

**Gabriel Harrison, "The Dignity of Our Art," April 1852**

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THE DIGNITY OF OUR ART.

BY GABRIEL HARRISON.

EVERY art and every science have had their votaries, consecrating themselves to the great worth, and the peculiar beauties existing in them. Art has had its Fulton, Science its Newton, and Daguerreotyping its Daguerre, and with the latter, the morning of the new art dawned with a light as pure, as brilliant and far penetrating into the chaste and beautiful as ever radiated on earth from the old arts or sciences, and it is undeniable that it is intimately connected both with pure art and science, so much so, that it seems to set a seal upon the age of its discovery; as the sun itself marks the heavens, telling us in language strong as its own brightness, I am Lord of the day, and yet how few there are either in or out of the profession, who properly estimate its great importance. In fact, there are those connected with the art, who refuse to read a journal devoted to the science of the art, on the ground, that, because they understand the simple manipulation of daguerreotyping, there is nothing more for them to learn—good fortune save the profession from any more such philosophical gentry, for, in my opinion, they have not enough of the intellectual to discern the difference between a hawk and a hand-saw—that it requires the taste of an artist to be an operator of any merit, is conclusive from the decision, that all it creates is precisely that which every true artist desires to accomplish, the nearest resemblance to nature, or most faithful representation of the object to be portrayed. The painter draws with his pencil, while the daguerrean draws with the camera, and each instrument in unartistic hands will undoubtedly produce abortions; for if the painter is without the knowledge of the general rules of perspective we may expect faulty productions with their distorted proportions and bad lines, no matter how good the coloring may be or how effective the arrangement of lights and shades, and it will be disagreeable to look upon. The same rule holds good in daguerreotyping, as the correctness and pleasing lines depends entirely on the proper position of the camera towards the object to be taken, and it is from this fact, that we have so many complaints of daguerreotypes not looking like the person for whom they are taken. Operators seem to forget the immense distance to which the figure is thrown by means of the construction of the lens, also of the curvature of the glasses and the reflection of the image on a flat surface—the ultimatum looked for in a daguerreotype of a person is a strong likeness, and the proper position of the camera for such a result is to have the centre of the lens precisely opposite to the centre of the face at the same time taking care to have the position of the head as near plumb as possible, and if the glasses are purely achromatic

the proper degree of reach and field, the likeness must be perfect. For instance, place the centre of the lens as high as the top of the head, and so as to get the face to come into its proper place on the plate by pitching the tube downward; and, behold, the imperfect likeness that will be produced; the top side of the lens beyond the centre being nearest to the forehead, that part of the face will undoubtedly be the largest and most disproportional to the nose, mouth, and chin. In taking a full length figure, to obtain good drawings or good proportions of the whole, the same rule must be observed, by placing the tube opposite to the centre of the body; but, in such a case, it would not be prudent, for in so doing, we get a full view of the nostrils, which is not a very pleasant feature; therefore it would not be advisable to sacrifice a beauty in the face to any other part of the body, for it is with this as it is with many other things, "of the two evils choose the least." Beside inaccuracy of drawing to those who have pictures taken for the sake of the likeness, is far less observant in the body than it would be in the face.

