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# The groundbreaking daguerreotype

*by Robert Becker*

Until this spring, the name Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey was hardly known outside a small circle of photography collectors and academics. But it was Girault (1804–92), a quintessential nineteenth-century French aristocrat and dilettante, who in the 1840s created one of the first extensive bodies of photographic images that also qualifies as fine art. Take, for instance, *Palm Tree near the Church of Saints Theodore, Athens* (1842): it's an image as striking, simple, and complete as any Robert Mapplethorpe ever printed. Or look at the broad, dreamy landscape *Hadrian's Villa, Tivoli* (1842), with its jagged, spiky cypresses and billowing cedar tree. This image possesses all the visual poetics and wide-open grandeur of the work of Carleton Watkins. Girault made these photographs long before the other artists—in the case of Mapplethorpe around one hundred forty years—and without the benefit of any prior examples to base them on. Girault was there at the genesis of this most modern medium.

*Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey*, Palm Tree near the Church of Saints Theodore, Athens, *1842*, *Daguerreotype*, *Bibliothèque nationale de France.*

Acquainting himself with Louis Daguerre's new formula for fixing an image soon after that method became public knowledge in 1839, Girault initially photographed subjects around Paris and the French countryside. Then, in 1842, he packed his bulky box camera and hundreds of silver-coated copper plates and, lugging it all east and south through Italy, Greece, North Africa, and the Holy Land, took three years' worth of pictures of landscapes and architectural artifacts. When he set out on this grand tour, his plan was not to create artistic compositions, but to use the process for a new kind of sketch that he could refer to back home in his studio while painting and engraving. But it's the thousand or so daguerreotypes, one hundred and twenty of which are currently on

view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the exhibition "Monumental Journey: The Daguerreotypes of Girault de Prangey," not his oils or etchings, that survive and attest to his vision.

*Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey*, Self-portrait, *1841–42*, *Daguerreotype*, *Bibliothèque nationale de France*.

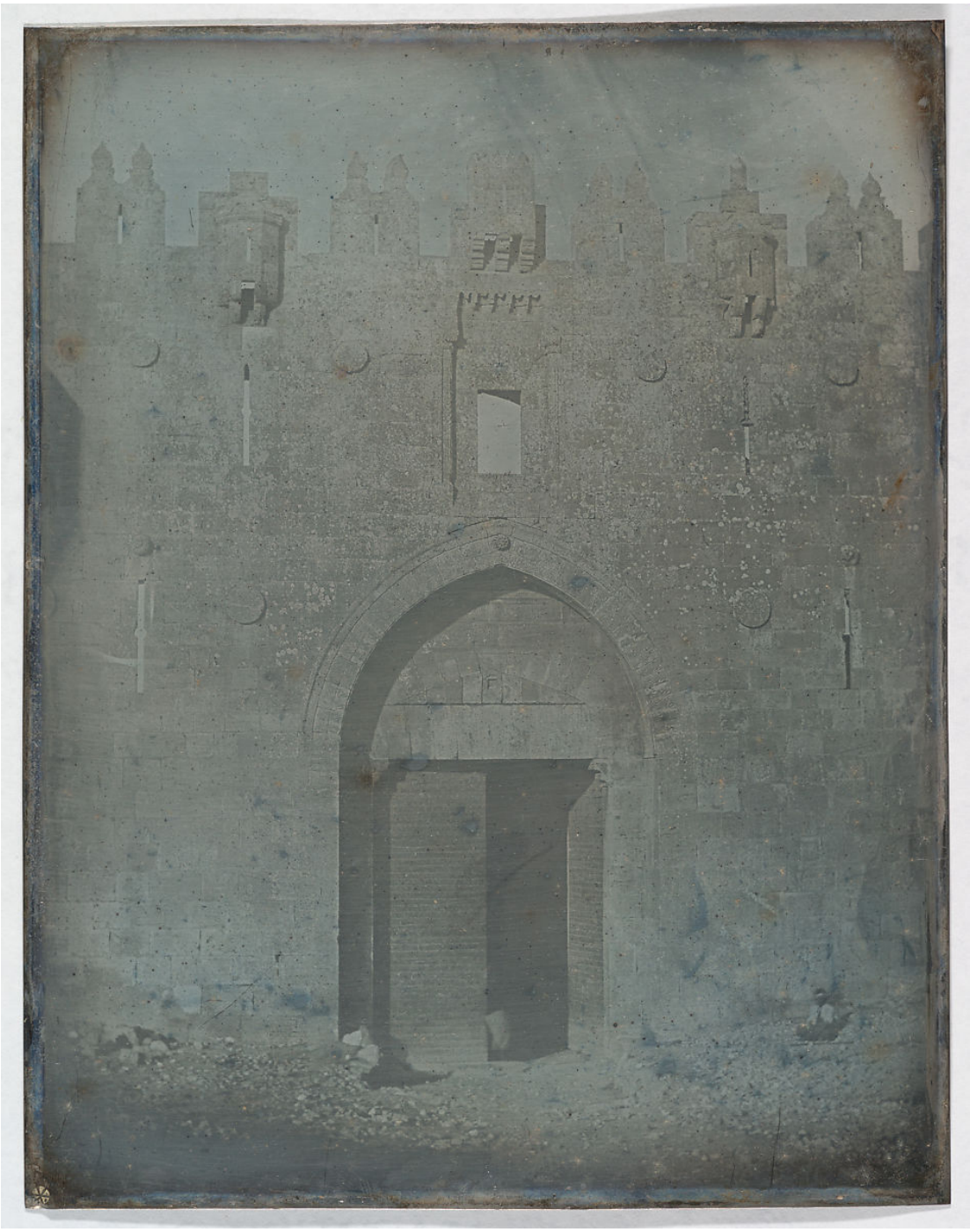
Girault, who was born the year of Napoleon's ascendency and died midway through the Belle Époque, grew up at his father's château in rural France. In Paris, along with earning Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Law degrees, he studied painting with François-Edmée Ricois and Jules Coignet. He had an interest bordering on obsession with the ruins of the ancient classical world, some of which lay not far from where he was brought up in Langres. It might be fair to say, then,

