

Daguerre's demonstrations in 1839 at the Palais d'Orsay.

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RDW – Researching some aspects of the course of events in Paris in 1839 regarding the daguerreotype, I realised that the place where Daguerre first demonstrated his process in public had not been reported in the past with any consistency. Had such a situation arisen because various interpretations of the original French could be involved? For example, the word 'hotel' having a different meaning in French than in English would be an obvious reason why a French address could be rendered in various ways in English publications.

Discussion of the issue by correspondence with Pierre Harmant in France followed. Pierre Harmant has a historical knowledge always highly worthy of publication. Most unfortunately this year he has operations on both eyes so that preparing work for publication has to be foregone. Therefore this note is derived from that correspondence about the palace of the Quai d'Orsay with the second part translated with his kind permission.

The place where Daguerre obtained Daguerreotypes during public demonstrations in September 1839 has been reported by historians in varied ways that makes the situation uncertain. For example:

1. 'demonstrations were held at the Hôtel d'Orsay'
– Beaumont Newhall, *Latent Image*, New York (1967), p.98
2. 'at the Grand Hotel on the Quai d'Orsay'
– Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography*, revised edition, London (1972), p.18
3. 'The Minister of the Interior ... has put at the disposal of Daguerre the largest room of the immense palace on the Quai d'Orsay' (see original French in Ref.7 below)
– Beaumont Newhall's translation in *Latent Image*, p.97–98 of an original French report in *L'Artiste*, 1 September 1839, Vol 4 (Second series), p.3

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4. 'in a room at the Ministry of the Interior on the Quai d'Orsay'
– Helmut Gernsheim, *L. J. M. Daguerre*, London (1956) and New York (1968), pp.103–4
(Gernsheim cites his source: *London Journal of Arts and Sciences*, Vol 15).
5. 'in one of the halls of the hotel of the Quai d'Orsay'
– *The Times* (London), 10 September 1839, p. 4
6. 'at the Grand Hotel on the Quai d'Orsay, in which the Minister of the Interior had given orders to prepare a room'
– *Morning Herald*, 12 September 1839, p.3; and reprinted in Newton's *London Journal of Arts and Sciences*, Vol 15 (conjoined series), ([1839–]1840), No.XCII [October 1839], p.120
7. 'M. Daguerre ... se propose de démontrer son instrument au public ... M. le ministre de l'intérieur ... a mis à la disposition de M.Daguerre la plus vaste salle de cet immense palais du quai d'Orsay...'
– [Jules Janin] *L'Artiste*, 1 September 1839, Vol.4 (Second series), No.1, pp. 2–3
8. 'Aujourd'hui a eu lieu, à midi, dans l'hotel du Quai d'Orsay, où M.le ministre de l'intérieur avait donné l'ordre de préparer un local convenable, la première expérience publique faite par M. Daguerre'.
– *Journal des Débats*, 8 September 1839, p. 2
9. 'samedi dernier,dans une des salles du palais du Quai d'Orsay. Le secret de M.Daguerre ... la manière de procéder doit être publiquement expliquée'.
– *Courrier des Théâtres*, 11 September 1839, No.7568, p. 2

PGH : Reporting in detail Daguerre's first public demonstration on 7 September 1839 the article of October 1839 in *London Journal of Arts and Sciences* does not cite the French source for its translation. I have found the original French text to be from the *Courrier des Théâtres*, 11 September 1839, No.7568, pp.2–3. What is surprising however is that the first paragraph (exactly that part dealing with the place where the demonstration was held) in the *London Journal* is a melange of the French reports in the *Courrier* and in *Journal des Débats*, 8 September 1839, p.2. Or is it perhaps a personal presentation by the *London Journal* writer? Otherwise he has made a huge error in translation: nowhere in French reports is there any suggestion of a 'large mansion' on the Quai d'Orsay, but a Palace of the Quai d'Orsay. The building no longer exists: on the present Quai Anatole France is the Gare d'Orsay built in 1898 which in recent years became the immense Musée d'Orsay, the Museum of the Nineteenth Century.

As can be seen from the map, this 'Hôtel' or 'Palais d'Orsay' is immediately opposite the Louvre Museum where the large courtyard was enclosed by the Palais des Tuileries under Napoleon III and which was also destroyed by fire. The facade of this building was chosen by Daguerre for his first public demonstration as its geographical orientation, viewed from the Palais d'Orsay across the river, gave a well illuminated facade in the afternoon. Daguerre placed his camera on the balcony of the room overlooking the Quai d'Orsay: 'In view of the period of the season and state of the sky' said Daguerre, 'I judge that twenty minutes is necessary for the objects reflected on the plate to be fixed with suitable intensity – at other periods of the year, and when the sun was at a higher elevation and possessing more force, seven to eight minutes would be sufficient'. That is how Daguerre's words were reported in a detailed description of his first demonstration in *Courrier des Théâtres* on 11 September 1839. The same publication three days before, had also briefly touched on the subject immediately after the event in reporting Daguerre had obtained a good proof in 13 minutes – 'on account of the cloudy weather'. Indeed, there is a record of the atmospheric conditions for the whole of 1839 in Paris. On that particular day of 7th September 1839, it was very cloudy. Temperature was 23.8°C (75°F), Barometer pressure 755.69mm (29.75inches) with a westerly wind. These were unfavourable conditions and the unforeseen increase in the time of exposure shows that Daguerre already had some table of photochemical action according to atmospheric conditions. A detail maybe, but, without doubt, a first public demonstration that had the risk of being a catastrophe.