Another evidence of the relativity of photography to pure art is, that the operator must observe all of the identical rules necessary for the production of a work of merit that a painter or sculptor would follow to secure graceful position, proper distribution and degree of light and shade, also tone of picture, arrangement of drapery, &c. As to daguerreotyping partaking strongly of science, who dares to deny it, if they understand any part of the art or the definition of the word, which means "a collection of general principles on any subject, as a branch of knowledge depending on speculative principles rather than on practice," for you may be a daguerrean for fifty years, and there will hardly be a week in that whole space of time but what something will turn up in your operations eluding all your philosophy and years of experience. For one moment look at the thousand chemical freaks under the influence of atmospheric changes, the chemical action of colors differing in degree of tint on the plate, in proportion to the peculiar powers of the fabric for absorption and refraction of light. A hundred other things could be mentioned, and, in fact, it is a perfect world of science, and you cannot look upon anything in nature without being reminded of some peculiar and beautiful result if daguerreotyped; even the small blade of grass, the little yellow butter-cup that in genial spring spangles o'er and makes more lovely the face of nature; the blue jay that sports in endless space; the umber colored eagle that makes his course against the blazing sun as if it were his natural home and the nestling of his young. In taking this view of the art,—and beyond all doubt, it is the just one—it is not surprising that there should be so many in the profession so little calculated to carry it on with that taste and dignity that its thousand meritorious parts demand. What we mean by the dignity of the art, is that pride and appreciation of it which the proper class of men who properly estimate the many beauties existing therein will make apparent, causing the public to look upon it with a higher estimate than that of merely requiring on the part of the operator nothing more by way of qualification, than the mere capacity to drive a nail into a board or place a lamp under the mercury bath. There must be a cause for the introduction of persons so unworthy the profession, and the parasite should be cut and rooted from the vitals of the new being before the sickly fibres entwine themselves too closely, causing decay and premature death to the discovery that has placed upon the brow of the discoverer a never-fading wreath. The first cause that has had the tendency to destroy the high position which photography should hold, is the fact of the very low price asked to communicate the art to others, so low that the lowest are always in possession of sufficient means to obtain instruction, and an ignoramus can be taught the manipulation in six hours, and will, perhaps, occasionally by accident produce a fine picture or two, thereby making for

himself something of a reputation, as the individual will take great care to have always in his pocket the identical and only good picture he ever produced to hawk about as a sample of work equal to that of our best artists; Brady, Morand, Gurney, Root, Whipple and others. This then being one of the great causes that keeps the art from its proper elevation in the minds of the people or persons of letters. It now behooves those in the art, and who really know something of its merits, to put up immediately the price for instruction, to that standard which will demand the attention of men of capital, talents and respectability and that will hereafter encircle the new discovery with that tone and dignity to which it is rightly entitled.

A specimen of some of the men now engaged in the art, may be gathered from the following advertisement which is cut from the New York Herald of the 5th of February, 1852:

“WANTED, Fifty young men to learn the Art of Daguerreotyping. Instructions given in a few days, and a whole set of apparatus furnished for fifty dollars. Direct, ‘Broadway Post Office,’ will meet with immediate attention.”

This was some poor creature, undoubtedly, who knew very little about the art, and who was on his last legs in consequence, and thus made his last dive at Daguerreotyping, and we will venture to say, he jumped higher, went deeper, and came out dryer, than any other man who has ever had anything to do with what such men elegantly term “Dog-ar-ror-typing.” However, I am sorry to say, that this Sam Patch of the art does not stand alone, he has a fit competitor in an operator of this city, who told me but a few weeks since, that he was going to “advertise for a class of one hundred persons to whom he would give instructions for *Five Dollars* per head.” I gave him my opinion of such a transaction in round terms, and I believe he had sufficient of moral suasion in him to deter him from his intended dishonorable course. The matter does not end with these last instances. A great error exists at the present time in some of our first establishments in Broadway; men, who, if they choose, could be ornaments to society, if they conducted their operating departments in a proper manner, by having the right sort of men for operators, and paying a sufficient salary that would induce men of artistic taste to embark in the profession, and not take their illiterate plate cleaners, whenever a rush of business occurs, from their work-bench, and in shirt-sleeves attempt to take a picture of a lady in a room beautifully furnished with Brussels carpets and marble top-tables, as has frequently been the case under my own observation during the few months past. We have heard of falls from the sublime to the absurd, but a better illustration of the respectable and the vulgar could not be given. Such conduct is disgusting, and its practise is the principal cause for my dedicating these few feeble lines to the Daguerreotypists of our beautiful art; with the hope that what I have said on the subject will be thought to have been actuated by a kindly feeling, to correct an abuse, which will in the end wound those the most who practise it; rather than with a disposition to find fault with those who might be an ornament to the profession and help to keep it in its own natural sphere, *the very centre of the noon-day sun.*

[End of text.]

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EDITOR'S NOTES:

For a biographical sketch of Harrison, including a lithograph portrait, see S. J. Burr, "Gabriel Harrison and the Daguerrean Art," *Photographic Art-Journal* (New York) 1:3 (March 1851): 169–77.<sup>1</sup>

1. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510012\\_HARRISON\\_PAJ\\_1851-03.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510012_HARRISON_PAJ_1851-03.pdf)

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