

Marcus A. Root, "The Various Uses of the Daguerrean Art," December 1852

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The Various Uses of the Daguerrean Art.

Extract from a Manuscript Volume, soon to be published.

NEW as the discovery of the daguerrean art is, and far as it is from having reached its destined perfection, the benefits are various and important, which it has already conferred on society. Nor, as the art receives that enlightened study and assiduous culture, which for immemorial ages have been devoted to its sister arts, can it be doubted, that these benefits will be vastly augmented. And as I would if possible, promote juster views than now prevail, whether in the public at large or among heliographic artists themselves, touching the legitimate claims of this art to consideration, I would crave my readers attention to some obvious suggestions as to its various uses.

I. In a world where incessant competition and struggle tend to produce a selfish egotism, whatever serves to vivify and strengthen the social sentiments should be hailed as a blessing to our race. Daguerreotype acts indirectly, but not the less powerfully to this important result. The moderate price of these sun-linings, as compared with that of all previous portraitures, has induced multitudes of all classes and degrees of culture to procure portraits of relatives and friends. In those breaking up of kindred and neighborly circles, so all but universal, these pictures become of peculiar utility. They are authentic representatives, left behind them by the absent, to keep their memories fresh and green; nor is it easy to measure their influence in counteracting the indifference and virtual alienation, which prolonged absence is so apt to create. With a transcript of the beloved features ever at hand, wearing the very expression which revealed the soul so plainly, we are scarce more likely to forget or grow cold to the original, than we should be in his corporeal presence. The importance of preventing the dying out of our loves and friendships and of keeping our social affections alive and glowing, it were hardly possible to overstate; next to true religion itself they operate to preserve us from that self-involution and hardness of nature so often credited by advancing years with the painful struggles, the carking cares, and the bitter experiences of life. How, then, can we overprize an art which permits us to behold the all but living, speaking antitypes of beloved ones, though continents may now stretch or oceans roll between us.

Even greater still is its value, when the separation is by death, and we may not hope, on earth, to meet them more, we cannot count them utterly lost to us, while we may yet look on their pictured faces and forms, truthful and fresh as life itself, and inaccessible to the decay, which soon resolves their originals into dust. The remembrance of them, thus preserved to us, has a power to elevate and purify. The faults of the departed are forgotten, while their virtues shine for us more brightly than while they were with us. The

tenderness with which death invests their image softens our hearts to an unwonted susceptibility to all virtuous impressions. At the same time it directs our thoughts to that awfully momentous event which has summoned our friends away and the mysterious world, into which it has ushered them; topics which, beyond all others, are deserving our regard, since they are connected with our own destiny not less than theirs.

II. Again, this art has already done much, and must hereafter do vastly more for the artistic education of the masses. Obviously, the first requisite for such education is, that its subject be enabled often and familiarly to inspect works of art. To a certain extent this condition is fulfilled by the immense number of daguerreotypes, which several hundred of professors are incessantly occupied in putting into circulation. True, many of these specimens are of indifferent quality; but none, perhaps, so utterly belie their own pretensions, as not to suggest to the beholder the thought of art, so that the very poorest do somewhat towards waking to life the artistic capabilities: and as among things indifferent there are always a better and a worse, comparison is stimulated and taste and judgment receive something of discipline, causes apparently trivial often produce the most magnificent effects; and in defiance of ridicule, I venture to predict the coming of a day when results of highest national import may be traced to the simple fact of the heliographs so generally suspended at the entrance-doors of the daguerrean professors. Hundreds of persons of all ages and of every class, may be seen every hour of the day, stopping for a brief inspection of the specimens produced by different artists; and thus, unconsciously to themselves, they are acquiring at once a love of art and a capacity to discriminate between various styles and degree of excellence. And the susceptibility thus developed for one species of art, is naturally impressed by other species also, and the habit grows up of noting and enjoying the products of the pencil and the chisel: and ultimately the beautiful, the graceful, and the grand in form and color, wherever and however embodied, be it in the works of Man or of God.

