



Behind the Scenes with Franklin George Weller: The Creation of Stereoscopic Tableaux

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This article presents the discovery of original, stereoscopic, glass-plate negatives created between 1871 and 1876 by Franklin George Weller, of Littleton, New Hampshire. The body of Weller's work was narrative stereographs, which are now prized by historians of stereography as being masterful examples of the *tableaux vivants* in stereo. In pristine condition, these negatives have never been presented to the public. They provide not only the clearest record of the high quality of F. G. Weller's work, but also reveal the series of choices that the stereographer made in constructing a scene for maximum stereoscopic effect. As 'sister views', or other stereographs made at one sitting, the negatives reveal points of comparison with the published prints. By demonstrating Weller's choices in moulding space and creating a unified, theatrical composition, the negatives are instrumental to understanding how he conceptualized stereoscopic space. Weller orchestrated 3D space across the entire scene, synthetically contrasting and complementing elements to create total tableaux of active stereoscopic viewing. The negatives allow us to go behind the scenes of his theatrical views in order to understand his methods in set design, composition, direction of models, lighting, and the planning of stereopsis. The final stereoscopic negative in this article has been unavailable to the public in any form, as it was never published or recorded. The author attributes it to Weller as a self-portrait and analyses its humour, which was characteristic of his work.



The nineteenth-century stereograph that once enthralled vast numbers of the viewing public presents us with an old and renewed absorptive experience. It does so through a refined crafting of spatial effects that stimulate stereoscopic perception in the viewer, which can increase the longer one looks. The stereoscope can seem magically transportive, but there is no magic involved, only optical principles. As a requisite of the Victorian parlour, it presented stereoscopic subjects that held a transatlantic sway over the visual culture of the United States and Europe. Also called stereoviews, or just views, stereographs were published on a massive scale, beginning in Europe in the 1850s, and in the US from approximately 1859 to the 1940s. One company, Underwood & Underwood, published nine million views in 1901.¹ It is no exaggeration to say that the stereograph defined what Victorians on both sides of the Atlantic wanted and expected from photography.²

Reluctance to recognize this history, or its outright dismissal, occurred in the mid-twentieth century, coterminous with the argument for the acceptance of the two-dimensional photograph as fine art.³ That argument is moot, but stereography meanwhile suffered a certain neglect and mischaracterization. This is less the case in the twenty-first century, as an increasing number of scholars have addressed the medium with enriched focus and original research.⁴ Also less habitual is the publication of half-stereographs as a single, mono-photographic image, thus taking the ‘stereo’ out of stereography.⁵ This practice turns the stereograph into a static object and an entirely different viewing experience than it was meant to be. While publications today tend to respect the materiality of the stereograph as a two-imaged artefact, hesitance lingers towards articulating how these two images work in tandem to create spatial effects.

The stereograph offers an optical journey into simulated space, which is time intensive and immersive, allowing the viewer to float *in medias res* within photographic

¹ Melody Davis, *Women's Views: The Narrative Stereograph in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of New Hampshire Press, 2015), p. 72.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 5–8.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

⁴ A very small sample includes: Linda McShane, *When I Wanted the Sun to Shine: Kilburn and Other Littleton, New Hampshire Photographers* (Sherwin Dodge, 1993); *Paris in 3D: From Stereoscopy to Virtual Reality 1850–2000*, ed. by Françoise Reynaud, Catherine Tambrun, and Kim Timby (Musée Carnavalet, 2000); *3D: Double Vision*, ed. by Britt Salvesen (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2018); Glenn Willumson, *Iron Muse: Photographing the Transcontinental Railroad* (University of California Press, 2013); and authors Denis Pellerin and others published by the London Stereoscopic Company <<https://shop.londonstereo.com/lsc-books.html>> [accessed 20 July 2025]. A journal and a magazine dedicated to the field are the *International Journal on Stereo & Immersive Media* <<https://revistas.ulusofoa.pt/index.php/stereo/index>>, and *Stereo World* <<https://stereoworld.org/stereo-world-magazine/>> [both accessed 20 July 2025].

⁵ An example of the publication of half-stereographs chosen from a repository solely dedicated to stereography is Michael Lesy, *Looking Backward: A Photographic Portrait of the World at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Norton/California Museum of Photography, 2017).

verisimilitude. This ‘alternative reality’ transported the Victorian audience, and today’s viewer no less. With advances in 3D cinema, virtual reality, and other immersive media like AI, we witness a continuing interest in spatialized realism. Historical stereographs offer a high degree of personal interaction, upon which a full experience of stereopsis depends. As viewers, we proceed at our own pace and volition, so that hovering above a canyon or hanging out in a parlour is a matter of temporal self-direction. As the stereograph was in continuous commercial production from 1855 to the 1940s, it also offers a wealth of social history.⁶ This article addresses the experience and creation of spatial perception, with social-historical context, in the work of an American stereographer, Franklin George Weller, active 1867–77, through a group of his recently discovered negatives. By comparing these original wet-collodion negatives with his published prints, we can see that Weller conceptualized stereoscopic effects across the entire scene, synthetically contrasting and complementing elements to create total tableaux of active viewing. The negatives allow us to go behind the scenes of his theatrical views to understand his methods in set design, composition, direction of models, lighting, and the planning of stereopsis. In highly curated scenes, Weller thought in a pre-cinematic style, long before cinema. That is, ‘take’ by ‘take’, Weller worked progressively through the *mise en scène*, revising the vision until the perfect experience of volumetric actors and objects appeared within a visual realization of space. This induced the viewer to take leisure in the scene and develop the diegesis in her own manner through a spatial-linguistic oscillation between the 3D image and the titles printed on the cards.

