

Les Diableries

3D Visions of Hell
from the 19th Century

A History

By M. Kaba

Les Diableries: 3D Visions of Hell from the 19th Century
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Introduction

In the opening lines of his 1978 publication, *“Diableries: La vie Quotidienne Chez Satan,”* Jac Remise relates how a crew of demolition workers in Paris discovered a mysterious wooden box hidden in the ruins of a condemned building. The box, which had been wrapped with old military belts, was found to contain a remarkable collection of photographs printed on glass. Unlike the mundane scenes of everyday life portrayed in most photographs, these pictures depicted a hedonistic world filled with drunken devils, sinister skeletons and scantily clad women. Few clues were given as to who could have created these extraordinary images, or why they were made. Were they political satire, or designed to warn against temptation? Or were they made purely for entertainment? An anonymous note found buried among the glass images only added to the mystery.

*“This is the work of my life. It is thus that I dreamed of Hell.
If my visions are true then the wicked may rest assured,
the afterlife will be sweet for them to bear.”¹*

What the demolition workers discovered that day was a series of photographs known as *Les Diableries*, The Diabolical. Each scene in the series was composed of an elaborate diorama sculpted out of plaster and clay and embellished with miniature props. Created in Paris during the 1860s, the series was printed in the form of stereoscopic transparencies which, when viewed with special lenses, produced a mesmerizing 3D effect. At the time of the discovery not much was known about their origins. Dealers and collectors had been trading the macabre images for years, though no one had been able to provide a comprehensive history. While many details have yet to be revealed, this essay presents an overview of what we know so far, including recent discoveries which help shed light on the characters who dreamed up this unheavenly realm.

Stereo-Views

Of the countless inventions to emerge from the industrial revolution, perhaps the most fascinating was a series of devices which had the ability to mimic the processes of the natural world. The phenakistoscope, invented by Joseph Plateau in 1832, brought static images to life through animation. The Daguerreotype, invented by Louis Daguerre in 1837, gave us the ability to freeze moments of time in precise detail. The phonograph, invented by Thomas Edison in 1877, gave us the power to record and reproduce sound at will. Just as astonishing was the invention of the stereoscope, a device which turned flat two dimensional images into three dimensional worlds.

Unveiled in 1838 by Charles Wheatstone, the stereoscope was the culmination of his research into binocular vision. Humans observe the world in three dimensions as a result of having eyes spaced at two different viewpoints. The brain takes information from each of these viewpoints and grafts them together, giving us our perception of depth. Simply by creating two images of any particular scene, then placing those images in front of our eyes, we are able to trick our brains into thinking we are standing in that particular place and time. This same natural phenomenon is utilized today to create 3D effects in modern cinema.

The first stereo-views created by Wheatstone were geometric drawings. A few years later, with the advent of photography, the medium truly sprang to life. Stereo-views on display at the Crystal Palace during the Great Exhibition of 1851 were greeted enthusiastically by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. This event roused public interest and marked the beginning of the 3D craze. Itinerant photographers began roaming the far corners of the world creating stereo-views of exotic sights for tens of thousands of customers throughout Europe and America. From the pharaohs tombs to the fallen victims of the Civil War, life's triumphs and tragedies were being recorded forever in 3D.

In the 1850s the French began producing a type of stereo-view known as a tissue view or hold-to-light view. These were composed of stereo photographs reinforced with a layer of tissue paper and mounted in backless cardboard frames. Tissue views could be observed with reflected light, or transmitted light, and gave manufacturers the ability to add color to their views by painting on the reverse side of the photograph. Some tissue views, known as *surprise* views, were reverse painted with hidden scenes. A popular subject of surprise views was burning buildings. When observed with reflected light the building appeared as it normally did, but when backlit the building suddenly appeared engulfed in flames. Another common effect in tissue views was produced by piercing or scoring the photograph. This permitted white light to shine through,

adding brilliance to details such as diamond rings, street lamps and bolts of lightning. Tissue views from the Diableries series carried this technique a step further. The eyes of the various demons were not only pierced but were also backed with dabs of colored gelatin, causing their eyes to glow menacingly red.

