

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Daisuke Miyao

exhibition review of

Lumière!: Le Cinéma Inventé

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 14, no. 3 (Autumn 2015)

Citation: Daisuke Miyao, exhibition review of *Lumière!: Le Cinéma Inventé*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 2015), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn15/miyao-reviews-lumiere-le-cinema-invente>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

Lumière!: Le Cinéma Inventé

The Grand Palais, Paris

March 27–June 14, 2015

The whole world seems likely to soon become conquered by the Cinématographe Lumière, judging by the considerable number of new animated scenes taken from the old and the new continent that the Lumière Company is constantly receiving from their skillful cinematographers.

The Lyon Républicain, April 18, 1896.[\[1\]](#)

The Grand Palais is a perfect setting for the exhibition, *Lumière!: Le Cinéma Inventé* (fig. 1). The Grand Palais was built for the Universal Exposition of 1900 in Paris. One of the major attractions at the 1900 exposition was cinema. Five years had already passed since the first public fee-paying screening of Lumière brothers' films to Parisian audiences at the Salon Indien du Grand Café, currently the basement breakfast room of the Hotel Scribe in Paris, on December 28, 1895. The Lumière brothers knew that they had to offer something spectacular to the sensation seeking fair audience. The Cinématographe Géant, a giant screen that measured sixteen meters high by twenty-one meters wide, was set up in the Festival Hall of the Galerie des Machines. Screenings of a program lasting twenty-five minutes were presented every evening free of charge to an audience that could swell to 25,000 and averaged around 5,000 every night. Likewise, the most spectacular object of this exhibition *Lumière!* is a giant screen. The 1,422 films produced by the Lumière Company from 1895 to 1905 are projected on the screen all together (fig. 2). Those films include *Le Grand Palais* (1900), which was photographed at the exposition site by an anonymous cinematographer from the Lumière Company.



Fig. 1, View of the exhibition site, The Grand Palais, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, View of the installation with the giant screen on which 1,422 Lumière films are projected. *Lumière!: Le Cinéma Inventé*, the Grand Palais, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

The basic structure of the exhibition *Lumière!* follows the permanent exhibit at the Musée Lumière of the Institut Lumière, a film history and restoration center in Lyon, which designed and produced this exhibition. The permanent exhibit at the Musée Lumière is composed of five major sections: “The History of the Lumière Family,” “The Cinématographe,” “The Lumière Films,” “The Autochromes,” and “The Photorama.”^[2]

The *Lumière!* exhibition also begins with the history of the Lumière family as successful industrialists. Antoine Lumière (1840–1911), a sign painter, portrait photographer, and the father of Auguste and Louis Lumière, entered the photochemical business and built his factory in Lyon in 1882. In 1881, Louis Lumière discovered a way to capture images on dry plates with gelatin silver bromide (“Blue Labels”). By 1892, Antoine Lumière and Sons was the second largest photographic company in the world; only Eastman Kodak in the United States was larger. By 1913, according to the exhibition wall label, 800 employees were producing glass plates, sensitized papers, and chemical products over a surface area of four hectares, with a turnover of over 10 million French francs.

The Lumière family history is followed by a section that contextualizes the invention of the Lumière Cinématographe, a compact device that is capable of photographing, making copies, and projecting images in 35mm celluloid strips that extends seventeen meters, each about fifty seconds in duration (fig. 3). The family history section also includes magic lanterns, Étienne-Jules Marey’s Chronophotograph, the Edison Kinetoscope, the Thaumatrope, and the Zoetrope.



Fig. 3, The Cinématographe Lumière, 1895. Institut Lumière. [\[larger image\]](#)

Then, at the center of the Salon d'Honneur, the exhibition space of the Grand Palais, is the replicated Salon Indien du Grand Café, arguably the very first movie theater in the world (fig. 4). The ten films that were screened on December 28, 1895 are continuously viewable there, just as the thirty-three spectators of the first fee-paying (only one French franc!) exhibition experienced. The films included the first one that Louis Lumière photographed on March 19, 1895, *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* (Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon).



Fig. 4, Installation view of the replicated Salon Indien du Grand Café. *Lumière!: Le Cinéma Inventé*, the Grand Palais, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

Behind the Salon, there are sections that introduce the Lumière brothers' further technological experiments and inventions: a 360-degree photographic panorama (a miniature representation of the 1901 Photorama), the first viable commercially available color photography (the 1903 patented Autochrome), and 3D technology (the 1935 remake of the 1896 film, *L'Arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* [The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat]).

