

T. B. Thorpe, "Webster, Clay, Calhoun, and Jackson: How They Sat for their Daguerreotypes," May 1869

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WEBSTER, CLAY, CALHOUN, AND JACKSON.

HOW THEY SAT FOR THEIR DAGUERREOTYPES.

WHEN Daguerre made practical the art of taking portraits by the aid of sunlight and chemical combinations, Webster, Clay, Calhoun, and Jackson were past the prime of life. Two of them had wasted much time in sitting to artists; and if they had been captious men they could have told of long, dreary hours they had dreamily, and often miserably, passed in the studios of painters and sculptors. In fact, Clay and Webster had been so much "persecuted" in this way that they were nervous at the very suggestion of the idea of entering an artist's studio. Calhoun was not a popular idol with the masses, and his immediate constituents seemed never to have taxed his patience much in endeavors to obtain his "counterfeit presentment." Jackson lived so much on the "frontiers" before he was President that he seemed to have had little experience with artists, if we may judge from the fact that he asked Mr. Powers, the sculptor, "how he was getting along with his portraits?" meaning busts.

When these great men were in the very acme of their fame the daguerreotype came into vogue, and it was deemed a desirable thing to preserve their faces for posterity by the aid of the new process; and while they would probably have refused to sit long and weary hours and days to accomplish this desired object, they made no objection to giving a flitting moment of their valuable time for the purpose.

Mr. Webster sat for his picture in the year 1849 in the art-gallery corner of Fulton Street and Broadway, opposite St. Paul's Church. He was the guest at the time of the Astor House, in which establishment he was by the proprietors treated with the most princely consideration. He received the request to sit for his picture, after being informed it would only occupy a few moments of his time, with a prompt assent, and made no other remarks than were necessary to fix the time and place. Punctually to the moment, and unattended, he was at the gallery. He was expected, and when he made his appearance his dignified presence, massive head, his large dark eye, and commanding political position almost paralyzed the then comparatively inexperienced workmen. His style of dress was also calculated to attract attention, the prominent object of which was a blue dress-coat ornamented with richly-gilt buttons. Under direction he quietly took his seat, and was as kindly disposed as a well-trained child. It was more difficult in those days than now to take a picture, but Mr. Webster submitted with the greatest good-nature

to every request, and at the proper moment was as motion-less as a statue. The picture, under such favorable circumstances, was soon obtained, and Mr. Webster, on being told that such was the case, his face brightened up with an expressive smile, and without other demonstration, except a formal bow, he left the gallery.

Mr. Clay sat for his picture in New York in 1850, directly after he had announced himself in favor of the "Compromise Act" of that year. The attention he received from our citizens made it almost impossible to see him. Mr. Clay, whose health was then beginning to decline, declared that he was overwhelmed with demands on his time. His friends, however, were very urgent, and he finally decided that he would gratify their wishes, and appointed the morning of the day he was to have a public reception at the City Hall. Mr. Matsell was then Chief of Police, and by his assistance the camera was taken to the Governor's Room, curtains were tacked up, and every thing arranged, Mr. Clay being present, and expressing himself relieved by the quietness of the room. The crowd of people in the mean time outside of the building was becoming demonstrative, and the corridors of the City Hall were lively with noise. At the very moment Mr. Clay was to sit "a committee" of some kind broke open the door into the refreshment-room, where a lunch was spread, and commenced helping themselves with the greatest freedom; from the lunch-room they came into the Governor's Room. Clay acted with great presence of mind, by seeming to not notice the intrusion. He was dressed with unusual care, for he had set apart some hour of the day for the especial reception of the ladies. The fashion of the day for the neck was a high satin stock, with standing collar to match, which gave a singular stiffness to the whole costume. When every thing was announced as in readiness Mr. Clay took his seat, surrounded by his host of admirers, who seemed wonderfully delighted with this "private view." For a moment it appeared as if the real object of the moment would be defeated. Mr. Clay, however, suddenly waved his hand, which had the effect to command the utmost silence; then dropped both before him, one grasped within the other. While the process of taking the picture continued, which was for some seconds, many of the spectators, unaccustomed to mental discipline, grew pale in their efforts to subdue their interest in what was going on, or from fear of being rude by some unfortunate interruption. Mr. Clay all the while seeming to be perfectly at his ease; the blood flowed calmly through his cheek, his eyes beamed with peculiar intelligence, and his large, expressive mouth was firm but kindly disposed; he could not have been more self-possessed if alone in his study. When the click of the instrument announced that the affair was ended, an enthusiastic but subdued demonstration was made by the spectators. Mr. Clay took the hint, and gracefully rising, put every one at ease by commencing conversation with those persons, nearest to him, and he did this as if he had not been interrupted. In a few moments the room was relieved of cameras and extra curtains, the doors were thrown open to the public, and then proceeded the last and probably the grandest reception Mr. Clay while living ever received in New York.