Consecutive scenes that advance a storyline or provide contrast have been a device of printmakers for centuries. Sequential views are also part of the Weller *oeuvre*, with 2–4 card sets. Designed to increase the investment of a viewer in the drama, such sets, unlike traditional prints, are replete with photographic detail and immersive stereopsis. Weller’s views particularly excelled in these qualities, which, combined with the hood-darkened, forward-focused optics of the stereoscope, created an isolated space for absorptive interest and identification with the scene. Though Weller’s views were created in the 1870s, they remained in publication through the 1890s, a decade awash with stereos of all kinds from dozens of publishers.⁷ I do not suggest a direct link between Weller and cinema but, rather, a cultural one. The stereographer modelled

⁶ The Keystone View Company continued to publish stereographic sets into the 1940s.

⁷ Research has begun on the connections between stereography and cinema in the penny arcade. Eric Kurland, ‘The Influence of Early 20th Century Silent Cinema on Commercial Stereo Views Produced for Entertainment, Especially in the Penny Arcade’, unpublished paper delivered at the conference ‘Sessions on the History of Stereoscopic Photography, 3D-Con’ (Wichita, KS, 26 July 2024).

scenes for sustained viewer engagement that preceded the saturation of absorptive tableaux at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Weller views that I discuss are domestic dramas, or narratives, that appealed more often to women. As I have demonstrated, companies that followed Weller employed target marketing towards the woman at home, who was considered to have more leisure time for the salesman's attention as he touted what we call the 'edutainment' value of views for the family. This approach was tremendously successful.⁸ The stereoscope and stereoview, created for individual consumption, developed so successfully from a culture of domesticity that its home was in the home's centre — on the parlour table. From that revered place, the subjects of stereo drew material from theatre, cartoons, music, minstrelsy, literature, the music hall, and contemporary life. Portable and playful, stereoscope and stereograph were both voyeuristic and reflective of viewers' values, and did they ever sell.

Beginning as an ornamental carriage painter and a partner in two carriage businesses, F. G. Weller studied for a winter with the Hudson River School painter, Samuel Lancaster Gerry, in his Boston studio.⁹ The year of this study is unknown, but I suggest that it concluded before 1867, for that winter he purchased the photographic studio of Franklin White of Lancaster, New Hampshire, and his daughter Fontinella was born.¹⁰ Weller began in photography with conventional and sentimental scenes, views of tourist hotels, and tried-and-true landscapes in large plate and stereo formats. He photographed subjects that the Hudson River School painters, photographers, and tourists had made famous for decades.¹¹ After a few years, he transitioned to narrative views, which he called his 'Stereoscopic Treasures'. A sole operator, he competed with the legendary Kilburn View Company (1867–1910), though according to historians of Littleton, New Hampshire, there was no animosity between the stereographers of this small town; they socialized together and intermarried.¹² In 1871 Weller turned towards

⁸ Davis, pp. 62–81. See also, Leigh Gleason, 'Canvassed and Delivered: Direct Selling at Keystone View Company, 1898–1910' (unpublished doctoral thesis, De Montfort University, 2018) <<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/228182115.pdf>> [accessed 20 July 2025].

⁹ G. H. Loomis, 'Gallery Biographic No. 8: F. G. Weller', *Anthony's Photographic Bulletin*, October 1875, pp. 305–06 (p. 305); and *A Faithful Student of Nature: The Life and Art of Samuel L. Gerry*, ed. by Elizabeth Dubrulle (New Hampshire Historical Society, 2021). I have found no record of Weller's paintings.

¹⁰ Loomis, p. 305.

¹¹ *Consuming Views: Art and Tourism in the White Mountains, 1850–1900*, ed. by Donna-Belle Garvin (New Hampshire Historical Society, 2007); Kirsten M. Jensen, 'Seeing in Stereo: Albert Bierstadt and the Stereographic Landscape', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 12.2 (2013) <<http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn13/jensen-on-albert-bierstadt-and-the-stereographic-landscape>> [accessed 20 July 2025]

¹² For Littleton photographers, see McShane, *When I Wanted the Sun to Shine*; and T. K. Treadwell, *The Stereoviews of F. G. Weller and Related Companies* (Institute for Photographic Research, 1992).

narrative scenes, which he made available through his catalogue, canvassers, retail shops, and in Weller's Art Rooms in Littleton's Atwood and Brackett building.¹³ With the Stereoscopic Treasures, which are featured in this article, Weller hit his stride, becoming celebrated in his day for his charming and ironic narrative scenes, with each stereoview directed, designed, and photographed by himself. His work circulated widely after his death in 1877, as three successive companies purchased his stock and kept reissuing it until the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Collectors and historians of stereography today have high regard for Weller's stereographs, which are not difficult to find.¹⁵

