

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Gabriel P. Weisberg

book review of

Charles Marville, Photographer of Paris by Sarah Kennell, with Anne de Mondenard, Peter Barberie, Françoise Reynaud, and Joke de Wolf

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 13, no. 2 (Autumn 2014)

Citation: Gabriel P. Weisberg, book review of *Charles Marville, Photographer of Paris* by Sarah Kennell, with Anne de Mondenard, Peter Barberie, Françoise Reynaud, and Joke de Wolf, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 13, no. 2 (Autumn 2014), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn14/weisberg-reviews-charles-marville-photographer-of-paris>.

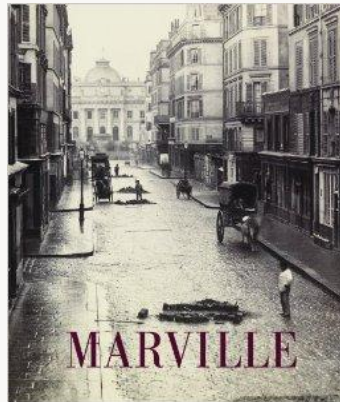
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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](#).



Sarah Kennell, with Anne de Mondenard, Peter Barberie, Françoise Reynaud, Joke de Wolf,
Charles Marville, Photographer of Paris.
Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art exhibition catalogue, in association with Chicago and
London: University of Chicago Press.
266 pp.; 3 color illustrations, 159 b&w illustrations; selected bibliography.
\$60.00
ISBN 13: 978-0-226-09278-1

Although Charles Marville (1813–1879) has been regarded as one of the most creative photographers of the nineteenth century, awareness of his work has been limited to specialists and those few scholars of photography that go beyond the norm. Part of this problem has been the fact that a thorough-going study of Marville and his work has been lacking; the other issue has remained the fact that his photographs have not been widely reproduced, hindering awareness and an appreciation of his contribution. Now, at the bicentennial of his birth, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, has arranged a splendid survey of his entire life's work including extensive examples of his images of the streets of Paris, his landscapes, and portraits.^[1] Each of the works has been reproduced with great care in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition to insure that the publication will have the validity of becoming both a record of the show itself and a reference tool that will continually demonstrate the range and subtlety of Marville's photographic eye.

As an official photographer for the city of Paris, many of Marville's works often recorded a section of the city before buildings were razed to make way for its transformation under the aegis of Baron Haussmann's modernization plan. What has remained in these photographs provides a glimpse of a city in transition, and the eventual loss of buildings and sites due to modern construction. At the same time as great attention has been lavished on Marville's works, much research has been accomplished in pulling together a life history of the artist, including the fact that Marville was not his given name. Born Charles François Bossu, the artist adopted the pseudonym of Marville in 1813 when he began his career as an illustrator.^[2] While it is not possible in this review to examine the exhibition itself, the catalogue (really a book in itself) is worth discussing at length because of the depth of the original scholarship

that each essay contains and the ability of each essayist to convey new insights about Marville and his time. Each essay will be examined in detail.

In the first essay, “Charles Marville, Hidden in Plain Sight,” Sarah Kennel examines the origins of his adopted name—Marville—and presents solid biographical documentation on the artist’s career and evolution. Ms. Kennel’s archival work provides an opportunity to utilize documents that provide significant accurate information about the artist’s life. In charting Marville’s early years as an illustrator for magazines (1834–50), Kennel admirably reveals which early books were able to use Marville’s illustrations, such as *The Picturesque History of England*. Through contacts in developing images for this and other romantic books, Marville established significant ties with individuals, such as Leon de Laborde, who were instrumental in furthering the case for photography (7). The illustrations for travel guides also prepared the way for Marville, later in his career, to return to some of these locations in order to photograph them. But it was Marville’s long-lasting relationship with the publication *L’Illustration* that became seminal: he would often supply photographs for the magazine, which the editors eventually reproduced as line engravings. Kennel also establishes quite carefully how Marville began as a photographer, as an independent figure working on his own. By 1851, in a letter discovered in the archives, Marville wrote to the Ministry of Public Works, identifying himself as an *artiste-peintre* [artist-painter] and revealing that as a member of the photographic society in France, he was offering his services to record buildings as needed.^[3] The sites that Marville asked to photograph were made up of a number of the official buildings in Paris including the Louvre. At the same time, Marville was active in helping to develop new techniques for taking photographs, demonstrating that he was deeply engaged in professionalizing himself as well as the field of photography. Among the best photographs from this early period were a series of twelve views of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, images that demonstrate not only his familiarity with the building but his sensitivity to what the location stood for among all the artists of Paris (15).

