

Metropolitan Improvements or London in the Nineteenth Century

From Original Drawings by Thomas H. Shepherd with
Historical, Topographical & Critical Illustrations by James
Elmes, London: published April 11, 1829.

James Elmes' description of the Diorama building on the east side of Park Square, Regent's Park, London, appears on pp. 80–81:

Let us now proceed, once more by THE PORTICO of the Colosseum, pass by the Diorama, through Park Square, and finish our morning's walk by an investigation of Mr. Soane's new church, at the south-eastern angle of the park, on the verge of the New [Marylebone] Road.

The exterior of the Diorama has nothing more than the adjoining houses on either side, and its interior has nothing in common with any thing else in the metropolis; nor has St. Andrew's Terrace much more to recommend it, except the pretty pavillion-looking building of the Corinthian order at the further end, which forms two houses, so contrived as to appear like one. Therefore, as the unruly sun has been looking upon us with his warmest regards for some hours, suppose we enter the cool rotunda of the Diorama, and rest our wearied bodies, and refresh our tired eyes, with the artificial beauties of Messrs. Bouton and Daguerre [sic].

This delightful exhibition (let us sit down in the hall, while the theatre and its audience, like that of Scribonius Curio at Rome, is turning from one subject to another, during which operation we cannot enter), is a display of architectural and landscape scenery, painted in solid, and in transparency, arranged and lighted in a peculiar mode, so as to exhibit changes of light and shade, and a variety of natural phenomena in a really wonderful manner. The body of the picture is painted, on what scene-painters technically term a flat, and this main or perpendicular subject is aided by wings or side scenes, by painting on the floor, by raised bodies and by other optical and pictorial effects, till the delusion is perfect and almost incredible. These paintings are lighted from behind by large windows as

big as the pictures, and by sky-lights over and in front of them; and by the aid of opaque and transparent screens and curtains of various colours and degrees of transparency, the various effects of light, shade and gradations of colour are produced.

These pictures, or scenes, are viewed from a very elegant circular theatre, with pit, boxes and passages, through an opening, decorated by a proscenium. While the opening in the theatre is before one picture, the whole body of the audience part is slowly moved round by some admirable machinery below, and the spectators, seats, attendants and all, are moved imperceptibly round, from the Mary Chapel of Canterbury Cathedral to the lake of Lausanne, or from the city of Rouen in France, to the interior of Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland. The elevation next Park Square is from the designs of Mr. Nash, and the interior of the theatre from those of Mr. Morgan and M. Pugin.

The theatre has now revolved upon its axis, and one of the openings removed to the door in the hall, therefore we may enter, and be mystified by the delusions of these eminent pictorial enchanters.

I hope you will admit, that I have not misapplied the epithet of enchanters to these artists, and if you are sufficiently rested and gratified by your inspection of the Diorama, we will walk gently onward towards the new church, which is just completed on the eastern extremity of the immense parish of St. Mary-le-bone. This new church is called the church of the Holy Trinity ...

**John Timbs, on ‘Diorama and Cosmorama’,
in his *Curiosities of London*, 1855, pp. 252-3**

The Diorama, on the eastern side of Park-square, Regent’s-park, was exhibited in Paris long before it was brought to London, by its originators, MM. Bouton and Daguerre; the latter, the inventor of the Daguerriotype, died 1851. The exhibition-house, with the theatre in the rear; was designed by Morgan and Pugin: the spectatory had a circular ceiling, with transparent medallion portraits; the whole was built in four months, and cost £10,000. The Diorama consisted of two pictures, eighty feet in length and forty feet in height, painted in solid and in transparency, arranged so as to exhibit changes of light and shade, and a variety of natural phenomena; the spectators being kept in comparative darkness, while the picture received a concentrated light from a ground-glass roof.

The contrivance was partly optical, partly mechanical and consisted in placing the pictures within the building so constructed, that the saloon containing the spectators revolved at intervals, and brought in succession the two distinct scenes into the field of view, without the necessity of the spectators removing from their seats; while the scenery itself remained stationary, and the light was distributed by transparent and movable blinds - some placed behind the picture, for intercepting and changing the colour of the rays of light, which passed through the semi-transparent parts. Similar blinds, above and in front of the picture were movable by cords, so as to distribute or direct the rays of light.

The revolving motion given to the saloon was an arc of about 73 degrees and while the spectators were thus passing round, no person was permitted to go in or out. The revolution of the saloon was effected by means of a sector, or portion of a wheel, with teeth which worked in a series of wheels and pinions; one man, by turning a winch, moved the whole. The space between the saloon and each of the two pictures was occupied on either side by a partition, forming a kind of avenue, proportioned in width to the size of the picture. Without such a precaution, the eye of the spectator, being thirty or forty feet distant from the canvas, would, by anything intervening, have been estranged from the object.