My research into Weller's *oeuvre* took a serendipitous turn in 2019 when a dealer offered me a group of wet-collodion negatives in pristine condition made by the photographer. I cannot emphasize how rare an occurrence this is for glass plates, which are especially susceptible to the vagaries of time, and were often discarded once their commercial value waned. By close examination of these negatives, I realized that most were sister views — taken at the same sitting as one or more negatives of the subject — and they revealed much about the photographer's process. From the details of his studio, such as his carefully carpentered and painted sets and backdrops, to the small adjustments between sister views calculated to increase the sense of stereopsis (3D vision), these negatives mapped Weller's thought process. We are allowed behind the scenes to witness how a stereographer curated a *mise en scène* for visual effect, where even a slight adjustment could make a difference. Later companies, such as Keystone and Underwood & Underwood, followed Weller's lead in making adjustments through multiple views.¹⁶ As a sole photographer, though, Weller single-handedly built his studio, painted backdrops, carpentered sets, curated props and lighting, and directed his models, which included himself.¹⁷ With the better lenses of the 1870s, he was able to bring his subjects closer to the camera,

¹³ See *List of Views for the Stereoscope, Manufactured by F. G. Weller, Littleton, N. H.* ('Republic' Print, [1873]), unpaginated. Collection of the Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, MI <<https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/artifact/486347#slide=gs-493047>> [accessed 20 July 2025]; and *White Mountain Republic*, 2 October 1868 and 19 March 1874. The Atwood and Brackett was located on Main Street in Littleton. Its exact location has not been confirmed.

¹⁴ The companies were George M. Aldrich (1879), the Littleton View Company (1883), and Underwood & Underwood (1890s).

¹⁵ Weller's views are in the collections of the National Museum of American History, the Library of Congress, William and Mary College, the Getty Museum, and others. They are actively traded at fairs and conventions, such as the National Stereoscopic Association's annual 3D-Con.

¹⁶ Leigh Gleason, "'The Stereoscopic Photograph' and 'The Traveller': What We Learn from Underwood & Underwood's Failed Magazine", unpublished paper delivered at the conference 'Sessions on the History of Stereoscopic Photography, 3D-Con' (Tacoma, WA, 5 August 2022).

¹⁷ Loomis, p. 305.

imparting a sense of intimacy for the viewer, as though she were in someone else's domestic drama (Fig. 1). Weller's views were among the earlier examples of the sense of floating perception that good stereoviews may impart, whereby objects in space are solid, but the viewer's sense of his own space vis-à-vis that which he perceives is suspended. Very few early stereographers managed this proximity, and few from any time took such painstaking care to offer a convincing virtual reality. By a close comparison of the negatives to his prints, we can observe that Weller's method was to work through the visual process negative by negative, creating improved effects through different 'takes'.



Fig. 1: F. G. Weller, *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1873), albumen print stereograph. Courtesy of the Littleton Area Historical Museum.

The technology of stereoscopic photography holds to a few basic principles. First, our two eyes see slightly different images because of the separation between them called the ocular interval. The optic nerve feeds these close but distinct images to the brain, which has learned how to adjust for the differences between them and create a sense of volume, or stereopsis. We also see the two images as one, which is termed binocularity. In stereoscopic photography two photographs taken from a distance separation of 2.5 inches mimic the ocular interval between the eyes and offer images from the point of view of each. In order for the brain to fuse the two photographs of a stereographic print into one binocular image, our eyes must converge or cross. The card being at close range initiates a strong convergence from the eyes, while the magnification of the stereoscope's lenses can heighten the sensation of minute eye movements.

The stereoview illustrations that accompany this article reproduce the full card, which may be seen in 3D. The viewer can either cross the eyes, which is called free viewing, or look at the photographs with a device, called a stereoscope or stereoviewer. To see the stereographs on a computer screen, adjust the position of the head to square with the screen. You may need to move your seat forwards or backwards a little, then simply cross your eyes and hold them steady. This will not harm your vision. The two photographs will blur, and a third will form in the centre of the two, which will be fused (in depth). It may take a little practice. Alternatively, stereoviewers are available for viewing onscreen.¹⁸ To view stereographic prints, our ancestors would have used either a Holmes-Bates or a lenticular/Brewster stereoscope.

We begin with F. G. Weller's *A Girl of Olden Time* (1874), an albumen print with hand-colouring (Fig. 2). In its current faded condition, the print's selective colour has become a distraction. An American convention for deluxe prints at the time, selective hand-colouring was read as both an enhanced value and a form of naturalism, with the albumen print's warm highlights and brown-blacks for skin. I conjecture that the red would not have been as intrusive when it was applied in 1874. Compare this with the negative version in a digitized positive (Fig. 3). We see in clear detail Fontinella, or Fontie, Weller's daughter, standing barefoot at a giant spinning wheel. As such



Fig. 2: F. G. Weller, *A Girl of Olden Time* (1874), albumen print with hand-colouring. Courtesy of the Kelvin Ramsey Collection, Special Collections Research Center, William and Mary Libraries.

