HENRI LEFORT: THE ULTIMATE ENTERTAINER

A SHORT INTRODUCTION

I have been fascinated with the work of Henri Lefort for several decades and some of his staged scenes were among the very first vintage stereoscopic cards I ever bought. Over the years I amassed lots of his images, and looked for whatever information I could find about the man himself. It was not easy task. However, what I discovered made me appreciate his photographs even more and in 1998 I eventually wrote an article about Lefort which was published in the American magazine *Stereo World* under the title "Henri Lefort – A Stereo Wizard" (*Stereo-World* 25:5, November/December 1998). It was a good start but I was convinced then, and still am these days, that the man deserved much better.

In the early 2000s I was in desperate need of some money and sold part of my collection of stereoscopic cards, including over two thirds of the 500 Lefort's staged scenes I had put together. I have regretted that move ever since and have strived to reconstruct my former collection one piece at a time whilst also looking for documents which could illlustrate Lefort's life before he became a stereo photographer. This took me years and the new photos I bought were generally not in such good condition as the previous ones as well as way more expensive ! "C'est la vie !" Once I was satisfied I had enough information and illustrations I decided it was high time to write something more substantial than my 1998 article and the following pages are the result of that work.

Illustration A – Henri Lefort. The Sculptor's Studio. One of his typical staged scenes, hyperstereoscopic, sequential, and crammed with props and sitters.

I am aware of the risks I am incurring by publishing this: the price of Lefort cards will go up, which means I won't be able to buy any new images, and lots of Lefort "experts" will appear on social media and elsewhere, who will pillage my research and will never credit me for their easily acquired "knowledge". It has happened before and it will happen again. However, I do think that what matters most is to give Lefort the credit and recognition he deserves and has not received so far. In this he is very much like most stereoscopic photographers, who are

generally undervalued and understudied. It is my opinion that he is definitely worth all the recognition he can get and my hope that you will share my views once you have read these pages.

I could have tried publishing this work via a Kickstarter but what with the price of paper and shipping costs rising fast the book would have proved expensive to produce and consequently to buy. By publishing it online I make it possible for many more people to read it, and at no cost. I am confident Lefort would not have minded as he was all for the promotion of stereoscopy. I, for one, most certainly don't. I love books as physical objects, but I would rather share this with several hundred readers than with a mere handful of them.

All the illustrations used in the full pdf of this digital book (read HERE) are from my present or former collection (fortunately, I scanned most of the cards before selling them).

Denis Pellerin
May 2022

Illustration B – Lithograph by Cham (real name Charles Amédée de Noé) about a new tax on paper, published in the satirical newspaper *Le Charivari* on August 18th 1871. Nearly 150 years after it was published Cham's cartoon is relevant again. This is what reading books might look like in the near future if the costs of paper and shipping keep going up.

PART ONE – Before the Stereoscope

How can one define a person who, during a lifetime spanning over seventy-six years, two empires, three monarchies, three revolutions and as many epidemics of cholera, was in turn a draughtsman, a painter, a playwright, a lyricist, a composer, a toy-maker, an inventor/manufacturer of optical instruments and a stereoscopic photographer/publisher ?

I think Henri Lefort can be best described as the ultimate entertainer. Throughout the forty odd years of his working life he not only strove to amuse and educate his contemporaries but also to bring them the world in a box, so to speak, whether in the shape of a "polyorama panoptique" or of a Brewster-type stereoscope.

Pierre Henri Amand Lefort was born at Corbeil, Essonne, France, on August 16th 1804, the second child and second boy of Jean Baptiste Nicolas Aubin Lefort, a thirty-one year old primary school teacher, and of his twenty-seven year old wife, Angélique Charlotte Jassenne [1]. The couple had married at Corbeil two years previously on August 16th 1802 and their union had been blessed on June 27th of the following year with the birth of a son who was named Alexis Céline. Two more sons were to come into this world after Henri, first Eusèbe Victor Natalie, on December 25th 1805, then Jean Baptiste Simonide on January 15th 1808. Nothing is known of Henri Lefort's childhood and the 1817 census, which could have given some information about the Lefort's life at Corbeil, is unfortunately missing.

Lefort had just turned fifteen when his mother died, on August 31st 1819. Her brother, Jacques Marie Jassenne and her brother-in-law, Etienne Louis Laurent, signed her death certificate which mentions that her husband, Lefort's father, was then a "maître de pension", which means he was running a private boarding school. In 1824 Lefort turned twenty and, like every twenty-year old young man at the time, he had to draw a number to see whether he was to be drafted or not. I have not yet been able to find out whether he drew a "good" number, which exempted him from being drafted, or a "bad" one which made him a soldier for several years.

