

# THE DAGUERRE DIORAMA AT BRY-SUR-MARNE

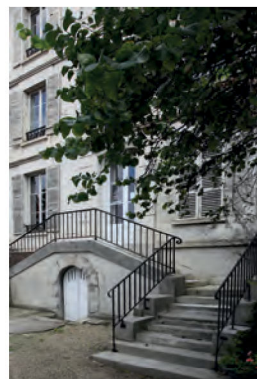
Simon Warner



Mike Robinson's Daguerreotype workshop: photographing Daguerre's memorial plaque in the garden of the Hôtel de Malestroit



Finished Daguerreotype of the plaque



Frontage of the Maison Daguerre



Daguerre monument, Bry-sur-Marne

**HAVING WRITTEN TWO PREVIOUS REPORTS** on the progress of the Diorama restoration at Bry-sur-Marne near Paris, it was a great pleasure to attend the official re-opening of this remarkable 19th-century survival, which took place supported by a series of events and exhibitions on 19 September 2013.

There are no surviving paintings from the original Diorama theatres in Paris and London, most of which were destroyed by fire. But after retiring to Bry with the government pension

*Interior of Bry-sur-Marne church, showing the Diorama and newly reinstated Saints Peter and Paul at either side*



East end of the church, showing the mid-19th-century extension and triangular zenithal window



Daytime view of the Diorama, with sunlight illuminating the painting from behind

awarded in return for making the Daguerreotype freely available, Daguerre decided to create one last Diorama for the parish church just across the road from his fine mansion. This Diorama was to be a permanent fixture, substituting natural, self-activated lighting effects for the theatrical manipulation of light that characterised the Parisian performances.

So the Bry Diorama completed in 1842 was a swansong, but also a new beginning as nothing like this had been attempted. In order to introduce enough light above and behind the canvas to create a Dioramic effect, Daguerre persuaded the authorities to

*Modern reconstruction (incorporating digital effects) of Daguerre's Diorama Saint-Etienne du Mont based on an original by the Théâtre Mécanique Morieux, showing a Midnight Mass. From the exhibition 'The Diorama – A Contemporary Art' at the Hôtel de Malestroit, Bry*





extend the apse and install roof windows along with a triangular zenithal window to allow diffused sunlight onto the back of the picture. The canvas was painted taking into account this directional illumination so that in daylight the dark interior of the church is bathed in light emanating from the painting itself, and the three-dimensional effect is almost palpable.

The Bry Diorama has had a chequered history. Daguerre himself made the first repairs as early as 1847, and subsequent conservation was far from sympathetic. The clergy never seem to have liked the artistic intrusion – priests considered that the responsiveness of the painting to changing light conditions distracted their congregations from the business of worship. As early as 1908 the Diorama was covered by a heavy curtain, and it was not until the formation of the Association Louis Daguerre in 2001 that plans for a comprehensive restoration were set in motion. After several years of work, substantially funded by the Getty Foundation, the transparency of the original has been revived by replacing its fabric support. Details painted on the back of the canvas had already been lost in earlier attempts at conservation, so the full effect of Daguerre's later Dioramas from the 1820s and 1830s cannot be experienced.

Still, this is a unique art-historical treasure. At the same time, Daguerre's former mansion has been bought by the municipality, as the first step to opening it as a museum of his life and work. Coinciding with the return of the Diorama, an exhibition of American Daguerreotype portraits from the William Becker Collection was held in the house, and it was also the venue for a series of Daguerreotype demonstrations, the first of which, by Canadian photographer Mike Robinson, was a *tour de force* of chemical wizardry and assurance. Armed with a fume cupboard and some simple but ingenious pieces of apparatus, Mike produces Daguerreotypes using Daguerre's original method, which he claims superior to later adaptations.

Another public building, the Hôtel de Malestroit, hosted a fascinating exhibition, *'The Diorama – A Contemporary Art'*, showing original paintings and documents by Daguerre along with two large canvases based on the lost Diorama paintings of Vesuvius erupting and of a Midnight Mass at Saint-Etienne du Mont. These had been copied from pictures shown at the Théâtre Mécanique Morieux in Paris and Belgium in the later 19th century, and displayed Dioramic effects created by a mix of lighting changes and video projection.



Saint-Etienne du Mont Diorama, dissolved to its daytime state



Margaret Calvarin, curator of the Musée Adrien Mentienne, Bry-sur-Marne, speaking about the restoration at the opening of the church Diorama in September 2013