Beyond the basic structure, however, there are two issues that the *Lumière!* exhibition emphasizes in particular: media globalization and digital technology. The *Lumière!* exhibition

sheds new light on the history of cinema and its origin from a global perspective. At the same time, it regards the Lumière brothers' technological innovation as the forerunner of the development of digital media.

First, adjacent to the recreated Salon Indien is a large section titled, "Offering the World to the World," which demonstrated how the Lumière brothers' films photographed the world. The leaflet of the exhibition describes this section as follows: "Driven by the desire to share animated photographic images with as many people as possible, the Lumière brothers trained a hundred or so operators on filming and projection techniques. Sent to the four corners of the globe with the camera under their arm, they captured unprecedented images from faraway territories. The films show the extraordinary diversity of subjects captured on film and comprises the first animated archives from the eve of the twentieth century."^[3]

The Cinématographe Lumière had an important function: to capture, catalog, and display subjects beyond France—people and sites—in an immediate manner. The "Offering the World to the World" section features a large panel that simultaneously displays the films shot by a number of Lumière cinematographers in various parts of the world in 1896 and the images that webcams capture every moment at the same places where those cinematographers went 119 years ago (fig. 5).



Fig. 5, Installation view of "Offering the World to the World." *Lumière!: Le Cinéma Inventé*, the Grand Palais, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

The motion picture camera was a perfect medium for this archival purpose because of its photographic indexicality as well as its innate nature of compiling static moments. The Lumière Company sent numerous cinematographers all over the world, traveling with the compact Cinématographe Lumière, and collected a repertoire of films for screenings in France. Collected images included not only such historic sites and picturesque landscapes as the pyramids in Egypt and Niagara Falls in Canada, but also objects and people of French colonies. There were films about military training in Algeria and Indochina, for instance. As noted at the beginning of this review, newspapers of the period tended to cover the travels of the Lumière cinematographers as an imperial conquest and marveled at how "the entire world" might soon be "the conquest of the Cinématographe Lumière."^[4] In this sense, Lumière films were clearly a part of French imperialism, which was observed in the fields of

geography, archeology, and anthropology in the name of civilizing the world. This *Lumière!* exhibition does not fail to acknowledge that history.

Among those “a hundred or so operators,” this exhibition particularly focuses on the works of two: Constant Girel (1873–1952) and Gabriel Veyre (1871–1936). Both Girel and Veyre went to Japan and photographed thirty-three films combined. It may seem unusual to have thirty-three films shot in Japan. No Lumière film was shot in other parts of Asia except French Indochina. This exhibition clearly indicates that Japonisme, the influence of Japanese art, culture, and aesthetics on European art, roughly between the 1860s and 1910s, was most likely the reason for that number.[\[5\]](#)

Originally a student in pharmacy, Girel started traveling in Europe on behalf of the Lumière Company. After being trained as a camera operator and photographing some film in France and Germany, Girel left for Japan on December 6, 1896. He arrived in Kobe on January 9, 1897, where he met up with Inabata Katsutarō (1862–1949), an old classmate of the Lumière brothers at La Martinière Institute in Lyon and the Lumière representative for Japan because of that connection. Girel and Inabata showed Lumière films at the Nanchi Enbujō Theater in Osaka from February 15 to 28, 1897, which is considered to be the first film screening in Japan. A poster for this screening is included in the exhibition (fig. 6). Girel traveled to Kyoto, Osaka, Tokyo, and Hakodate and photographed eighteen films in Japan before he returned to France on December 29, 1897.



Fig. 6, A Japanese poster for the Lumière showcase at Nanchi Enbujō Theater in Osaka, Japan, 1897. Institut Lumière. [\[larger image\]](#)

Five letters (and one blank Japanese-made postcard) that Girel sent from Japan to his parents were exhibited (fig. 7). In one of them, dated April 28, 1897, Girel wrote, “I came back from Osaka to Kyoto last night. I have found a house for myself and settled in. . . . Enclosed please find a photo of a festival in Yokohama. I used a camera of Mr. Favre Brand. Look at the ‘sakura’ [cherry blossoms] of Yokohama in full bloom. . . . ‘Mikado’ [The Japanese emperor] is in Kyoto right now. I will ask about showing the Cinématographe to him today.” A house in Kyoto. Cherry blossoms. The emperor. Stereotypes of Japan are listed in his short letter.

