The colours of another world

As we approach the centenary in 2007 of the first commercially viable process for colour photography, Victor Gray describes the Autochrome photographs of Lionel de Rothschild (1882–1942)

The regular meeting of the Royal Photographic Society on 5 November 1907 broke all records for attendance. 'The society was almost unable to cope, what with the crowd that besieged its doors', reported *The Amateur Photographer*. Mr T.K. Grant,[1] the lecturer for the evening, held his audience as rapt as any magician. He had brought with him a single glass photographic plate which he proceeded to dip and wash with chemicals and varnish and dry and finally to put in a lantern projector. There, on the screen, appeared the image of a bowl of flowers standing before a window. But unlike any photographic image this audience had seen before, these were flowers in colour, a colour that was soft and subtle and surprising, a colour that seemed true to life in a way that they felt they had only seen before in the work of artists. They had witnessed the Autochrome coming to life.

Part of the reason for the packed audience was the build-up of tension that surrounded the launch in Britain of the Autochrome. The invention of the French Lumière brothers, the process had first been described by them in theoretical terms three years before and demonstrated publicly in Paris in June 1907. The unexpected rush of orders which followed in France led to problems of supply and the first plates for sale did not reach Britain until September. The delay was long enough for rumours to blossom of the miraculous quality of the images and excitement to grow feverishly. For this was the first commercially viable colour photographic process, bringing colour photography within the grasp of the amateur (albeit a well-heeled amateur, for this was no cheap product).

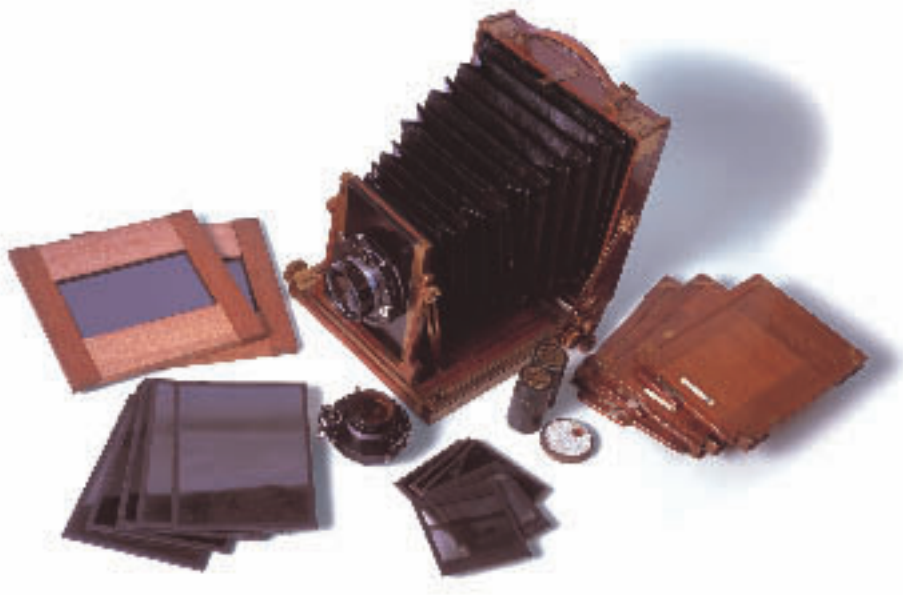
It is hard, a hundred years on, to recapture the astonishment of that audience at seeing their world reproduced so faithfully on a screen in a darkened room, bringing together the sharp eye of the camera lens with the palette of the painter. Photography, despite nearly sixty years of experiments with colour, had remained, for all but the isolated professional, a monochromatic achievement, and colour reproduction in books had generally enlivened the page rather than captured the true colours of its subjects. Now their world – their colour-full world – had been captured and reflected back to them as they had never before seen it.

It was a good time to be young and in love with the new. Wireless signals had crossed the Atlantic in 1901. Moving pictures were being shown in cinemas across the country. The speed limit for the growing number of motor cars had been raised to 20 m.p.h. in 1903. The Wright Brothers were developing their powered flying engines and would, within months, make their first public demonstration.

Lionel de Rothschild was young in that time and shared in the passion for the new. He was born on 25 January 1882, the son of Leopold de Rothschild who was one of the three partner-brothers in the business of N.M. Rothschild & Sons, one of the most powerful international financial forces of the time, then at the height of its fortunes. His course had been set for him from birth. Harrow and Trinity led inevitably to the door of New Court, the family banking house, and to New Court he duly went at the age of 21, in 1903. He stayed there for the rest of his life, becoming a full partner in 1915 until his death in 1942.

