

The Stereograph in Court

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Many writers in the last century extolled the value of stereography because of its ability to capture a pictorial scene in life-like reality. The *Photographic Art Journal* in September, 1852, described the stereoscopic effect in these words:

"It creates a most peculiar impression...caused by the union of the two images in relief. When brought near, they seem to rush together with an accelerated velocity as if they more strongly attracted each other."

Quoting from the *Philosophical Magazine* it described a similar experiment to that when "two persons lay their foreheads together and look into each other's eyes. Each observes the eyes of the other to run together into one large eye in the center of the forehead."

Abbe' Francois' Moigno, writing in 1851, noted that the stereoscope made its appearance in the scientific world before the Royal Society of London on the 21st day of June 1838. Unfortunately, however, it seems that few scientists were excited about this astonishing discovery. Disturbed by this attitude, Moigo commented that "the more wonderful and the more glorious an invention or discovery may be, the more of indifference, apathy or hostility will it have to encounter." However, his optimism for its future acceptance and usage is evident in these words:

"And let it be borne in the mind that this is no question of hope, no twilight of uncertainty, no infant in its cradle, but it is an entire creation, a magnificent reality, accepted with enthusiasm, which has taken possession in the world."

The most favorable attitudes toward stereoscopic photography centered upon its aesthetic value in reproducing scenes of interest and beauty of places that one has visited. Many others have also marveled at the magnificence and attractiveness of places which they have studied in school. As general appeal increased, one writer in the *British Journal of Photography* noted in 1864 that "everyone now has a stereoscope and a collection, more or less extensive, of stereographs of interesting objects and scenes." Even so, stereoscopy was regarded as a "philosophical toy." Many used it only for their own amusement during idle hours. Few realized that it could be used for a means of instruction.

Personally, I have often taken a series of stereographs from my collection and spent an enjoyable and informative evening "free-visioning" scenes at Chatworth, The Holy Land or Greece. Though not having the opportunity to actually visit such places, the mountains of

Greece and the ruins of the Acropolis became almost real to me in three-dimensions through the stereo pictures.

It was suggested, as early as 1864, that one who was planning a visit to Belgium, Paris, Holland or the Rhine River Valley should utilize the stereographs in preparation for the trip. In this manner one could become familiar with the places beforehand and actually get the sensation of returning to familiar scenes.

Not everyone, however, has restricted stereoscopy just to pleasurable or enjoyable purposes. It has been used by the military for measurable determination of aerial views and by the medical profession in instructing physicians in visible relief images of skin diseases. Sir David Brewster, inventor of the first lenticular stereoscope spoke of its value to the naturalist, the zoologist, the architect, the engineer, and the physicist. Even the astronomer has used the stereoscope in studying the phenomena of the horizontal moon and its apparent increase in size.

One of the most interesting uses of the stereograph occurred in a New York law court in November, 1864. The fascinating story resulting in the acquittal of the defendant in a civil law suit, was told by Editor John Towler, M.D. in *Humphrey's Journal of Photography*, No. 22, New York, March 15, 1865, Vol. XVI. Dr. Towler was Prendegast Professor of Natural Philosophy, College Professor of Mathematics and acting Professor of Modern Languages in Hobart College, Professor of Chemistry and Pharmacy and Dean of the Medical Faculty of Geneva Medical College, and author of *Silver Sunbeam*.

The day after the Presidential election, the defendant engaged Professor Towler to appear in court as a witness. The defendant was being sued by a neighbor whose land had been inundated by masses of gravel, stones and logs following a recent rain storm. It seemed that the stream, owned by the defendant, separated his property from his neighbor's. However, a barricade built by the neighbor on his side of the stream formed a cul-de-sac, hindering the normal flow of the stream and causing an avalanche of debris to spill over several acres of his property.

Upon visiting the site, Professor Towler saw the cause of the trouble and "stereographed all the facts." With fourteen stereographs of the stream, fences and the barricade, he entered court that day and exhibited them to the jury, judge and counsel for both the plaintiff and defendant. Each stereograph was viewed by all as an accompanying explanation of the facts was given by Dr. Towler. Though the plaintiff had secured the services of an engineer who submitted maps of the area, the stereographs revealed apparent inconsistencies in the maps. After the jury judged the truth of the testimony given, a verdict

was rendered in favor of the defendant. Professor Towler concluded his article by exclaiming, Bravo! Stereograph.