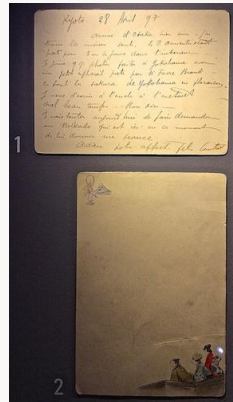


Fig. 7, Constant Girel's letter to his parents, 1897. Institut Lumière. [\[larger image\]](#)

In addition to his letters, a photo album with seventy photographs that Girel collected in Japan was exhibited. The album cover is a sophisticated carved lacquer ware, showing a geisha riding in a rickshaw pulled by a running man in front of Mt. Fuji and Kyoto temples (fig. 8). Similarly, the photographs inside are full of exotic scenery and people, including geishas, Shinto priests, castles, shrine gates (*torii*), Mt. Fuji, and cherry blossoms. Some of the photos are in color.



Fig. 8, Constant Girel's photo album, 1897. Institut Lumière. [\[larger image\]](#)

Many of the Lumière brothers' films were called *actualités*, or actuality films, by historians. An early film historian, Arthur Lenning, claimed that the Lumière film was “nothing more than motion picture snapshots” that were “the recording of unadjusted, unarranged, untampered reality.”^[6] However, the “reality” that Girel captured in Japan was in fact adjusted, arranged, and tampered with by the discourse of Japonisme that he had been familiar with in France. Among the eighteen films that Girel photographed in Japan, there is one titled *Dîner japonais* (Japanese dinner). In this film, numerous women, supposedly geishas, play the *samisen* (a three-stringed musical instrument), sing, and serve cups of sake to only two men at the table. The Japanese-style *goza* [mat] is on the ground and the Japanese screen is seen at the back. Because of the location in Japan and the appearance of the Japanese people, it looks as if the entire scene really happened as an everyday practice in Japan. However, if we place *Dîner japonais* right next to a painting such as James Tissot's *L'enfant prodigue* (*The Prodigal Son in a Foreign*

Land, 1880), which is exhibited at Musée d'Orsay, right across the Seine from the Grand Palais, it is easy to notice the similarity of the subject matter and the characters within the frames. They clearly share the Orientalist discourse, in which an imaginary Orient (in this case, Japan) was presented as an ahistorical and timeless entity while such temporality as progress or development was an attribute of the West. The exhibition leaflet states, "For today's spectator, the films are an important cinematographic heritage, with each image reflecting a vision of society at the beginning of the twentieth century." The "vision of society" that is "reflected" in Girel's letters, photographs, and films included a shared discourse of Japonisme and Orientalism.

It is noteworthy, though, that Girel was aware of the ethnic and cultural diversity in Japan despite his Orientalist and colonialist worldview. He visited Hakodate in Hokkaido, a far northeastern island of Japan, and made two films about the Ainu, the indigenous people of Japan and Russia. In addition, his photograph collection included a number of images of Jesuit missionaries, their churches, and their Japanese followers.

The case of Gabriel Veyre was more complicated and fascinating. According to the wall label, Veyre was a twenty-five year old pharmacist in 1896 when he was recruited by the Lumière brothers. "His knowledge of chemistry, his interest in electricity and his passion for photography made him the ideal candidate" for the Lumière brothers' global operation. His travels first took him to Latin America: Mexico, Cuba, Colombia, Panama, and Venezuela where he fell ill in Caracas. After a short rest in Lyon, he was sent to the Far East in July 1898. Traveling by way of Canada, he arrived in Japan, and then went on to China and Indochina. Upon his return to France, he learned that the Sultan of Morocco, Moulay Abd El-Aziz, was looking for someone to teach him photography and cinema. "Why not me? It was an excellent opportunity to discover a new country, more mysterious and closed than any I had traveled to thus far," thought Veyre, according to the wall label. He arrived at the Marrakech palace in March 1901. The assignment was supposed to last six months, but he remained in Morocco for the rest of his life.

Veyre had Japonist and Orientalist ideas very similar to Girel. For instance, Veyre wrote about Japanese women: "In order to fully understand the social status of Japanese women, we need to completely wipe out the sense of Western morality from our minds. . . . Japanese girls are extremely attractive because they combine decency and indecency, obedience and obscenity."^[7] The Japanese women of Veyre's conception were nothing but *Madame Chrysanthème* whom Pierre Loti imagined in 1887 and Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly*, the opera that Giacomo Puccini would create in 1904. Veyre also had a clearly Orientalist image of Japan, in which an imaginary Japan remained ahistorical and timeless; Japan's growing role as an international trading partner dealing directly with Europe and the United States was not a part of his vision. Veyre lamented, "Whenever I go through a city, I see too many vulgar derby hats. They abandon the beautifully unique hairstyle that they have learned from their ancestors and are imitating Western hats. There are policemen wearing Western-style uniforms that do not fit. There still are delicate and beautiful wooden houses, but many of them are on the verge of being replaced by unstylish and gigantic concrete buildings."^[8] In fact, Veyre took part in the French colonialist project. In Hanoi, which he visited after Japan and China, the Governor General Paul Doumer commissioned him to produce a

cinematographic documentary of French Indochina to be shown at the 1900 Paris World Fair. According to the exhibition text, Veyre shot over 500 scenes.

