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book review of

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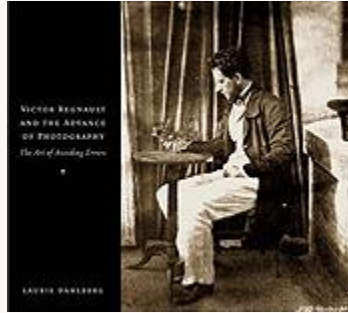
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Victor Regnault and the Advance of Photography: The Art of Avoiding Errors

Laurie Dahlberg

Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005

208 pages; 100 b/w illustrations, index.

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Now—in the digital age, when the click of the camera (or cell phone) has become ubiquitous, when virtually anyone can harness an image instantaneously and deliver it (potentially) to the entire world—is an apt moment to reflect upon the history of the photographic medium. Laurie Dahlberg's book, *Victor Regnault and the Advance of Photography: The Art of Avoiding Errors*, not only addresses an unheralded player in the early history of photography, but also examines the debate over the use of photography in the decorative arts. In a succinct, focused manner, Dahlberg contextualizes the intellectual and socio-economic factors during Napoleon III's Second Empire that characterized photography's tumultuous first quarter century. Delving into an array of topics including the tension between art and industry, aesthetic issues, and technical challenges, Dahlberg's richly illustrated text fills a gap in the literature.

Dahlberg introduces Regnault with a biographical portrait that paints the director of the national porcelain works at Sèvres, and eventual leader of the "official" French photographic world, as a unique type of man who came of age during the Second Empire when career scientists could advance to an influential place in French society through personal merit. Regnault's ability to blend empiricism with a subjective interpretation of experience outside of hard science, allowed him to articulate a vision of photography that embraced beauty by seeing beyond its mere utility. Dahlberg concentrates on the technical innovations Regnault introduces to the medium, his emphasis on its pedagogical uses, as well as vital role as president of the Société Française de Photographie, whose charge he took it to have photography admitted to the beaux-arts or state exhibitions.

Dahlberg's volume highlights the difficulty Regnault experienced as director of the Manufacture at Sèvres. When Regnault assumed leadership of the institution in 1852, it was one of the most technologically conservative ceramic producers in Europe. His efforts to integrate practical photographic applications, such as photographic cataloguing and transfer printing on ceramic, into artistic process at Sèvres were slow to be accepted. In fact, Regnault received a strong rebuke in 1863 from the new minister of the Emperor's Household and Fine Arts when he requested permission to fund a photography studio at

Sèvres; the minister was of the opinion that the factory's unique models would become "vulgar." Dahlberg probes this issue, by identifying three concerns embedded in the debate over the use of photography in the decorative arts: 1) whether the designs of Sèvres, once so closely guarded, could be copied by private industry if photographs were publicly available; 2) why state patronage was not receiving its expected return of prestige from its investment in budget-draining "theoretical experiments"; and 3) the disintegration of distinctions between the upper and middle classes.

One explanation Dahlberg provides for the Manufacture's resistance to innovation is the resurgence of Catholicism whose hostility toward industry was manifested in a distrust of science. Another obstacle the author emphasizes is the anxiety and harsh views held by influential, contemporary critics that Sèvres sold out its sense of craftsmanship to the promise of technology. For instance, in light of the country's poor showing at the 1862 Universal Exhibition in London, The Goncourt brothers privately accused Sèvres of ruining French taste by pandering to middle-class taste and the "bourgeois ideal of porcelain." Similarly, the author points out that Philippe Burty, who, despite being a great collector of photography and one of its most intelligent critics, nevertheless commented in 1866 that science had bullied art into submission.