On August 24th and 25th 1834, Lefort, now thirty, was one of the witnesses at the civil and religious wedding of Pierre Thomas Levassor (1808-1870) and Anne Morisseau (1812-1874). Levassor was then a clerk in a shop and his bride a "demoiselle de magasin" or shop assistant. Lefort is described in the wedding certificate as an artist living at 33bis rue du Faubourg Poissonnière, in the former third arrondissement of Paris, and a friend of the bride. He was soon to become a very good friend of the groom who, shortly after his marriage, quit shopkeeping to try his luck on the stage where he turned into a great comedian and comic singer.

On April 30th and May 2nd 1835, it was the turn of Levassor, now an actor and a singer, to be one of the witnesses at the wedding of Pierre Henri Amand Lefort and of his bride, Elisa Joséphine Christophe (1806-1887), a native of Antwerpen, Belgium, and the daughter of Jacques Christophe and of his wife Claire Anna Doussais. In both the civil and religious wedding certificates, Lefort is described as a draughtsman but he is said to be living at 33bis rue du Croissant in the former, and at 5, rue des Dames, in the latter [2]. Lefort's father was still alive then and living at Nevers.

On October 21st 1835, Levassor got his first big part in a comedy by Messrs. Théaulon and De Forges, entitled, *La Périchole*, in which the title role was played by Pauline Virginie Déjazet (1798-1875). Chances are Lefort and his wife went to see their friend on the stage of the

Palais-Royal theatre. Mrs Lefort was several months pregnant then and gave birth to a daughter, who was named Céline Léontine, on March 21st 1836. The Leforts were living at the time at 10, rue du Croissant, in the former third arrondissement and in Céline Léontine's reconstructed birth certificate [3] Lefort is described as a painter-draughtsman.

1836 proved to be an important year for Lefort who saw his first play – a one act vaudeville entitled *Un Secret d'État* (A State Secret) – performed at the Ambigu comique theatre from November 28th onwards. His co-author was Adolphe Auguste Lemoine (1812-1880), also known as Montigny or Lemoine-Montigny. Born at Mons, Belgium, on October 5th 1805, Montigny was not a novice in the art of play writing and several of his works had already been produced, mostly at the Ambigu comique [4]. Henri Lefort and Lemoine-Montigny were to remain friends for the rest of their lives and co-wrote a few other pieces together. On February 27th 1837 a one act comedy premiered in 1828 was revived at the Ambigu comique theatre, under the title *Le Banquier empaillé* (The Taxidermied Banker). Originally written by Montigny, the new version was co-authored by Montigny and Lefort. It is described in the press of the time as a "comédie-folie-anecdote" (literally comedy-madness-anecdote) and was thus called because it was funny, full of crazy twists and turns and based on an anecdote told by Louis Philippe, count of Ségur (1753-1830) when he was the French Ambassador to Russia at the court of the Empress Catherine the Great (1784-89). Apparently the Empress had a dog whose name was the same as that of her banker Tom Parkins, whom everyone called Tom. When the dog died, she asked one of her aides to have Tom taxidermied. You can easily guess what confusion ensued. However, in real life as on the stage, all is well that ends well and Tom Parkins lives.

Also in 1837 Lefort published the first of the many comic songs he wrote the lyrics of: *Le Postillon de Mam' Ablou* (Dame Ablou's Postilion). Postilions being a thing of the past, it may not be remiss to remind the reader that the postilion was the person who rode the leading left-hand side – also called nearside – horse of a team or pair drawing a coach or a carriage. Lefort's postilion was actually a parody of a character introduced in Adolphe Adam's opera *Le Postillon de Lonjumeau* (The Postilion from Lonjumeau) which had premiered at the Salle de la Bourse in Paris on October 13th 1836. In the opera there is a song about a young and gallant postilion, who is loved by all the women of the area, whatever their conditions, and ends up marrying the Queen of a desert island ! In Lefort's composition the postilion has some success with the fair sex but is also a heavy drinker. As was common then with comic songs, Lefort's *Dame Ablou's Postilion* is half-sung and half-spoken. It is introduced on the music score as a "dialogue found at the foot of the hill of Ponthierry by Jean Lepailleux, stable lad, and set to music by Brunet Ducornet, coachman, known as the Terror of the valves" (this is a terrible pun on the name Ducornet and the instrument called "cornet à pistons", cornet in English, which uses "pistons" or valves). I very much doubt Lefort's *Postilion* would make any modern audience laugh, but at the time it was an immediate and lasting success, probably due to the performance of the person who created it, singer-actor Pierre Thomas Levassor, Lefort's good friend. The music of the song was composed by musician and violinist Antoine Louis Clapisson (1806-1866), with whom Lefort would collaborate on several occasions and who generally signed his less "serious" compositions under the name Waldimir.