Contrary to Girel, who was ultimately an observer of different people and their customs, Veyre was willing to transform himself into Mexican, Japanese, Chinese, and eventually Moroccan personas. He learned different languages. He put on different clothes (fig. 9). He tried to eat Japanese food even though he did not like it very much. He published a book, *Dans l'intimité du sultan* (In the Privacy of the Sultan) in 1905, in which he depicted daily life in Morocco in detail, including the Moroccan manners and the customs at the palace. In 1934, he journeyed through Morocco with a camera, the Lumière Autochrome, and depicted hundreds of landscapes and many scenes of everyday life. He also photographed a self-portrait as a Moroccan. Veyre thus became a global citizen.



Fig. 9, Gabriel Veyre's Mexican outfit, 1896. Institut Lumière. [\[larger image\]](#)

Second, the giant screen that simultaneously projects the 1,422 Lumière films is not only a historical monument that praises the achievement of the Lumière brothers, but also a showcase of digital archiving. All the Lumière films have been transformed into digital memories and become instantly accessible to viewers all over the world, technically speaking. (Legally and financially, because of copyright issues, all those films are only viewable at the Institut Lumière in Lyon for now. At the exhibition site, all the films are offered in their entirety on tablets. The Institut Lumière is releasing a Blu-ray Box set of 150 newly restored Lumière films this year.) The gate-shaped screen is symbolically proper. It indicates that this is the opening of a new era of the Lumière cinema. While the ten films screened in the replicated Salon Indien are 35mm prints as they were in 1895, the 1,422 films projected on the giant screen right behind the Salon Indien are in digital formats. The contrast is noteworthy if we compare the “new” media at the end of the nineteenth century and 120 years later. Moreover, the simultaneous digital screening of 1,422 films on such a gigantic screen winks at the current conditions of film exhibition: polarization between small screens of mobile phones or tablets and giant screens of I-MAX and/or 3-D theaters. In September 2015, the Institut Lumière and Editions Actes Sud also will publish a collection of essays in honor of the celebration.

In addition to screening and archiving, this exhibition emphasizes the historical continuity of film production beyond the difference between analog and digital technologies. The last

section of the exhibition, “The Lumière Heritage in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Century: Aesthetic Permanence and Technological Change,” examines how the switch from conventional photochemical to digital formats affects cinema “from the redefinition of the professional environments to the elaboration of new aesthetic theories,” as stated in the exhibition leaflet. Instead of interviewing filmmakers about the transition, as the documentary film *Side by Side* (2012) does, the Institut Lumière asked five current filmmakers, Quentin Tarantino, Pedro Almodóvar, Michael Cimino, Paolo Sorrentino, and Jerry Schatzberg, to remake *La Sortie de l’Usine Lumière à Lyon*, the Lumière’s first film, with a digital camera. In addition, the Institute Lumière digitally photographed more remakes of the film on March 19, 2015, exactly 120 years after Louis Lumière placed the Cinématographe Lumière in front of the exit of the Lumière factory. People from all over the world (including myself) gathered and appeared on the screen. These remakes became available rather instantly to the viewers all over the world from the Institut Lumière’s own website as well as on YouTube.^[9] Such a digital practice makes a clear contrast to the one that the Institute did in 1995 during the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of the cinema. Twenty years ago, forty-one internationally acclaimed filmmakers were invited and each was asked to make a short film using the original Cinématographe Lumière. That was an elite project that seemingly attempted to enhance the status of the original equipment. While this year’s project still treasured the original site in Lyon, it opened its door to the public and invited us to explore the possibilities of cinema. This makes a full circle. According to the exhibition text, Louis Lumière’s first invention, the “Blue Label” dry plates with gelatin silver bromide “resulted in photography’s break from professional elitism and opened its doors to amateurs alike.” So too does the digital technology.

Daisuke Miyao
Professor and the Hajime Mori Chair in Japanese Language and Literature
University of California, San Diego
dmiyao[at]ucsd.edu

Notes

[1] Michelle Aubert and Jean-Claude Seguin, *La Production Cinématographique Des Frères Lumière* (Paris: Librairie Du Premier Siècle Du Cinéma, Bibliothèque du film, Éditions Mémoires de Cinema, Diffusion, CDE., 1996), 72.