that his training with paint and pencils was less about fulfilling an ambition to become an artist than providing a means to record and broadcast this passion to a wider audience for study and pleasure. A sophisticated understanding of compositional strategies picked up from painting, specifically narrative framing and perspective, translated perfectly into the format and lenses of his camera, training he held in common with other early French masters of photography like Charles Nègre and Gustave Le Gray.

The daguerreotype has rarely been thought of as anything more than a vernacular medium, like a Kodak drugstore print.

In the photography canon, daguerreotypes generally fall somewhere between curio and junk. They've always been the poor stepsiblings of prints on paper. For roughly twenty years, from around 1840 to 1860, they were mostly an inexpensive portrait medium. Because the technology was free—the French government bought the patent from Daguerre and distributed it widely through pamphlets—anyone capable of following a recipe could set up shop to make likenesses of anyone else who would pay a few *sous* for them. Daguerreotypists traveled as far afield as Honolulu in the early 1840s to shoot American missionaries and native Hawaiians, housing the pictures in dainty, leather-cased *passe-partout* mounts. Workaday portraits of hundreds of thousands of long-forgotten men, women, and children of the nineteenth century exist to this day—the moma director of photography John Szarkowski called them "an endless parade of ancestors." Their visages come in and out of view as you tip and turn the plates to catch the light exactly right, their faces and torsos fugitive like specters because the polished metal surface they're chemically fixed to is reflective. With a few exceptions—the Americans Southworth & Hawes, for instance, or Mathew Brady, or the Frenchman Jules Itier—there is little variety in all the thousands or even millions of portraits that still exist, the poses virtually identical again and again. The daguerreotype has rarely been thought of as anything more than a vernacular medium, like a Kodak drugstore print.

Art in early photography has been the realm of the practitioners who used paper to make their prints. All were contemporaries of Girault, including Nègre, Le Gray, Félix Teynard, and John Beasley Greene (to name a few on the Continent), along with William Henry Fox Talbot, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Benjamin Brecknell Turner in England. These photographers, long accepted as artists, used Fox Talbot's own process of creating a negative—invented simultaneously with Daguerre's—and making multiple prints in a lightless room where a second layer of creative manipulation could take place. Girault stuck with the French invention he'd learned just before Fox Talbot's process crossed *La Manche*.



*Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey*, Damascus Gate, Jerusalem, *1844*, *Daguerreotype*, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

The Girault images, lined up at the Met in enormous black vitrines and lit precisely so that the subjects jump from the plates, are shockingly contemporary. He was the first to become articulate in the visual language photographers—artists and Instagram posters—continue to practice to this day, and the evidence is spelled out in these snapshots from his travels. Discovering Girault is a bit like finding the Rosetta Stone. He understood, for instance, how to arrange pictures to produce a certain drama and mystery, not to mention movement. In *Damascus Gate, Jerusalem* (1844), eye and imagination wander through dirt and rubbish in the daguerreotype's foreground, around the massive crenellated wall, finally coming to rest in the darkness inside the enormous door, left

slightly ajar. *Cedars of Lebanon* (1844) explodes like a firework, a sparkling maze of solid and ethereal elements, the heft of centuries-old trunks and limbs on the one hand, balanced by the weightless delicacy of the conifers' needles on the other. This and other tree images were composed by Girault long before Charles Marville, Le Gray, Ansel Adams, Frederick Evans, or Eugène Atget made similar ventures into nature photography.

Girault made many broad, panoramic photographs by cutting his copper plates horizontally. In *Gardens, Villa Medici, Rome* (1842), the tops of umbrella pines float above the house and ground like clouds. He also emphasized the soaring heights of a Cairo mosque's minaret or a Roman column by dividing plates vertically. And while he readily pulled his camera back from the subject to shoot Constantinople and Rome in all their glory from the hills above the cities, he didn't hesitate to push it right up to slightly enigmatic architectural vignettes, for example in pictures he took of the Agios Eleftherios Church in Athens or of Arabic characters surrounding a *mihrab* at a mosque in Cairo, or of details at other sites across the region that capture the layering of sensibilities and civilizations just as Auguste Salzmann would do so beautifully seven years later in Jerusalem. Because daguerreotypes are unique direct positives, chemically fusing the image to a buffed metallic surface, their details are sharper than those on paper, which is an absorbent surface. All the tilework of Islamic architecture and the carvings in Greek temples remain vivid and fresh in Girault's work. He made a few portraits, as well, but inanimate scenes and subjects were far easier to photograph considering the long exposure time necessary to freeze the composition. His cityscapes and landscapes appear empty of life, adding to their poignancy, because anything that moved in the minutes the cap was off his lens disappeared for eternity.

In his mind he may have been taking notes, but his eye couldn't help but make art.

*Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey*, Gardens, Villa Medici, Rome, *1842*, *Daguerreotype*, *Frédéric Hoch Collection*.

Though fascinated by the Orient, Girault's abiding romance remained with the ruins of Occidental antiquity. He filled one plate with a perfectly squared-up shot of the *Temple of Athena Nike*,

*Acropolis, Athens* (1842), keeping it precise and honest, allowing the subject to dictate the composition. Taken during a restoration of the ruin—the Elgin Marbles having been already removed to England—the picture is neatly sliced into four by the elegantly fluted columns of the structure, then scrambled by shadows, the seams in the walls, and a rubble-strewn foreground. Girault moved back to a distance again to photograph *Spiral Columns, Aprodisias* (1843), isolating the pair of columns and lintel in the dry, dusty setting, calling attention to both the poverty of its surroundings and the magnificence and monumentality of the fanciful chisel work. These and a few dozen other superb daguerreotypes, including *Olympieion, Athens, Viewed from the East* (1842), used for the cover of the excellent catalogue, make an unequivocal argument for putting Girault at the top of the list of photography's early masters. In his mind he may have been taking notes, but his eye couldn't help but make art.

*Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey*, Olympieion, Athens, Viewed from the East, *1842*, *Daguerreotype*, *Qatar Museum Collections*.

Since Girault's work is so impressive and groundbreaking, why did so few people know who he was until now? (Beaumont Newhall barely mentions him in his seminal *History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* of 1949, and the International Center of Photography's *Encyclopedia of Photography* fails to mention him at all.) When Girault's original plan for publishing a series of engravings based on the images fell through, he simply catalogued them and packed them into wooden crates, stashing the trove in the attic of his house with an aristocrat's insouciance towards commerce and fame. (He lived out his years more interested in growing hybrid flowers and adding to his château than making art.) Despite Girault being the first to do so much with a camera, few ever saw these pictures, limiting his influence on other practitioners. Luckily for us, a later owner

of his house found the images and, understanding their enormous value, began a process of dissemination that included private sales starting in the 1950s and two major auctions at Christie's in 2003 and 2010. The lion's share of the images in this exhibition come from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, the Getty, the National Collection of Qatar, the Met, and a few very savvy private collectors. "Monumental Journey" marks the first time his best images have been reunited and viewed in a curated exhibition and the first opportunity for them to speak of Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey's genius.

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**Robert Becker** was the arts editor and a writer for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine in the mid-1980s and is the author of *Nancy Lancaster: Her Life, Her World, Her Art* (Knopf). You can find him on Instagram: @RobertBecker3.