

The Oldest Masonic Photo? A Fascinating Masonic Daguerreotype

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ABSTRACT

Freemasonry wants to be a traditional organization a little on the fringe of time. However, it is of course subject to the evolution of the living conditions and techniques. Thus in the 19th century, although "secret", it will meet this new and revolutionary technique that is photography. What is the oldest Masonic photo? Perhaps it is necessary to look for it in France, the country where photography was born. Thus the Museum of Freemasonry in Paris was recently able to acquire an astonishing daguerreotype, dated from 1850, representing a Freemason with his decorations One detail, this Mason died and the photo was taken on his deathbed! This strange piece therefore illustrates too the neo-gothic romanticism that also touched the lodges.

Keywords: Masonic photography, masonic daguerreotype

¿La foto masónica más antigua? Un daguerrotipo masónico fascinante

RESUMEN

La masonería quiere ser una organización tradicional un poco al margen del tiempo. Sin embargo, por supuesto, está sujeto a la evolución de las condiciones y técnicas de vida. Así, en el siglo XIX, aunque "secreto", conocerá esta nueva y revolucionaria técnica que es la fotografía. ¿Cuál es la foto masónica más antigua? Quizás sea necesario buscarlo en Francia, el país donde nació la fotografía. Así, el Museo de la Francmasonería de París pudo adquirir recientemente un asombroso daguerrotipo, fechado en 1850, que representa a un francmasón con sus condecoraciones ... ¡Un detalle, este masón murió y la foto fue tomada en su lecho de muerte! Esta extraña pieza, por tanto, ilustra también el romanticismo neogótico que también tocó las logias.

Palabras clave: Fotografía masónica, daguerrotipo masónico

最古老的共济会相片？一张吸引人的共济会银版相片

摘要

共济会希望成为一个稍微停留在时间边缘的传统组织。不过，它也会受生活条件演变和技术演变的影响。因此，在19世纪，即使保持“神秘”，但它也将接触摄影这一新的变革性技术。最古老的共济会相片是什么？也许应在法国这一摄影术发源地去寻找它。因此，巴黎的共济会博物馆（*Museum of Freemasonry*）近期获得了一张追溯到1850年的惊人相片，这张相片代表了一名共济会会员和他的装饰物...一个细节是，这名共济会会员已经去世，并且相片是在他的临终床上拍摄的。这张相片因此还描述了影响共济会各会所的新哥特式浪漫主义。

关键词：共济会摄影，共济会银版相片

Photography was long regarded as a mere technical device. However, for some thirty years, it has fully entered the terrain of cultural heritage, and its history has been documented in numerous works. Nevertheless, up to now, the field of freemasonry has been left untouched. Even though the collections, whether private or in museums, contain some “masonic” photos—mainly of Brethren in their regalia—those have neither attracted the attention of researchers nor produced specific studies. For that matter, the relation of freemasons to photography varies according to their countries. British and American Masons had their pictures taken on a wide scale at the end of the 19th and in the first part of the 20th centuries. In France, masonic photos seem to be rather scarce. Let us begin our approach of masonic photography

with a particularly early and singular item. A few months ago, a specialist presented the Museum of Freemasonry with a most curious daguerreotype; it shows a slightly morbid scene: a freemason on his death-bed, wearing his apron and a collar of Rose-Croix.

Nicéphore Niepce invented photography in the 1820s. It rests on the use of a “camera obscura” (dark chamber), long since familiar to draughtsmen wanting to capture a scene. One replaces the glass pane at the back by a plate covered with some light-sensitive material. The whole of Niepce’s research bore on the making of such material. The other problem consisted in stopping the chemical reaction at a given time in order to “fix” the picture. In 1827, Niepce finally managed to take a permanently stable picture: a view

