

James Elmes, "Description of the London Diorama," 1827

(keywords: James Elmes, London Diorama, Charles Bouton, Louis Jacques, Mande Daguerre, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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Selected text published in:

James Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements; or London, in the Nineteenth Century: being a Series of Views, of the New and Most Interesting Objects, in the British Metropolis & Its Vicinity* (London: Jones & Co. 1827): 80–81.

Let us now proceed, once 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 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 build 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 Daguere [Daguerre—ed].

This delightful exhibition (let us sit down in the hall, while the theatre and its audience, like that of Scibonius 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 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 shade and gradations of colour are produced.

These pictures, or scenes, are viewed from a very elegant circular theater, 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 is slowly moved round by some admirable machinery below, and the spectators, seats, attendants and all, are move 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 you are sufficiently rested and gratified by your inspection of the Diorama, we will walk gently onwards 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, or for brevity sake, [Trinity Church.]

[End of selected text. All content related to the Diorama herein provided.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Two other description of the London Diorama are found in John Timbs, *Curiosities of London* (London: David Bogue, 1855): 252–53;¹ and Jefferys Taylor, *A Month in London, or Some of its Modern Wonders Described* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1832): 71–78.²

Several informative articles regarding the Daguerre and the Diorama are available on the web site, *Midley History of Photography: R. Derek Wood's Articles on the History of Early Photography, the Daguerreotype, and Diorama*.³

The London Diorama structure is still standing and is now used by the Prince's Trust. Two recent views of the building are viewable on the web page, *Knowledge of London: History of the London Cinema*. A satellite view, from Google Maps, is provided below.

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8550003_TIMBS_CURIOSITIES_DAGS_1855.pdf
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8320001_TAYLOR_MONTH-IN-LONDON_1832.pdf
3. <http://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20100311230213/http://www.midley.co.uk/>
4. <http://knowledgeoflondon.com/movies/cinema.html>



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