¹⁸ The Loreo Pixi is designed for computer stereoviewing <https://www.berezin.com/3d/loreo_lite.htm> [accessed 20 July 2025].



Fig. 3: F. G. Weller, *A Girl of Olden Time* (1874), digital positive from wet-collodion stereoscopic negative.

machines were mainly relics by 1874, she evokes a bygone time. A white thread is a locus, not attached to any wheel but, rather, to a spindle. It is held in tension between Fontie's fingers, creating a vector line from the little wheel to herself. Its brightness provides depth cues as it recedes in space. Depth cues are the points between the two pictures that appear to the eyes when viewing in 3D as slightly non-corresponding, and thus they stimulate the brain to negotiate between them in order to read stereoscopically. A good stereograph has a range of depth cues from near to far. That range is called the depth bracket, which includes all the objects in focus in 3D. Successful stereographers and cinematographers spread out their depth cues for a deep depth bracket, or they may manipulate them for effect.¹⁹

In *A Girl of Olden Time* the most prominent depth cues are on the foregrounded wheel of the machine, which projects towards the viewer, threatening to veer out of the depth bracket. The treadle board is detached from the machine and thus mechanically dysfunctional. Its utility, rather, is stereoscopic — to provide a perspectival plane of depth cues from the base line and, connecting with the checked cloth and basket, to the backdrop. The elements along this diagonal express the full depth bracket, which creates a rich spatial effect.

The pinned-up portion of Fontie's dress forms a peak with its point near her elbow, while her outstretched foot directs the viewer's eyes from this point through

¹⁹ Bruce Block and Philip Captain 3D McNally, *3D Storytelling: How Stereoscopic 3D Works and How to Use It* (Focal Press, 2013).

the fold in her dress to the treadle board. Its left corner diagonally aligns with Fontie's outstretched hand, forming an angle. Weller makes more triangular play between the spokes of the wheel, the legs of the machine, and the angle made by the thin strips that attach to the wheels. While the little wheel juts into the viewer's space, Fontie seems to rein it in by her counter pull on the white thread, which also bisects the angle made by the strips joining the wheels. All contribute perspectival lines throughout the depth bracket and activate the viewing experience by keeping the eye moving between the parts. By contrast, the photographer's painted backdrop reads flatly, but its planarity encourages the eyes to stay focused on the girl and machine. The exception to this is the steam billowing from the pot and continuing out the window, which in my viewing, has a mild stereopsis. In the print version in Figure 2, it is only a blur.

Through the negative in Figure 3, we have an enriched understanding of the photographer's intentions, and we see details about the studio he built. The windows for photographing by natural light, a must for photographers of the day, indicate that Weller conceived of his views as studio productions and planned for directional light to model his figures. He clearly also used frontal light, its source behind the camera. Rounded by two light sources, Fontie stands in relief to the planarity of the backdrop, close enough to the camera lens to impart a sense of intimacy. The steaming pot painted on the backdrop, which the eyes must shift from the figure to see, creates a contrasting sense of time and movement. Space is volumetric but uncertain, as though this little girl dropped through a chute of time, and the room flattened its background to allow her passage.

While the negative of *A Girl of Olden Time* does not seem to vary from the print, other negatives reveal variations that illuminate how even the smallest choice can make a large difference in effect. As was customary for the time, Weller took a number of sister views at one sitting. This could maximize how many could be printed at once but, in Weller's case, they were not all printed. Rather, he seemed to use them progressively in a pre-cinematic fashion, to study the development of a scene by subtle shifts in placement and thereby enhance the compositional structure and its ability to effect stereopsis. By comparing two negatives and a print for *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1873), we can understand the development of his thought process in creating a scene (Figs. 1, 4, 5). Weller models a successful but lonely bachelor dreaming of marriage, while his fantasy bride, her white dress blending into the background, hovers above him.

In the negatives of this scene, we follow Weller's careful adjustments. In versions 1 and 2 (Figs. 4, 5), we notice the painted flats that the photographer used to create his bachelor study. On the top left, the lighter backdrop juts in front of a black flat, while at the bottom, the lighter flat is clearly behind the darker one, which tilts backwards to

accommodate the shift in position. This tilt is disguised by an étagère, which anchors the scene in the print. Why did he go to the trouble of tilting the planes of large and heavy carpentered flats? Moving the white flat forward allowed the figure of the bride to be closer to the lens, and we, the viewers; while the backward tilt of the black flat deepened the shadows. Together, they form a strong contrast.

