

John H. Fitzgibbon, "Daguerreotyping," June 1851

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DAGUERREOTYPING.

BY J. H. FITZGIBBON, OF ST. LOUIS, MO.

PROUD indeed must that man be, who, while yet an inhabitant of earth, finds his fame encircling the habitable globe. With what exquisite feelings of pleasure must be the consciousness that the civilized world are now practicing that beautiful art of which he was the happy discoverer, and to know that every time the sun rises the name of DAGUERRE is written:

“With a pencil of light”

on countless myriads of tablets in both hemispheres. And, proud may we be who find the enchanter’s wand placed within our own grasp, that we too, can command the sun to stand still, and find him obeying our slightest wish, ministering to our fondest loves, and holiest affections, with an alacrity almost beyond the power of comprehension.

Onward as has been the march of this wonderful art,—if we may give such a term to the skilful management of science,—since its first discovery by the great Frenchman and more especially since its introduction to this progressive country, until we may now say it is perfect,¹ where each operator tries to surpass his brother in producing the finest effect on the polished surface of the silver plate, yet there are many,—it is to be regretted,—who seem to care but little what kind of a picture they produce, so long as they gratify their mercenary desire to accumulate the almighty dollar. That such *professors* of the art exist at all is more owing to the fault of the community in which they live, than any other cause. Most persons like to have *cheap* pictures (not likenesses) and when it is too late, they find to their cost, they have paid too dear for them, for one half of those so taken have to be taken over again by more competent and skilful operators. Few persons in the present day are aware how their resemblances are transferred to the surface of the metallic plate. And few, very few, of the travelling operators are sufficiently educated in the science of their art to explain the *why* and the *wherefore* of the appearance of the picture, or even the nature or effect of the chemical agents they employ. The cause of all this ignorance on such subjects arises from the fact that many young men suddenly captivated with a love for the Fine Arts, take it into their heads that they are destined to make a figure, or *figures* in the world, consequently their genius must no longer be

hidden under a bushel, but expand its wings in a higher intellectual atmospheric region. Or, what is still more likely, they are lured into this pursuit by a prospect of an *easy* and rapid accumulation of money. Instantly they repair to some cheap Daguerrean establishment or perhaps apply to an itinerant *professor*, and for *ten, twenty, or thirty dollars* are regularly manufactured in the short space of from three to six days, into full-bred professors of the photographic art. Is it then to be wondered at that we find so many awful, ghost-like looking shadows poured out upon the world by a host of ignorant pretenders? Not at all!

If a person wishes to become acquainted with the Daguerrean art, instead of going to a mere tyro, he ought to place himself under the tuition of an operator of established reputation, one who is permanently located in some city and well known to his neighbors as a man of skill and experience in his profession. Such a man must be well paid for the knowledge he imparts, and the pupil ought to spend at least *three months* with him, if he is desirous to become familiar with the whole process of Daguerreotyping in all its present perfection.

Some of the pictures now to be found in the galleries of the large cities, are such beautiful gems of art that our wonder is excited by the production of so much excellence, and we ask ourselves how is it possible to find fault with things so true to nature. And it is to be hoped that when the Hillotype is brought into full operation there will be still less cause to complain.²

Although the writer has had many years of practical experience in Daguerreotyping, he finds every day something new presenting itself before him, and if it is not in one branch of the business, it is in another that we have a chance of learning, and improving the knowledge already acquired. Yet it is as simple as it is beautiful.

Nature, copying nature by nature's hand, is so wonderful in its simplicity, that through that very simplicity it becomes difficult of comprehension to some operators, for they will so veil and mystify it to those who know nothing of the operations of science, as to make them believe that they produce pictures by the powers of *parafarageraramus*, as McAllister does his tricks of legerdemain.

As this interesting art is not generally known in the great West, it may not be uninteresting to the readers of the Western Journal to hear a few remarks upon the subject and of the materials through whose agency the Daguerreotypes are produced.

As it is an operation, the success or failure of which, in a great measure, depends upon the atmospheric changes, and the nature and qualities of the chemical agents employed, many difficulties obtrude themselves which render this art one of great interest to those who really take pleasure in its pursuit. Yet there are some who have been in the business for years, who profess to have attained perfection in its theory and practice, and to whom, as they fondly believe, no further instruction can be imparted,—most signally fail for want of a right understanding of the business in which, perhaps, they have already made money.

The simple process of taking the Daguerreotypes may be explained in the following manner:

In the first place it is of the utmost importance to have the plates, designed for the reception of the impressions, as clean as possible, for herein lies the great secret of success,—and nineteen out of twenty of the operators of the present day don't half clean their plates. I have known operators to spend an hour in cleaning one plate and in the end it would be less fit for use than when they began, and again, in five minutes others will prepare their plates in the most perfect manner. The mind as well as the hand must be

busy in the operation. The *buffing* is also a very important part and should be attended to with the utmost care. Great care should be taken to protect the buffs as also the *rouge* or polish from the effects of dampness or moisture. Galvanizing very materially helps in the process of plate cleaning and adds considerably to the sensitive qualities of the metallic surface and renders it more capable of receiving a good, effective impression. Indeed it is absolutely necessary to have the best of *tripoli*, *rotten stone*, or any other substance which is used, in order to insure a perfectly clean plate.

In the second, it is very essential to the attainment of good pictures that all things used in the operation should be of the best quality, otherwise you can have no dependence on your manipulations. A bad camera will produce a dull and shapeless, indistinct shadow of a shade which might conscientiously be worshiped for the want of resemblance to anything human or divine. Voightlander and Sons of Vienna have attained the greatest celebrity in the daguerrean world for the perfection of their instruments, and well do they deserve their fame, for, their lenses are the finest at present known. C. C. Harrison of New York also manufactures some excellent cameras, his and Voightlander's are used by myself, and I must candidly confess that I find no difference between the pictures taken from one or the other.