Mr. Calhoun sat for his picture in Washington city in the year 1849—less than two years before he died. His hair, which in his younger days was dark, and stood so frowningly over his broad, square forehead, was now long, gray, and thin, and combed away from his face and fell behind his ears. Mr. Calhoun was dressed in a suit of black, over which he wore a long cloak. Nothing in human form could have exceeded his dignity of manner and impressive personal appearance that day. He came promptly in accordance with his appointment, accompanied by his daughter, Mrs. Klempton. The day was cloudy and unfavorable for the business proposed. Mr. Calhoun seemed to feel this, but was at the same time very obliging, and was constantly making some kind remark

about any delay or accident that might occur. The first trial, owing to the floating clouds and murky atmosphere, consumed some thirty seconds, which appeared to be a long time in a standing position. Mr. Calhoun readily consented, however, to a second trial, which was perfected in ten seconds. Mrs. Klempton, who delicately arranged at times her father's hair or the folds of his cloak, expressed her surprise at this, and said, "Father, how is it that your first picture, to make it, consumed so much more time than your second?" Mr. Calhoun resumed his seat while the plate was preparing for the third picture, and substantially replied that the art of taking pictures by the daguerreotype was a new process, and that while the results had deeply interested him, as indicative of great advantages to the social circle and all scientific pursuits, yet he did not feel competent to explain the exact method, and with these preliminary remarks he proceeded to open up the invention by an analytical disquisition and explanation that could not have been surpassed by the most accomplished expert; and all this was done in the simplest and clearest language, that fascinated and astonished the workmen in the gallery. Mr. Calhoun sat the third time, and after expressing a great deal of pleasure at the announced success of his visit, and calling the attention of his daughter to some pictures on the walls, he left the gallery.

General Jackson's picture was taken at the Hermitage in the spring of 1845. He was at the time a confirmed invalid, so much so that his death was a possible event at any moment. Against the wishes of his household, who were only solicitous for his comfort, he would know who called upon him, and against the positive advice of his attending physician he persisted in gratifying those who had "come so far" by having his picture taken. On the morning appointed he caused himself to be dressed with especial care, and bolstered up with pillows and cushions. He was very determined in his manner, and would not listen to any denial. At this time his hair, once such a remarkable steel-gray, and which then stood like a mass of bayonets round his forehead, was now soft and creamy white, and combed quietly away from his temples, and fell upon his shoulders. When the moment came that he should sit still he nerved himself up with the same energy that characterized his whole life, and his eye was stern and fixed and full of fire. The task accomplished, he relapsed into his comparatively helpless condition. When relieved from pain he was pleasant and courtly, yet never seemed to be entirely satisfied with the restraints imposed upon him as an invalid.

In looking through the camera glass into the eyes of these remarkable men, Webster's seemed to be dark and mysterious, where way down in profound depths were hidden strange mysteries. Clay's was a light bluish-gray, and was always restless, the pupil of which seemed to be constantly trembling from the electrical effects of the controlling mind; it was fascinating, and caused you to look away from its concentrated gaze. Calhoun's eyes were cavernous, they seemed so deeply set in his head, but there was a deep blue in their depths that appeared trembling with a threatening storm; and yet there was, for all this, inconsistent as it may seem, a wonderful sense of repose. Jackson's eye was of a bluish-gray, dashed with yellow and red, that in his youthful days made it look so hot, red, and terrible. It was ever trembling by the agitations it had been accustomed to, and was constantly changing, one moment stern and defiant, the next quiet and peaceful; the imperious was, however, always predominant.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Regarding Webster's sitting at the "art-gallery corner of Fulton Street and Broadway, opposite St. Paul's Church": this was this location of the gallery of Mathew B. Brady. Brady would later recount Webster's sitting for him in "An Old-Time Photographer and His Reminiscences," *Photographic Times and American Photographer* (New York) 25:681 (5 October 1894): 226.¹

Daguerreotypes of all four of these individuals are included in Harold Francis Pfister, *Facing the Light: Historic American Portrait Daguerreotypes* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978).

This article is one of twenty-one articles by Thomas Bangs Thorpe published in *Harper's*.² Additional information regarding Thorpe is found in the Wikipedia entry, "Thomas Bangs Thorpe."³

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8940004_BRADY_PHOTO-TIMES_1894-10-05.pdf
2. <http://www.harpers.org/subjects/ThomasBangsThorpe>
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Bangs_Thorpe

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