Habert (1824-1893)

At least three sculptors are known to have modeled scenes for the Diableries series. The most accomplished and prolific was Louis "Alfred" Habert. Habert's vignettes embody a distinctly higher degree of proportion and attention to detail than others in the series. Thanks in part to genealogical research efforts carried out by his great grandson, Michel Brunetti, a wealth of new information on Habert has now become available.

Alfred Habert was born in Paris in 1824. His mother Pierrette Rollat was a lace mender and his father Claude Nicolas worked as a chef. Habert attended the Ecole des Beaux Arts where he studied under the professor and eminent sculptor Jean-Jacques Pradier. Like Pradier, Habert became known for fashioning neoclassical figures out of bronze and marble. Alfred's exceptional work gradually gained him recognition. He had his first Salon exhibition in 1850. In 1852 he married Honorine Oudart, the daughter of a prominent painter and porcelain designer. In 1861 Habert received first prize from the Academy of Fine Arts for his statue of Cupid titled, *L'Amour Meditant*. With the influence of his father-in-law, Habert was hired later that same year as a painter at the Imperial Porcelain Factory in Sevres. The position was in essence honorary as numerous artists had been hired by the company with little or no work to go around. It did succeed though in bringing Habert's qualifications to the attention of the director of the Louvre. The following year Alfred was asked by the Louvre to perform restoration work on statues which had been purchased by the French government from the collection of Giampietro Campana. Campana, former head of the papal bank *Monte di Pietà*, had been sentenced to exile by the Pope for embezzling papal funds to finance his addiction to art. His extensive collection of jewelry, paintings and statuary were sold off and placed in various institutions around the world including the Louvre. According to family records, Habert's expert handling of the Campana restorations resulted in a commission to produce a portrait of Prince Napoleon IV². For more details concerning Habert's life, including rare photographs, visit Michel Brunetti's website at:

<http://michel.brunetti.pagesperso-orange.fr/genealogie/histoire/cotemichel/page105.htm>

As a man of the arts Habert undoubtedly followed the development of photography with great interest and must have been well aware of the public's fascination with stereo-views which were being sold in large quantities throughout Paris. While stereography could magically transport a viewer to exotic lands with ease it did have its drawbacks. Photographic exposure was relatively slow at the time, making it difficult to capture live action scenes. The low sensitivity of the wet-plate collodion process used to create negatives also

required subjects to be brightly lit. Habert understood he could overcome these drawbacks by photographing action scenes sculpted out of plaster and clay, thus giving him complete control over lighting, exposure time, perspective, as well as composition. It also meant he could create fantastic worlds limited in grandeur only by his imagination.

Habert began sculpting dioramas for a provocative set of stereo-views which would become known as *Les Diableries*, The Diabolical. The series featured satirical images of daily life in Hell, mirroring the corruption and excess of Paris during the Second Empire. Napoleon III's authoritarian rule was repeatedly the subject of criticism, as was the decadent lifestyle of the bourgeoisie. In view 56, "Satan Journaliste," an allegory of truth stands trapped behind bars while a two-faced devil goads his minions into publishing lies. The image clearly mocks press censorship, a common form of political control under Napoleon's rule. In view 55, "Conference par Mlle Satan," we see Satan's wife kicking up her legs in a pair of men's trousers, a scandalous image in light of the fact that it was illegal for women to wear pants in public without a police permit³. This rare view of a feminist demonstration is also significant in that the woman is depicted wearing full pants, as opposed to bloomers which were worn under skirts. View 49, "Les Clodoches de L'Enfer," is based on a quartet of male burlesque dancers. Two of the men in the quartet performed in drag, dressed as a milkmaid and a nurse, while the other two wore the uniforms of a firefighter and a soldier. Their style of dance, typically a quadrille in which they gyrated wildly, was described at the time as epileptic, and likened to the nervous maladies of hysteria⁴. Views 61, "La Guerre, Depart de L'Enfer," and 62, "La Guerre, Retour en Enfer," emphasize the futility of war. In view 62 a victory banner proudly proclaims the "Grand Harvest of 200,000 Souls!" roughly the number of those who were killed during the Franco-Prussian war⁵.

