

Albert S. Southworth, "An Address," published June 1872

(keywords: Albert Sands Southworth, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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EWER ARCHIVE P8720002

Selected text published in:

Philadelphia Photographer 9:102 (June 1872): 178–81.

AN ADDRESS.

BY ALBERT S. SOUTHWORTH.

MR. PRESIDENT AND FELLOW MEMBERS OF THE
NATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSOCIATION.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: In a former address it was my endeavor to impress upon you the importance of study to any and all who desire to excel in our profession: and that by general remarks, covering all the grounds upon which we can rightly lay claim to the appellation of artists. The standard of acquirements was upon no narrow and limited scale. It embraced all that preparatory and disciplinary education which we term liberal, and, in addition, all that is necessary to a realization in its fullest extent of what is recognized as professional. And this is not all. To our qualifications must be added, if we would pass examination properly, the mechanical, and this should, in the regular course, be the last before entering upon our life-career of practice and practical study. Of all ordinarily intelligent scholars, such an education is within their capacities; but for practical excellence, there must be added to common capabilities a talent and genius for art, and if genius is wanting, persistence in the art of photography, or any of the finer arts of drawing, engraving, painting, and sculpture, will only be misplaced and mistaken effort.

I stated that the mere handling of the chisel, or the brush, or pencil, is mechanical, and requires only the same talents for their use as the arrangement of the camera, or the use of the chemicals, in the practice of photography. Architectural outlining and the rules of perspective are attainable in the same way as the art of chirography, requiring only the same powers and faculties of body and mind. But a representation of nature in her poetic character, whether in still or animal life, either as a drawing in chiaroscuro, or a painting in colors, or the sculptural form, calls forth other and higher powers of appreciation, intellect, and invention. To render expression as may be observed in the works of nature, or may be anticipated and imagined by poetic fancy, is a power beyond the formal and mechanical, possessed only by the mentally cultivated and refined, and cannot worthily be accomplished without such refinement.

But let me be plainly and fully understood. To discourage you is not my purpose. You have labored assiduously already. You have risen early and retired late, and have not eaten the bread of idleness. The most of you have passed one decade, some two, and a few three, in your devotion to our art. Through accident you stumbled upon a new creation, and appropriating you fostered it, and educated yourselves until you began to be self-satisfied, as though it were actually your own. But on looking around, you saw that

others were striving to exert all their powers also in the same direction, and perhaps it was apparent that you were outdone altogether in the beauty and excellence of the productions of this art. How happened this? Just as a variety of attainments always happens in a knowledge and practice of all arts. Early education, opportunity, example, discipline, cultivation, fortune, all perhaps conspired to carry your neighbor, or your competitor, far beyond yourself in the beauty and perfection of his results. There is a certain something denominated “Genius,” also, which is acknowledged to be attendant upon every successful character or personage in the domain of art. Much more than genius must be brought to the artist’s aid ere he can be raised from the physical to that higher and more noble element of the intellectual, which has its aspirations in the lofty and sublime developments of the soul. If you expect meritorious success, “Study” is your watchword. By study comes the knowledge of all the elements of art or science. But I seem to hear coming from the lips of those whom I address, how shall I study? I answer, from nature, by observation, from pictures, productions of artists, or copies from nature, and from books. Observation of nature and of pictures comes by the organs of vision. Knowledge from books is received from others who are describing their observations through vision also, and by the study of books you are experiencing the observations of others to add to your own stock and acquirements.

I cannot stop to take into account that mistakes will often occur, and that apparent progress either in observation or reading will often be found a retrograde march, to be retraced by dispirited and weary travellers. In the nature of things we must expect this, and bear up manfully under its trials. But we can substitute no preferable watchword—“Study” is first and foremost, and the subjects are ever before us. But I seem to hear whispered from here and there among you, that it is a convention of photographers that I am addressing, and not of students in painting and sculpture. Of this I am aware, and have still guided my pen wittingly, or at any rate as I intended. To occupy a proper position, the photographer must understand art as well as the painter, every possible form and expression of it. Painting, in its perfection, is the truest representation of nature to the eye. Sculpture may be more true to form; but wanting color, it is cold as its marble, and chillingly deathlike. Painting strikes us through and through with its life, and warmth, and truth. The photograph is only at best a copy of the marble representation of the modelling of nature upon a flat surface. It may have the lights and shadows of the marble; it must have, to be a good picture. But it is wanting in the life and warmth of beauty, and the beautiful coloring of nature which exists in the painting. In photographing scenery and still life, an artist’s eye is necessary to select the point of view. In portrait or miniature taking from the living model, we need the eye of the sculptor to arrange the subject for representation. It is our own vision that must be educated and trained to serve us in these our accustomed works and duties. Our observation must begin by comparisons and contrasts. We must learn beauty of form, and arrangement, and grouping. We must be familiar with the colors of nature, and appreciate their adaptation and beauty. Nothing should escape our most careful notice both as to detail and general effect. Nature’s drawing, perspective, and coloring should be our first lessons, and these should be familiarly learned. Next should come a knowledge of paintings and pictures—that study and familiarity that will empower us to judge and criticize them by a comparison with nature as their groundwork; not that they should be exact imitations, though they ought never to go beyond nature’s possible limits. From these we may go to forms in nature, and from forms in models and sculpture. Then books upon art, essays and lectures upon all the various subjects that pertain to art; and if we seek, we shall find a great many

volumes, and if prepared by previous study and observation, we shall read with pleasure and profit, and learn from the works of those who have a just and legitimate claim to the title of Masters.