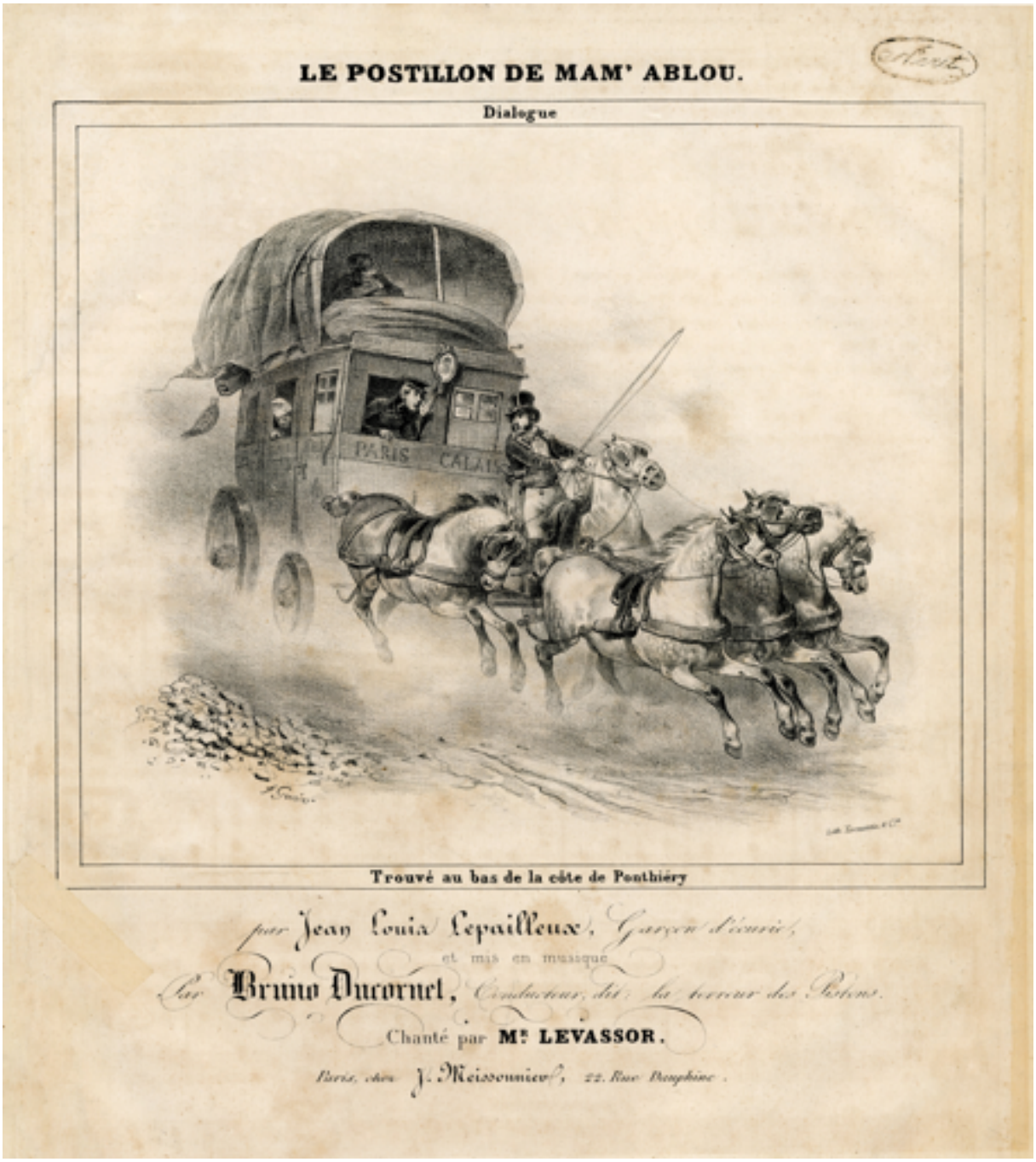

Illustration 01 – Music Sheet Cover for Henri Lefort's *Le Postillon de Mam' Ablou*. Drawing by François Grenier de Saint-Martin, alias Francisque Martin Grenier.

