

Wilfred A French, "Repairing a Rare Daguerreotype," November 1917

(keywords: Wilfred A. French, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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EWER ARCHIVE P9170001

Published in:

Wilfred A. French, "Repairing a Rare Daguerreotype," *Photo-Era, The American Journal of Photography* (Boston) (November 1917): 206. (The article appears under the division, "On the Ground-glass.")

Repairing a Rare Daguerreotype

BALDWIN COOLIDGE, the veteran photo-specialist, who has restored hundreds of priceless daguerreotypes, told me of an incident that illustrates the perversity of human nature. A gentleman of Cambridge, Mr. X., a descendant of a distinguished family, brought him a daguerreotype of his mother to be copied—several years ago. The portrait was made in 1845 by one of the masters of Daguerre's art, and, as it had been shown very frequently during a period of seventy years, it had acquired a faded look—a common surface-condition that will yield quickly to expert treatment. Nevertheless, Mr. Coolidge copied the picture just as it was and, a few days afterwards, delivered it to its owner, together with the negative and ten prints, at the same time suggesting that the daguerreotype be cleaned. The owner declined to consider the proposition, though M. Coolidge assured him that the process was simple and absolutely safe, likewise inexpensive. The scion of a noble family said merely that he would think the matter over. Thereupon Mr. Coolidge explained that, although he was not eager to do the work, it should be entrusted only to a recognized expert.

Several days afterwards, Mr. Coolidge was called to the telephone, some one inquiring if he could restore a daguerreotype that had been damaged. Mr. Coolidge replied that this depended entirely upon the nature of the injury, but that in many instances the damage had proved to be irreparable. "Very well, I'll bring it to you," was the final remark of the inquirer. A little later, a young man entered Mr. Coolidge's studio. He was very much disturbed, the apparent cause being a daguerreotype-case which he held clutched in his hand. He stated that he conducted a second-hand camera business in Bromfield Street and that, several days previously, a gentleman, after purchasing a used equipment, had asked him if he could clean a daguerreotype. As the answer was in the affirmative, he left it. Continuing, the camera-dealer said: "I was very busy the next day, so I gave it to my assistant, a young chap who occasionally develops and prints films for customers, and asked him to clean it, which he did." And with trembling hands he opened the daguerreotype-case, displaying a virtually *plain silvered surface*. "Is this the daguerreotype your assistant said he cleaned?" Mr. Coolidge asked with apprehension, recognizing the case by its distinctive appearance. "I'm sorry it is. But can't you restore the picture that my assistant seems to have cleaned off?" anxiously asked the visitor. "No; never!" answered Mr. Coolidge sharply. "The surface of a daguerreotype is more delicate than the wing of a butterfly; the slightest touch of the finger will cause a blemish that can never be repaired. If let alone, the daguerreotype you destroyed would have

lasted several hundred years more. It has gone forever now—like the soul of a man who has died. As for Mr. X.—he has paid the price of his folly.”

Mr. Coolidge deprecated the habit of certain photographic journals of publishing methods to restore injured daguerreotype advising that amateurs practise them. Although these methods are generally trustworthy, they should be severely let alone by inexperienced person, for the least slip is likely to spell disaster.

[End of text

EDITOR'S NOTES:

The editor has in the past been personally shown a daguerreotype with a printed back label from Coolidge indicating that the daguerreotype had been restored by him.

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URL: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P9170001_FRENCH_REPAIR_DAG_PHOTO-ERA_1917-11.pdf

Document author: Gary W. Ewer

Creation date: 2008-10-30 / Last revision: 2009-06-23

Citation information: Wilfred A. French, "Repairing a Rare Daguerreotype," *Photo-Era, The American Journal of Photography* (Boston) (November 1917): 206.

Prepared from: photocopy of original issue..

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