Habert teamed up with photographer and publisher Francois Benjamin Lamiche (1808-1871+), and in 1860 the first set of Diableries were published. A certain amount of fear concerning government retaliation must have accompanied their debut. Lamiche had previously been fined for printing subversive photographs, in particular for an image titled "Revue de la Garde Infernale," Review of the Infernal Guard, which showed Napoleon reviewing his troops. The same title was later used for view number 11 in the Diableries series, only this time Napoleon was replaced with an image of Satan⁶. A watchful eye was likely kept on those involved with the project, though no immediate retribution seems to have occurred.

Habert worked with Lamiche for several years before switching to the publisher Adolph Block (1829-1915+). It appears Lamiche may have sold Block the printing and distribution rights to most if not all of his stereo negatives, as

block's name begins to show up on sets which were originally published by Lamiche. Throughout the 1860s Habert created a number of other stereoscopic sets using the clay modeling technique, including *Les Theatres de Paris*, a series of views based on popular plays and operas such as *L'Africain*, *Robert Le Diable*, and *La Biche au Bois*. Nothing, though, would surpass the brilliance of his masterpiece, *Les Diableries*. In all Habert constructed over 45 scenes for the series. His work remains some of the most unique ever produced in photography let alone stereography.

The second Empire marked a time of substantial economic growth in France. The increased wealth inspired a trend of wanton extravagance in the upper classes. Ostentation and decadence became the *tendance du jour* while the country unknowingly teetered near the edge of oblivion. Due to a series of obstinate errors in foreign policy France soon declared war on Prussia. The French underestimated the strength of their enemy, and less than two months after the war began Napoleon III was captured by the Prussians in Sedan. Days later Paris was surrounded and supply lines into the city were cut. Starving citizens were forced to eat whatever they could find including their dogs and horses. The siege lasted several months and came to an end after a campaign of nighttime bombings by the Prussians forced a surrender. A treaty was signed between the French provisional government, set up in the wake of Napoleon's capture, and the newly formed German Empire.

Though the war was over and relief began to pour into the city, factions in Paris were resentful of the surrender. Indignation over disparities between the upper and lower classes had been on the rise for years. Stirred by the agonies of the Prussian siege, and the humiliation of defeat, tensions finally reached a breaking point. National Guardsmen and Bohemian members of the working class united as Communards under the red banner of socialism and took control of Paris. Adolph Thiers, head of the French provisional government, responded by dispatching troops into the city. The horrific showdown which occurred became known as *La Semaine Sanglante*, The Bloody Week. Thousands of French citizens were massacred in the streets during the week long civil war. Reprisals were swift and extreme. On May 26th, over 50 hostages, including two priests, were lined up against a stone wall on Haxo street and executed by the Communards. Habert, who lived nearby with his wife and two sons, overheard the fatal shots⁷.

The Communards were unable to hold back the French Army's assault and the rebellion was soon crushed. Following the defeat came a demoralizing series of arrests and executions. The guilt of many of those accused was questionable, and trials were carried out with little regard for due process. Fear

and distrust spread through the city like a disease. Habert's daughter, Leonie, relates in her memoirs that suspicions began to rise concerning her father⁸. The politically adverse nature of his work on the Diableries may have provided fuel for such paranoia. Accusations of espionage were made, and Habert was arrested by an Army officer and taken to prison. Honorine feared her husband would soon find himself before a firing squad. Desperate friends and family members gathered at the police headquarters where they were relieved to discover that Habert would soon be set free. It turned out the judge in the case had been studying photography and was keenly interested in Habert's knowledge of the subject. In the wake of the uprising, photography was proving to be a valuable tool. Photographs taken during the rebellion were being used to identify and convict insurgents. Prisoners were also being photographed for police reference, foreshadowing the use of mug shots which became standard in Paris only a few years later⁹. Habert discussed his profession at length with the judge and was then allowed to return home safely.

The hardships of the Prussian siege and the further tragedies of the Paris Commune left indelible marks on Habert and his family. As a way of thanking God for delivering his loved ones through the war he made the decision to finish his work on the Diableries, and chose instead to create a series of views depicting the life of Christ¹⁰. Two sets were published by Adolph Block, *La Vie de Jesus* and *Chemin de la Croix*. Louis Alfred Habert passed away on September 30th, 1893, and was buried in the Cimetiere des Lilas.