Between the two sister negatives, we can also observe a subtle change in Weller's figure. In version 1 (Fig. 4), his left foot is tucked back, and the fist on which he rests his head does not lay upon the table. His head and body have an element of tension. The bride holds her left hand flatly against her waist. In version 2 (Fig. 5), we can see that Weller's left leg is extended, offering more depth cues, while the hand and body relax to better indicate sleep. The extended leg offers a compositional vector to the scene. The bride's hand relaxes too, with the fingers dropping slightly, and her head has moved into a three-quarter turn, corresponding to Victorian conventions of compositional balance and elegance. Weller also moved the camera position slightly closer to the subjects in version 2. Both the extended leg and the closer camera render a tighter, more intimate composition with no wasted foreground space. In this version the foot occupies that space, leading the eye along the axis of the leg with its depth cues, which are more profound in foregrounded elements. This version, but for some minute details, is practically the same as the published print in Figure 1. In the print view Weller extended his right leg next to his left, and his fist moved closer to the book. Note that in version 2 of the negative, the number 304, corresponding to his



Fig. 4: F. G. Weller, *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1874), digital positive from wet-collodion stereoscopic negative (version 1).

cataloguing system, is scratched beneath the ground line. This may indicate that this sister negative also was published.

Other examples indicate the careful posing of models and curation of *mise en scène*. In *The Toilet* (1872) (Fig. 6), we see a new Rapunzel, having her hair styled.



Fig. 5: F. G. Weller, *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1874), digital positive from wet-collodion stereoscopic negative (version 2).



Fig. 6: F. G. Weller, *The Toilet* (1872), albumen print stereograph. Courtesy of the Kelvin Ramsey Collection, Special Collections Research Center, William and Mary Libraries.



Fig. 7: F. G. Weller, *The Toilet* (1872), digital positive from wet-collodion stereoscopic negative.

Look at the foregrounded foot stool on the left. In the negative (Fig. 7), the stool is below her foot, and we can see the stage set. The long window on the left admits a directional light that illuminates a false window with a careful arrangement of plants and drapery. We can also see in the negative that the stylist's left arm rests on top of Rapunzel's head. In the print view in Figure 6, the model's arm has moved so that the hand is behind the head — it was a distraction on top of it. The lady's head was slightly blurred with one errant strand of hair in the negative in Figure 7. These were corrected in the print version. Weller has also moved the foot stool to a foreground left position so that it fills the dead space and creates a fuller tableau with more depth cues.

The best print I have been able to find of *The Artist's Dream* from 1874 is faded with hand-colouring that we can only hope was more successful in its day (Fig. 8). In far better condition is the sister negative (Fig. 9). The biggest difference between the two is the chair in the lower right-hand corner of the negative version. It is outside the depth bracket and therefore a strain upon the eyes. The viewer will either see the backrest which appears on one side of the negative, or not see it, as it is gone from the other. This is called retinal rivalry — the differences in the two images are too great to be unified by the brain, so the brain decides which it will see. The chair is a distraction and Weller eliminated it from the published negative. The scene now is fully in the depth bracket and becomes a successful *tableau vivant* about the longing of artists for recognition.

In the negative view we can also note Weller's training as a painter. In addition to the picturesque scenic design, we see a collection of landscapes, and some may be his.²⁰ The central figures are the 'old masters', as Weller describes them, who occupy an elevated



Fig. 8: F. G. Weller, *The Artist's Dream* (1874), albumen print stereograph with hand-colouring. Courtesy of the Kelvin Ramsey Collection, Special Collections Research Center, William and Mary Libraries.



Fig. 9: F. G. Weller, *The Artist's Dream* (1874), digital positive from wet-collodion stereoscopic negative.

²⁰ Weller, a trained painter, exhibited his paintings and those of others at his art rooms (Loomis, p. 306). His last series featured his paintings on the theme of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in stereoscopic prints.

level in a ghost effect.²¹ The ramp to this level is disguised by the placement of a table with a bust and a few books and papers. A muse has appeared with a laurel wreath to crown the sleeping artist, who is not Weller here. In the print version the artist's head is more erect, perhaps the better to receive his laurels? Notice the play of gazes: the muse looks towards the artist, while the two portrait busts also gaze in his direction. The female figure depicted on the canvas, likely painted by Weller, looks towards the old masters, as though for approval, while one of them looks directly at us, as though to ask for our opinion. Small shifts in the viewer's coordinated eye movements between these elements are experienced in an amplified manner in stereoviewing, since the scene at close range fills the optical field. At the apex of this visual volley, the critic metonymically stands, breaking the fourth wall of the theatre as we, less bounded in space, drop in.

In *The Studio* of 1872 (Fig. 10), Weller posed as an artist at work, à la Jan Vermeer's canvas, *The Art of Painting* (1666/68). If we look at a negative version (Fig. 11), we notice that the mahl stick is lower in position, held closer to the body, and it does not extend as far beyond the edge of the canvas. Weller's body position is more relaxed, the elbow lower, and the right hand not visible. By returning to the print version (see Fig. 10), we can note the adjustments of the raised arm, lifted mahl stick, and more active left leg, all of which cause his body to sit upright and twist a little left. Expressive creases in the

