

Studying Robert Demachy's photographic work in 2007: boundaries, methods and issues

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Today, Robert Demachy is mostly famous for the main role he played in the history of pictorialism. Yet, only a few researches and publications were dedicated to his career and all the existing ones respected the "classical" image of the character: a passionate man, a smart writer and a talented practitioner, but also a man stuck with academic and backward-looking principles.

Three years ago, I was charged to study an unseen collection of Demachy's photographs. It's the reappearance of this collection combined with the carrying out of a new methodology that made possible to discover Robert Demachy as he really was.

Born in 1859, Robert Demachy was, from 1895, the French leader of the pictorialist movement. Excellent technician, he promoted and renewed the pigment processes (gum prints, oil prints and transfer prints). Following other foreign photographers, he tried the etching of negatives in order to create new artistic effects. He also was a very convincing theorist in his books but also in his numerous articles in French, European and American newspapers.

His very delicate prints were exhibited in the "Salons d'Art photographique", from Paris to New York including London or even Moscow. Perfectly bilingual, Demachy also exchanged letters with English speaking photographers like Alfred Stieglitz who bought and exhibited some of his works in his New York gallery.

His favourite subjects were the female models, captured in the studio or in the open air. Among his most famous photographs, we can find the very classical "Dancers behind the scenes", which was often compared to Degas' pastels, "Speed" greatly admired for its modernism or the picturesque "Effort".

According to biographers, Demachy suddenly stopped photography in 1914. He died in Normandy in 1936.

Here are the main things about Robert Demachy's photographic career usually emphasized in the studies dedicated to him since his death. This is a lot. But is it enough? Couldn't we find and tell other things about this man?

By carrying out a new methodology, based on a larger view of what is usually considered as being part of the work of a photographer, we can understand better and grasp more easily Demachy's photographic practice. Such an approach allows us to become aware of the blanks existing in such a biography but above all to go past this strictly biographical point of view (inherited of Art History).

What Demachy considered as being part of his photographic work is much more restricted than the acceptance we have of it today. When, in 1936, he divided his collection between the French Photographic Society and the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain for one part and his children for the other part, he made a distinction between his official works and the rest of his production. The first part was public and artistic, the second part, private and domestic.

For me, studying Demachy's work consisted mostly in considering the entirety of his production, whatever its characteristics. Thus, were studied : letters, articles and books, photo-engravings published until his death and all the original photographs belonging to the French institutions (which means : glass and film negatives, glass positives, glass slides, glass stereoscopic views, albums and isolated prints particularly pigment prints).

One of the conclusive elements that led me to understand the real issues of Demachy's work was the study of the photo-engravings of his photographs published in the French, European and American periodicals of the time. Indeed, these images set off a total reconsideration of his work as they challenged the vision we previously had of his production.

It's important to say that if Demachy's writings have often been used and quoted to comment his prints, the meaning of the pictures he had reproduced in periodicals and books had never been considered before.

The systematic census of the photomechanical reproductions enabled me to assemble and compare almost 400 photo-engravings. It appeared that if many of them were totally in agreement with the pictorialists principles, many others were far away from this aesthetics. This led me to assume that Robert Demachy had not only been the leader of the French artistic photography but that, at the same time, he had also carried an amateur practice. Moreover, far from hiding it, he had spread and entirely assumed this practice meanwhile publishing and expressing, in the same journals, very critical remarks against "straight photography".

Then, I considered all the original photographs from the unseen Niépce Museum collection and from the little-known collection of the French Photographic Society, creating a corpus of almost 4000 items. They were all carefully studied, and the connections between their different shapes, the sorting out and re-creation of series, led to a more accurate vision and a better understanding of the issues of the work. All the photographs were taken into account and examined equally as being all part of Demachy's photographic production (I nevertheless kept in mind the fact that all these images had various status for him). It was vital to go beyond the study of the pigment prints, the only items examined up to that moment.

Therefore, the discoveries I made were numerous as most of these photographs were on glass and as, among them, many were negatives. These negatives had never been examined except the most "artistic" ones, that is to say only the etched glass plates (this last comment concerns only the

French Photographic Society's collection as the Niépce Museum's one was unseen). This simple fact emphasizes the status this kind of objects used to have: the intervention of the artist-photographer's hand on the negative confers to it a status close to that of a pigment print, namely the status of a work of art. As a result, such negatives can be studied and exhibited when the straight ones can't. The glass material, the difficult perception of the subjects, with their reversed values, but also the disjunction between these straight objects in process, sometimes rough, and the extreme delicacy of the pigment prints, can explain why the negatives were put aside of what was considered, up to now, as being part of a photographic work, especially those of a pictorialist. Hopefully, from now on, the widening of this notion allows a global study of negatives and other photographs on glass.