Before the year was over, Lefort and Clapission's *Postilion* had been turned into a piano rondeau by Karl Schunke (1801-1839) and a piano quadrille for four hands by Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Tolbecque (1797-1869). All of the music scores of the *Postilion*, be they the original one by Clapisson and Lefort, or the variants by Schunke and Tolbecque, are illustrated with the same lithograph by Charles Henri Hancké (1808-1869) – who was the manager of the lithographic firm Formentin and Co. for fifteen years – after a drawing by François Grenier de Saint-Martin, pseudonym of Francisque Martin Grenier (1793-1867).

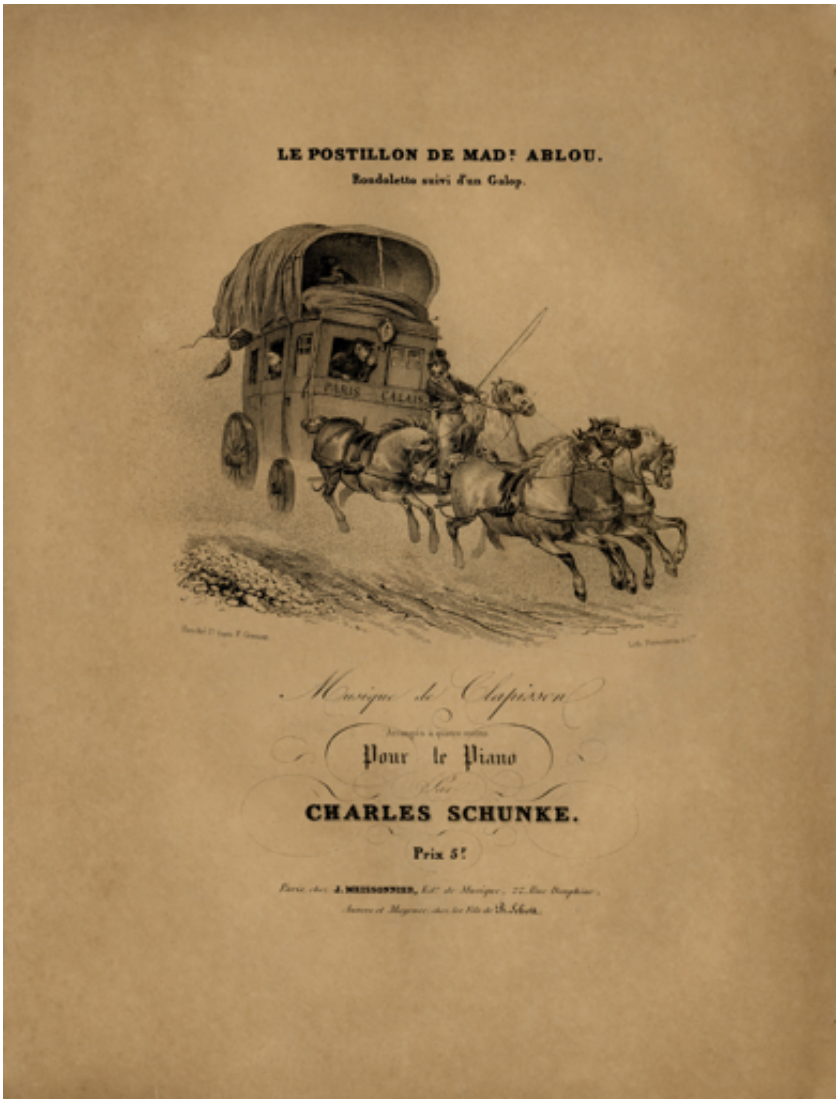

Illustration 02 – Music Sheet Covers for Karl Schunke's piano rondo inspired and Musard's quadrille, both by Lefort's *Postillon*. Drawing by François Grenier de Saint-Martin, alias Francisque Martin Grenier.

Such was the success of the song that its main protagonist also became the subject of a lithograph (unfortunately unsigned) that was published in the satirical periodical *Le Charivari* on October 14th 1837. It features "Le postillon de Mam Ablou, la fleur des positillons, le bijou des Dames" (Dame Ablou's postilion, the cream of postilions, the pet of the fair sex) standing next to two horses and lighting his pipe while a servant in wooden clogs is bringing him a drink.

Illustration 03 – Le Charivari, October 14th 1837. *Le postillon de Mam' Ablou, la fleur des positillons, le bijou des Dames*.

Also in 1837, the pair came up with another comic scene entitled *Lolo à la correctionnelle* (Lolo at the Police Court) the lyrics of which I have only recently found. I bought the music score online thinking my search was over but when the parcel arrived it only contained the cover of the said music score, with the names of Lefort, Clapisson and Levassor, but no bars and no lyrics. The lithograph on the cover is signed by the elusive Frédéric Bouchot.

