THE LAST JOURNEY
Views of Switzerland and the Alps,
by Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey

ABSTRACT

In 2002, a wooden box belonging to the archives of the museum of La Gruyère in Bulle was rediscovered. It contained 61 daguerreotypes, each one measuring 8 by 9.5 centimetres. These silver-coated copper plates were not framed but were in very good condition. They were accompanied by two sheets of paper. One was a typed list entitled Daguerreotypes by M. Girault de Prangey 1841-42-43 belonging to the Count of Simony, which also mentioned a "3rd box of 60 unlabelled Swiss scenes". The other was a smaller hand-written sheet of paper which stated: "1 box of 61 plates 8 - 9 ½, Scenery, Chalets, rocks, monuments, 1 boat. Ruins. In Switzerland. Good. The top of the box is removable".

This discovery was not due to sheer luck or chance, as it was made following an exchange of letters with the heirs of the Count of Simony mentioned in the typed list. They had inherited hundreds of photographic plates made by Girault de Prangey. Three separate series of daguerreotype plates were put up for sale in 2000, 2003 and 2004. During the same period, plates belonging to the National Library of France were put on display in the exhibition The French daguerreotype - A photographic work of art (Musée d’Orsay, Paris - Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2003).

The name of Girault de Prangey was no longer known only to enlightened specialists. It had suddenly emerged from oblivion and the general public was able to discover this prolific architectural designer and pioneer of photography who created nearly a thousand daguerreotypes between 1841 and 1844 in Europe and in the Middle-East (in cities such as Paris, Rome, Athens, Istanbul, Jerusalem and Cairo).

The curators of the Musée gruérien - an institution chiefly devoted to regional artefacts, which aims to preserve and enhance the heritage of Gruyère in the French canton of Fribourg - are well aware of the incredible scope of their discovery and the truly exceptional value of these unique images for the history of the art of photography. Thanks to the support of the Swiss state and a number of other partners they were able to employ two specialists, Sylvie Henguely and Christophe Dutoit, in order to initiate a research programme. The results of this important project were exhibited in Bulle in 2008 at an exhibition entitled Silver Mirrors. Daguerreotypes by Girault de Prangey. Views of Switzerland, France and the Middle-East. A book was also published in connection with the exhibition.

All of the questions that these daguerreotypes raised may not yet have been answered but, at this point, we certainly know a great deal more about the wooden box rediscovered in 2002, including its precious contents and their creator, Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey (1804-1892).

The first and foremost task for the museum was to ensure the long-term preservation of the unframed plates which had been stored, tightly packed in the grooves of the specially made wooden box. Christophe Brandt, director of the Swiss Institute for the Preservation of Photographs in Neuchâtel, was put in charge of this delicate task. The 61 daguerreotypes were cleaned, framed in modern casings to protect them from deterioration, and reproduced in high-definition so that they could be easily viewed and consulted, also online (ill. 2).

The plates were of a size that was quite unusual for that time and the lens used had produced excellent sharpness of the image in the centre with a slight blurring around the edges. The handling and mode of storage of the plates had led to some surface scratching and some of them had traces of oxidation.

A hallmark in the shape of a rosette was also noted. This was the emblem of the manufacturer of the plates but his identity remains a mystery for now. Nevertheless, this hallmark, together with some other elements, has enabled us to confirm that the images are genuine works of Girault de Prangey. In this the museum was assisted by a specialist, Sylvie Aubenas, the former director of the department of engravings and photography at the National Library of France. Had each of these ‘Swiss plates’ been properly labelled, it would have been easier to date them and determine their locations, but it was soon evident that the brief handwritten sheet found inside the wooden box was not a complete list of the plates.

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box was by the same hand as the labels on various other daguerreotypes by de Prangey.

In 2006 four major lines of research had already been developed:

• to reconstruct the biography of the author of the plates on the basis of existing biographies and original manuscripts;

• to conduct an overview of the works of the artist (paintings, drawings, engravings and photographs), which would be as complete as possible;

• to identify, locate and date the views preserved in the museum, in spite of the absence of a genuine travel diary or adequate labelling of the plates;

• to give Girault de Prangey the recognition he deserves in the history of photography, in Switzerland as well as in the world.