Between 1855–58 Marville began a process of diversification and transformation. He increased his network of associations while also demonstrating that he understood the importance of photographing architecture well since such photographs were to serve as valuable tools in the restoration of significant monuments.^[4] Commissioned during the late 1850s to make photographs of key construction sites, Marville created a number of documentary images that reveal how the work was carried out (24). With these photographs, and others of new buildings constructed by young architects, Marville is asserting himself as a crucial figure in the photographic revolution that was happening in France. By September 1858, it was reported in *La Lumière* that Marville was being given his first official photographic commission. He had arrived on the path that would make his name as a leading photographer of Paris. In working through many of these moments in Marville’s life, Kennel presents a complex picture with clarity, revealing how one figure was making his way as a professional photographer. The remainder of this chapter continues this direction.

The appreciation of “Old Paris” became one of the driving issues in Marville’s photographic life. As Kennel notes “. . . Marville’s approach was both selective and methodical: most of the street views were photographed at an intersection, and frequently Marville made views from either end of a street” (28). Although the photographs most likely began around 1862, most were apparently made in the period 1864 to 1869, allowing Marville to assume the designation

of “photographe de la ville” [photographer of the city]. What is quite telling is that his photographs parallel interests of a number of etchers, such as Maxime Lalanne or A. P. Martial who were doing prints of similar sites under the auspices of the Société des Aquafortistes [Society of Etchers].^[5] Photographs from Marville’s series were exhibited in the Paris Pavilion of the World’s Fair in 1878, documenting a key moment when Paris was reasserting itself as a modern city after the disasters of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune. These images also provided evidence of the city both before and after the massive renovations of the Second Empire (29).

The effects of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune are also presented by Kennel. In focusing on Marville’s photos of Paris with sites such as Les Halles, she also examines images of the sweeping, open boulevards, which had been developed. Marville also photographed the Hotel de Ville, a site that was almost totally destroyed with a great loss of archival material on the history of Paris and numerous irreplaceable art works. These interior shots are among the most affecting images by Marville, revealing that he could almost make buildings talk, thereby conveying qualities that moved their audience. But by the close of the 1870s, Marville worn out from his herculean efforts to advance his field, passed away on June 1, 1879. As Kennel chronicles, his death did not go completely unnoticed, although there was a hunt on the part of the City of Paris for hundreds of negatives of Marville’s work on the buildings of the city. His photographs, valued at the time, entered into official archives and only now are fully receiving the attention they deserve as both documents of an era and majestic art works in themselves.

A second essay, “Marville Before the Streets of Paris” by Anne de Mondenard, examines his earliest work before he became the official photographer of the streets of Paris. Asking significant questions, this author poses the issues of how Marville was trained as a photographer and why he decided to enter this new field when he had an already existing lucrative career as an illustrator. She comes up with few definitive answers. As someone aware of the innovations happening in this new field, Marville enthusiastically embraced the sense of experimentation that provided new horizons for him to master. In showing how Marville developed a battery of clients, the author demonstrates that Marville learned his new craft by making photographs of works of art and plaster casts (154). Following in the footsteps of earlier artists who did picturesque views of the French countryside, Marville’s ability to travel across France, from Chartres to Reims and further on into Germany, reinforces the breadth of his early work, while also demonstrating that he could be a sensitive landscape photographer. These qualities are equally apparent in Marville’s images of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, taken at different times of the year and under changing effects of weather. With this approach Marville comes very close to early Impressionist studies, although Mondenard does not lead her essay in this direction (159). In another way Marville anticipated the future: he recorded buildings, seen from almost the same viewpoint, in a number of similar images suggesting that he was thinking of his photographs as part of a much larger series (160–61).

In the mid 1850s, Marville moved in an unexpected direction. He did documentary photographs, amazing at the time, of historic events such as the baptism of the imperial prince. Using Notre Dame cathedral as the backdrop for this event led Marville into new territory, although he did not push this interest very far in his existing photographs. Similarly, he became a very sensitive portrait photographer, capturing J. A. D. Ingres on his deathbed and

colleagues who worked with him in intimate, personal settings. In both cases, as well as in his studies of the skies of Paris, Marville displayed breathtaking originality. Potentially inspired by the cloud studies of the English painter John Constable, the photographer took the opportunity to put ideas into tangible photographic form. Noting these areas is very important in order to acknowledge the range of Marville's work before he entered into the dialogue with the streets of Paris.

