The Lost Ruskin Daguerreotypes

In 1840 John Ruskin (London 1819 - Brantwood 1900), the leading Victorian writer on art, architecture and society, encountered the first truly successful photographic process - that of the daguerreotype - and he soon became a devotee, buying and commissioning daguerreotype images in various European cities. During one of his journeys to Switzerland he wrote to his friend W.H. Harrison that he was fascinated with the daguerreotype as it was "certainly the most marvellous invention of the century". Although he never truly considered photography as a genuine art form, Ruskin was captivated by the almost magical properties of silvered plates that recorded the true appearance of the natural world and by 1849 he had acquired his own daguerreotype equipment and he instructed his valets John Hobbs and Frederick Crawley to become skilled practitioners.

Ruskin's many journeys in Italy were very important in his life and in moulding his aesthetic attitudes, particularly his second tour of Northern Italy in 1845. This was the last visit to Italy he made alone, without his parents, and it led him to discover Tuscany and the Italian Gothic. On this journey he travelled to Venice, where he made his most significant acquisition of daguerreotypes, which he mentioned in a letter to his father on October the 8th 1845:

"I have been lucky enough to get from a poor Frenchman here, said to be in distress, some most beautiful, though small Daguerreotypes of the palaces I have been trying to draw, and certainly, Daguerreotypes taken by this vivid sunlight are glorious things. It is very nearly the same thing as carrying off the palace itself; every chip of the stone and stain is there, and of course there is no mistake about proportions."

A skilled draughtsman, Ruskin considered the camera as a basically mechanical drawing aid, due to its ability to precisely record forms and details, such as those that he attempted to emphasise and enhance in the natural landscapes and architecture he saw during his extensive tours on the continent between 1845 and 1858. In addition to his watercolours and sketches, the many daguerreotypes he bought in Venice in 1845 constituted an essential visual support for his books, such as The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849) and the epic three-volume work Stones of Venice, published in 1851-1853.

Who would have thought that these long-lost “most beautiful, though small daguerreotypes”, showing well known examples of Venetian architecture, which Ruskin inventoried in his manuscript catalogue of daguerreotypes (the notebook, inv. MS27 in the Ruskin Library in Lancaster) would have come up for auction in early March 2006 as part of a lot of 188 daguerreotypes?

The largest collection of daguerreotypes of Venice ever made, together with a number of landscape views of France and Switzerland, was consigned to the auction house of Penrith, Farmers & Kidd, at Penrith, in the Lake District of England by an elderly man who said the photographs had been in his family for about 50 years. The lucky buyers - the well-known photographic art collectors Ken and Jenny Jacobson - described this treasure trove as a veritable “Holy Grail of 19th century photography”, in the preface to their long-awaited book on Ruskin: Carrying Off the Palaces. John Ruskin’s Lost Daguerreotypes, available directly from the publishers since the 19th of March.

The book is available by phone: +44 20 7297 4866 or email to: a.ford-smith@quaritch.com

NOTES

1. Ruskin in Italy. Letters to his Parents, 1845, Oxford University Press, 1972.