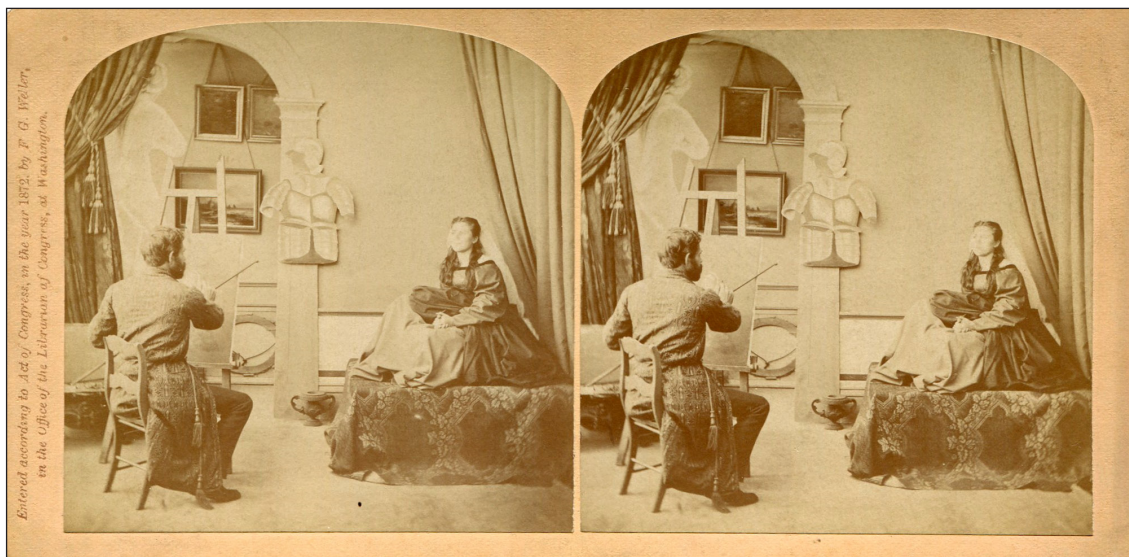


Fig. 10: F. G. Weller, *The Studio* (1872), albumen print stereograph. Courtesy of the Kelvin Ramsey Collection, Special Collections Research Center, William and Mary Libraries.

²¹ The ghost effect was created by having figures pose for only a portion of the exposure time, capping the lens, and then removing those who were to appear phantom-like.



Fig. 11: F. G. Weller, *The Studio* (1872), digital positive from wet-collodion stereoscopic negative.

artist's dressing gown form, and the figure is more active. The tassels of his robe are arranged with an artistic flair.

The mahl stick is important, as it activates what would be a dead space between the artist and model, without many depth cues. Here, too, is a pyramidal composition, with the apex being the helmet of the armour, which appears crudely painted on the print. In the negative, though, we see much more detail. The arch is but a painted flat, as is the marbled panelling to the right of it, and the armour is not so crudely painted, after all, as it stimulates depth cues, uniting the model and her painter. The scene is dark with the studio's left-side lighting, which, here, evokes illumination used for artistic modelling of a figure. The painted backdrop of a classical female nude competes with the model for our attention in the negative. However, in the published print, it blends into the background, and we can see through the supports of the easel a landscape reminiscent of the Dutch. Allowing for fading from time, this print was, I believe, exposed on the lighter side, so that the general illumination could highlight the background elements of the artist's atelier. Reading these subtle adjustments conveys the importance that Weller attached to his craft. Placing himself in the tradition of Vermeer, an artist famed for interiors, Weller has high goals: 'It has been and always will be, as long as I manufacture Views, my aim and desire to make them as perfect as possible; not only in manipulation, but in artistic merit.'²² Weller thought 'through the shoot', turning the process by degrees to a more artistic effect.

²² *List of Views* [1873].

In the austere composition *Love Aloft* of 1873 (Fig. 12), we note the carefully carpentered set in an initial composition. The rooftop scenario is just wide enough to cover the area of the negative that will be printed, and the girl's dress appears beneath the shingles. A roofer flirts with her as she leans out of the window to shake her duster. Here, the possibility that the girl is a daughter of the house, while the roofer is a working man, imparts a Yankee sensibility of level class structure. In the published view (Fig. 13), the camera position moves closer to the couple. Notice that



Fig. 12: F. G. Weller, *Love Aloft* (1873), digital positive from wet-collodion stereoscopic negative.



Fig. 13: F. G. Weller, *Love Aloft* (1873), albumen print stereograph with hand-colouring.

the feather duster has switched to a brush, a narrower tool that compositionally draws the eyes towards the pair. They are closer to each other and to us. The tentativeness of the models' expressions in the negative view is now genuine attraction. Everything leans, even the roof shingles. William Weller, Franklin's brother, is posed with his hand inside the window frame, while the young lady's elbow has moved into the space between his hands. Their gazes lock, they smile. In cinema we know what will happen next. But this is a stereoview, where the suspension of the pre-kiss is more perfect than its realization. The moment invites viewer interaction, and stereographers excelled at courting the viewer with coded narrativity.

