

Dominique de Font-Réaulx

La Photographie est-elle un art? Issues Raised by Roger de la Sizeranne's Book in 1897

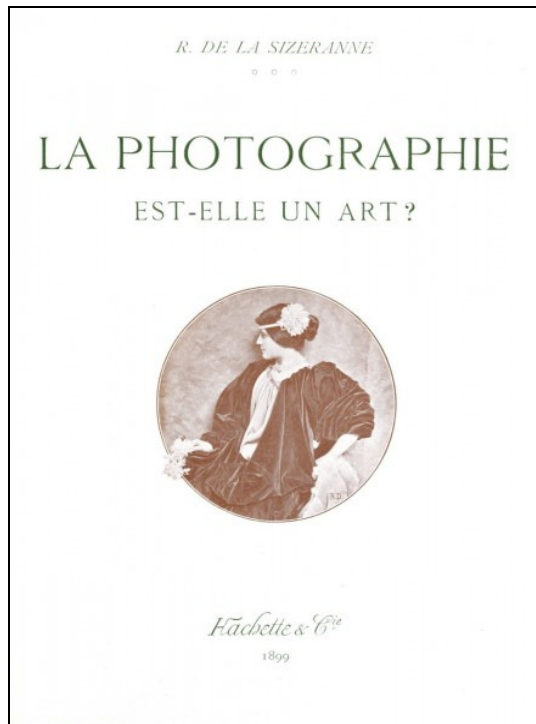
Lecture on November 22, 2013 on the occasion of the symposium
"Inspirations – Interactions: Pictorialism Reconsidered"

Roger de la Sizeranne's text, *La Photographie est-elle un art?*, published as an illustrated book in 1899, had been previously issued in *La Revue des deux mondes* in 1897.¹ The title raised the crucial question for pictorialist photographers at that time: was photography an art? La Sizeranne was inspired to write it by his 1896 visit to the third *Exposition d'art photographique* in Paris. Examples and illustrations are taken from the exhibition itself. The text is now largely forgotten, though it was often quoted during the second part of the twentieth century to evoke the links between painting and photography.² Available in a small edition in French without any illustrations, it has not been translated into English or German (as far as we know).³ Its degree of influence on photographers themselves at the time of its publication is quite difficult to gauge. Indeed, if La Sizeranne was close to some pictorialist photographers, socially speaking, he was neither a photographer nor a regular photography critic. His book nevertheless remains as the only one presenting photographic reproductions with a theoretical text attempting to analyze them. The cover was illustrated by a photograph by Constant Puyo. (III. 1)

¹ The book was published by Hachette in Paris with forty engravings from photographs by Walter Barnett, Frédéric Boissonnas, Craig Annan, Robert Demachy, Constant Puyo, John H. Gear, and C. Reid, among others.

² The two first postwar analyses of the links between painting and photography both quote La Sizeranne: Jean Adhémar, *Un Siècle de vision nouvelle* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 1955) and Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography*, London 1968.

³ Robert de La Sizeranne, *La Photographie est-elle un Art?* La Rochelle 2003.



III. 1

The text's interest for us today is beyond any doubt. Roger de la Sizeranne (1866–1932) was born into an aristocratic French family with artistic aspirations. He was an art critic. Fond of British painting, he published a short book on the Turner collection in London, *Deux heures à la Turner Gallery*, in 1890. He went on to write several texts on John Ruskin and became the editor of Ruskin's works in French. He was very much attracted by Pre-Raphaelite painting and praised the pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais. It is unlikely that La Sizeranne had any idea at that time of the links between Pre-Raphaelite painters and their photographer contemporaries – for example Julia Margaret Cameron, Oskar Rejlander, and Lewis Carroll. Nevertheless he would have been, even unconsciously, attracted by the singular balance they had achieved between an archaic symbolism – based on their respect for *Quattrocento* artists – and true realism, which had been for a large part supported by their interest in photography. In 1897, when La Sizeranne visited the 1896 *Exposition d'art photographique*, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was indeed already ancient. It had been created in 1848, fifty years earlier. Despite this anteriority, Pre-Raphaelite art was praised by critics at the end of the nineteenth century and admired by Symbolist artists.

La Sizeranne was far more attracted by pictorialism than by photography itself. He started his book with a cruel but clear statement on photography's "shortcomings" – "*Les défauts de la photographie.*" When he visited the exhibition, he was interested in the way pictorialist photographs resembled old master paintings. Though he expressed great dislike for photography's commercial uses at the end of the nineteenth century, he emphasized that photography, thanks to the particular achievements of the pictorialists, could indeed be a fully artistic expression. His whole text was an attempt to find in the exhibited photographs the pictorial models they were referring to.