In 1838 Lefort and Clapisson pubished two comic songs. The first one was entitled *La Basse-Cour* (The Farmyard) and was dedicated by Clapisson to his friend, society singer Charles Barthélémy Chaudesaigues (1799-1858) [5]. The second song, the lyrics of which were co-written by Lefort and librettist Adolphe de Leuven (1802-1884) [6], was called *Une Visite à la Nourrice* (A Visit to the Wet Nurse) and was sung with great effect by Levassor. It was common practice then for middle class people from the capital to put their progeny in the hands of a wet nurse who lived outside of Paris and was supposed to make sure that the baby had plenty of fresh air and rich milk. The parents would visit the child regularly and the song is about one of those weekly visits.

Illustration 04 (left) – Front page of the Music sheet for *Lolo à la correctionnelle*. Lithograph by Frédéric Bouchot.
Illustration 05 (right)– Front page of the Music sheet for *Une Visite à la Nourrice*.

That same year, 1838, saw the death of Lefort's mother in-law, Marie Anne Bouffart, and the premiere at the Gaîté theatre of a one-act vaudeville by Lefort, *La Tarentule* (The Tarentula). In France, when you see someone running around all the time and being generally over-busy you say that he has been bitten by a tarentula (piqué de la tarentule). The bite of the spider does not actually make people agitated but only continuous movement is supposed to cure the general lethargy caused by its poison. In the play, the mayor of a village in Provence has workers pull down a place where the youth of the area used to dance, thus causing some violent protest. Potinet the mayor, piqued by the villagers' reaction, retaliates by banning any dancing. One of the villagers, who is especially fond of dancing and resents the interdiction, has the mayor believe that he has been bitten by a tarentula and that he has contaminated all the people he has shaken hands with. Those include the members of the municipal council and the local gendarmes. The only remedy is for them all to dance and since they cannot possibly enforce an edict they are themselves breaking everything gets back to normal and dancing is permitted again. One reviewer, who did not really want to commit, said of the play that "it made the audience laugh" and added that "if it does not draw people to the theatre it will not keep them away from it either" [7]

In 1839, while the scientific and artistic millieux were busy wondering how showman and inventor Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre had been able to fix on a metal plate the images from the camera obscura, Lefort, Montigny and Horace Henry Meyer (1801-1870) were putting finishing touches to, and rehearsing, their fairy play in three acts and a prologue, *Le Sylphe d'Or* (The Sylph of Gold), which premiered on April 13th at the Gaîté theatre. Having the play staged there was made easier by the fact that Montigny and Meyer were by then co-managers of La Gaîté. The critics and reviewers did not have much to say about the text of the play or

of the morale of the story, namely that gold is the root of all evils and does not make anyone happy, but commented at length on the richness of the costumes, the magnificence of some of the sets and on a particular ballet danced by children disguised as rabbits. As in most fairy plays, there is a poor hero (here a miner named Cyprien), a genie (the Sylph of Gold) who has to obey the person who has freed him from his prison in the bowels of the earth, and a baddie, Desire, who encites Cyprien to wish for more money and more luxuries. *Le Sylphe d'or* was a realtive success, but its popularity was hampered by the competition, in the nearby theatre of l'Ambigu comique, of another fairy play, *Les Pilules du Diable* (The Devil's Pills). *Le Sylphe d'Or* was to be Lefort's last foray into the world of play writing and from then on he devoted his talent to song writing. The experience had been a good one, though, and its effects proved to have a lasting influence.

In 1840, Lefort came up with another very successful song, which made use of his theatrical experience. *Un Entracte au Paradis* (An Interval in the Gods) is set in the highest part of a theatre, where the cheapest seats were located and the spectators were all from the working class [8]. Unlike a lot of the wealthier part of the audience, the people in the gods did not go to the theatre to be seen but to actually watch what was happening on the stage. They were a good-natured but rather noisy lot, clapping, booing, and loudly commenting on the action. Their responses to a play made it a success or a flop. Just over a century after Lefort wrote his song, French film director Marcel Carné devoted a film to the theatrical world of the 1830s and 1840s, which he called *Les Enfants du Paradis* (The Children of Paradise, the latter word being a synomym of "the gods"). It is a tribute to the theatre as well as a love story which centres on the imaginary character of Garance, on poet and murderer Pierre François Lacenaire (1803-1836) and on two actual giants of the Parisian stage, mime Jean-Gaspard Deburau (1796-1846) and actor Frédérick Lemaître (1800-1876).

Lefort's song is about two Parisian boys who pay for their seats in the gods and make a general nuisance of themselves. It is clear from the start they have come to be naughty and the song ends with them getting bored and contemplating going to another place to cause some more disruption. The front page of the original music score bears an illustration by Jean Ignace Isidord Gérard, better known under his pseudonym of Jean-Jacques Grandville (1803-1847). It shows one of the boys giving a five-finger salute and poking out his tongue at the adults around him.

