PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE FRENCH SCIENTIST HENRI VICTOR REGNAULT

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The role of British Fellows of the Royal Society in the development and promotion of photography, after William Henry Fox Talbot’s landmark paper,1 is a very familiar one. Fox Talbot and Sir John Herschel were both instrumental in the invention of paper-negative photography from which multiple positive prints could be made (as opposed to the unique metal plate process of the Paris-based Louis Daguerre). However, the significant contributions in the 1850s of the French physicist and Royal Society Fellow Henri Victor Regnault (1810–78), ‘probably the most powerful man in French photography’,2 have only more recently been reasserted. Regnault exercised his scientific connections and diplomatic skills to heal Anglo-French rifts opened up by the rival processes, but more practically he shared his enthusiasm for photography with British friends and colleagues.

The Royal Society’s archives contain a major set of photographs by Victor Regnault and his sometime collaborator, John Stewart (exemplified in figures 1–3). Stewart was related by marriage to Sir John Herschel, who added Stewart’s and Regnault’s photographs to his personal collection. They accompanied Herschel’s papers to the Royal Society in 1944.

Herschel attempted to introduce John Stewart to practical photography in 1851, enlisting Fox Talbot’s aid:

A brother in law of mine Mr J Stewart is very desirous to get some lessons while in London in the art of Talbotype (with the albuminous improvement if possible) to aid him in travelling. Do you know and can you recommend any artist who would give him such or if not, what book should he procure for a brief working code of instruction and where can he get the apparatus and materials special to the Talbotype process….3

Stewart was already hard at work in Paris before Talbot replied, and Herschel would later send Talbot a specimen photograph of Stewart on horseback at the fashionable (for the English) town of Pau in southwest France.4 Early images of the Pyrenées by Stewart and others form one part of the Society’s Herschel-derived collection, catalogued as MS/784.

Annotations on their original wrappers suggest that images sent to Herschel by Regnault date from the years 1848–52.5 At least one more of Regnault’s photographs, an 1851 portrait of Jean-Baptiste Biot, appears to have arrived at the Society independently, possibly via Herschel; 1851 seems to be the year in which Regnault and Stewart met, perhaps as a result of Stewart’s time in Paris. For this French special issue of Notes & Records, three of the photographs are reproduced here.
Regnault began his work in paper photography using the improvements to Fox Talbot’s calotype process introduced by Louis Désiré Blanquart-Evrard (1802–72) from 1847. This river study by Regnault is probably his most-reproduced landscape, one of a series of nature studies and river bank scenes from the area surrounding the Sèvres porcelain factory.
Figure 2. John Stewart (1814–87) and Henri Victor Regnault. *The Lime Pond, Hawkhurst* (1853), 25.5 cm × 38 cm. A comparable English landscape, this time one of a set of six photographs, taken jointly by Stewart and Regnault on an excursion in England during 1853. The photographers captured Bodiam Castle and Peterborough Cathedral, but the most impressive studies are of Hawkhurst village in Kent, near Sir John Herschel’s residence. Herschel’s diary notes that the two photographers attended a dinner there on 6 June 1853 and returned to the area during July.
Figure 3. Henri Victor Regnault (1810–78). The ladder (1853), 28 cm × 21 cm. From being a process pioneer, Blanquart-Evrard established himself as a large-scale (for the period) publisher and promoter of photography. This light-and-dark still life by Regnault was one of two rustic genre studies reproduced in Études Photographiques (Blanquart-Evrard, Lille, 1853). It shows an angled corner of the Government factory at Sèvres, ‘between the stable and the porter’s lodge’. 

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NOTES

1 Royal Society Archived Papers AP/23/19 W. H. F. Talbot, ‘Some account of the art of photogenic drawing or, the process by which natural objects may be made to delineate themselves, without the aid of the artist’s pencil’, read to the Royal Society on 31 January 1839.


5 Royal Society MS/784. Unidentified family note: ‘The 9 photographs in this sheet are by Regnault (of Sèvres) given by him to Sir J. H. taken between 1848 & 1852 accord[ordin]g to J. C. Stewart’.


7 Royal Society MS/585 Herschel Diary 1853.