When Regnault arrived at Sèvres, photography was not being investigated for its potential design applications. Instead, it served as a means by which the broader community working and living at Sèvres experienced their familial bonds through portraiture. As evidence, the author investigates Regnault's artistic production. At issue is whether Regnault (much of whose photographic oeuvre and glass plate negatives were destroyed by Prussian forces who utilized Sèvres as their base during the 1870 Siege of Paris) was an "amateur professional." Dahlberg's analysis of Regnault's portraiture of his colleagues, for instance, views it as an idiosyncratic body of work. One consideration is that Regnault preferred to experiment with calotype, which was mostly ignored by commercial portraitists in France (who operated with daguerreotype). More significant is that Regnault deviated from the model for portraiture established by Hill and Adamson, whose elegant calotype portraits of the Edinburgh intelligentsia the French academician would have seen. According to Dahlberg, rather than scrupulously constructing the pose, accessories, camera distance and angle, Regnault's approach was not only "as simple as theirs was complex," but it also openly acknowledged the contact between himself and his sitters. Apparently, it was this very interest in creating portraits "as is" that served as the basis for the master portraitist Nadar's praise of Regnault's work. Likewise, Dahlberg argues that Regnault's domestic portraiture—although thematically contrived and maintaining certain rules relating to cultural proprieties that involve age, class, and gender—is subtly different from that of commercial approaches. This is chiefly due to the quality of greater intimacy, which is the result of Regnault's use of the vocabulary of gesture, body language, expression, and internal gaze (or "meta-awareness") between sitters.

Dahlberg's examination of Regnault's oeuvre also pays particular attention to the "picturesque" landscape, which held special importance as a photographic subject, particularly when set against the foil of the "vulgar" commerce of portraiture. The author contextualizes the picturesque not only by addressing the importance of English landscape (particularly the work of Gainsborough as well as William Gilpin's theories), but also by

examining the Barbizon painters, several of whom Regnault was acquainted with, particularly Corot and Troyon, who were regular visitors at the factory. Their imagery had taken on a renewed importance by the mid-1850s, when changes to the French countryside had become noticeably detectable as a result of unprecedented industrial and suburban development.

Dahlberg's analysis of the picturesque is particularly noteworthy for pointing out the irony of photographers within Regnault's circle who, in an effort to ameliorate anxiety over capitalist production, employed a nostalgic tone in their landscape imagery. Rhetorically asking how aware these industrialists may have been about the damaging effects of industrialized capitalism on the natural environment, Dahlberg informs the reader that, as early as the 1840s, a new model of natural history was gaining traction. Two of Regnault's closest colleagues, Justus von Liebig and J.-B. Dumas, published the view that all forms of life were interdependent. As such, Dahlberg distinguishes Regnault's landscapes from his peers, due to a willingness to feature industrial modernity and the rustic tradition equally. Formally, Regnault achieved this by shooting the scene from a distance that emphasized topography over picturesque detail.

The author's study of Regnault's landscapes also identifies a number of traditional themes and visual strategies that locate his work within the picturesque tradition. Thematically, Regnault frequently depicted rural views with a country road or path, which was common in the Dutch and English style, as well as Barbizon art. Another subject dear to the Barbizon painters was studies of trees; however, rather than select a single, ancient motif, Regnault photographed clusters of trees. He also photographed formal gardens whose long views convey a sweeping pictorial space, or alternatively, Regnault shot "garden corners," which, according to Dahlberg, is essentially a "found" still life arranged in an outdoor setting. Rather than interpret "garden corners" through the lens of semiotics, so that the scene becomes a "language event" or moral epigram for religious and philosophical meaning, Dahlberg understands this motif as an exercise in the picturesque idiom that allowed photographers to satisfy the aesthetic challenges emphasized by Gilpin, and that are inherently available in the technical process.

To a great extent, Dahlberg insists Regnault's work as a whole attempted to explore aesthetics through the study of light. While he certainly understood optics scientifically, the author argues that Regnault also sought to communicate the primacy of this formal element through a photographic method that could achieve qualities still found only in the work of painters. As a case in point, Dahlberg examines his photographs of the Seine along the Meudon-Sèvres stretch of the river, which, according to her research, had previously attracted a number of proto-Barbizon landscapists. In Dahlberg's opinion, these views, which alternately create a feeling of tranquility or depict an active site of modern labor and commerce, resist neat interpretation. Seemingly, Regnault could move effortlessly between the motivations of the picturesque and documentary (and not expressly artistic) renderings of the modern, man-altered landscape.

Dahlberg's volume is an important contribution to the history of photography, in its balanced approach, well-researched analyses, and assessment of the aesthetic heritage that informed Regnault's imagery. By addressing a wide-range of cultural, political, and

economic concerns confronting France during Napoleon III's reign, and the institutional pressures mounting against the national porcelain works at Sèvres, this book not only redirects our attention to an important player in the early history of photography who advocated its role as a design tool, but it also captures the complicated story of photography's struggle to raise itself to the level of an "art".

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