

Mentienne, "Notes on Daguerre," 2 September 1887

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Notes on Daguerre from a Manuscript written by M. Mentienne, ex Maire de Bry-sur-Marne, a Personal Friend of the Inventor of Photography, kindly communicated to Professor Stebbing by M. Glaise.

LOUIS JACQUES MAUDE DAGUERRE was born at Corneilles en Parisis, Seine et Oise, the 18th of December, 1787. His father, a clerk in the Financial Department of the State, desiring to give his son an honourable profession, placed him, when young, under an architect. The youth manifested very early a decided taste for painting. His parents used their influence to divert him from this art, but in vain; his resolution to be a painter was immovable. His father, yielding at last to his great desire, apprenticed him to Degotis, decorator of the Opera. It was not long ere the young Daguerre made rapid progress in the art he had chosen. Important decorative work was confided to him, and he soon gained the reputation of being a talented artist.

He received an order for a theatrical scene for the l'Ambigu-Comique, and made a complete revolution in this style of decoration. His paintings for that theatre are still cited as chefs-d'oeuvre—"The Dream in the Chapel of the Castle of Glenthorn," "De la foret de Senart," &c. He then executed, in collaboration with M. Ciceri, the decorations of the wonderful lamp for the great Opera; the magical effect of his rotating sun was remarkable. He assisted Pierre Prevost in the execution of his panoramas of Rome, Naples, London, &c. About this time he associated himself with the painter Bouton, for a moment a rival of Horace Vernet, in view of a panoramic establishment, in which light was made to act in order to give mobility to the effects as well as a charm to the coloration. This establishment was opened to the public on the 11th of July, 1822. Here he offered to the astonished view of the spectators most admirably painted pictures, which, by the different effects of light, were made to pass from daylight to night, and from one scene to another. Renown spoke of a valley in Switzerland: Holyrood Chapel—this was so wonderful as regards painting, as well as scenic effect, that the Government decorated him with the Cross of the Legion d'Honneur (1824). "The Abbey of Roslin in a Fog"—which transformed itself into a snowstorm, "The Fire of Edinburgh," "The Deluge," "A View of Paris taken from Montmartre," "The Tomb of Napoleon at St. Helena," "The Mont Blanc," "The Black Forest," "The Midnight Mass at St. Etienne du Mont," "The Temple of Solomon"—this was his last production for his diorama (1839). This exhibition gained for its author universal renown; foreigners came from far in order to witness such a novel and wonderful sight.

Master of his art, Daguerre produced by his perspective the most complete illusion—darkness to light, as well as all the atmospheric variation, were scrupulously represented. All at once the spectators were carried, immense pillars, and the coloured glass windows admirably portrayed—perspective had created space with striking reality. Then the admiring sightseers were shown a landscape lighted up by the silver beams of the moon, a castle hidden in the shade of a grove of trees, the heavens beautifully decorated with silver and golden tipped clouds. As a type of these changing panoramas must be cited the famous “Midnight Mass,” seen at first by daylight, then during the night service. This change was obtained upon the same picture, and without removing it in the least.

The 3rd of March, 1839 [8 March 1839—ed.], a fire devoured these chefs-d’oeuvre, and many others having a great artistic renown and value. This was, indeed, a misfortune. From that time up to the present day no establishment of the kind has been got up.

Through this inauspicious event the fortune of Daguerre was very much curtailed. He continued, nevertheless, to occupy himself with the different effects to be obtained by light. Since 1834 he had been seeking to fix the image obtained in the camera obscura. This idea had been ridiculed by all those he had spoken to on that subject, with the exception of the eminent chemist, L. J. Dumas, “l’illustre savant de l’Academie Francaise,” who gave him every encouragement to continue, and prognosticated his future success. In fact, as a recompense for the loss he had sustained by his fire, towards the end of April, 1839, he discovered the means to fix the reproduction of nature by means of light.

Henceforth an immense fortune appeared to lay beneath his grasp. Brilliant offers were made to him by foreigners for the purchase of his secret. England, which is never behindhand, offered him 10,000 l. sterling and an annuity of 1000 l. Prussia and Russia made him most brilliant offers. The United States offered to give him whatever his might demand. But Daguerre was resolved to give the honour of his discovery to his native country. The statesmen of France voted him unanimously a national reward in the form of a pension for life.

By a deed executed before a notary, signed June 15, 1839, he took the solemn engagement to reveal the process he had discovered to obtain proofs by the aid of light, as well as to publish the means he employed to obtain such admirable effects in his dioramas. For this abandonment of his invention he was to receive from the State the humble pension of 240 l. per annum. The Government decorated him Officier de la Legion d’Honneur; the King of Prussia sent him the Order of Merit; the Emperor of Russia sent him a handsome present; the Universities of Edinburgh, Vienna, Munich, and New York sent him the diploma of honorary member of their respective colleges.

Daguerre, desiring to rest a little from his labours, purchased a charming villa in the hamlet of Bry-sur-Marne. He occupied himself in embellishing his dwelling, and there he spent, with his worthy and respectable wife* and his niece (not having any children of their own) the happiest portion of his life. At the same time he did not neglect his taste for scientific subjects. Probably to please the priest he took it into his head to decorate the humble village church. Behind the high altar he prepared a canvas frame nearly five yards square, lighted from above; upon his he painted one of his very effective pictures—the only one left which can give the visitor an idea of what his Diorama was before its destruction.