Un Entracte au Paradis, like most of Lefort's comic scenes is half-spoken half-sung and this time the music was signed by a musician only known by his pseudonym of Max. The piece became an instant success thanks to the talent of its performer, Levassor, who had a way of saying some parts of it – especially the expression "à la porte … de quoi ?" that were soon on everybody's lips.

> A la porte … de quoi à la porte ? … de quoi ? …
> Qui qui fait la loi, si c'n'est moi ?
> A la porte … de quoi ? … à la porte ? de quoi ? …
> Je veux faire ici la loi, oui, moi, quoi ! … [9]

Such was the success of the song that composer and conductor Philippe Musard (1792-1859) quickly turned it into one of those quadrilles he was famous for.

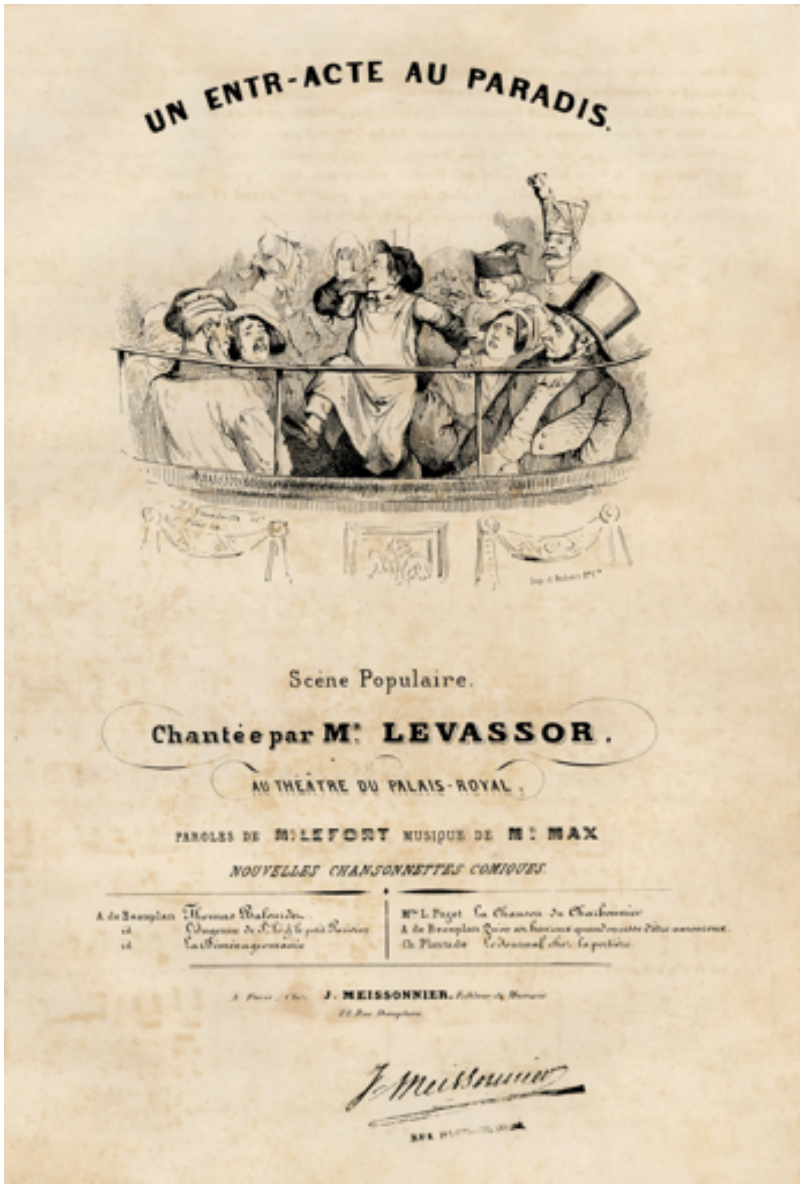

Illustration 06 – Front page of the Music sheet for *Un Entr'acte au Paradis.* Drawing by Grandville.

After the triumph of *Un Entracte au Paradis* Lefort doubled his efforts and in 1841 he published four new pieces to music by Antoine Louis Clapisson: *Le Cocher de Cabriolet* (The Cabriolet Coachman), *Le Chanteur Cosmopolite* (The Cosmopolitan Singer), *L'épaulette d'or* (The Golden epaulette) and *Les Jeux Innocens* [sic] (The Innocent Parlour Games). The games referred to in Lefort's song were those played, at the time and later, in the salons of the middle-class. A lot of them were not as innocent as their generic name implies and were as many ways of flirting with the opposite sex. They often included forfeits, some of which involving kissing.

