Julius F. Sachse, "The Oldest Sun Picture of the Human Countenance?" January 1894
(keywords: Julius F. Sachse, John William Draper, Dorothy Catherine Draper, William Herschel, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

Published in:
American Journal of Photography (Philadelphia) 15:169 (January 1894): 33–38.

"THE OLDEST SUN PICTURE OF THE HUMAN COUNTENANCE"?

PERSISTENT EFFORTS TO DETRACT FROM THE HONOR DUE PHILADELPHIA SCIENTISTS.

JULIUS F. SACHSE.

THE persistency with which certain parties connected with the University of the City of New York, during the past year have attempted to controvert photographic history, and thereby claim for themselves honors which belong to others in Philadelphia, is certainly worthy of a better cause, the more so as it is done in the face of indisputable proof published in the AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY and the *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, both of which publications were sent by the writer to the parties in question, at both Chicago and New York.

The facts as to who made the first "sun picture" are so well known, and the documentary proof is so positive and strong, and has been so widely published at home and abroad, that we fail to understand why these continued persistent efforts.

The writer repeats that he does not wish to detract one iota from the credit due Professor J. W. Draper[1] for his valuable researches and experiments in the early days of Heliography. At the same time we challenge our New York friends to show a single line in the writings of Dr. Draper wherein he claims the priority in heliographic portraiture.

A full account of his earliest experiments with reference to the authorities quoted was published in the AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY, vol. xiii., 361-2, to which renewed attention is called.

As is well known, the first portrait of a human face taken by aid of the sun and a sensitive plate was made in Philadelphia, and shown before the American Philosophical Society at the meeting held December 6th, 1839. During the same month others were made by both Cornelius and Dr. Paul Beck Goddard, and in less than three months the daguerreotype miniature had ceased to be a novelty in Philadelphia. These originals are still in existence and in possession of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Another fact to be remembered is that photographic portraiture (daguerreotype miniatures) was worked commercially, and a regular studio established in Philadelphia, months before this alleged portrait of Dorothy Draper is claimed to have been made. Further, there are a number of these Philadelphia miniatures still in existence, which are dated, as was the custom at the time.[2]

A specimen of above in possession of the writer was taken early in the year 1840 (February). (See AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY, vol. xiii., p. 312)

Further, a commercial studio was opened in New York City by Walcott [Wolcott—ed.] and Johnson some time after the successful establishment of the Philadelphia gallery, and several months prior to the date given by Mr. William John Herschel, and it was not until September 1840 that Professor Draper sent his communication to the *London Journal of Science* describing "The process of daguerreotype, and its application to taking portraits from life."

(See AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY, Vol. xiii., p. 404).

A reference to the U. S. patent reports will disclose the fact that May 8th, 1840, a patent was granted to Alexander J. Walcott, City of New York, for an "Improved Apparatus for taking Daguerreotype Likenesses." (See AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY, Vol. xiii., p. 408, specifications in full.)

Here are material facts which cannot be disputed, and all antedate Professor Draper's experiment which is now heralded about the country with so much *eclat* after having been exhibited at the World's Fair at Chicago, during the late exhibition.

An examination of the alleged Draper portrait, a crude copy of which we here reproduce, shows at a glance that it is not the result of an experimental exposure. The studied pose, the carefully arranged dress of the sitter, the lighting and the finish of the picture, all prove that this was a result obtained long after the experimental stage of Daguerrean portraiture had passed. It is not to be denied that the portrait is an early specimen of heliographic portraiture, but the persistent claim that it is "the earliest sunlight picture of a human face," is misleading, and sets forth a claim which cannot be substantiated.

The occasion that calls forth these remarks is the account of the special meeting held Tuesday evening, December 19th, 1893, by the Society of Amateur Photographers of New York, for the express purpose of exhibiting the daguerreotype of Miss Dorothy Draper.

President R. A. B. Dayton presided. T. J. Burton Secretary. Mr. Dayton announced that through the courtesy of Chancellor MacCracken and Professor D. W. Hering of the University of the City of New York the Society was enabled to exhibit the original cameras used by Professor John W. Draper in his experiments in and about 1840, also the first daguerreotype of the human countenance. Professor Daniel W. Hering was presented to the Society and read the following paper:

"Some of the rarest, and most interesting relics that were displayed at the World's Fair in Chicago, were those which comprised the exhibit of the University of the City of New York. The exhibit was situated in the gallery of the Liberal Arts Building, and formed a part of the great exhibit from the State of New York, the largest American educational exhibit at the Fair. Foremost among the achievements in sciences stand those of the Drapers, John W., and Henry—father and son. Some of the first applications of the camera to obtain pictures of living objects were made by Dr. John W. Draper.

Daguerre made pictures of inanimate objects, but the process was a long one. Professor Draper, by the application of a different chemical to the plate, reduced the necessary time of exposure from forty-five minutes to about one minute, and was thus able not only to daguerreotype inanimate objects, but also the human face. The picture which he took of his sister is claimed to be the first sunlight portrait ever made. The history of this picture is interesting. It was presented by Professor Draper to his warm friend Sir William Herschel, the great astronomer. After Sir William's death it passed, with his effects, into the possession of his son Sir William John Herschel, and seems to have been forgotten. Chancellor MacCracken knew of this picture, and when the exhibit was proposed, set about to obtain it, feeling that it would form a valuable addition to the University's display, and be, at the same time, a tribute to Professor Draper. A letter was accordingly sent through Minister Lincoln to Sir William John Herschel; at first the picture could not be found, and the expectation of recovering it was given up. But later a cable message was received, saying that the picture had been found, and would be forwarded. The following legend was attached to the picture during the exposition:

'The Oldest Sun Picture of the human countenance. Taken upon the roof of the University of the City of New York by Professor John W. Draper early in 1840. Kindly loaned through the Hon. Robert Lincoln to Chancellor MacCracken by Sir William John Herschel, to whose father, Sir William Herschel, it was presented in a letter, of which the original draft is here given, as also Sir John Herschel's reply. The photograph by its side is of the same person, taken more than half a century later.'