The decoration represents a Gothic edifice from the “jube” to the choir. This changes totally the aspect of the little village church, giving it the noble and majestic appearance of a cathedral. The visitor remains in wonder and admiration, looking at the numerous

details of that holy scene. The curves of the archwork are so exquisitely rendered that the air appears to float among the pillars and the breath of prayer whispers among the arched buttresses. Spiders' webs can be seen hanging from the acanthus of the chapiters. In the foreground, Christ upon His cross appears about to descend. On the other side a wax taper is represented as being just extinguished, wafting its slightly curled and transparent smoke towards the skies, leaving the wick glowing red. Many other details could be mentioned which when touched are but optical illusions! By this last piece of work Daguerre appears to have left a pledge of his friendship and high esteem for the inhabitants of Bry-sur-Marne.

During his retreat he occupied himself with his favourite studies. He became a member of the Free Society of Fine Arts, established in 1830, and assisted very regularly at their meetings. It appears he sought diligently to obtain instantaneous results for his photography. In the year 1844, at the meeting of the Free Society of Fine Arts held on January 30, he communicated his hopes that he had found a new chemical of which the sensitiveness was so instantaneous that he intended to make the portrait of a horse at full gallop. "The effect is so prompt," said he, "that I can only compare its rapidity to the velocity of the electric spark." Daguerre was very particular and difficult as to the perfection and easy application of his inventions. Perhaps he did not attain the success he desired as to rapidity, for at his death nothing could be found relating to this subject, which appears strange and unaccountable.

He endeavoured to bring designs in pastil to perfection by seeking a manner to fix the colour upon its support so as to do away with the protecting glass which was necessary at that time. It appears he met with many difficulties in order to preserve the velvety appearance so precious in that kind of drawing.

At the moment when death knocked at his door he was occupied with a new process of monochrome painting on glass to be seen by reflection. The glass replaced the best varnish, and gave a highly glazed appearance to the finished picture. The specimens he left are painted with black paint, very vigorous indeed in tone. The half tones are obtained by means of the semi-transparency of the coating, this coating being more or less thick according to the taste of the artist. A coating of white to finish up gives depth of shadow. Several landscapes executed by this process were terminated, and one nearly finished was found upon the easel. As to the mode of production and preparation it can only be surmised, as nothing was left by him on the subject.

Although busy in study and science, he was not against rendering service to the inhabitants of the village he had chosen for his retreat. Advice and help was not withheld from those who had chosen him to represent them on the Municipal Council.

He received many visits from strangers and foreigners; photographers and artists came even from America, among the Messrs. Meades, who took the portrait of the master they came to honour with the intention of reproducing it on the other side of the ocean, to make the features of the celebrated artist known to their countrymen.

He was very friendly with Mdlle. De Rigny, niece of the Baron Louis de Rigny, the great banker. This lady was owner of the greater part of the village, very learned, at the same time advanced in science. Daguerre found great pleasure in her society.

In 1848, during the great Revolution, the inhabitants of Bry were in the greatest distress. He occupied them in the park of Mdlle, de Rigny in making a miniature representation of Switzerland. Mountains, rocks, old castles, ruins, lakes, bridges, &c., all were represented on a large scale. A double object was here obtained—an artistic work

was accomplished, and the workpeople were prevented from frequenting the national workshops, where bad doctrines were inculcated rather than honest work counselled.

Daguerre died suddenly on July 10, 1851, in the prime of life. A few days before his death he took part in the work of a commission des Beaux Arts, and nothing could prognosticate that his end was near.

His loss was universally regretted. When the sad news reached the New World the photographers there sent addresses to his widow, expressing the deepest regret for her bereavement. In order to show their admiration and acknowledgments to Daguerre, they wore mourning during eight days, in sign of sorrow for his loss. A sum of 2000 l. was collected to build a monument to his memory at New York, so as to show to all nations that the American photographers admired and appreciated the invention of Daguerre.

The mortal remains of this great artist repose in the cemetery of Bry-sur-Marne, where a monument has been erected to his memory by the Societe Libre des Beaux Arts in the midst of those he loved, surrounded by his friends, which he considered as belonging to his own family.

M. Glaise writes me to-day, "The monument is in stone, two and a half yards high. In the centre is the bust of Daguerre. The inscription is:—

A.
DAGUERRE,
La Societe Libre des Beaux Arts,
MDCCCLII.

"On the back of the stone is the date of his birth and death, also that of his wife, who survived him six years."

* Louisa Arrowsmith, and English lady.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

See also Adrien Mentienne, *La Découverte de la Photographie en 1839* (Paris: P. Dupont, 1892).

The 8 March 1839 Diorama fire is reported in "Destruction of the French Diorama," *Aldine Magazine of Biography, Bibliography, Criticism, and the Arts* (London) vo. 1 (April 1839): 239.

1. <http://books.google.com/books?id=NBwDAAAAYAAJ>

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