With "Marville in the Bois de Boulogne," Peter Barberie examines another aspect of Marville's development. The Bois de Boulogne, a key locale for Second Empire France, provided an opportunity for the photographer to note the mixture of "art, engineering, and politics and landscape theory" (172). Aware of what the Barbizon painters had accomplished, and the importance of an *etude* as an initial study in the progression toward a finished Salon landscape painting, Marville sought out unusual sites (some in the Bois de Boulogne) where he could concentrate on various effects of light and atmosphere. Marville also must have been aware of Gustave Le Gray's photographs of Fontainebleau Forest, but he wanted to establish his own individuality as a landscape photographer so that he would not be seen as a follower of someone else. In his views of the Bois de Boulogne, Marville found a theme that no one had yet attempted; his sixty views remain his most direct engagement with the landscape. As another example of the diversity of Marville's photographic interests this essay provides a valuable addition to the cohesive view of the photographer as an artist.

In the next essay Françoise Reynaud, examines, in detail, "Marville and Old Paris". She comments on the outstanding aesthetic qualities of the photographs, notes the immediate success that they had, and documents how the official commission came about. In the documents Marville noted how he was focusing on recording "streets that had already been demolished" or those that were about "to be demolished" creating an aura of preserving the history of a city that was changing, and in flux (193). What emerges from this chapter are questions about how Marville knew where to go to find streets that were jeopardized. While not offering information on this process, the careful and methodical examination of the photographs against the street maps of the city provide evidence that Marville wanted to create a veritable topography of the city. Citing the current location of Marville's photographs as either held in the Carnavalet Museum or in the libraries of the Hôtel de Ville or the historical library of the city of Paris, helps in providing sites where someone could continue to examine the photographs themselves. This is a particularly detailed essay, which is necessary for continued understanding of what Marville accomplished.

In the last segment of the book, "Paris on Display: Marville's Photographs at the Universal Exhibitions," Joke de Wolf reveals the ways in which photography, in general, was becoming more visible at international exhibitions in London and Paris. Documenting how Marville exhibited some photographs in the London exhibition of 1862, the author points out how he called attention to what he was doing. The essay traces the emergence of photography as a force in Vienna (1873) and readies the reader for an understanding that in 1878, in Paris, the largest number of Marville's photos would be shown. In the Paris Pavilion (1878) Marville was a central star; his photographs showed what had been accomplished in the modernization of the city. And the city "attempted to demonstrate how it had grappled with the challenges of urbanization." (218). While the photographs were not regarded, in 1878, as aesthetic objects on their own—instead serving as documentary evidence for maps—the fact that so many of the

images were on public display gave increased credence to photography both as a tool and a visualization of what had been achieved in the city of Paris. In the process, Marville emerged as a major force.

The interlocking essays reinforce one another and ensure that many of the most significant issues surrounding Marville and the role of photography are discussed in depth. Beautifully produced, with great care expended on the quality of the images, the book provides ample evidence that this major study will become a volume that people will consult for years to come. As a group effort, overseen by Ms. Kennel, this book sets the highest possible standard for an exhibition catalogue as its excellence is beyond reproach.

Gabriel P. Weisberg
Professor of Art History
University of Minnesota
Voonil942[at]aol.com

Notes

- [1] The exhibition was reviewed in the *New York Times* on Friday, January 31, 2014 while the exhibition was on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.
- [2] Going through life with the name of Bossu, which means “hunchback” would have been a clear handicap. Marville was correct to have changed it to something that would not provoke humor or sympathy for someone who could have been thought to be disabled.
- [3] Kennel provides conflicting statements on whether or not Marville was actually a member of the photographic society.
- [4] There was a huge restoration project underway, with some who did the work taking liberties with what the buildings originally looked like when first created.
- [5] While Kennel does note some of these images, photography and etching were in a definite combative position, with photography frequently gaining the upper hand. For reference, see Gabriel P. Weisberg, *The Etching Renaissance in France* (Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Museum of Fine Arts, 1971).