The last two songs were created by Pierre Frédéric Achard (1808-1856), an actor from the Théâtre du Palais-Royal who, in 1844, was hired by Lemoine-Montigny and joined the players of the Gymmase before returning to the Palais-Royal in 1850.

Illustration 07 – Music sheet covers for *Le Chanteur Cosmopolite* (left) and *Les Jeux Innocens* (right).

Illustration 08 (left) – One of the forfeits of the "innocent games", the kiss *à la* nun. The penitent, on his knees, kisses a lady through the back of a chair. Illustration from the book *Les Jeux Innocents de Société*, by Joseph Poisle-Desgranges (1823-1879).
Illustration 09 (right) – Portrait of Pierre Frédéric Achard. Lithograph by Marie-Alexandre Menut (1812-1883), better known under his pseudonym Alophe. Published in the *Galerie de la Presse, de la Litérature et des Beaux-Arts*.

The first two songs were performed with great success and talent by Levassor who also sang another one of Lefort's compositions entitled *Le Nouveau Bélisaire* (The New Belisarius) inspired by a tale told about Flavius Belisarius who, despite being a successful military commander, is said to have been blinded and reduced to begging by order of his master, Emperor Justinian. Over the years Belisarius became to symbolise the ingratitude of the great and powerful towards those who serve them faithfully, and inspired many stories, dramas, and paintings, including one by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825).

With the collaboration between Lefort and Levassor being so important, here is the opportunity to tell you more about the latter. Pierre Thomas Levassor was born in Fontainebleau on January 22nd 1808, the son of a forty-eight year old retired army captain and knight of the Legion of honour, Pierre Levassor (1760-1832), and of his wife, Marie Anne Chartier (1789-1848). Levassor made his theatrical debut in 1831 in *Le Charpentier* ou *Vice et Pauvreté* (The Carpenter, or Vice and Poverty) at the théâtre des Nouveautés. Despite the talented actors that worked there, les Nouveautés, were not a profitable venture and closed in 1832. As we saw earlier Levassor found a job as a clerk in a shop and was still working there at the time of his wedding in 1834 but he soon left his shopkeeping days behind and embraced his true vocation when he was hired at the théâtre du Palais-Royal where he was to become one of the greatest comic actors and singers of his generation. In 1840 he briefly left the Palais-Royal for the théâtre des Variétés but was back there after three years. Levassor had a very mobile face, and could change his voice and mannerisms at will so that he excelled at playing multiple parts in songs and plays. In *Brelan de Troupiers*, for instance, he played a young private or troupier, as well as the latter's father and grandfather, while in *Le Troubadour Omnibus* (The Omnibus Minstrel) he held ten different parts !

Illustration 10 – Marie Alexandre Menut, aka Alophe. Portrait of Levassort published in the the *Galerie de la Presse, de la Litérature et des Beaux-Arts*.

Levassor was especially good at impersonating English characters and used this particular talent in such songs as *Le Postillon de Mam' Ablou* (Mrs Ablou's Postilion), *L'Anglais et le ramoneur* (The Englishman and the chimney-sweep), *Les Rêves d'un Anglais* (The Dreams of an Englishman), *L'Anglais et le Gamin de Paris* (The Englishman and the Paris Boy), *L'Anglais mélomane* (The music lover from England), *L'Anglais Touriste* (The English Tourist), etc., and in such plays as *Les trois Dimanches* (the three Sundays, the first one in which he played the part of a native of Albion), *Sir John Esbrouff*, *Le poisson d'Avril* (April's Fool), *Les Chansons de Désaugiers* (Désaugiers' Songs, in which he played Milord Dog) [10], etc.

Levassor performed several times in Great Britain (1843, 1844, 1848, 1851, etc.), sometimes with Virigine Déjazet. He even spent a whole year there in 1855-6. He was a great favourite of the public on the other side of the Channel and is often mentioned in the British press.

Illustration 11 – Jules Joseph Guillaume Bourdet (1799-1869). Lithograph published in 1836 in the satirical newspaper *Le Charivar*i and showing Virginie Déjazet as Cadet Batteux and Levassor as Milord Dog (not Broc) in the play *Les Chansons de Désaugiers*.

