

Habiba Salem

1003241119

FAH252

October 10, 2018

### Le Gray's Mer Méditerranée



*Mer Méditerranée- Sète, photograph by Gustave Le Gray, albumen print, 1857.*[https://](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/283124)

[www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/283124](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/283124)

Since the beginning of the 1850s, photography has been used for different purposes. Such purposes include the documentation of war, the construction of buildings, and scientific and medical cases.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, photography has been a widely controversial subject, and many argue that it could be used as an artistic practice. To support this notion, photographers such as Gustav Le Gray formed groups with other English and French photographers. The purpose was

---

<sup>1</sup> Quentin Bajac, *The Invention of Photography* (New York: Abrams, 2002), Chapter 4.

to experiment with photography artistically and encourage photographers of different backgrounds to share information.<sup>2</sup>

In 1857, Le Gray produced a collection of seascape photographs to demonstrate his belief. One of the most significant photographs of this collection is *Mer Méditerranée*, whose noteworthiness will be discussed. This specific photograph is of great importance for two reasons: it supports the group's artistic ideology and is one of the first successful seascape photographs taken. The photograph's main reasons for its success are its formal qualities and technical methods used to reflect the practice of photography as an artistic and aesthetic medium and to achieve a truthful representation of nature.

Firstly, *Mer Méditerranée* demonstrates Le Gray's belief that the focus of artistic practice is also to represent the spiritual gesture of the subject, which is evident in the tone and harmony the photograph exhibits.<sup>34</sup> The photograph consists of the photographer positioning his camera directly at the sun, which appears bright and glaring to create a dark and glistening effect.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, despite the dark and melancholy appearance of the sea, the effect delivers an ethereal feeling of peace and balance between the sky and the sea.

---

<sup>2</sup> Bajac, *The Invention*, chapter 5: 95-96.

<sup>3</sup> “As for myself, I express the desire that photography, instead of falling into the realm of industry and commerce, should come into that of art. That is its only true place, and it is along this path that I will always strive to ensure it progresses” — Gustav Le Gray. Bajac, *The Invention*, chapter 5: 93.

<sup>4</sup> Bajac, *The Invention*, chapter 5: 99.

<sup>5</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum, “Gustave Le Grey Exhibition,” Gustave Le Gray: Sea and Sky Photography (Victoria and Albert Museum, July 15, 2013), <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/gustave-le-grey-exhibition/>.

This photograph was not widely reproduced and distributed despite the reasons mentioned above. However, when Le Gray first produced and published this photograph, he intended to distribute it to society as a whole. His photographs were commercialized through exhibitions, where he would also sell them.<sup>6</sup>

Another significant element that makes Le Gray's photograph unique is its technical methods to achieve an elevated composition. The photographer used photomontage, a technique consisting of paper and multiple collodion negatives methods with different exposure times for the sea and the sky to develop a sharp and artistic dimension.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this method assists in controlling the final composition and minimizing style changes when transferring from one paper to the other.<sup>8</sup> *Mer Méditerranée* presents a high contrast and dramatic effect. It is significant because it was difficult to achieve a dramatic seascape with such clarity and intense tones.

Finally, compared to Le Gray's extremely valuable era, the advancement of today's technology has caused photography to become diluted and generic. Although today's photography is exceedingly advanced, Le Grey's photographs of the sky and sea will perpetually be the most alluring and capitative in history and the first that illustrates authenticity. Whereas seascape photography, nowadays, is merely an imitation and a reproduction of Le Grey's technique. The technological advancement of photography has provided a swift and effortless use through phone cameras, which one can take multiple photos at once and never look at them again. Furthermore, the composition and quality of phone photos are nearly identical. This mass

---

<sup>6</sup> Bajac, *The Invention*, chapter 5: 99.

<sup>7</sup> Bajac, *The Invention*, chapter 5: 100, 101.

<sup>8</sup> Bajac, *The Invention*, chapter 5: 101.

production deprives the picturesqueness and distinction of each photograph taken. It extracts the long and timely process of developing a unique photograph that one can appreciate.

## Bibliography

Bajac, Quentin. *The Invention of Photography*. New York: Abrams, 2002.

Victoria and Albert Museum. "Gustave Le Grey Exhibition." Gustave Le Gray: Sea and Sky Photography. Victoria and Albert Museum, July 15, 2013. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/gustave-le-grey-exhibition/>.