I think it was Pericles, who said, "he found Athens of brick and left it of marble." Such, at any rate, was the fact; and from infancy the Athenian was trained artistically by Beauty in painting, sculpture and in architecture, and in manifold other shapes, on which his eye lighted constantly, whether abroad or at home. Where is the absurdity of beholding in the sun-linings, which arrest the passers' eye at so many points in our principal streets, the germ of an eventual development of art, which shall make the moderns the full peers of the ancients alike in creative genius and the ability to appreciate and enjoy? We see none.

While, however, daguerreotyping is in our view destined to exert an important influence in creating a general taste for the fine arts, we are equally confident it will do much for the improvement of those arts themselves. A good daguerrean portrait furnishes essential aid to the painter in transferring face and form to the ivory or canvass. By its means he is able not only to get a more exact general likeness of his sitter, but to catch also his brightest and best expression. The daguerreotype, it will be remembered, is a *literal transcript* of its original, as the last named *appears at the moment*. An essential part of the daguerreotypist's skill is to act on his subjects' mind so as to call up its best mood, though it were only for a single instant. Then, as the transferring process is hardly less rapid than thought, he can seize the reflection of that mood in the face before it has vanished, either through fatigue or reaction. By such a daguerreotype the painter is, in various ways, aided in over-looking his own task. Thus he need not subject his sitter to the long, wearisome sessions formerly needful. A few brief sittings devoted exclusively to studying the subjects' type of mind and character, and so settling the fittest mode of expressing the same in the countenance, will fully suffice. For all other purposes, such as

representing the drapery, &c., &c., the daguerreotype copy will serve, perhaps, even better than its living original. In a word, this use of the daguerreotype is a mode of *economising* both time and force, leaving to the painter more of both for producing the *highest effects* of the art.

The landscape painter, the sculptor, and architect, as well as all others, whose aim is visible representation, be their instrumentalities what they may, may also derive important help from daguerreotype copies of their originals. The majority of artists are beginning to recognise the value of daguerreotypes, as an auxiliary in their own spheres: and not a few of the most eminent among them use freely the facilities it offers. Nor do we doubt, that, with the advancement of the heliographic art, we shall witness a corresponding advance in the fine arts universally.

While, then, the benefits and the possible appliances of daguerreotype are so many and important, what monstrous absurdity to regard the art itself as a mere process of *mechanical transcription!* rather should it be reckoned one (and that not the least) among the fine arts; and therefore not only opening a field for the exercise of high genius and large culture both artistic and general, but absolutely requiring these for great eminence therein.

It would seem superfluous to say, that the greater the ability and the more complete the cultivation devoted to a pursuit, be this what it may, the more likely is eminence to be attained and success achieved in it. Stupidity and ignorance qualify their subject for distinction in nothing save themselves. And what is true of other pursuits is certainly not less true of the heliographic art. The ablest and most disciplined mind may find full scope for its energies both in the sciences lying at the basis of this art and the manifold particulars of its practical department.

If to these appeals be added another, of which I have already spoken at some length in Chapter IV., even the dullest will hardly maintain, that mere mechanical aptness will answer all their requirements. And the wise and judicious will not hesitate to declare, that to fulfil perfectly conditions so numerous and difficult might well tax to the uttermost the genius and the culture of Raphael or Michael Angelo.

My purpose in presenting the foregoing suggestions—for which I do not venture to claim either novelty or depth—will have been more than accomplished, if they aid in rousing the daguerrean body to a stronger conviction of the dignity and value of their art and of the importance of devoting to it their best powers and most strenuous efforts. For them, as for all others, the true and the sole fitting maxim for guidance is “Excelsior.”

M. A. ROOT.

140 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia.

November 25, 1852.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

The “soon to be published” volume appeared twelve years subsequent to this extract. See M. A. Root, *The Camera and the Pencil; or, the Heliographic Art, its Theory and Practice in all its Various Branches* (Philadelphia: M. A. Root, 1864). This text, however, does not appear in the volume. Two other extracts similarly described are “Some Thoughts on the Fitting Up of Daguerrean Rooms,” 5:6 (June 1853): 361–64; “The Fine Arts,” 6:1 (July 1853): 51–53. Another article by the same title appears in 6:6 (December 1853): 360–63.

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