

Frederick Gutekunst and the Art of Photography
Marvin Samson Center for the History of Pharmacy
University of the Sciences in Philadelphia

Frederick Gutekunst, the son of a German émigré cabinetmaker, was born in the Germantown section of Philadelphia in 1831. From age twelve to eighteen, at his father's urging, he apprenticed in the law office of Joseph Simon Cohen, prothonotary to the Supreme Court. Law proved so "dry and uninteresting" to Frederick that – as he recounted later in life – he would spend the majority of his dinner allowance on materials to carry out experiments in physics and chemistry. It was around this time that he developed an interest in photography, a new and burgeoning art form that would eventually make him famous. (As if somehow a portent of his natural talent, the name "Gutekunst" translates from the German as "good art.")

In his early teens Frederick was a frequent (volunteer) sitter at the daguerreotype gallery of Marcus Aurelius Root, who was among the earliest photographers in America; however, Frederick learned the craft of daguerreotyping from Robert Cornelius, founder, in 1840, of Philadelphia's first photographic studio. Although not its originator, Frederick succeeded in the chemical process that converted the unique daguerreotype image into a printable electrotpe (intaglio) plate; the results were promising, but not good enough to pursue commercially. Frederick's talent for chemistry did not go unnoticed by his father, who apprenticed him, from age eighteen, to the druggist Frederick Klett, which soon set him on a path to Philadelphia College of Pharmacy (henceforth PCP). It is perhaps no coincidence that Cornelius studied chemistry with Gerard Troost, PCP's first chemistry professor.

In 1853, after a four-year apprenticeship with Klett, the last two of which included simultaneous matriculation at PCP, Frederick graduated with a thesis titled *History of electro-metallurgy and its application to pharmacy*. As Frederick progressed towards a pharmacy career, he also began experimenting with his first camera, which consisted of a five-dollar lens he added to a box built by his father. In October of that same year, at age 22, he entered his first photography contest at the 23rd Exhibition of American Manufacturers at the Franklin Institute for the Promotion of Mechanical Arts.

For the next two years Frederick worked in the Market Street drug store of Avery Tobey, a fellow PCP alumnus. Meanwhile, Frederick's interest in photography grew even stronger through the encouragement of his younger brother Louis, a barber, with whose financial support Frederick opened, in 1856, the "Gutekunst & Brother" photography studio at 706 Arch Street. Their partnership lasted until 1860, when Louis resumed his former work.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 and Philadelphia's importance as an economic, industrial, and military center turned Gutekunst's studio into a major photography destination, particularly for portraiture. In 1866 the business moved several doors down to 712 Arch Street, and Frederick spared no expense turning the larger space into a "temple of beauty and grandeur." As one newspaper columnist wrote in a 1913 profile about him: "There was hardly a busier man in Philadelphia than Mr. Gutekunst. As the troops tramped through the city, thousands of men flocked to his Arch Street studio to procure a likeness to send back to loved ones left behind, and many times those curious little prints were, and still are, the only pictures of tangible kind of this

or that boy who marched away from home in Federal blue. The generals came, Grant and Meade and Sheridan while, as his reputation spread, the most prominent figures in other walks of life more and more frequented the photographer's studio."

Gutekunst was a favorite photographer of the elite of the period, and his sitters included Walt Whitman, Ulysses S. Grant, Lucretia Mott, Thomas Eakins, A. J. Drexel, John D. Lankenau, and Woodrow Wilson. The nine national and international exhibitions the studio participated in between 1865 and 1876 garnered it gifts, medals, and awards, all of which helped secure for Gutekunst a name beyond the United States. One of the studio's most celebrated images is an impressive technical feat: a ten-foot long panoramic view of the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, which at its unveiling in 1876 was described as the largest photograph in the world. (One of several rare surviving original imprints of this subject is on view in this gallery.)

Throughout his more than 60-year career Gutekunst maintained close ties with PCP. He was an active member of the Alumni Association, a significant donor, and his photographs appeared regularly in PCP publications. Assembled in several albums still owned by USP (two of which are on display in this gallery) are dozens of photos of PCP graduates, officers, and trustees that bear the Gutekunst studio stamp. At Gutekunst's death in 1917 the *American Journal of Pharmacy* published a three-page obituary, and the PCP Board of Trustees issued the following resolution to memorialize him:

Whereas the membership of the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy has suffered a severe loss by the death of Frederick Gutekunst, one of the oldest graduates, and an honorary member of the College, and whereas the membership of the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy wishes to express sorrow in the loss of an esteemed and beloved member who by his long and eventful life, devoted to the Art of Photography, won the title of 'Dean of American Photographers.'

Be it resolved that in the death of Frederick Gutekunst the membership of the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy has lost one of its most distinguished associates who endeared himself by his many gifts of portraits of living, and reproductions of portraits of deceased officers and members, and by his life-long interest in all affairs of the Institution; also that by his skill in his Chosen Art he has inspired many others to attain the same perfection of work that was so characteristic of him, and thereby elevated the Art of Photography to so high a plane that his name will ever be an inspiration to those that follow his footsteps.

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