

Two Marcus Root Daguerreotypes

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John Fries Frazer (1812-1872) sat for this portrait (Figure 1) at the studio of well-known Philadelphia daguerreotypist Marcus Aurelius Root (1808-1888) in about 1850. Philadelphia was an early center for photographic activity in America, and both Root and Frazer contributed to the new field. John Frazer's translation of Louis Daguerre's official manual, *Practical Description of the Process called the Daguerreotype*, the first translation to appear in the United States, was printed in the "Journal of the Franklin Institute" in October 1839. This translation paved the way for early American experimentation in photography. Frazer reportedly produced a daguerreotype following the manual's instructions, but the daguerreotype was later lost. John Frazer's interests and talents extended beyond photography. Trained in law, medicine, and science, Frazer, at the time of this portrait, held the position of Professor of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania.

Marcus Root, on the other hand, devoted his life to photography. An 1855 advertisement for his studio boasted that "he has taken *above* 60,000 Daguerreotypes, and has gained *Sixteen Medals and First Premiums* for *truthfulness* of representation, exquisite tone, superior finish and artistic effect." (*The Illustrated American Biography*, vol. III by A. D. Jones, p. 113) Root prided himself on being an artist with his camera. He chastised the "mere mechanics" who operated photographic studios, declaring that the true daguerreotypist was able to capture "that indefinable *somewhat* which reveals to the beholder the soul within; which stamps a man with that *individuality*, which distinguishes him from all men else." (*Photographic Art-Journal*, June 1853, pp. 361-362)

Persifor Frazer (1844-1909) sat for his portrait (Figure 2) at the Chestnut Street studio of Root in the early 1850s. Perhaps to make the experience of sitting still more pleasant for the young boy, Root posed his subject in an eighteenth-century costume complete with wig and sword. Marcus Root wrote extensively about the need for daguerreotypists to create a comfortable environment for their subjects. He advocated filling the waiting room with engravings, books, vases, and statuary, so those entering the studio "may inhale a spirit which shall illuminate their faces with the expression desired. . . ." (*Photographic Art-Journal*, June 1853, p. 362). In this daguerreotype, Root succeeded in capturing a child-like liveliness dancing in Persifor's eyes, and one almost expects to see him jump up from his chair and leap around the studio brandishing his sword.

Persifor Frazer grew up to be a scientist, following in his father's footsteps as a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Marcus Root spent the

next thirty years practicing and perfecting his craft. He considered photography an art and worked hard to have it recognized as such. An 1852 advertisement for Root, for example, included testimonials from respected painters and engravers extolling the merits of his work. "For beauty and richness of tone; judicious arrangement of light and shade; and tasteful, artistic manage-

Courtesy the Library Company of Philadelphia.



Figure 1: John Fries Frazer by Marcus Root Studio about 1850.

ment of all accessories," declared portrait painter James Reid Lambdin, "Mr. Root's pictures, in my judgment, are unsurpassed" (Broadside in Library Company's collection).

Courtesy the Library Company of Philadelphia



Figure 2: *Perisfor Frazer* by Root Studio, ca. 1850.