A reflective moment occurs in *The Cottage Window* (1872) (Fig. 14), a sister negative that demonstrates the care that Weller took to stage a frame with flowering vines and grape leaves, a convention in Victorian portraiture. The railing complements the lace at the girl's collar and sleeve, her elaborate coiffure, and the florals in the room behind her. She holds an *objet d'art*, indicating middle-class tastes. With ample depth cues, perfect stereopsis, and the sentiment of domesticity, this view would appeal to the female market for stereographs at the time. In the print version of *The Cottage Window* (Fig. 15), the angle of the vase and the tilt of the woman's head has altered slightly, while the blend of gold and brown albumen hues, with a light application of burgundy and green, imparts a soft and natural effect. Partial hand-colouring, as mentioned, was an added value for stereographs. It also mimicked publishing convention in journals such as *Godey's Lady's Book*, which accustomed the public to visually complete the



Fig. 14: F. G. Weller, *The Cottage Window* (1872), digital positive from wet-collodion stereoscopic negative.



Fig. 15: F. G. Weller, *The Cottage Window* (1872), albumen print stereograph with hand-colouring. Courtesy of the Kelvin Ramsey Collection, Special Collections Research Center, William and Mary Libraries.

pictures.²³ Here, the Victorian viewer may be similarly enticed to colour the daydream with her own, projecting a desire to have and hold the admiring gaze in the window frame metonymically double-framed as a stereoview.

Weller excelled at stereoviews of anecdotal humour and gentle irony with a democratic ethos that seemed to poke fun at everyone, including himself. *Electric Hobby* of 1872 presents a quack dentist cranking a generator that delivers an electric shock to a hapless young man in an effort to cure his toothache (Fig. 16). Every surface is papered with authentic posters assuring similar miracle cures. In the negative version (Fig. 17), we see a collage of whirligig gadgetry, bottles upright on their shelves, and Victorian wood type. Each poster promises bigger and better results: 'Webster's Vegetable Hair Invigorator', 'Dr. Topliff's Syrup of Tar', 'Savage's Ursina — Canadian Bear', and 'Wright's Indian Vegetable Pills'. The competition of the new display style echoes the boy's shock, as Weller makes a sardonic comment on hype and gullibility. This negative version would not have been used as there is blur from the motion of the figures. On the published print the quack's head is not blurred, and the position of his back leg is more dynamic. The apprentice's leg meets with it, he leans forward a little and, most importantly, holds still. The electrified boy's expression is priceless. The sequential view, *An Effectual Remedy* (Fig. 18), seen here in another sister negative, demonstrates

²³ Louis Godey published *Godey's Lady's Book* in Philadelphia from 1830 to 1878.



Fig. 16: F. G. Weller, *Electric Hobby* (1872), albumen print stereograph. Courtesy of the Kelvin Ramsey Collection, Special Collections Research Center, William and Mary Libraries.



Fig. 17: F. G. Weller, *Electric Hobby* (1872), digital positive from wet-collodion stereoscopic negative.

the merits of the tried and true. An old-fashioned tooth pulling is the remedy. This negative would also have been rejected, as the blur caused by motion was unacceptable by standards of the day. It does, however, allow us to easily read that a poster has been added. The sign that reads 'HELMBOLD'S I have it' has been raised in position to



Fig. 18: F. G. Weller, *An Effectual Remedy* (1872), digital positive from wet-collodion stereoscopic negative.



Fig. 19: F. G. Weller, *An Effectual Remedy* (1872), albumen print stereograph. Courtesy of the Kelvin Ramsey Collection, Special Collections Research Center, William and Mary Libraries.

accommodate another sign, 'Fitch and Cornwell's Among the Roses': *I have it among the roses*. In the print version (Fig. 19), there is no motion. The dentist's body position has opened towards the audience for greater visibility and dramatic effect.

One of Weller's last narratives, *Putting on the Finishing Touch* (1876), is faded and hard to read in the print version. However, in the negative view (Fig. 20), we see a complex



Fig. 20: F. G. Weller, *Putting on the Finishing Touch* (1876), albumen print stereograph. Courtesy of the Kelvin Ramsey Collection, Special Collections Research Center, William and Mary Libraries.

composition that made the view a success. Soil and plants have been brought onto the set for an outdoors effect, which runs from the foregrounded props to the backdrop with a perspective extending the depth bracket into an illusion of expansive space. A budding artist stands to scrutinize his jack-o'-lantern, while an admiring girl reclines before its glow. The negative was exposed with vignetting, perhaps intentionally for a Halloween effect? The windows of the set also indicate a time of low light. Subtle adjustments between the sister negative and the print version show that Weller moved the camera closer to his subjects in the latter, and the children are closer together to allow for a seamless flow from near to far. The girl reclines further and does not move in the print, while the boy stands in *contrapposto*, with his carving knife slightly raised and turned for greater legibility. Each of these adjustments improves the stereoview. But for the negative, however, we could not know how perfectly Weller painted a perspectival landscape that fuses into deep space. Nor would we know the darkness brought on by the vignetting and low light level, as though the enchanted environment were ushered in by the boy's skill.

F. G. Weller could narrativize a landscape, too. The final image is an untitled and unpublished negative that arrived in the same group as the others discussed in this article. It is identified only by the number 704 scratched on the negative (Fig. 21). This number is absent from the archival record, though No. 703 is present.²⁴ The scratched

²⁴ No. 703 then No. 707 appear in an archive of Weller stereoviews compiled by Kelvin Ramsey. William and Mary Libraries, Special Collections Research Center, Kelvin Ramsey Collection.

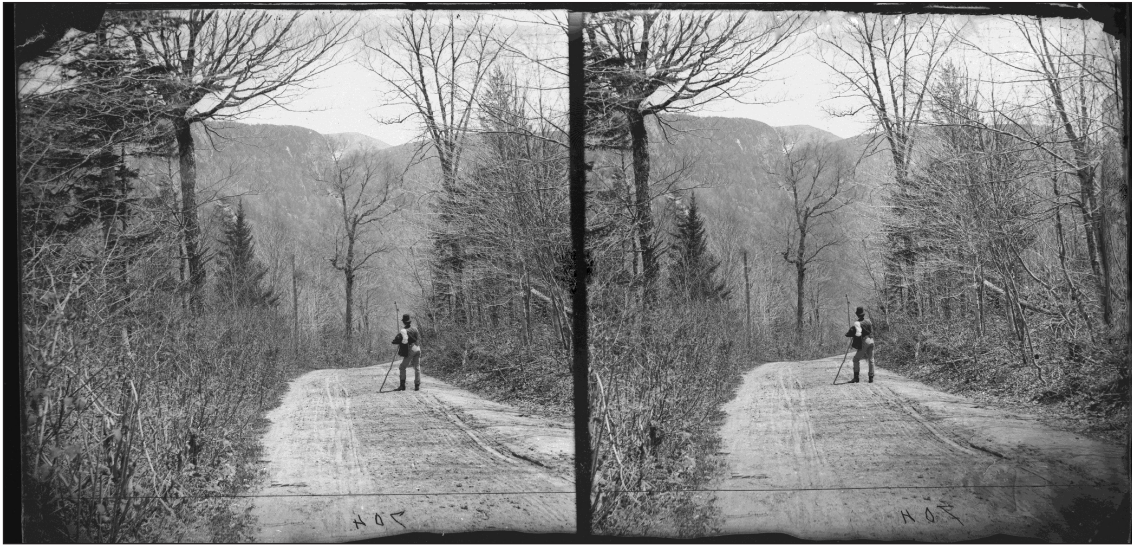


Fig. 21: F. G. Weller, unpublished stereoview no. 704 (no date), digital positive from wet-collodion stereoscopic negative.

number and the ground line, both characteristic of Weller, support an attribution to him. The lean frame and build of the man also match his. I suggest that this is the photographer himself, presenting an ironic portrait of his backside. He is in character, playing a curious chap rambling down a winter road, leaning on his stick, with no apparent purpose but to swing his hip into a comical thrust and look into the distance — at what? — the bend in the road? Nothing remarkable there. We can identify this scene, *sans* actor, as it was photographed by Weller in the summer season, as No. 249, *Road from Echo Lake to Profile House*, depicting the travel of a tourist from the lake to his hotel.²⁵ Further strengthening the attribution to Weller are the numbers themselves, particularly the zero. The same zero, made with an angular bend on the up stroke, also appears as the number 304, which we can see on the negative, *Reveries of a Bachelor* (see Fig. 5). The zeros with their idiosyncratic angle neatly match. The fours in both negatives similarly bear crisp angles.

I conclude with this cheeky ‘self-portrait’, not only because it is the first instance of this stereoview to enter the record but, more importantly, it demonstrates that Weller has been able to turn an undistinguished road into a *tableau vivant*. By posing himself as an awkward ardent naturalist, he gently pokes fun at the tourist market upon which he relied for his business. Only the truest vagabond of Transcendentalism would walk the Echo Lake Road alone in winter, either too broke for a carriage or too enamoured of scenery to care. Here, the landscape is his studio set, and the character

²⁵ Ibid.

he plays is, well, a bit of an ass. F. G. Weller was not afraid of satirizing himself for stereoview fun.²⁶

Nor did he spare himself any detail if it could enhance a composition and increase the stereoptical effect for the viewer. These negatives reveal a rare behind-the-scenes glimpse of the working processes of the first American photographer recognized, even in his time, for excellence in genre scenes. Weller's sets, illusionistic backdrops, and carefully placed props created a *mise en scène* that stimulated the viewer's eye movement between parts. The coordinated scanning of the eyes allows the viewer to activate the forms in the composition, tying them together through vectors with ample depth cues for a rich stereopsis. Weller worked in a pre-cinematic style by using multiple negatives to work through the visual process, tweaking each scene for compositional strength, expressive poses, and stereoptical effect. In this manner he moulded space through orchestrating depth cues for a long depth bracket in the scene. His tightly constructed scenes, illusionistic backdrops, adroit use of natural light, and direction of models created immersive environments for the ocular journeying so favoured by the Victorian age. Weller's creation of the total tableau would be emulated by other companies, such as Underwood & Underwood, Keystone, and, eventually, by cinema in conventional and 3D form. Cinematographers of today may not be aware of the debt they owe to Weller as innovations can become absorbed in culture and their creators lost to time, but thanks to the surfacing of these negatives, we are now aware of Weller's contributions.

²⁶ Weller's stereoview, *Did you Ring, Sir?* of 1875 (No. 547) features the artist posing as a surprised bather, nude from waist up.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