In carrying out this research from 2006 to 2009 Christophe Dutoit and Sylvie Henguely retraced the footsteps of the photographer through Switzerland, France and England. Their task gradually became a genuine detective investigation with a multitude of clues, all of which had to be collected, compared and pored over. Possible theories had to be checked out, with some trails leading to good results, others to dead-ends. There were moments of joy when the solutions came to light and other moments of blank discouragement. With the help of the people in charge of various institutions, as well as private researchers and collectors, all the hard work was finally crowned with success and a detailed and informative picture could be presented of the life and the works of this artist and his fascinating character, as well as an insight into the period in which he lived.

The daguerreotypes of the Musée Gruérien are exclusively views of natural scenery and buildings, and there are no portraits, still-lifes or pictures of other genres. All the images were taken during various trips and journeys to Switzerland. The only written trace of a visit by the artist to Switzerland is his signature in the register of foreigners who stayed at the Hotel des Trois-Rois in Basel in August 1849. On the other hand, specialists on the lakes of the area have claimed that a picture he took of a steamboat near Interlaken (Canton of Bern) can only have been taken between 1843 and 1847. Other clues such as the dates of the inauguration of monuments, or of the conversion of buildings, lead us to the conclusion that the pictures taken in Switzerland can reliably be dated between 1845 and 1850.

Prior to 1845 Switzerland was not entirely unfamiliar to our daguerreotypist. His family had taken refuge here during the French Revolution and in 1834, on a return trip from Italy, he had also travelled through Switzerland, where he stopped to draw a picture in Baden and another in Zurich (of the cathedral cloister). A few years later he entered into a correspondence with the archaeologist Désiré Raoul-Rochette, the author of Lettres sur la Suisse who, although French, had a particular interest in Switzerland.

Another discovery was that, in spite of the indications written on the two sheets of paper found in the box, not all the pictures were actually taken in Switzerland. The pictures that have been identified - and this is not the case for all of them - included pictures taken in Chamonix (the Mer-de-Glace glacier) and Aix-les-Bains (the Roman arch dedicated to Lucius Pompeius Campanus) (ill. 3). It should however be noted that the guide books of the period generally associate these locations with Switzerland. Nevertheless there is also a picture of the church of Avrigney, in Haute-Saône in the region of Franche-Comté (this may have been taken during a trip between the artist’s home in Courcelles-Val-d’Esnoms and Switzerland), and four pictures of the ruins of the former spa of Mont-Doré in Auvergne.

If one considers the collection from a geographical point of view, all three of the main regions of Switzerland are represented: the Jura (with views and rocky gorges between Basel and Bienne), the central plateau (with pictures of the towns of Bern, Basel and Vevey) and the Alps (with the Bernese Oberland and the Valais) (ill. 4). As regards the actual pictures themselves, Girault de Prangey was
and worthy of an exceptionally clear definition. Sometimes it is rather difficult for us to understand why certain details such as a tympanum supported by a Roman column in the cloister of the cathedral of Basel, specific rock or glacier formations or a particular house in a street in Unterseen (canton Bern) were emphasised in this way. Occasionally, the artist even took two pictures of the same subject, one close-up and the other from further away. He sometimes took a series of plates of rocky cliffs that can be viewed one next to the other in order to create a wide panorama.

One is inevitably led to the conclusion that Girault de Prangey was not merely concerned with the more picturesque aspects of photography. He did not just produce overall views but often chose to focus more on certain key elements or details. This kind of emphasis can be explained by the use the artist made of his daguerreotypes from 1841 onwards, which is similar to his use of sketches and drawings before then. It seems that in creating most of the views on his ‘Grand Tour’ between 1842 and 1844, Girault de Prangey considered photography not so much as an end in itself, but as the means to achieve a final result, and as a step in the process of creating other images.

He undoubtedly saw the ability of daguerreotypes to precisely and faithfully reproduce the world as an essential quality and he used them, with the help of water-colour sketches to record the exact colours of the scenes he photographed, to create the large sized albums of coloured lithographic prints entitled Arabian Monuments of Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor, drawn and measured between 1842 and 1845 (1846) and Monuments and Scenes of the East (1851). The only other artist of the time who worked in a similar way and who can be compared to de Prangey as regards the quantity, quality and use of daguerreotype plates he used, including the same attention towards focussing, was John Ruskin. There are some differences, however, especially since the Englishman employed other people to make the plates, whereas the Frenchman made his own.