In doing so, La Sizeranne was true to his own taste. His choices show him to be a man of his time and of his social class. Indeed, like many late-nineteenth-century dandies, he despised realism and praised artists who sought to eschew representation in favor of idealism.



III. 2: James Craig Annan, *L'Eglise et le Monde*

He was close at the time to young critics who supported finding a new form of artistic expression, renewing the search for idealism, and searching for Symbolism. He had certainly read Jean Moréas's celebrated literary manifesto "Le Symbolisme" of 1886: "*Ainsi, dans cet art, les tableaux de la nature, les actions des humains, tous les phénomènes concrets ne sauraient se manifester eux-mêmes. Ce sont là des apparences sensibles destinées à représenter leurs affinités ésotériques avec des Idées primordiales.*"⁴ The reaction of the young critic Albert Aurier to Paul Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon* (now at National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh) was mainly idealistic, even mystical. La Sizeranne shared this view when he praised James Craig Annan's photograph, *L'Eglise et le Monde*, exhibited in 1897. (III. 2) Indeed, the program he defined for contemporary painting was in contradiction with the importance of Impressionism at that time.

⁴ "In this art, scenes from nature, human activities, and all other real world phenomena will not be described for their own sake; here, they are perceptible surfaces created to represent their esoteric affinities with the primordial ideas."



III. 3: Henry Peach Robinson, *The Lady of Shalott*, Bradford, the National Media Museum

La Sizeranne, too, rejected Impressionism. Impressionist paintings seemed ordinary to him, too close to the daily life of the time. The *idea*, he felt, was absent. Like most of the young *fin-de-siècle* writers, he was also critical of academic paintings for the dryness of their lines. A new way should be found. In his eyes, the choice of subjects and the expression of ideas were both crucial, as was the artist's ability to tell stories. *Ut pictura, ut poesis*. It explained his taste for Pre-Raphaelite pictures that referenced poems and essays. Celebrating the works of Rossetti and Millais, he also praised Henry Peach Robinson's photographs.⁵ Peach Robinson started to work in the 1850s as a young man. His images were then quite closed to Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics. His *Lady of Shalott* was inspired by Millais's *Ophelia* and his melancholic *She Never Told Her Love* was an attempt to illustrate a famous line from Shakespeare, by way of one of Christina Rossetti's poems. **(III. 3)** Peach Robinson was still alive when La Sizeranne wrote and appeared to him as a model to be followed by photographers.

After British paintings of the 1850s, La Sizeranne praised works of French painters of the time, particularly Camille Corot, Jean-François Millet, and Jules Breton. For him, these artists succeeded in going beyond the representation of reality, as they jealously kept to their own, singular visions. The critic praised the melancholy of Corot's landscapes, the religious spirit of Millet's peasants, and the morality of Breton's scenes. Indeed, they stood as models for photographers. La Sizeranne showed quite a conservative mind. Whatever he claimed, his praise for *scenes de genre* and their quite paradoxical realism essentially amounted to a rather bourgeois taste. Jules Breton's pictures, for instance, although they refer to their time with a careful attention to details, were indeed compliant with academic rules of composition. They also presented an idealistic notion of peasant life. Breton avoided revolutionary subject matter. His models were always shown in a happy, peaceful, and quiet state. **(III. 4)** Moreover, his paintings could be grasped at first sight, with easy narratives. Carefully composed and lit, the paintings of Breton and Millet

⁵ For the quality of their composition, see La Sizeranne, p. 23–25.

avoided instantaneous representations. To La Sizeranne, then, they showed a thorough and deep degree of premeditation. Instead of the mere and immediate representation of reality that Impressionists paintings seemed to give, these works were the result of keen reflection. Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance masters were also among La Sizeranne's models.



III. 4: Jules Breton, *Harvest Blessing near Arras*, 1857, Arras, Musée des Beaux-Arts

It was through his analysis of paintings that his notion of what qualities a photograph should possess in order to be appraised as a work of art took form. He emphasized the precedence of blurred over clear images. The reference to Corot's landscapes supported it. "*L'indéfini est le chemin de l'infini*," he wrote – the indefinite is the path towards the infinite.⁶ Of Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs, he declared that their blurred effect was one of their great qualities. **(III. 5 and 6)** He claimed the importance of the art of composition over the preeminence of details. Referring to the achievements of the old masters, moreover, he noted how he despised accuracy in favor of faithfulness to the artist's inspiration. He also praised the reference to literature where a new subjectivity could be found.⁷ Between the lines, a photographic aesthetic was to be read here, one that was indeed very close to what many Pictorialists were seeking.

⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

⁷ One of La Sizeranne's chapters is entitled "*L'objectif et le subjectif*." He played on the two meanings of the word "*objectif*," both as an adjective and as noun.



Ill. 5 and 6:

George Frederick Watts, *Choosing*, 1864, National Portrait Gallery;

Julia Margaret Cameron, *Pomona*, 1872

While emphasizing the links between Pictorialist photographs and the old masters, or even to English Pre-Raphaelites, La Sizeranne pointed out the reactionary trend of pictorialism – and praised it as such. Such a trend was underlying the whole Symbolist movement. La Sizeranne was certainly conscious of this, as he entitled his last chapter “*Une réaction idéaliste*.” Artists claimed the need to return to technique and to *savoir-faire* as opposed to instantaneity; to the idea, in contrast to the fleeting impression; to narration instead of emotion. Yet going backwards was at the same time, of course, going forwards. The reaction itself was a manifesto calling for artists’ recognition and – for the Pictorialists in particular – for recognizing photography as an art. Moreover, the close links Symbolist painting had with literature, theater, and music showed the consistency of the artistic project. Both Symbolism and Pictorialism were international movements. The exhibitions organized in Paris, Brussels, London, Berlin, and Moscow, for example, underlined the strong desire of the artists to be acknowledged. The trend proved to be successful. When Alfred Stieglitz first published *Camera Work*, now seen as one of the most modern reviews of its day, he associated in its columns paintings by Pre-Raphaelites and the old masters alongside photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron and other Pictorialist images.

Pictorialist photography borrowed the processes, the manual gestures, and the decorative intentions of painting in order to counter the idea that photography was merely mechanical. Despite what Pictorialists claimed, their works were nevertheless closely linked to reality. Indeed, when they chose Pre-Raphaelite models, they were de facto

choosing paintings that were already based upon a photographic aesthetic. This opens up a new way of examining the links between painting and photography at the end of nineteenth century. Examining La Sizeranne's essay would certainly reward the scholar with new clues for going forwards. Beyond the strict comparison between a particular photograph and a particular painting, it would reveal how Symbolism, too, was linked to reality, despite the artists' search for the transcription of ideas.⁸ Looking at Pictorialism through the lens of Symbolism would emphasize the complexity of fin-de-siècle artistic creation, joining pure idealism and mere realism, while being neither virtuous history painting nor bourgeois genre painting.

Dominique de Font-Réaulx is senior curator at the Musée du Louvre and director of the Musée Delacroix. She graduated from the École du Louvre and from the École nationale du patrimoine. She submitted a D.E.A. at Paris IV-Sorbonne on Courbet and photography under the direction of Bruno Foucart. A historian of nineteenth-century art, she has worked closely over the past 15 years on the links between painting and photography during the Monarchy de Juillet and the Second Empire. From 1995 to 2002 she worked as curator at the Musée des Monuments français where she was in charge of the cast collections. She also managed the restoration of collections and building after the fire of 1997. In 2002 she joined the Musée d'Orsay as curator of the photography collection. She currently teaches at the École du Louvre and at the Institut de Sciences politiques in Paris.

De Font-Réaulx has curated many exhibitions, including *L'art du nu au XIXe siècle* (Bibliothèque nationale, 1997), *Sir John Soane* (Musée des Monuments français/Archives nationales), *L'invention du sentiment* (Musée de la Musique, 2002), *Le Daguerrotypage français* (Musée d'Orsay and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), *L'Art russe* (Musée d'Orsay, 2005), and *Gustave Courbet* (Grand Palais, 2007, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008). She also curated the Jean-Léon Gérôme exhibition presented in 2010 at the Getty Museum of Los Angeles and in Paris at the Musée d'Orsay. Her numerous published essays and books on nineteenth-century art include works on cast collections, art reproduction, and links between painting and photography. Her most recent book, *Painting and Photography*, was released by Flammarion in 2013.

⁸ The catalogue *Paradis perdu* is an interesting reference. See Jean Clair and Pierre Théberge, eds., *Paradis perdu: l'Europe Symboliste*, ex. cat. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Paris 1998.