[2] <http://www.institut-lumiere.org/musee/les-freres-lumiere-et-leurs-inventions.html>.

[3] Even before the “Offering the World to the World” section begins, this exhibition emphasized that the Lumière brothers were industrialists and the Lumière Company was a forerunner of a transnational media corporate. The “Cinématigraphe Lumière” section displays the patent certificates from various countries, starting in France on March 30, 1895, and spreading to other countries, including Germany, Russia, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Austria-Hungary, the United States, and Canada between 1895 to 1897.

[4] Aubert and Seguin, *La Production Cinématographique Des Frères Lumière*, 72.

[5] I discuss the relationship between Japonisme and the Lumière brothers’ films in detail in my forthcoming essay, “Japonisme and the Birth of Cinema: A Transmedial and Transnational Analysis of the Lumière Brothers’ Films,” which will be published in an inaugural issue of *The Journal of Japonisme* from Brill Publishing (2016). This essay is a part of my forthcoming book, *Japonisme and the Birth of Cinema*. I would like to thank Gabriel Weisberg for his generosity and

enthusiasm for my work. I would also like to acknowledge Armelle Bourdoulous, Jean-Marc Lamotte, and Nathalie Morena of the Institut Lumière for their valuable help and support.

[6] Arthur Lenning, *The Silent Voice: A Text* (Albany, N.Y.: Lane, 1969), 14.

[7] Gabriel Veyre, *Opérateur Lumière: Autour du monde avec le Cinématographe Correspondance (1896–1900)* (Lyon: Institut Lumière/Actes Sud, 1996), 275–76. Translation by the author.

[8] *Ibid.*, 272. Translation by the author.

[9] <http://www.institut-lumiere.org/actualités/les-sorties-dusines-a-telecharger.html>.

Illustrations

All photographs were taken by the author.



Fig. 1, View of the exhibition site, The Grand Palais, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, View of the installation with the giant screen on which 1,422 Lumière films are projected. *Lumière!: Le Cinéma Inventé*, the Grand Palais, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, The Cinématographe Lumière, 1895. Institut Lumière. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Installation view of the replicated Salon Indien du Grand Café. *Lumière!: Le Cinéma Inventé*, the Grand Palais, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Installation view of “Offering the World to the World.” *Lumière!: Le Cinéma Inventé*, the Grand Palais, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, A Japanese poster for the Lumière showcase at Nanchi Enbujō Theater in Osaka, Japan, 1897.
Institut Lumière. [\[return to text\]](#)

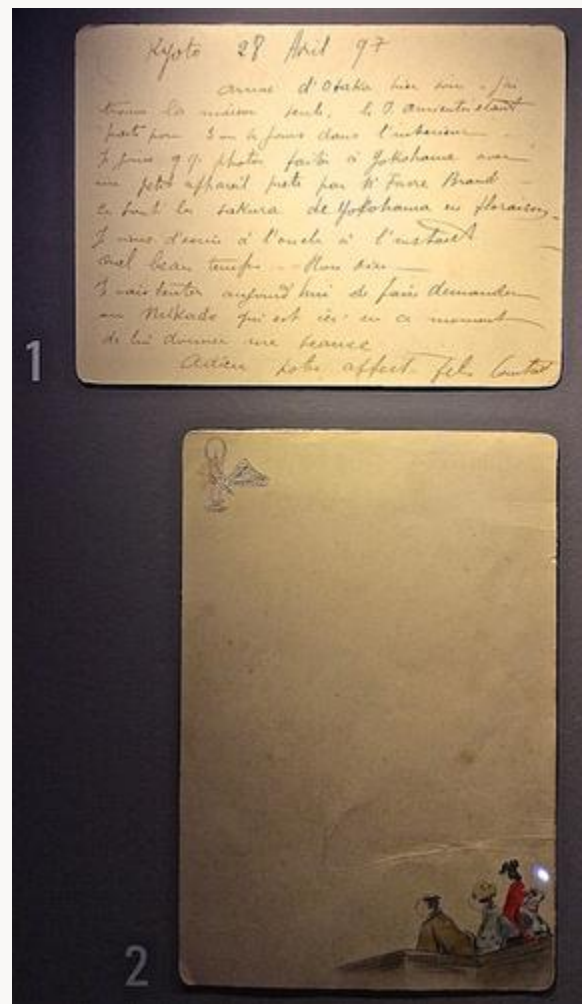


Fig. 7, Constant Girel's letter to his parents, 1897. Institut Lumière. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Constant Girel's photo album, 1897. Institut Lumière. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Gabriel Veyre's Mexican outfit, 1896. Institut Lumière. [\[return to text\]](#)