Hennetier (1828-1888)

Little is known about Pierre Adolph Hennetier. At least 15 of the 72 views from the Diableries series, which were published by Adolph Block, are attributed to Hennetier. The production of new scenes under Block appears to have ended with Habert's retirement from the project. Hennetier, who must have wanted to continue the enterprise, sculpted a number of additional scenes which were likely published by Jules Marinier (1823-1896+). Marinier was a competitor of Adolph Block's, and had printed numerous sets of tissue views depicting theatrical subjects similar to those which Block produced, including a set for "La Biche au Bois."¹¹ Though the *macabre* views published by Marinier are considered by many to be a continuation of the Diableries series, it is unclear whether they were actually called "Diableries." The similarities between the two projects are undeniable, though Marinier's views are typically inferior in quality to those published by Lamiche or Block. The exact number of additional images produced after the "original" series of 72 is not known. Over 85 have been documented.

Hennetier is also attributed with modeling scenes produced by Jules Raudnitz (1815-1872) for a series of views titled *Le Sabbat Rouge*, which focus on the tragic events of the Paris Commune¹². One of the scenes, "Saturnales de la Place Vendome," depicts the toppling of the Vendome Column. Erected by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1805 to commemorate his victory at Austerlitz, the column was cast from over one hundred bronze canon seized during various European battles, and was crowned with a statue of the emperor. During the Communard rebellion the radical painter Gustave Courbet suggested the column, which he considered "devoid of all artistic value,"¹³ be dismantled and relocated to the Hotel des Invalides, a complex of museums dealing with military history. The Communards were not interested in relocation but were allured by the idea of destroying the column, which to them stood for decades of imperial suppression. The matter was voted upon on April 12, and on May 8 the grand column was toppled.

Courbet had already earned a reputation among the establishment as a rebellious and disruptive individual. His paintings, such as *L'Origine du Monde*, which depicts a full view of female genitalia, were a shock to the genteel facade of the upper classes. After the rebellion was put down, and as a result of his involvement in the destruction of city property, Courbet was ordered to pay for the cost of replacing the column. The enormous amount of 330,000 Francs was levied as restitution. Courbet fled the country in disgust and died several years later in Switzerland without having paid a cent.

Couigny (1831-1900)

Louis Edmond Couigny was also a noted sculptor of the period. His marble bust of Jules-Antoine Castagnary, the art critic known for coining the term "impressionism," can be seen on display at the Musee de L'Echevinage in Saints. Couigny is also known to have cast the hands and breasts of the notorious French courtesan, Cora Pearl. Born in 1830s London as Emma Crouch, she fell into prostitution as a teenager and eventually wound up in Paris where she changed her name to the more beguiling Cora Pearl. Theatrical, charming and above all beautiful, Cora had little trouble rising through the ranks of the French demimonde. Her legendary high jinks made her quite popular among the elite. During her time in Paris she became intimate companions with numerous Dukes and Princes, including the Duke de Morny, half brother to Napoleon III. She is said to have bathed before dinner guests in a tub of champagne, and to have been served nude, as a dessert, drizzled in cream¹⁴.

In 1869 Couigny was hired to produce casts of Cora's hands out of terracotta, which she gave as gifts to her various suitors. In order to create a more fitting record of her physical beauty she desired to have an impression made of her breasts as well¹⁵. Couigny obliged. The plaster mold was later used by the firm Cornu et Cie to produce a replica of Cora's breasts, fashioned appropriately out of polished pink onyx.

Cora's luxurious lifestyle came to an end around the same time as the empire itself. Alexandre Duval, the young heir of a restaurant fortune who had squandered his inheritance on Cora, grew hopelessly despondent when she refused to continue seeing him. One evening Duval arrived unannounced on Cora's doorstep, brandishing a pistol. After a brief argument he raised the gun and shot himself through the side. Cora reportedly ignored Duval and returned to bed. Although Duval lived, news of Cora's ruthless behavior destroyed her reputation and she was forced to leave France to escape public ire. She returned to Paris years later, and must have been shocked to find that the once grandiose city had become somber and conservative. Cora could no longer find wealthy patrons, and had to sell her possessions in order to pay off mounting gambling debts. She spent her final years in a boarding house until her death of intestinal cancer near the age of 51. Her self-indulgent attitude and subsequent ruin reflects the folly of the empire itself, and is at the heart of that which is personified in *Les Diableries*.

