

John Timbs, "Dioramas," 1855

(keywords: Charles-Marie Bouton, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, London Diorama, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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John Timbs, *Curiosities of London: Exhibiting the most Rare and Remarkable Objects of Interest in the Metropolis* (London: David Bogue, 1855): 252–53.

DIORAMAS.

The Diorama, on the eastern side of Park-square, Regent's-park, was exhibited in Paris long before it was brought to London, by its originators, MM. Bouton and Daguerre; the latter, the inventor of the Daguerreotype, died 1851. The exhibition-house, with the theatre in the rear, was designed by Morgan and Pugin: the spectatory has a circular ceiling, with transparent medallion portraits; the whole was built in four months, and cost 10,000*l*.

The Diorama consists of two pictures, eighty feet in length and forty feet in height, painted in solid and in transparency, arranged so as to exhibit changes of light and shade, and a variety of natural phenomena; the spectators being kept in comparative darkness, while the picture receives a concentrated light from a ground-glass roof. The contrivance is partly optical, partly mechanical; and consists in placing the pictures within the building so constructed, that the saloon containing the spectators may revolve at intervals, and bring in succession the two distinct scenes into the field of view, without the necessity of the spectators removing from their seats; while the scenery itself remains stationary, and the light is distributed by transparent and movable blinds—some placed behind the picture, for intercepting and changing the colour of the rays of light, which pass through the semi-transparent parts. Similar blinds, above and in front of the picture, are movable by cords, so as to distribute or direct the rays of light.

The revolving motion given to the saloon is an arc of about 73°; and while the spectators are thus passing round, no person is permitted to go in or out. The revolution of the saloon is effected by means of a sector, or portion of a wheel, with teeth which work in a series of wheels and pinions; one man, by turning a winch, moves the whole.

The space between the saloon and each of the two pictures is occupied on either side by a partition, forming a kind of avenue, proportioned in width to the size of the picture. Without such a precaution, the eye of the spectator, being thirty or forty feet distant from the canvass, would, by any thing intervening, be estranged from the object.

The combination of transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque colouring, still further assisted by the power of varying both the effects and the degree of light and shade, renders the Diorama the most perfect scenic representation of nature; and adapts it peculiarly for moonlight subjects, or for shewing such accidents in landscape as sudden gleams of sunshine or lightning. It is also unrivalled for representing architecture, particularly interiors, as powerful relief may be obtained without that exaggeration in the

shadows which is almost inevitable in every other mode of painting. The interior of Canterbury Cathedral, the first picture exhibited, in 1823, was a triumph of this class; and the companion picture, the Valley of Sarnen, equally admirable in atmospheric effects. In one day (Easter-Monday, 1824), the receipts exceeded 200*l*.

In viewing the Diorama, the spectator is placed, as it were, at the extremity of the scene, and thus has a view *across, or through it*. Hence the inventor of the term compounded it of the Greek preposition *dia*, through, and *orama*, scene; though, from there being two paintings under the same roof in the building in the Regent's-park, it has been supposed the term is from *dis*, twice, and *orama*; but if several paintings of the same kind were exhibited, each would be a *Diorama*. (*Black.*)

Although the Regent's-park Diorama has been artistically successful, it has not been commercially so. In September 1848, the building and ground in the rear, with the machinery and pictures, was sold for 6750*l*; again, in June 1849, for 4800*l*; and the property, with sixteen pictures, rolled on large cylinders, have since been sold for 3000*l*.

Dioramas have also been painted for our theatres by Stanfield and Roberts, the Grieves, and other artists. In 1828, Stanfield painted for Drury-lane Theatre a series of views on the Rhine; in the same year, a Diorama for the Christmas pantomime; and another in 1836.

Other Dioramic exhibitions have been opened in the metropolis. In 1828, one was exhibited at the Queen's Bazaar, Oxford-street; in 1829, the picture was "The Destruction of York-Minster by Fire," during the exhibition of which, May 28, the scenery took fire, and the premises were entirely burnt.

In 1841, there was exhibited at the Bazaar, St. James's-street, a Diorama, of five large scenes, of the second funeral of Napoleon; but, though most effectively painted by members of "The Board of Arts for the Ceremony," and accompanied by funeral music by Auber, the spectacle excited little interest.

At Easter 1849 was opened the Gallery of Illustration, in the large saloon of the late residence of Mr. Nash, the architect, No. 14 Regent-street, a series of thirty-one dioramic pictures of the Overland Mail Route from Southampton to Calcutta; the general scenery painted by T. Grieve and W. Telbin, human figures by John Absolom, and animals by J. F. Herring and H. Weir: in picturesqueness, aerial effect, characteristic grouping, variety of incident, richness of colour, and atmosphere skilfully varied with the several countries, this Diorama has, perhaps, scarcely been equalled: it was exhibited between 1600 and 1700 times, and visited by upwards of 250,000 persons. The same artists have produced other subjects, including a set of Illustrations of the Duke of Wellington's Campaigns.

The Great Exhibition year, 1851, was very productive of Dioramas, which we shall scarcely be expected to enumerate. The most successful was the Diorama of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, painted from sketches by Bartlett, and exhibited at the St. George's Gallery, Hyde-Park-corner; the entire cost of this Diorama was 2000*l*.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

John Timbs was also the editor of the annual, *Year-book of Facts in Science and Art*..

Two other descriptions of the London Diorama are found in James Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements; or London, in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Jones & Co.

1827): 80–81.¹; Jefferys Taylor, *A Month in London, or Some of its Modern Wonders Described* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1832): 71–78.²

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*.³

The London Diorama structure is still standing and is now used by the Prince's Trust. Two 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
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8320001_TAYLOR_MONTH-IN-LONDON_1832.pdf
3. <http://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20100311230213/http://www.midley.co.uk/>
4. <http://knowledgeoflondon.com/movies/cinema.html>



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