

Analú López

Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre: The influence of the Diorama and Niepce

Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre (Daguerre) is best known as the inventor of the Daguerreotype process but more than this he was an artist, inventor, and stage Designer. (Grove Art Online) Although his contributions to the advancement of Photography weighed greatly upon his collaboration with another fellow inventor by the name of Joseph-Nicephore Niepce, Daguerre's lifetime talent in painting and his innovation of the Diorama greatly influenced his photographic pursuits.

Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre was born in the small village of Cormeilles-en-Parisis on November 18, 1787. When he was five his father, who was a minor government official, moved the family to Orleans, where Daguerre grew up. Daguerre's education lacked attention and was at times neglected because of his family's economic status. However, Daguerre showed a strong inclination for drawing and although his family wanted him to enter the administration of the estate, his father apprenticed him to an architect at the ripe age of thirteen. (Potonniee, p. 108) At sixteen he was restless for Paris; he was placed under the supervision of Degoti, a scene painter, famous for making sets for the Opera. Soon the young Daguerre left his master and struck out on his own. The late Georges Potonniee tells us in his book, *Daguerre Peintre et Decorateur*, more than one popular play became memorable for Daguerre's stage sets. Critics even suggested that the now scene painter with such talent, should take the bows before the actors and the author. (Newhall p. 9-10)

From this account we see from a very early age Daguerre had a talent and persistence for reproducing images from reality through his paintings. His interest lay in the reproducibility of nature and this talent was further nurtured, encouraged and influenced by his father and teachers. As many evolving artists do, Daguerre was growing to become a highly talented artist in need of spreading his wings yet again. While painting scenes he met Charles Marie Bouton an assistant to Pierre Prevost, who owned many buildings lined with murals of cityscapes, battlefields and historic events known as "panoramas." It is through this meeting that he started a partnership that would go above and beyond what the two artists had been working on with others.

Daguerre and Bouton are quoted in stating:

"Means should be found of imitating aspects of nature as presented to our sight, that is to say, with all the changes brought by time, wind, light, atmosphere."
(Newhall, p. 10)

On July 11, 1822, they introduced the Parisian Public to a new way of seeing the world in a purely illusionistic way that mimicked nature so greatly through the craft of their painted scenes that it fooled the eye into believing what they saw was truly real: "DIORAMA."

The Diorama was a popular form of entertainment in Europe from 1822 to 1880. An alternative to the also popular "Panorama" (panoramic painting), the Diorama was a theatrical experience viewed by an audience in a highly specialized form of theatre. Traditionally a person was to walk into a room and view the scenery paintings' as they would transition into another by the manipulation of light. So realistic were the renditions of nature that the audience would feel as if they were standing within them. As we will read Daguerre introduced new methods of experiencing his Diorama's.

Clark suggests that:

"Indeed, Daguerre's interest in the diorama (and panorama), is a significant but often an overlooked fact, and emphasizes his concern with producing views and prospects of cities and landscapes." (Clarke, Oxford University Press 1997)

As stated before, Daguerre was highly concerned with introducing a fresh, yet "naturalistic" perspective of experiencing these scenes that would allow the viewers to feel as if they had actually entered into his scenes. Above all, Daguerre concerned himself with the introduction of new lighting effects. (Potonniee, p. 109) He also began to experiment with including actual objects into his Dioroma's to push illusionism further. An example of this for the "View of Mont Blanc," he imported from Switzerland a peasant cottage, barn, live goats and growing pines (Daguerre, p. 11). Although he continued to include many unorthodox ways of experiencing the Diorama that he was often times accused of going too far Daguerre stated:

"My only aim was to effect illusion at its greatest height. I wanted to rob nature, and therefore I had to become a thief," (Daguerre, p. 12) He further achieved this "thievery" by including sound familiar to the landscapes he painted.

In 1839 his Diorama along with many of these famous paintings were destroyed and Daguerre never rebuilt it. Instead he turned his interest to another media that was on its way to becoming one of the most fascinating ways of depicting nature. It was not yet given the name photography but was well on its way to becoming just that, a way of capturing an image from Nature onto an object.

Daguerre had already been experimenting with optical lenses and chemical processes prior to the collapse of his diorama but many of his earliest attempts to record an image with the Camera Obscura-which he also utilized for painting his scenes-were unsuccessful. The earliest account of his attempts was written in the book "The Literature of Photography: The History of the Discovery of Photography," where in 1823, in his Diorama studio, Daguerre noticed the image of a tree projected through the small hole in the shutter onto a tableau that he had finished and the next day he was surprised to see that the image remained. This gave him the idea of further experimenting with "fixing" an image. (Potonniee, p. 114) His pursuits seemed to have stopped here for the time being but I believe that the combination of economics, the collapse of his Diorama, and a genuine interest in this new method of capturing nature influenced Daguerre's interest and feed his restlessness for finding inventive methods of reproducing nature to the fullest.

It is no surprise that in 1826 when Daguerre learned that a Joseph-Nicephore Niepce was working toward the same goal of recording an image with greater success that he quickly attempted to contact Niepce. ("Divine Perfection" p. 41) Daguerre's first attempt to contact Niepce was received cautiously with a "polite yet reserved" response. (Potonniee, p. 105) Daguerre wrote Niepce another letter in 1827 asking to see examples of a process Niepce called "Heliography." Niepce seeing Daguerre's persistence inquired about this fellow to an engraver familiar with him. He was still suspicious and it was not until Niepce had to visit London-a brother of his was gravely ill and dying- then decided to remain in Paris a few days to witness this famous "Diorama" that many, including Niepce's engraver friend, commended Daguerre on. After experiencing the Diorama Niepce was very impressed and later wrote to his son: "...I have not seen anything here that impressed me more, or gave me as much pleasure as the Diorama.." (Potonniee, p. 118)

In October of 1829 Niepce offered to collaborate with Daguerre. He stated he would "cooperate with him for the purpose of perfecting the heliographic processes and to combine their advantages, which might result in a complete success." (Potonniee, p. 126) An agreement was signed by both Daguerre and Niepce on December 14, 1829 and has been reproduced in many books and simply states: "Monsieur Daguerre invites Monsieur Niepce to join him in order to obtain the perfection of anew method discovered by Monsier Niepce, for fixing the images of nature without having recourse to an artist." Here we see that Niepce was finally convinced Daguerre would help him with his pursuits in advancing this new method of reproducing nature. It was an almost win-win collaboration in that Niepce having to place his research on hold due to the death in the family and was slowly plummeting financially, was now given the opportunity to work with Daguerre which was persistent in his work and very involved and well known with the arts community. Unfortunately, Niepce was unable to live out the success of his research to see it realized by Daguerre. Niepce passed away after having an attack of apoplexy on July 5, 1833. (Potonniee, p. 134) Some accounts state that Daguerre was very distraught over losing his research partner but quickly overcame this after realizing Niepce would have wanted him to continue with their research. Daguerre continued on with the experiments and came to discover the first method of fixing an image to an object. On August 19, 1839 at the Academie des Sciences and the Academie des Arts in France, the Daguerreotype was introduced to the world. (Barger and White, p. 1)

In conclusion, we can see Daguerre's interest within painting and advancement within creating unorthodox ways of experiencing the Diorama paved the way for his collaborative research with Niepce that lead to the discovery of the Daguerreotype Process. This process is known today as the first method of successfully reproducing an image from Nature that introduced the media of photography to the public eye. I believe that if it were not for Daguerre's grand interest in the Diorama and his inclinations for seeking out new methods of rendering nature we may have owed the introduction of photography to the public to another person.

Works Cited

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