

THE YOSEMITE PICTURE IN GLEBE HOUSE

By

Hugh B. Johnson*

Installed as a window over the stairway on the southeast side of the octagon room at Glebe House is a large (24½" x 26") glass plate color transparency that has considerable historic value. It is protected by a porch roof and by an outer sheet of clear plastic. Frank L. Ball, Jr., former owner of the house, has told us that the picture was exhibited at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904.¹ It was obtained by George W. Constantine, who then owned the Glebe House and land, and who installed it in its present location in 1912 by knocking a hole in the wall. The Ball family purchased the property in 1926 from George W. Constantine.

The Louisiana Purchase Centennial Exposition was held in St. Louis in 1904. For sheer size and grandeur it was one of the greatest such exhibitions ever held anywhere. It included "magnificent buildings at the world-renowned exposition; gardens and cascades; colossal structures and marvelous exhibits, such as works of art, scientific and industrial achievements, the latest inventions, discoveries, etc., etc."² The popular song, "Meet Me in St. Louis, Louis", revived by Judy Garland in 1944, was originally written in 1904 by Andrew B. Sterling and Kerry Mills for the St. Louis Fair.³

In spite of extensive research, it has not been possible for this writer to document or, indeed to find any mention of a display of color transparencies at the fair. We were told that the St. Louis exposition planners invited each state to exhibit a wilderness picture and that this Yosemite picture of Buffalo Butte and El Capitan was the California entry.⁴ We do know that the then new Yosemite National Park enjoyed worldwide popularity in the early 1900s.⁵

Numerous laboratory experiments in color photography were made in Europe in the latter part of the nineteenth century, but no system was developed that could be used by photographers in the field. In *Photography — History of an Art*, Jean-Luc Daval states that "In 1907 Louis Lumière brought out his autochrome process of colour photography — entirely new and of exceptional quality. The autochrome plate took the form of a transparency: it originated from Louis Lumière's discovery in 1904 . . ."⁶ "The autochrome plate for the first time put colour photography within the reach of everyone."⁷

This thought is also expressed by Peter Glendinning, Associate Professor of Art, Michigan State University: "The screen process was modified by the two brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière of France. In 1904 they patented the first color photographic process that could be used by almost everyone owning a camera."⁸

“Charming color pictures were being taken as long ago as the first decade of the 20th Century. The procedures that were used were cumbersome by modern standards, but the results were remarkably good . . . the first practical color process Autochrome, . . . was invented by the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière of Lyons, France.” And, again, “Lumière’s screen plate marked the birth of color photography as a popular medium. Steiglitz’ prediction that the world would go ‘color mad’ was not far wrong.”¹⁰

In any event, it is clear that the Glebe House picture is an example of very early color photography, probably produced in the first year such pictures were marketed. The colors are remarkably good for a color picture exposed to daylight for seventy-five years. Glass plate transparencies were supplanted by film in 1932. Early exhibition type color moving pictures were beautiful, but pictures taken with the same type film and printed on paper, later in the 1930s, faded very badly if exposed to daylight. The Glebe House picture should be given recognition as an example of an important milestone in the history of photogaphy.

Notes and References

*Hugh B. Johnson F.A.I.A. is a retired architect living in Arlington.

¹Frank L. Ball, Jr., 1437 N. Court House Road, Arlington, Virginia 22201.

²Hon. Murat Halstead, *Pictorial History of the Louisiana Purchase and the World’s Fair at St. Louis*. (Philadelphia: National Publishing Co., 1904), title page.

³Roger Lax and Frederick Smith, *The Great Song Thesaurus*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁴Frank L. Ball, Jr.

⁵According to *The World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Field Enterprises, 1955) Yosemite National Park was established in October 1890. At that time, however, the national park did not include the Yosemite Valley or the Mariposa Grove. California gave up these areas and they were added to the national park in 1906. El Capitan is in the Yosemite Valley.

⁶Jean-Luc Daval, *Photography — History of an Art*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), p. 98.

⁷Ibid. p. 100.

⁸Peter Glendinning, *Color Photography — History, Theory, and Darkroom Technique*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985), p. 9.

⁹Editors of Time-Life Books, *Life Library of Photography, Color*. (Alexandria, Va: Time-Life Books, 1978), p. 70.

¹⁰Adrian Bailey & Adrian Holloway, *The Book of Color Photography*. (New York: Knopf, 1984), p. 21.

Additional Sources

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Robert Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

Official Guide to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at the City of St. Louis, State of Missouri, April 30th to December 1st, 1904. (St. Louis: The Official Guide Co., 1904).