But away from New Court, Lionel played fully the part of a young man of fortune let loose on an exciting world. He had first acquired a motor vehicle at Cambridge and, once bitten, longed for bigger and better. Thwarted by an anxious father in his attempts to compete in

A portrait of
Lionel de Rothschild
by Frank Salisbury.
The picture was formerly
in the collection of the
Alliance Assurance
Company of which
Lionel was a director.



Some of the equipment
used by Lionel to produce
his Autochromes.

endurance trials in his brand new, powerful Siddeley-Wolseley, he nevertheless, in October 1905, accepted an impromptu challenge from his French cousin, Henri de Rothschild, a practised racing-driver, to race from Paris to Monte Carlo in their respective 60 h.p. Mercedes. Lionel, much to his satisfaction, won, completing the 600-mile journey in 18 hours.

Simultaneously he was exploring new ways of satisfying his passion for speed. In 1903, Sir Alfred Harmsworth, proprietor of the *Daily Mail*, had funded the world's first powerboat racing prize, The Harmsworth Trophy. In a new Napier motor-boat, equipped with the largest six-cylinder engine yet built by the manufacturer S.F. Edge, and sharing the crewing with his friend, the Hon. John Scott-Montagu, he entered the 1905 challenge, a race over 35 miles in the Bay of Arcachon in France. They crossed the finishing-line in a winning time of 2 hours, 2 minutes, 26 seconds. In the following year, 1906, again with Scott-Montagu, he beat the world water-speed record at 28.8 knots and in 1907 went on to win the prestigious Perla del Mediterraneo.

The excitement of travel had also come into the picture. In 1905 Lionel set off with his driver and mechanic, Martin Harper, on a trip to Rome in a 40 h.p. Mercedes, the first of many. The following year he was hurtling through Italy at 40 m.p.h. with Winston Churchill and was recording, in the magazine *The Car*, a motoring expedition to Algeria. In time these trips of exploration across Europe and beyond would provide many of the opportunities for Lionel's photographic forays.

Precisely when he took to the camera is not clear, though the 1906 article in *The Car* is illustrated with photographs taken by him. Some black-and-white pictures of Corsica can be firmly dated to the spring of 1908 and a year later Harper was recording a delay on their journey around Spain while Lionel spent two days photographing the cathedral in Burgos (the black and white photographs still survive).[2]

Below left
An example of one of Lionel's earlier experiments with Autochromes: the Generalife, Granada, dating from a tour of Spain in 1909.

Below
The Japanese gardens of Lionel's French cousin, Edmond, at Boulogne-sur-Seine.

With a passion for the lens and for the new, it was almost inevitable that Lionel would try his hand with the Autochrome, and so he did, and with considerable success. Indeed, the seven hundred glass plates which are housed today in The Rothschild Archive represent the largest single collection of Autochrome plates by an individual British photographer to have survived.

Lionel's earliest experiments appear to date from 1908 and by 1909 he was bringing back from his tour of Spain colour plates of Granada and other points en route. At home he began to take pictures in the gardens of Ascott in Buckinghamshire, the family home designed for Lionel's father in the 1880s. Gardens were a favourite subject for the early Autochromists, providing, in plenty of light, the ideal testing ground both for composition and, above all, for the subtlety of contrast or complementarity of colour offered as a challenge for the first time by the Autochrome.

Gardens, which were later to become the central preoccupation of Lionel's life, would continue to provide him with inspiration as Autochrome subjects. Occasional close-ups betray a plantsman's concern and interest but equally it is clear from a number of other images taken in the countryside, both in Britain and mainland Europe, that the setting of flowers within a landscape was naturally pleasing to Lionel's eye. In all he made some 250 colour plates of English houses and gardens, by far the largest group of them at Ascott. Lionel never entered the house with his camera. The inordinate length of exposure required for the Autochrome and the ease with which colours could be upset by poor light or wrong exposure were no doubt enough of a deterrent for him. And anyway, his interests and pleasure lay outside, whether in the formality of the topiary gardens or the opulent drifts of spring-flowering bulbs which Leopold had planted in the surrounding meadows, often providing Lionel with some of his richest capturings of colour, as tulips or daffodils sprang up and burst into seas of colour beneath blossoming trees.

Below
Views of the gardens at Ascott, the Buckinghamshire estate created by Lionel's parents, form the largest group of images of English gardens in the collection.

Below right
Lionel combined two of his passions, horticulture and photography, to great effect on his European tours.