Couigny modeled only one view for the Diableries series, "Satan Chasse du Paradis," which shows Satan's fall from grace into the depths of Hell. Evidence suggests that Couigny may have been associated with another series of views

published by Adolphe Block based on Grandville's *Metamorphosis* prints of the 1830s, in which human behavior is parodied by animals ¹⁶.

Unattributed

Two of the views contained in the “original” series, numbers 23, “On Opere Jour et Nuit,” and 36, “Rendez-Vous de Chasse Chez Satan,” stand out to a degree that suggests the involvement of a fourth sculptor. The furrowed brows of the skeletons, the jagged quality of their teeth, as well as the calligraphic style of the titling clearly distinguish them from the other views. Though few clues exist as to the possible identity of a fourth sculptor, the views themselves are fine examples of the genre.

Manufacture & Assembly

The vast majority of Diableries were manufactured as tissue views, though, particularly in later years, non-tissue formats of varying quality were also produced, including many poorly made pirated copies which were often sold in American drug stores. The series was also produced as a set of glass “magic lantern” projection slides, probably around the turn of the nineteenth century. It seems likely that the photographs mentioned in the introduction to this essay, which were discovered in a condemned building in Paris, were part of this series of glass slides, and not a set of original negatives as is often thought¹⁷. After their discovery, the glass images were offered for sale at a Paris flea market where they were purchased by Jac Remise, a collector of antique children's toys. In 1978 Remise published the images in a monograph titled, *Diableries: La Vie de Quotidienne Chez Satan a la Fin du 19e Siecle*. While Remise does not specify whether the glass plates are negatives or slides, he does state the name “Mazo” as the likely manufacturer. Mazo was a large-scale dealer in magic lantern slides and equipment, and is known to have produced slides of the Diableries series. In addition, the illustrations in the book display a style of border cropping that is typical of magic-lantern slides. The anonymous letter found hidden with the photographs is assumed to have been penned by Habert, although an analysis of the handwriting has yet to be undertaken.

The photographs for *Les Diableries* were printed on albumen paper, which used egg whites to bind the light sensitive silver nitrate to the paper. The prints were then reverse colored by hand. Watercolors were originally used but were replaced by cheaper synthetic aniline dyes in subsequent years¹⁸. The earliest views tend to have the most detailed coloring. These early sets were presumably produced on a smaller scale, allowing for higher quality control. Records suggest that stereo-views were often mass-produced by young boys and girls in assembly lines. Such methods of production would explain the wide range of quality that exists from one view to the next.

After the print was colored it was backed with a layer of tissue paper to protect the coloring, increase structural integrity, and diffuse light more evenly. Following this the images were framed between double window cardboard mattes¹⁹. Mattes were produced in several styles and colors through the years. Embossed yellow or orange mattes from the 1860s and 70s are the most common and were the standard mattes used by Adolph Block, whose views are easily identified by the blind-stamped monogram "BK."

The Diableries were most likely sold in boxed sets of 12 at a price of 18 Francs²⁰. The average income for working males at the time was only 3 francs a day, thus requiring nearly a week's wages for one box²¹. Such a costly item

would only have been affordable to the upper classes, ironic considering they were the intended targets of the satire.

The designated order of the views does not appear to be chronological, nor does it illustrate a linear story. For a complete list of the 72 “original” views, along with sample images, visit Thomas Weynant’s excellent site:

<http://users.telenet.be/thomasweynants/diableries.html>

For full size images, including high resolution downloads, visit:

<http://cine-graphics.com>

The Diableries series represents an important milestone in the history of 3D technology, an art which has had an increasingly profound effect on modern cinema and other forms of entertainment. They are also fascinating examples of the use of photography as a tool for communicating discontent. By voicing their criticism toward the status quo, artists such as Habert and Henrietier have left a valuable record of the political and social mores of this important era in history which nearly led to the destruction of one of the most historically significant and beloved cities in the world.

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