Lying alongside the relic was the following autograph memorandum by Sir W. J. Herschel:

'This daguerreotype of Miss Draper was taken by Professor Draper of the University of the City of New York, her brother, not later than 28th July, 1840, when he sent it to Sir William Herschel in England, in whose possession and that of his family it has remained ever since. Thanks to the inquiry made for it by the Chancellor of the University its unique history and value were brought to light again in 1893.

Oxford, 25. March. W. J. H.

Except the case the mounting is as received from America originally.'

A little further away were the following autograph directions by the same person :

‘This daguerreotype is lent to the Chancellor of the University of the City of New York to be used at his discretion during the Chicago Exhibition, and to be returned by him to Sir W. J. Herschel, Bt., Oxford, by the close of this year. It has never been opened, but may be so if the Chancellor desires to copy it by any process which does not involve contact of any substance with the surface or the application of heat. W. J. H.

Note.—The outer American case does not belong to it, but please return it.’

The camera with which this picture was taken was a cigar-box camera and was lost. The other early cameras used by Dr. Draper and the microscope and other apparatus with which he applied the daguerrotype process to microscopy, were exhibited in the case occupying the centre of the alcove. Some of the apparatus for sensitizing the silver plates is hand-made and crudely put together, but important scientific results were achieved by its use.

In the show-case was another piece of apparatus, called the Chlor-Hydrogen Photometer, the invention of Professor John W. Draper. It was based on the property which chlorine and hydrogen have for uniting, when exposed to the light. It could be exposed to but a small amount of light or the chlorine and hydrogen would unite with an explosion. However, it was an exceeding delicate and accurate instrument, and for a long time was the most useful of all photometers.

The following note is taken from *Harper’s Magazine*.

‘Professors Bunsen and Roscoe, in their chemical researches, made at the University of Heidelberg, and communicated to the Royal Society of London, 1856, say:

The first and only attempt which has been made to refer the chemical action of light to a standard measure, is to be found in the researches of Draper. * * * *

Professors Bunsen and Roscoe, having modified this instrument to suit the objects they had in view, accordingly used it in their very exhaustive and important series of researches.’

On the right side of the exhibit stood the bust of Henry Draper, and behind it his great work in science. The largest one is the photograph of the moon, about five feet in length. It was enlarged from a small negative perhaps two and a half inches in size. Seven hundred negatives were taken before one was secured sufficiently clear to enlarge, and this was in the days when wet plates were used! There was no paper made at that time large enough to print the photograph, and four pieces were pasted together.

The other photographs show his “discovery of oxygen in the sun, and the early investigations of star spectra.”

Professor Hering exhibited the cameras of Professor Draper, and also some of micrographs made by him in the early days.

Mr. J. Wells Champney, at the close of the paper, moved that a hearty vote of thanks be tendered to Professor Hering, for his interesting paper. The motion was unanimously adopted. The meeting closed with an interesting exhibit of new apparatus.

1 AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY, Vol., xiii., p. 243
2 See AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY, Vol. xiv., pp. 370-1.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This text should be used with caution; not all assertions of Sachse are accurate.

Additional information regarding Draper and his portrait of his sister is found in Howard R. McManus, "The Most Famous Daguerreian Portrait: Exploring the History of the Dorothy Catherine Draper Daguerreotype*," Daguerreian Annual 1995* (Pittsburgh: The Daguerreian Society, 1996): 148–171; Howard R. McManus, "'It Was I Who Took the First' An Investigation Into Professor Robert Taft's Assessment of Whether Dr. John William Draper Took the First Portrait," *Daguerreian Annual 1996* (Pittsburgh: The Daguerreian Society, 1997): 70–100; R. Derek Wood and E. D. Shoreland, "The Daguerreotype Portrait of Dorothy Draper," *Photographic Journal* vol. 10 (December 1970): 478–82.[1]

A copy daguerreotype of the Draper portrait, made by John William Draper's son Daniel, is in the collection of the Smithsonian and is viewable on their web site.[2]

See also, "Philadelphia's Share in American Photography," *Wilson's Photographic Magazine* (New York) 40:558 (June 1903): 287–88;[3] Julius F. Sachse, "Philadelphia's Share in the Development of Photography," *Journal of the Franklin Institute* (Philadelphia) 135:4 (April 1893): 271–87;[4] Julius F. Sachse, "The Daguerreotype in America," *American Journal of Photography* (December 1896): 552–57.

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Document author: Gary W. Ewer
Creation date: 2010-06-07 / Last revision (proofread): 2010-06-21
Citation information: *American Journal of Photography* (Philadelphia) 15:169 (January 1894): 33–38.
Prepared from: microfilm; graphic is from GoogleBooks. Also available from G*oogle Books*. (http://books.google.com/books?id=GCATAAAAYAAJ)
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