Other images were taken at the older family home at Gunnersbury in west London, where a favourite time of year was the flowering of the lilies in the lake before the house. But the gardens of friends, both great and small, were also laid siege to by Lionel's camera. Close-up studies of flowers, rural scenes of heath with gorse, the interiors of glass-houses: all were of interest to him.

In France his cousin Edmond, also a banker, invited him to his home at Boulogne-sur-Seine outside Paris, where Lionel photographed both the formal gardens and the Japanese Garden. It seems highly probable that, on one of these visits, he would have met Edmond's neighbour, Albert Kahn, another Jewish banker who was then developing his interest in the Autochrome, an interest which was to lead on to his hugely ambitious twenty-year long project, Les Archives de la Planète, a massive collection of 42,000 Autochromes and a hundred hours of film, attempting nothing less than a vast album of images of every corner of the globe. It is impossible not to believe that their conversation would have turned excitedly upon the Autochrome and its future.

Some of the most arresting images among Lionel's work, almost a hundred in number, are portraits of family and friends, again mostly taken in the setting of family gardens. It is here, perhaps, as we stare back into the eyes of Edwardian high society, that we most clearly experience the shock and surprise of seeing in colour a world before the First World War which we have grown used to thinking of in monochrome. And there is an added poignancy in the images of smiling faces at an Army encampment in Buckinghamshire in 1910, blissfully unaware of the onslaught which would come four years later.

Of the rest of Lionel's Autochromes, some four hundred in number, most were taken on tours in Europe and North Africa, a clear indication that, for him, as for so many of us, photography remained largely a holiday habit. As at home, so abroad, the theme of plants and trees in landscapes recurs again and again, whether in the study of a corner of a Mediterranean garden, with the sun on a terracotta urn, draped by a curtain of cypresses, or a tree heavy with oranges against a background of mountains and sea.

But there was also an educational strain to Lionel's work. Whether in Egypt, Rome or Pompeii, his eye was drawn, like any other tourist, to the ruins of past civilisations, but his was an eye tempered by a clear interest in the detail of those long-gone societies. We know from surviving lecture notes that he prepared at least two sequences of plates to be projected for an audience. The notes betray wide reading in and around his subjects to bring to life the world whose magnificent vestiges he was capturing in his lens.

Other survivals, less easy to categorise, are relics of Lionel's bolder attempts to explore the potential of the Autochrome. A few are still-life compositions, of flowers in a vase with oranges and books or maize-cobs laid out to dry on a sun-baked stone wall. There are attempts (many of them brave but unsuccessful) to challenge the technical difficulty of capturing broad sunset skies at dusk. And there is the fascinating handful of images of animals and birds in the Zoological Gardens in London, the earliest known colour photographs taken there.

The Autochrome, ground-breaking as it was, in the end proved to have drawbacks discouraging to the amateur. The plates could not be printed onto paper and could therefore only be viewed through a viewer or a projector; it was not possible to copy them, so each image was unique and irreplaceable; and they were expensive compared with black-and-white plates. By the time war broke out, interest had waned and the Autochrome survived largely as a format for the professional. So it was with Lionel. The most enthusiastic phase of his interest dates from the few years between 1908 and 1912, culminating with a splendid series of images of Italy taken on his honeymoon with his wife Marie-Louise.

After the war, now weighed down with the responsibility of partnership in the bank and fired with a new passion for developing his horticultural interests on his estate at Exbury in Hampshire, Lionel confined his photography largely to family groups and holidays – and solely

A tiger, from Lionel's collection of Autochromes taken at London Zoo.

in black and white. His brief but passionate exploration of colour through the Autochrome now translated itself into a lifelong pursuit of new colours and shades in his beloved rhododendrons. The plates he had taken were consigned for some ninety years to a dark cupboard where, mercifully, they lost none of their colour. Now cleaned and conserved they wait only to be held up to the light to release again, as freshly as on the day they were taken, the image of a world remote in time and style, yet lit by the same light, dressed in the same colours as the world around us today.

Many of Lionel de Rothschild's Autochromes will be displayed as part of an exhibition at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in the summer of 2007, staged to mark the centenary of the Autochrome process. Victor Gray, Trustee of The Rothschild Archive and former Director, is co-ordinating the Archive's contribution to the exhibition.

NOTES

1 Grant was the representative in London of Messrs Lumière of Paris and Lyon.

2 Most of the clues to the locations shown on his European photographs are to be found in the itineraries of these journeys recorded by Martin Harper, his driver/mechanic, in his memoirs *Mr. Lionel: An Edwardian Episode* (London: Cassell, 1970).