The meaning of the different photographic objects has also been used to shed new light on Demachy's practice. The existence of family albums, of stereoscopic views made during his stays in the country, but also of small negatives taken during his travels with a hand camera, confirmed that he was an amateur photographer of the beginning of the twentieth century. The fact that he used large glass negatives, underlined the professional nature of his work (reinforced also by the subjects of such plates: models in the studio or in the open air can be seen on most of them). As for the pigment prints, some of them were only "sketches" while others were created to be exhibited throughout the world. Finally, the glass slides also have a particular meaning: some were meant to be shown only to the family, others to be projected to the members of the amateur photographic societies during sessions but also during contests Demachy took part in, as I found out.

Last but not least, some biographical facts have also been corrected thanks to the methodology used. This is notably true of the idea of his giving up photography after 1914. In fact, Demachy was still interested in photography during and after the First World War.

The study of the original photographs confirmed the belief the photo-engravings had created and allowed me to give a new definition of the nature of Robert Demachy's photographic work. Indeed, it appeared clearly that this man had actually been a "professional amateur photographer" who selected images from his amateur work and improved them with various interventions in order to create photographic artworks.

Robert Demachy was an amateur photographer who took thousands of photographs starting at the end of the 1870's (that is to say long before the birth of pictorialism). In the 1880's, he took part in the prints and glass slides contests as he was, at that time, a member of the French Photographic Society.

His artistic and aesthetics ambitions soon led him to follow the pictorialist path and he became an active member of the Paris "Photo-Club" whose first exhibition took place in 1894. At the same time, he built up a large collection of various images typical of the amateur photographers of that

time: photographs of historical events or of the family parties; of his travels or his hobbies; of his children and his pets; of the picturesque of the country towns or of the Parisian modernity.

Although he was the leader of the pictorialist movement in France and the instigator of the “modified print”, although he claimed that “*a work created mechanically will never be a work of art*”, Robert Demachy was an amateur photographer (and so were most of the pictorialists). The aesthetics of his images, the means, the condition and the reason of their creation, links him with this branch of the History of Photography.

All in all, Robert Demachy was an amateur photographer whose education, artistic ambition and talent, led to follow the precepts of the pictorialists. In that way, he can be considered as a “professional amateur photographer”. Indeed, many of his pigment prints were obtained from amateur negative plates.

Some of his photographs even testify of a certain modernity of vision, far from the aesthetics of most of his pictorialist prints. This seems to be especially true for pictures taken after 1910, but not only.

Demachy’s photographic work proves that pictorialism follows from amateur photography while constituting itself in denial of it. There’s not, actually, a strict partition between amateurs and artists. Pictorialism is, finally, only a section of amateur photography or, to quote Emile Zola, “*an area of creation seen through a temperament*”. Thus, the movement from pictorialism to “straight photography” should not be seen anymore as a break point but as an evolution, a change of photographic temperament.

If we study again the three famous prints mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we can now have a new and more complete understanding of them. The stylish “Dancers behind the scenes” are, in fact, only models playing a part in the photographer’s studio and not artists working at the Paris opera house. It is a pure creation, a *mise-en-scene* revealed by the negatives (where elements of Demachy’s studio can be identified).

“Speed” is the only pigment print Demachy ever made on the theme of automobiles. We could imagine that this subject did not exist in his production. In fact, it was one of Demachy’s favourites as he was one of the first car owners in France. But it’s in his amateur work that examples of this hobby can be found, such objects being not the best elements for a pigment print. On the contrary, this kind of subjects delights the amateurs for many reasons (novelty, pride of the owner, speed, modernity, movement, etc.). This image of a race was the only one kept by the pictorialist because of its qualities (dust cloud and relative imprecision of shapes).

At last, the “Effort” is quite typical of Demachy’s photographs of harbours and sailors made in Brittany, thus it’s quite precious and artificial. This print was admired, when it was exhibited in

1904, as being an elegant amateur snapshot as proved by the commentaries and the numerous photo-engravings published in the periodicals of that time.

Demachy considered his photographic work in a totally different way as we do now. What has to be done today is to study all his photographs as a whole, while keeping in mind the position occupied by each image in the mind of its creator. It is essential to start from the photographs to see what we can learn from them instead of trying to match them with writings or biographical facts.

In 2007, we must examine and evaluate Robert Demachy's photographic production with a fresh approach and a new vision instead of simply commenting his work through his writings and those of his contemporaries.

As a conclusion, I would say that, studying Demachy in 2007 means going beyond the preconceived ideas about pictorialism and enlarge the research field by considering all the aspects of the production.