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from his window—the “*point de vue du Gras*”—fixed on a tin plate coated with “bitumen of Judea” (or Syrian asphalt). According to present day specialists, that first picture required an exposure of several days! From that moment, research focused on improvements to the light-sensitive material and to the fixing agent. Rapid progress was made. Niepce died suddenly in 1833; however, he had established a partnership with Louis Daguerre, a painter who went on improving the process. In 1837, by using silver, iodine and mercury, he managed to reduce exposure time by several hours and to obtain a precise and nuanced picture; daguerreotype was born. Daguerre was an enterprising man. After having presented his method to the Academy of Sciences, he promoted it to the public. Enthusiasm was immediate and as soon as the 1840s the technique was commercialised and “daguerreotype studios”, the first photographic studios, proliferated. At first, they only reached a well-off clientele because of the high cost of the process; however, over the years, it became affordable for the middle class. Yet, the brilliant success of the daguerreotype was short-lived. As early as 1850 it was replaced by photographs on paper which were produced by cheaper and more efficient techniques. The glory of the daguerreotype was the portrait. Contemporaries were fascinated by a technique which could capture a realistic likeness of them for their families, their friends and for posterity.

Indeed, our masonic daguerreotype belongs to the category of the portrait, even though it is a very special one

as the model had just died. As is the case for all daguerreotypes, it may not very much exceed 1850. For all that, its chief interest is in the precious mention on its back “Benjamin Louis Tailliez, born in Planques lès Douai; 1774+1850” (in the absence of any identification, most early photos have sunk forever into anonymity). The masonic historian then has recourse to his tools, beginning with the files of the “fichier Bossu” in the French National Library (BNF). Luckily, it contains a file card in the name of Tailliez and informs us that the brother in question belonged to the Lodge “La Franche Cordialité” in Saint-Omer in 1830. Is he the character on our daguerreotype? At least, this is a first clue, a track to follow.

The assumption is confirmed by the archives of the correspondence of “La Franche Cordialité” with the Grand Orient of France. On the list of the Lodge members there is one Benjamin Tailliez, born in Douai on 20 X^{bre} (December 20th) 1776. 1776 or 1774—an approximate date was usual practice in the documents of the time. However, the similarity of the places of birth confirms that Brother Tailliez, of “La Franche Cordialité”, was indeed the model of our daguerreotype. This identity once confirmed, further research informs us that Benjamin Tailliez, often called Tailliez-Dereudre, residing “Rue du Soleil”, was a person of note in Saint Omer. He was the owner of an important juniper distillery, a prosperous merchant, the secretary of the “consultative chamber of commerce”, until massive bankruptcy made him a social outcast and brought about the closing down of “La Franche Cordialité” of

which he was the life and soul. In 1830, the documents of “La Franche Cordialité” specify that Tailliez was “coming from l’Heureuse Reunion”. “L’Heureuse Réunion” was the lodge of Saint Omer in Napoleonic times; it was created in 1801, but it had to interrupt its activity in 1813. A review of his file—unfortunately rather incomplete—shows that it was there that Tailliez must have been initiated and received all his degrees up to that of Rose-Croix between 1809 and 1813. His regalia, as they appear in the photograph of 1850—apron, collar and jewel of Rose-Croix—probably date back to his former masonic life, at the end of the first Empire. The collar, and its beautiful rhinestone jewel of Rose-Croix are very clearly reproduced. The apron is more difficult to identify. Close scrutiny seems to reveal a large com-

pass and a bridge, which might mean that it was a “tablier aux quatre Ordres” (apron of the four orders), i.e. an apron bearing the symbols of the four higher degrees of the French Rite (Elect, Scots Master, Knight of the East, Rose-Croix).

The magic of the daguerreotype thus allows us to gaze at the photograph of a man who was young during the Revolution, an adolescent in 1789—he was 20 years old in 1796—and initiated under the first Empire. He could remember the Restoration, King Louis-Philippe, the 2nd Republic before passing away just before Napoleon III’s coup d’état. This is the photograph of a man who lived in the 18th century! Freemasonry took such a place in his life that his relatives and friends decorated him with the regalia of the order for his last journey.