A postcard from Austin

It is an interesting coincidence that 1839, the year in which the invention of the daguerreotype was made public, was also the year in which the government of the Republic of Texas moved from Houston to Austin and the Texas Congress bought some land that was designated as the site of what is now the state University of Texas at Austin, although this institution was established in 1883. This city hosted the 26th annual symposium of the Daguerreian Society in September of this year, with a programme of conferences of great historical and scientific interest, enhanced by the traditional Trade Fair, as well as a series of visits to various local institutions, including the renowned Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin where the earliest known surviving photograph made by a camera is preserved, the daguerreotype by Niepce entitled View from the Window at Le Gras, 1826-1827, which is known as the First Photograph, or the “FP”.

The novelties of the Symposium - which in previous editions focused mainly on historical aspects of the daguerreotype - included several talks about the most recent scientific research concerning the chemical and physical nature of daguerreotypes, also featuring a panel of three leading experts who discussed topics connected to the state of the art in the conservation, collecting and exhibiting of daguerreotypes. These experts were the senior curator of photography at the Nelson Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri (Keith Davis), a photographic conservator who has a private practice in Boston (Paul Messier) and a contemporary daguerreotypist, researcher and daguerreotype conservator working with the AMC collection in Toronto (Mike Robinson).

We would like to thank the Daguerreian Society for giving us the opportunity to present the European project “Daguereobase” and our organization, the European Daguerreotype Association (EDA), to the American public. On this occasion we also publicly invited the supervisors of public collections in addition to private collectors all over the United States to share any daguerreotypes of European origin they may possess on the website daguereobase.org. At the conclusion of the “Daguereobase” project (in Summer 2015), the EDA will be the organization responsible for maintaining the website daguereobase.org, which will continue to accept new daguerreotype images so as to further its aim of becoming an internationally recognized daguerreotype database.

During the Austin symposium an initiative that should complement the “Daguereobase” project was announced by Larry J. Schaaf. This is entitled The William Henry Fox Talbot Catalogue Raisonné. While very few original daguerreotypes created by Talbot himself still survive, there are more than 25,000 photographic prints and negatives made by Fox Talbot all over the world, together with hundreds of his letters, published articles and books. In August 2014 the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford gave the photography historian Dr. Larry J. Schaaf the task of publishing his catalogue raisonné of original photographs by Talbot and his circle. Schaaf is the author of numerous books and articles on Talbot, including Out of the Shadows: Herschel, Talbot & the Invention of Photography (Yale, University Press, 1992) and The Photographic Art of William Henry Fox Talbot (Princeton, 2000). He is the founder and editor of The Correspondence of William Henry Fox Talbot, which is an online database at consisting of nearly 10,000 letters dating from 1800 to 1877 addressed to and from Talbot. It was set up by the University of Glasgow in 2003 and subsequently transferred to De Montfort University in Leicester.

A complement to the Catalogue Raisonné of Talbot’s photographic work will be a significant private collection purchased by the Bodleian Library at the end of a two-year national campaign to raise £2.2 million, thereby saving this precious archive for Britain. The Bodleian received funds from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) and a substantial grant from the Art Fund. The Library’s fundraising efforts were actively supported by the distinguished photographers Hiroshi Sugimoto and Martin Parr. The purchased archive is somewhat exceptional, as it consists of family diaries, drawings, manuscripts, letters, musical scores, and even some of the objects used by Talbot in his photographic compositions, together with scientific instruments, photographic images that various other photographers from Great Britain used the continent sent to Talbot, some of the first photographic views of Oxford, and an exceptional photograph taken by his wife, Constance, in 1839, which may well be the earliest photograph taken by a woman. All of this wonderful material will certainly give us “a fuller image of an extraordinary Victorian scientist and humanist” says Prof Schaaf. He also points out that “a Catalogue Raisonné is required to unlock the enormous artistic, documentary, and technical information embodied in these images. This project seeks to make more than four decades of personal research freely available to scholars. While much of the work has already been done, the data is confined to my private databases and files and is in danger of being lost”. Those who will wish to consult this material will be “anyone interested in the history of photography, a steadily growing area in academia. There is a great deal of historical, architectural, and general documentation preserved in these photographs, which are often unique records of an early period”.

We are therefore all looking forward to see how this exciting and valuable project will develop!

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\[ by SANDRA MARIA PETRILLO \]