

## Myths and Legends

from photography's shady past

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An intriguing subject for speculation is that "photography" could have been invented, perfected - and forgotten - in previous histories, only to be *re*-discovered in Europe in the 1830s. Fascinating hints at such a possibility abound in many early writings from almost every culture. There is, as yet, no proof that photography existed in past ages but the number of myths, legends and suggestions in these old documents powerfully underline the notion that a direct transcription of reality was always a yearning dream.

A few examples picked at random will make the point.

One of the strangest legends concerns a Chinese emperor, who reigned about 1000 years B.C. He was shown a picture of an ox which exhibited a curious property. Every morning the ox came out of his frame, and went to graze in the meadows, returning at night, to resume his place in the frame, where he remained stationery until the next morning. The emperor sought in vain for an explanation of the mystery until an old priest remembered that the Japanese might have worked such a miracle. The Japanese, the priest explained, could coat oyster shells with various chemicals in order to capture colored images, which were invisible by day, but became visible by night. The priest concluded that the ox picture was made in this manner - and the fact that the image disappeared at daylight led to the belief that the ox had rejoined the flocks in the neighboring pastures. (1)

Another Chinese legend credits the sun with sometimes producing pictures of neighboring objects upon the ice-covered surfaces of lakes and rivers. (2) For the sake of historical completeness, however, it should be mentioned that a Victorian photographer D. Winstanley, did not consider this tale to be a legend, but a statement of fact. He had not only witnessed such ice-images himself, while wintering in Wisconsin in 1864, but also conducted experiments in the production of pictures by the action of cold. He termed these processes "thermography" or, more clumsily, "frigerography". (3)

A similar phenomenon occurs in a French fable, Une Voyage Suppose', 1690, written by

Francois Fenelon: "There was no painter in that country, but if anybody wished to have the portrait of a friend, of a picture, a beautiful landscape, or any other object, water was placed in great basins of gold or silver, and the object desired to be painted was placed in front of that water. After a while the water froze and became a glass mirror, on which an ineffaceable image remained."

The most famous fictional account of a "photographic" process occurs in Giphantie (4), published in several editions during 1760-1761. Giphantie is the name of an idyllic island inhabited by supernatural beings. The hero's guide explains how these beings make their "photographs" on canvas coated with "a most subtle matter, very viscous, and proper to harden and dry, but the help of which a picture is made in the twinkling of an eye." The text continues with a detailed description of a process which is remarkable for its prophetic nature, even to the suggestion of the development of a latent image in a darkroom. The aim was "to fix these transient images" of nature without the intervention of the human hand. This is a fascinating passage for students of the pre-history of photography and extracts can be found in several history textbooks. (5)

More succinctly, a verse by one of the minor Latin poets, Statius (45-96 A.D.), included in a collection called The Silvae, describes a powerful mirror: "Do you only fix your glance upon it and leave your features here. Thus he spoke and he shut up the mirror with the picture trapped inside."

Talking of mirrors, archaeologists at Olmec sites (6) have discovered highly polished concave mirrors of crystalline hematite which may have been used to throw images on flat surfaces. Perhaps these are ancient precursors to Alexander Wolcott's little daguerreotype cameras, which used concave mirrors in place of lenses!

Other archaeological finds which aroused considerable interest in the late 19th century included a plano-convex lens, dated 720 B.C. (7), which is now in the Assyrian section of the British Museum. One year after this discovery it was reported (8) that digging operations among the ruined temples of Upper Egypt had unearthed an iron box to which was attached a glass object. Some of the more rash commentators pronounced that these items to be a camera and lens.

More intriguing and relevant, perhaps, is a document written by the monk Panselenus, c. 500 A.D., and claimed to be in the library of the Dionysian Convent on Mount Athos. According to Dr. Constantine Simonides, who drew attention to the document in 1864, the ancient monk described a "photographic" process very similar to the daguerreotype. Simonides' conjecture is that Daguerre may have seen this document when he visited Mount Athos to make paintings for his diorama. (9)

Apart from China, Japan, Italy, France, Mexico, Assyria, Egypt and Greece, we must not neglect Russia and Germany as the possible repositories of photographic knowledge in ancient days. In 1857 it was reported that a manuscript was discovered which was a Russian translation of a German document 300 years old, giving a "very clear explanation of the principles of photography." (10)

Whether or not there is any truth to these reports is, in one sense, irrelevant. Their purpose in this context is not to claim authenticity or even to suggest that photography was invented, and forgotten, in ages past. The point of these brief examples is this: irrespective of the truth, these dreams of "photography" in literature, myth, legend and archaeological speculation indicate that the *desire* for a direct faithful transcription of reality, unsullied by the hands of an artist, has existed for hundreds if not thousands of years.

My favorite story from the pre-history of photography is also one of the best documented; it is also one of the few examples which is accompanied by an illustration. In the collection of the Guimet Museum, Paris, is a Tibetan painting, "Scenes from the life of Buddha." (11) A detail of the picture shows a painter coloring the image of Buddha which has been projected onto a canvas. The accompanying text describes the story.

A king of Tibet received a gift of a marvelous gem-covered suit of armour from a neighboring ruler. The king was at a loss to know what gift would be suitable in return for such a priceless treasure. So he visited and asked the advice of Buddha. Buddha's reply was: draw on a piece of material my image and send it to him immediately. The king summoned the court painters and ordered them to produce the Buddha's portrait. Unfortunately the painters were overawed by the Buddha and could not obtain a good likeness. The Buddha, noticing their difficulty, asked the king to provide some cloth. The Buddha then "projected his shadow" on the material, where it remained fixed, and said to the painters: now fill in the shape with colors.

It was clearly a miracle - and hence a fit subject to be included in "Scenes from the life of Buddha." It is a delightful story (12) and hence a fit citation in the antecedents of today's photography.

#### References:

1. Quoted in The Photographic News, 23 August 1889, p. 547
2. The History of Photography, W. Jerome Harrison, 1888, p. 11
3. "Pictures by the action of cold," D. Winstanley, The Photographic News, 17 August

1888, pp. 517-518.

4. The title is an anagram of Tiphaigne; the author's name being Charles Francois Tiphaigne de la Roche (1829-1774).

5. Including The History of Photography 1685-1914, by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, 1969. For those who wish to examine the original, The British Library collection includes several editions .

6. Most archaeologists believe the Olmec civilization arose along the Mexican Gulf coast, sometime before 1200 B.C.

7. The Amateur Photographer, 9 September 1892, p. 168. Sir David Brewster stated that this was used for magnifying purposes, but its actual purpose remains a mystery.

8. The Amateur Photographer, 16 June 1893, p. 396.

9. The Amateur Photographer, 16 June 1904, p. 466.

10. The Photographic News, 5 October 1860, p. 274

11. The archaeologist, Joseph Hackin, who studied the painting in 1913, insisted that the legend only dates back to 1734. Even if this late dating is correct, the story of a projected and "fixed" image on cloth, a century before the invention of photography, remains an interesting antecedent. Readers are referred to two publications by Hackin: "Les scenes figurees de la vie du Buddha d'apres les peintures tibetaines," Memoires concernant l'Asie Orientale, Tome II, Paris, 1916, pp. 42-51; Guide catalogue du musee Guimet. Les collections bouddhiques, Paris-Bruxelles, 1923, pp. 77-78.

12. I am grateful to Jean Keim for first bringing my attention to this delightful story (Album, no. 12, 1970) and to G. Beguin, Conservateur, Musee Guimet, Paris, who provided me with references and copy prints.

1982