It should be noted that Girault de Prangey never used the term ‘daguerreotype’, in the titles, footnotes or captions of his published works. Instead he referred only to ‘drawings’ and ‘measurements’. As far as we know his daguerreotypes were, moreover, never exhibited to the public during his lifetime. While most painters at the time used hand-drawn sketches or designs to create their final paintings, our artist used his silver-plated photographic plates as a means to an end rather than as work of art in themselves. In this sense Girault de Prangey was following the advice of Paul Delaroche, who at that time was a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts:

“If daguerreotypes were to be included in the notion of artistic creation, it could only be as a support to be used in the art of painting; the painter could make use of this process to quickly make a collection of study-designs. Otherwise, personal sketches and drawings would be far more time-consuming and less precise, however talented the artist”.

Prior to the invention of photography, it is very likely that Girault de Prangey, who was fascinated by the precise details of architecture, used a technical process similar to that of the ‘camera obscura’. This was the ‘camera lucida’ which projected an image of the real world onto a blank sheet of paper, where it could be accurately duplicated by hand. He seems to have worked along the same lines as Dutch painters of outdoor scenes such as Vermeer or Italian painters like Canaletto, who were already using the ‘camera obscura’ in the 17th century. In this sense he can be considered as an artist who used photography as an aid or support for his art, rather than as a photographer as such.

This explanation gives an interesting clue to the intended use of the daguerreotypes that our artist made during his travels between 1842 and 1844, but it does not really give us a clear insight into the reasons behind the daguerreotypes he made during his Swiss travels. Quite eclectic, and this was a fairly typical quality of the amateur daguerreotypists of the time, most of whom were knowledgeable and wealthy travellers, who were among the very first to experiment with this wonderful new technique. The themes that had attracted de Prangey on his travels in the Mediterranean crop up once more in these ‘Swiss’ pictures: natural scenery, scenes of geological and botanical interest, archaeological sites, townscapes and village streets, monuments and architecture (featuring buildings of various different styles and periods, often with fountains and statues) (Ill. 5). There are also some particularly individual choices that do not seem to fit in with what is otherwise a selection made with in a rather systematic way.

The photographer recorded (possibly at the request of the owners) a number of buildings that had been recently completed, such as the Schiltshof in Basel and the Château de l’Alie in Vevey, the first in Neoclassical style and the second in Neo-Gothic style (Ill. 6). He also took a picture of a steamboat, docked at a wharf in Interlaken, as well as one of a man in a top-hat sitting on a rock near the Hotel de la Tête-Noire in the Valais, seen from a mountain path. This man can, however, only be discerned with the help of a magnifying glass.

In order to better understand the aims of de Prangey and his photographic techniques it is worth examining his use of focussing. In his pictures the artist often focussed upon one element that he deemed to be more important

III. 5, Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey, Rock face in the Alps, 1845-1850 © Musée gruérien, Bulle, inv. GP-DAG-041

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travels. In fact Girault de Prangey never published an album of Remarkable monuments and scenery in Switzerland and the Alps and no engraving, drawing or painting with his signature has ever come to light representing any of the places he visited in Switzerland. This is all rather mysterious. Did Girault de Prangey have a project like this that he was never able to complete? Did he intend these images to be used as a support for further works on architecture and landscape or did he just intend to keep them as souvenirs of his travels?

As far as we know, Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey’s travels in Switzerland were the last of his photographic expeditions outside France. From 1851 onwards our adventurous traveller seems to have progressively cut himself off from the world, living like a hermit in the ‘Villa Orientale’ which he had built in Courcelle Val d’Esnomes. He was unmarried with no children and was considered by his neighbours to be somewhat eccentric. He cultivated exotic plants in greenhouses (although the Langres regions is one of the coldest in France) and from 1860 to 1870 he created a few more daguerreotypes and took some stereoscopic photos of nearby areas. Eventually he died in 1892 at the age of 88. As regards Girault de Prangey’s Swiss pictures it is of course possible that he had no intention of using them to make engravings at all, because he felt that these scenes were pleasing just as they were. Perhaps they had simply caught his eye and he had recorded them on the daguerreotype plates without wishing to use them as the basis for a further project. This idea is supported by the fact that during his previous travels he recorded other images - now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France - which show scenes such as cedar trees in Lebanon, a palm tree near Athens and a girl smoking a hookah in Cairo. These photographs seem to comply to a similar pattern, being taken for the sake of the beauty and interest of the image in itself.

This paper is based on the research conducted for the exhibition and the book: