

**Jefferys Taylor, "The Diorama and Colosseum," 1832**

(keywords: Jefferys Taylor, Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre, London Diorama, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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Jefferys Taylor, *A Month in London, or Some of its Modern Wonders Described* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1832): 71–78.

THE DIORAMA AND COLOSSEUM.

A REMARKABLY fine day afforded, at length, a favourable opportunity for visiting these truly surprising and interesting spectacles. Our party set off in expectation of great things, and I do not find that their hopes were at all disappointed.

The question regarding a conveyance was adjusted as soon as Mr. Finsbury issued from his door. A finger held up on his part was answered by a horizontal elevation of a coachman's whip, who immediately pulled across the way, as the phrase is, with that capacious convenience called an omnibus.

None of our party but Mr. Finsbury had entered such a machine before, and they were not a little amused with the novelty. Sixteen passengers on opposite seats formed something like a cabinet council, in appearance, but no business transpired. Locomotion was the only object common to the assembly, and this was attained without effort on their part. Going down Pentonville-hill, a hollow place in the road caused a sudden jerk, which displaced poor Harold, and sent him on his knees before an individual opposite, which, as it happened to be Mr. Finsbury, was attended with no other consequences than a general smile. He remarked that he could stand quite steadily in the sort of *waggon* used in the country.

"So you call this a *waggon*, do you?" said Mr. Finsbury. "You must not let *Mr. Shilibeer* hear you, for he considers it a very smart and commodious coach!"

"I think it seems like a piece of the Thames Tunnel," said Edward.

Presently afterwards the vehicle stopped, and the door-keeper at the end announced, "The Diorama Gate." Alighting immediately, a few steps to the right brought our friends to the building.

That master-key, money, having been suitably applied, every portal gave way, and they ascended to a place which might almost be called a dark-lantern. It however contained seats, on which the party placed themselves, and little more notice was taken of this curious vestibule; for the scene which presented itself on the open side, speedily fixed every eye. The scene was Mount St. Gothard, an assemblage of spiry, precipitous, riven rocks in Switzerland. The illusion was indeed complete. A shadowy chasm, amidst the vast Alps, showed a winding road, at an awful distance from the summit and the base, which had a low parapet only as security from the gulf on the open side. A bridge of a single arch was thrown across the fissure, and terminated the view of the carriage-road. Distant mountains, summits covered with perpetual snow, and the blue tops of others,

showed themselves above; whilst a roaring torrent, the rushing sound of which was exceedingly well managed, pursued its course beneath. The lads looked even pale at the sight, and had not a word to say but in a subdued whisper.

"I thought it was to be only a picture," said Edward;" but they must be real rocks and mountains, made on purpose!"

"*It is only a picture*" replied Mr. Finsbury." To convince yourself of this, you have only to change your position in the room, and you will see the objects are seen exactly in the same way, go where you will. For instance, there is a projection *represented* of a piece of rock in front. If a real projection, by moving across the apartment, you would see a little this way or that of the object behind it; but you find it is in vain that you rise from your seat, or stoop, or go from side to side; nothing different can be seen. It must, therefore, be a plain surface."

At this moment a bell rang, the doors of the gallery were adjusted, and the occurrence of the swing-bridge seemed to be experienced again. No one, however, perceived the motion until another and brighter view burst upon the eye from the left. This gradually expanded, whilst Mount St. Gothard narrowed at the same rate, and at length disappeared. The youths now found their tongues.

"Oh, this *must* be a real town! Now, sir, there is the very shadow of one of the houses on the street. Dear me, what strange buildings! lumps of stone laid on the roof, and the tiles of that other house look like fish's scales. Now say, sir—is this a picture?"

"It certainly is, my dear boy, and an admirable one too."

Mr. Hazelford partook of the natural tendency to incredulity, and actually shifted his place several times to convince himself of the truth.