There are two indispensable elements required by the artist, viz: light and vision. Light is an element of nature, existing without and independent of ourselves, free to the use of our natural and rational faculties. Whilst vision is a part or power of, and belongs exclusively to the individual. Having the perfect sense of vision, the beautiful colors of the external world and the infinite variety of the forms of natural objects, are presented to us through this sense for contemplation and enjoyment.

The human mind is progressive, receiving at first single ideas and confused impressions through the visual organs, afterwards enlarging and expanding, until a general or universal view is embraced, and comprehended with avidity and delight. From a single color to a union and combination of all the tints of the prism, from a single line or form or individual to a multitude of forms and objects, all grouped in the never-ending arrangements of animated nature. The uses of light and vision come to us at first as it were accidentally, but after a little experience they become a necessity indispensable to our happiness; and the deprivation of either would be a calamitous infliction. By attention and study we increase our faculties of observation, and become conscious of new delights, and new influences, in the contemplation of nature as spread around us, and laid at our feet. We soon learn that nature is ever changing; that the forms and colors of yesterday have to-day become new in their groups and effects, and all experience teaches us that this changing is always in progress, over the external world. Observation teaches us the beauty and variety of those changes, and we soon learn to view, passing before us, an all-pervading panorama, and begin to feel that we can comprehend only a very limited part or portion.

Our profession is, to catch here and there some faint outline or representation, that we may preserve for a space that part of the view for which for the moment we think we have some interest. The manner of doing this, as it at present interests us professionally, is by the aid of the newly discovered art of photography, by representations in light and shade, or chiaroscuro, which defined from its original Italian, is compounded from chiaro, "light," and oscuro, "dark." These terms appear almost inseparably connected, as, if we clearly perceive either, we of necessity have at the same time a clear conception of the other; the presence or sense of one being not supposable but with the absence of the other. Vision is properly the act of seeing, or perceiving external objects by and through the organs of sight, or the eyes. The terms vision and seeing, for our purpose, mean the same thing, though seeing may be considered the acting of the visual organs, and vision the resultant effect of their action.

To analyze fully these two terms, vision and chiaroscuro, would require volumes upon volumes upon science and philosophy. The field for the study of light alone is almost illimitable in extent, as well as exhausting and sublime in its character, standing next and nearest to its creative source.

The subject of my address then may properly be stated as vision or seeing, and light and shade. With their science and philosophy I shall have little to do, whilst my main effort will be directed to the point of impressing you with the importance of devoting your most energetic and persevering efforts to obtain a practical knowledge of their proper and most effective use.

No time need be spent before such an audience as this in explaining the object of obtaining such knowledge. To all, and each, it is of vital interest and paramount concern,

in a professional point of view. All possessing the ordinary visual organs should be able to see nature as it is. The power to comprehend artistically any landscape, presupposes the power to comprehend artistically any other. The power to judge and appreciate beauty, implies a power to judge deformity also, and every intermediate grade. The capability of determining the existence of beauty of form and expression in one person, is followed necessarily by the same power in the same respects to estimate the same or opposite qualities in all persons. The power to estimate beauty in nature is the same as to estimate its representation by whatever methods it is attempted to be shown, whether in models or drawings. But all experience tells us that these are faculties not often possessed, and when so possessed are acquired only by a long, careful course of training of the vision, placing such a scholar next in acquirements to the artist who is able to produce the model or drawing of nature.

He then who can see nature as a picture stands next to him who can make such a picture. But not all who attempt to model or draw have learned to see correctly. And indeed but very few, if we judge by their productions. History has recorded but few names of any one age, renowned for modelling, or drawing, or painting in colors; and comparatively speaking there are but few renowned names handed down to us of eminently distinguished sculptors or painters, and but a very small number of these have rivalled in any degree nature herself, but have fallen far behind her. Why has it been so? Not because of the mechanical difficulties of execution, for the world is full of mechanical models far surpassing any niceties of sculpture, in its chiselling and smoothing, and of far greater exemplifications of physical ability than the mixing of the colors or outlining of the pictures that cover the walls and ceilings of the Vatican.

The remaining portion of my remarks upon this subject of light and shade in photography, must be extempore, as opportunity may offer during our Convention, connected as I hope with some practical illustrations.

Mr. Southworth concluded amid applause, after which the Secretary read the following . . .

[End of selected text. The article continues with a paper by J. H. Kent, "Retrospective and Otherwise."]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Southworth, in his opening paragraph, refers to a "former address." The reference is to Albert S. Southworth, "An Address to the National Photographic Association," *Philadelphia Photographer* 8:94 (October 1871): 315–23.¹

An extensive, annotated bibliography of Southworth and Hawes, compiled by William S. Johnson, is provided in Grant B. Romer and Brian Wallis, edit., *Young America: The Daguerreotypes of Southworth & Hawes* (New York and Rochester: International Center of Photography / George Eastman House, 2005): 536–48.

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8710002_SOUTHWORTH_PHILA-PHOTO_1871-10.pdf

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URL: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8720002_SOUTHWORTH_PHILA-PHOTO_1872-06.pdf

Document author: Gary W. Ewer

Creation date: 2010-06-08 / Last revision (revised archive number): 2012-03-30

Citation information: *Philadelphia Photographer* 9:102 (June 1872): 178–81.

Prepared from: photocopy from an original volume.

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