pleasing address, his unwearied patience in pleasing every one who may come, gain for him general esteem, and the superiority of his pictures commands the almost universal preference where ever he has operated. There is a style in the mind of every operator which he prefers and for which he strives.

The style which Mr. Cook has adopted is peculiar to himself, and, so far as we have had an opportunity to judge, the best; and we have seen specimens of many operators, embracing works of the best artists in New York, Philadelphia, Boston and the Southern cities.

He alone, of all that we have seen, seems to possess the art of finishing with the pencil so as to give the almost exact appearance of the color of the flesh, and such is the peculiarity of the tone of his pictures thus finished, that all the tints and shades of the complexion seem to be truthfully represented; we can scarcely imagine anything more true to nature. Such is the admirable blending of his flesh colors and the beauty of his drapery, presenting faithfully every tint in the colors of the dress, that one in looking upon some of his highly finished specimens is led to believe that there is no room for improvement.

While all others have been striving to imitate the dark sombre tints of an engraving, and made that their standard of perfection, he has sought with as much zeal to fix, as near as possible, the glowing tints and rich shadows of life itself, so that his pictures differ very much in this respect, from those which we have seen of the best operators in this

country; while we look with pleasure upon these as far surpassing in beauty and richness of tone the most exquisite steel engraving, we gaze upon the other as we would admire the best and most highly finished miniature from the studio of the best painter.

After travelling through most of the Southern States, he determined to visit Charleston, S. C., and he is settled here at the time of writing this.

Having satisfied his mind that the perfection of the daguerreotype depended much upon the quality of the light, he has endeavored to improve upon every room he has established by a different arrangement of the medium by which the rays of the sun are admitted. He has at last succeeded in obtaining one of the best arranged “lights” in this or any other country. In order to accomplish this he has spared no pains or expense, and has expended incredible sums in his various experiments.

There are many interesting circumstances which might be noticed in the history of Mr. Cook illustrative of the principle, that when outward annoyances threaten to impede one’s advancement in the prosecution of an enterprise, energy, boldness and perseverance will enable him to overcome all difficulties and arrive at that position, which others, more timid, fail to reach. But however interesting these facts might be to him who writes this, we withhold them here, conscious that the Daguerrean world would prefer the course we have taken. We give a sketch of Mr. Cook’s life only so far as it relates to the Photographic Art. In conclusion, we would state that we have heard many operators complain of the uncertainty of their operation at certain times, not being always able to procure equally clear and perfect images upon the plate. This happens more generally before a storm.

In speaking to Mr. Cook of this, he gives it as the result of his long experience and faithful observation as to this point, “that this is owing to the want of electricity in the light or atmosphere, and that if the operator would go on and obtain as good pictures as he can, he must *wait for a few hours* and the same success will ensue as before this difficulty occurred. *Instead, of beginning to “FUSS” with the chemical boxes and change and alter with like results, let patience enable you to wait but for a short time and all will be right again.*”

We most sincerely hope that Mr. Cook will give us his own views on this important subject, in the “Journal.” We are sure the Daguerrean world would be gratified as well as instructed by the *practical* results among those of the first class of operators in America.

[End of text.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

A daguerreotype portrait of Cook is published in Bob Zeller, *The Blue and Gray in Black and White: A History of Civil War Photography* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005): 15.

Additional information regarding Cook is available from John Craig’s web site, *Craig’s Daguerreian Registry*.¹ See also Harvey S. Teal, *Partners with the Sun: South Carolina Photographers, 1840–1940* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001): 22–26, 43–48. See also the Virginia Commonwealth web site, *Through the Lens of Time: Images of African Americans from the Cook Collection*.² The site also provide a useful bibliography.

This article is the fifth 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 C. Edwards Lester, "M. B. Brady and the Photographic Art," 1:1 (January 1851): 36–40;³ S. D. Burchard, "Martin M. Lawrence and the Daguerrean Art," 1:2 (February 1851): 103–106;⁴ S. J. Burr, "Gabriel Harrison and the Daguerrean Art," 1:3 (March 1851): 169–77;⁵ J. P. Kidder, "Augustus Morand and the Daguerrean Art," 1:4 (April 1851): 237–39;⁶ R. W. Keyes, "Luther Holman Hale and the Daguerrean Art," 1:6 (June 1851): 357–59;⁷ M. Grant, "John A. Whipple and the Daguerrean Art," 2:2 (August 1851) 94–95;⁸ J. W. Tracy, "D. D. T. Davie; First President of the Association of Daguerreotypists," 2:3 (September 1851): 164–65.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

Regarding the failure of the daguerreotype processes before a storm, see a brief poem by "Photographicus" in *Humphrey's Journal* (New York) 6:7 (15 July 1854): 112.¹²

The italicized word with following question mark, "*sitters* (?)" is per original presentation and is likely a compositor's error.

1. <http://www.daguerreotype.com/>
2. http://dig.library.vcu.edu/cdm4/index_cook.php?CISOROOT=/cook
3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510010_BRADY_PAJ_1851-01.pdf
4. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510013_LAWRENCE_PAJ_1851-02.pdf
5. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510012_HARRISON_PAJ_1851-03.pdf
6. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510014_MORAND_PAJ_1851-04.pdf
7. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510009_HALE_PAJ_1851-06
8. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510015_WHIPPLE_PAJ_1851-08
9. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510016_DAVIE_PAJ_1851-09
10. *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 1:5 (May 1851): 319
11. *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 2:5 (November 1851): 319
12. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8540002_POETA_HUMPH-JOURN_1854-07-15.pdf

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