"It is ASTONISHING!" said he, with great emphasis." It is hard to say that that scene is nothing but paper and colours; yet the *proof* is so easy and incontestible, that the mind is fully compelled to call the eye a deceiver—reluctantly, yet positively, we are obliged to say, that posts, boards, tiles, stones, utensils, a road-way—every pebble of which has its own unimportant shadow—the bridge, the stream, the mountain—are all mocking ghosts and untruths! It would seem as if, by walking to the right, I certainly should see more of that building beyond; but no—somehow they all stick together at the corners."

"But surely, now," said Harold;" just that birch-broom, leaning against the house, is real. I suppose it was less trouble to put one there than to paint one."

"A birch-broom tacked on to a picture, Harold! No," said Mr. Finsbury;" that would, indeed, only have appeared like a thing hanging in the air—it would have formed no part of the scene. All is the work of an artist, who has taken an unusual method to enlighten his performance."

Harold now consulted the paper given him at the door, and found that the scene in question was the village of Unterseen in Switzerland; showing its principal street and houses, with mountains just beyond.

The *foreign* structure of the houses was a peculiar feature to English and youthful eyes. The roofs projected far beyond the walls, and sheltered heavy wooden galleries, by which the apartments above were entered. Some of the houses were covered with fir-boards, fixed on by cross planks, and these kept down by large stones, at irregular distances.

"Why did they not show some of the people?" asked Harold." There is nobody at all to be seen."

“The artist was wise there,” answered Mr. Hazelford,” for these must have been *motionless*, which would have too soon undeceived the eye. For gate-posts and buildings to stand still, is not so remarkable as for persons to remain so for hours together.”

The bell now rang again, and by an unfelt agency, the building in which the spectators sat again slowly revolved. Unterseen was shut out, and Mount St. Gothard reappeared.

“I generally wait,” said Mr. Finsbury,” till the scene has changed a time or two, for the contrast itself is striking—particularly here, from the sunshiny, cheerful homeliness of the village- street, to the blue grandeur of the towering Alps. We are allowed a quarter of an hour at a time for each view.”

After an hour spent in the alternate contemplation of those amazing exhibitions, our party left the Diorama, and directed their steps to the Colosseum, not far distant.

“A use may be derived from the sight of the Diorama,” observed Mr. Finsbury,” which perhaps was never meditated by its contrivers. It affords an important lesson to all those who would persuade themselves and others, that what they see cannot be disproved by what other men know and declare; in fact, that sensible objects must be what the senses take them for, and that nothing can be true that contradicts them. The period will come, when death will so change our position as spectators, that the things of time will be *proved deceivers*, and not those substantial realities which the world held them to be. Religion now does the friendly office of *undeceiving* us beforehand, if we choose to give her a hearing.”

The gate-way of the Colosseum was now at hand; but admission was not to be gained here on such easy terms as at the Diorama, *five shillings a-piece* being the sum demanded.

“We can scarcely expect to find this exhibition five times as good as the last,” said Mr. Finsbury.” Certainly, in point of *interest*, a view from the top of St. Paul's is not equal to Alpine scenery.”

**[End of selected text. All content descriptive of the Diorama herein provided.]**

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#### **EDITOR'S NOTES:**

Two other descriptions of the London Diorama are found in James Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements; or London, in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Jones & Co. 1827): 80–81.<sup>1</sup>; John Timbs, *Curiosities of London* (London: David Bogue, 1855): 252–53.<sup>2</sup>

Several informative articles regarding the Daguerre and the Diorama are available on the web site, *Midley History of Photography: R. Derek Wood's Articles on the History of Early Photography, the Daguerreotype, and Diorama*.<sup>3</sup>

The London Diorama structure is still standing and is now used by the Prince's Trust. Two recent views of the building are viewable on the web page, *Knowledge of London: History of the London Cinema*. A satellite view, from Google Maps, is provided below.

1. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8270001\\_ELMES\\_MET-IMPROVE\\_1827.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8270001_ELMES_MET-IMPROVE_1827.pdf)
2. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8550002\\_TIMBS\\_CURIOSITIES\\_DIORAMA\\_1855.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8550002_TIMBS_CURIOSITIES_DIORAMA_1855.pdf)
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