Roach and Lewis of New York make some really good instruments, but I would advise no operator to purchase cameras that are unaccompanied by the maker's name, as ten chances to one they are worthless.

Third. The best materials should at all times be made use of, for there is a satisfaction in knowing that when you have produced a fine picture, it is not spoiled by a blemish in the plate. The Scoville [Scovill—ed.] manufacturing company of New York, without the shadow of a doubt, furnish the operator with the finest and best of plates, but a great many persons do not use them because they are a little difficult to clean, and they themselves too lazy to use the necessary quantity of elbow grease; they prefer the French plates as they are easier to clean and moreover are a *little cheaper*, but unfortunately these plates are generally full of small holes. For my own use I prefer the Scoville plates to all others. The case in which the pictures are to be enclosed, should also be of the very best description, more particularly the glass, as this last named article displays the picture to great advantage. Operators, generally, do not put their work in cases as good as they should be, nor can the manufacturers make them as cheap as they wish them. If the community would make up their minds to refuse such pictures as are put up in common paper cases with thin, bad glass, there would be fewer daguerreotypes destroyed of persons whom their friends respect which, as frequently happens, cannot be replaced, owing to the false working of cheap materials.

One of the best and most extensive case making establishments now known, is that of E. Anthony, of New York. In this manufactory the best cases are all furnished with the finest glass I have met with.

Fourth. It is an important consideration in daguerreotyping to be provided with chemicals of the very best description, as nothing is more annoying to the operator than an inferior order of materials. The purest and the best should at all times be used, for to the excellence of our chemical agents are we indebted for the fine tone of the pictures we take. There are many establishments in this country celebrated for the care with which they put up the chemicals used in the business of daguerreotyping, but I believe none are better or purer than those prepared by Louis Beckers, of Philadelphia, In nine years experience I have not found a bad article from his manufactory.

And lastly; to succeed in this as in any other business, you must pay strict attention to it and never trust to chance but be ready at all times to operate, have every thing in order and when a sitter comes to have his likeness taken, go to work regardless of the weather, be prepared for all kinds of weather, and let me tell you some of the best pictures are frequently taken in wet and cloudy weather. Be very particular how you pose your sitters, as the painters term the position they give to the subject; let them always assume the easiest and most natural position possible, for on this, in a great measure, depends the beauty of the daguerreotype, and, never for one moment think of letting a picture leave your gallery that has no *shadow or out-line to the features*, as such productions, although they may please some sitters because copied from themselves, yet they will reflect no credit on either the art or the artist.

In a future paper I will give a description of Daguerreotyping simplified.

1. Mr. L. L. Hill of the State of New York, has announced to the world that he has discovered a method of taking pictures in natural colors, with all the perfection of nature herself.

2. Mr. Hill informs the writer by letter on the subject of his inventions, that he expects to be ready in about two months to announce to those interested, the whole process. He says, the process is more easy, more certain, and the picture so taken, less liable to fade than the Daguerreotypes, the time shorter, and that all articles now in use, except the *mercury bath* and a few new chemicals, will still be retained.

[End of text. For clarity, original asterisk footnotes have been replaced with numbers.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This is the first of two articles contributed to this periodical by Fitzgibbon. See also J. H. Fitzgibbon, "Daguerreotyping Simplified," 6:6 (September 1851): 380–85.¹ This text (lacking the final six paragraphs) is reprinted in *Daguerreian Journal* (New York) 2:6 (1 August 1851): 167–69. See also [Fitzgibbon], "Daguerreotyping in the Backwoods," and "The 'Arkansaw Traveler' Daguerreotyped," *Photographic and Fine-Art Journal* (New York) 7:11 (November 1854): 324–26.²

A brief profile of Fitzgibbon, with wood engraving portrait illustration, is found in "J. H. Fitzgibbon, of St. Louis," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York) 4:92 (5 September 1857): 213.³ See also the profile in "Fitzgibbon's Gallery," J. N. Taylor and M. O. Crooks, *Sketch Book of Saint Louis*. (St. Louis: George Knapp & Co., 1858): 311–14.⁴

A three-stanza memorial poem for Fitzgibbon is in Richard Smith Elliott, *Notes Taken in Sixty Years* (St. Louis: R. P. Studley & Co., 1883): 204.⁵

William Quesenbury describes his visit to the Fitzgibbon gallery in "Trip to St. Louis," *South-West Independent* (Fayetteville, AK) 2:46 3 August 1855.

Additional information regarding Fitzgibbon is found in Bonnie Wright, "This Perpetual Shadow-Taking: The Lively Art of John Fitzgibbon," *Missouri Historical Review* 76:1 (October 1981): 22–30; Delores A. Kilgo, "Fitzgibbon, John (1817–1882)," Lawrence O. Christensen, edit. *Dictionary of Missouri Biography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999): 301–2; Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers from the Mississippi to the Continental Divide: A Biographical Dictionary, 1839–1865* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005): 254–59.

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510018_FITZ_DAG-SIMPLIFIED_1851-09.pdf

2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8540007_FITZ-BACKWOODS_PFAJ_1854-11.pdf

3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8570002_FITZGIBBON_BIO_LESLIES_1857-09-05.pdf
4. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8580003_SKETCH-BOOK_FITZGIBBON_1858.pdf
5. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8830001_ELLIOTT_SIXTY-YEARS_1883.pdf

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