The combination of transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque colouring, still further assisted by the power of varying both the effects and the degree of light and shade, rendered the Diorama the most perfect scenic representation of nature; and adapted it peculiarly for moonlight subjects, or for showing such accidents in landscape as sudden gleams of sunshine or lightning. It was also unrivalled for representing architecture, particularly interiors, as powerful relief might be obtained without that exaggeration in the shadows which is almost inevitable in every other mode of painting. The

interior of Canterbury Cathedral, the first picture exhibited, in 1823, was a triumph of this class; and the companion picture, the Valley of Sarnen, equally admirable in atmospheric effects. In one day (Easter Monday, 1824), the receipts exceeded £200.

In viewing the Diorama, the spectator was placed, as it were, at the extremity of the scene, and thus had a view across or through it. Hence the inventor of the term compounded it of the Greek preposition *dia*, through, and *orama*, scene; though, from there being two paintings under the same roof in the building in the Regent's-park, it is supposed the term was from *dis*, twice, and *orama*; but if several paintings of the same kind were exhibited, each would be a Diorama (Black).

Although the Regent's-park Diorama was artistically successful, it was not commercially so. In September, 1848, the building and ground in the rear, with the machinery and pictures, was sold for £6750.; again, in June, 1849, for £4800; and the property, with sixteen pictures, rolled on large cylinder; was next sold for £3000. The building has since been converted into a Chapel for the Baptist denomination at the expense of Sir Morton Pete, Bart.

The Cosmorama, though named from the Greek (*Kosmos*, world; and *orama*, view, because of the great variety of views), is but an enlargement of the street peepshow.

Editorial comment by R. D. Wood (Midley History of early Photography) 2001:

John Timbs (1801–1875) should be counted as an invisible contributor to H and A. Gernsheim's Histories of Photography. For it will be noticed that the above information on the Diorama building in London forms a substantial part of the account provided by Helmut Gernsheim in his book on *L. J. M. Daguerre: The History of the Diorama and the Daguerreotype*, although Gernsheim does not cite his source. Again, Gernsheim happens not to provide any source for his account of the earliest use of the Daguerreotype in England and the part played by St Croix in London in 1839, although it is clearly dependent on the account given by Timbs in his *Stories of Inventors and Discoverers of Science and the useful arts of 1860!*

Timbs was indeed a prolific writer and editor. It should be his due that some notice be taken of him in relation to the historiography of the History of early Photography.

Very basic biographical and bibliographic information on him can be found in the following:

J. R. M. [J. R. Macdonald], 'Timbs, John (1801–1875), author', *Dictionary of National Biography*, London: Smith Elder 1898, Vol. lvi, 402–3;

S. A. Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature*, (3 Vols 1859–71), Vol. 3;

J. F. Kirk, *A Supplement to Allibone's Critical Dictionary of English Literature* (2 Vols 1891);

Anon, *Illustrated London News*, 10 February 1855, vol. 26 (No.727), pp. 125–6 (with a portrait of Timbs engraved from a painting by T. J. Gullick).

THE BAPTISTS AND THE DIORAMA.—It is currently reported that Mr. Peto, M.P., has purchased the building known as the Diorama, Regent's-park, for the purpose of converting it into a Baptist chapel. The name of a respected Baptist minister in the provinces has been mentioned as likely to occupy the pulpit; but at present, for obvious reasons, we refrain from naming the rev. gentleman. The purchase-money is said to be about 4,000l.—*Patriot.*

The Times (London), 1 December 1852

THE DIORAMA PICTURES.—Mr. J. Fuller begs to inform the public that the 15 PICTURES are not sold, the negotiation having gone off; he is, therefore, now ready to TREAT with any PURCHASER, and, as the promises must be surrendered to the contractors within a few days, they will be sold a bargain.—1st February, 1853.—161, Albany-street, Regent's-park.

The Times, 5 February 1853

DIORAMA, Regent's-park.—A gentleman, having purchased the whole of the VIEWS (14 in number), which, for many years past, have formed the most interesting and attractive exhibition in London, is desirous of DISPOSING OF the same, either together or separately. They are painted by those celebrated artists, MM. Bouton, Rénoux, and Diosso, at a very considerable outlay. Full particulars as to size and price may be obtained by letter, or by application to Mr. James Jarvis, 4, Union-place, near the railway arch, Church-street, Lambeth.

The Times, 13 August 1853