To get back to Lefort, another important event marked the year 1841 for him: the birth, on July 19th, of his only son, Georges Aubin Néré, who was baptised two days later at the Saint Laurent Church. The godmother was one Elisabeth Benoit, who was then living at the Leforts', and the godfather Victor Néré Lefort. It was later said that Levassor was Georges's godfather but the baptism register tells a different story. Thanks to Georges's reconstructed birth certificate and the baptism register we also know that, by then, the Leforts were living at 4bis rue de la Grange-aux-Belles, in the former fifth arrondissement (now in the tenth). The name of the street, literally "the barn of the beautiful girls", was a reference to a brothel that used to exist on a farm at the end of the street when it was still a narrow, tortuous lane.

In 1842, Lefort's name appeared for the first time in the most popular trade directory of the time, the *Almanach du commerce et de l'industrie Didot-Bottin*. Lefort's entry is a very short one and reads:

> Lefort, homme de lettres [11], Grange-aux-Belles, 4bis.

In 1842 our literary man published two new songs. The first one, *Les Guêpes de la rue Vivienne* (The Wasps of the rue Vivienne), was written in collaboration with composer Auguste Marquerie (1815-1864), while the second one, *Les Indiscrétions d'un garçon* (The indiscretions of a bachelor) was to a tune by the prolific Louis Clapisson.

Despite my efforts, I have not been able to find the lyrics of the former but the latter tells the story of a young man who, on the eve of his wedding to a pure innocent woman, is determined to erase all traces of his amorous past and burns one by one all the love letters, notes and tokens he has piously kept in a box. Needless to say that both songs were performed with great success by Levassor.

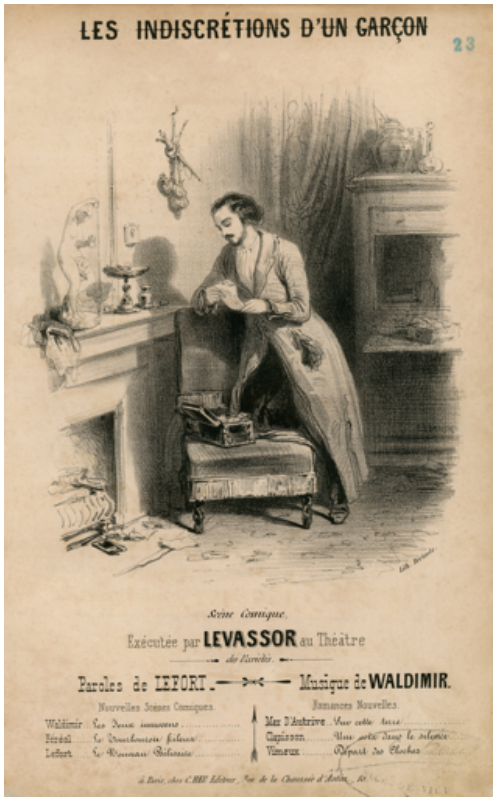

Illustration 12 – Music Sheet Cover for *Les Indiscrétions d'un garçon*. Note that two other songs by Clapisson/Waldimir and Lefort – *Les Jeux Innocens* and *Le Nouveau Bélisaire* – are advertised at the bottom of the lithograph.

In 1843, Lefort and Clapission came up with *Les Gobe-Mouches* but I could not find any new songs for 1844 and 1845. In 1846, however, Lefort and Marquerie collaborated again to create *Le Touriste et la Bergère* (The Tourist and the Shepherdess), a comic duet sung by Levassor and Virginie Déjazet. The lithograph on the cover of the music sheet is by Eugène Hippolyte Forest (1808-1891), a pupil of painter Camille Roqueplan (1803-1855) and the usual collaborator of Grandville, whom I have mentioned earlier. Forest drew on the lithographic stone all of this master illustrator and caricaturist's drawings.

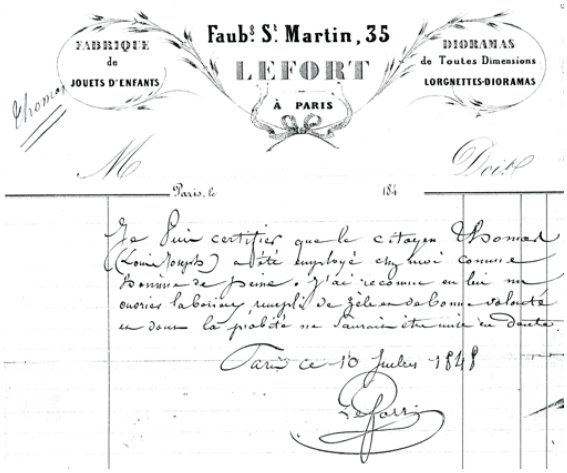

Illustration 13 (left) – *Le Touriste et la Bergère*. Front page of the music sheet featuring a lithograph by Eugène Hipplyte Forest.
Illustration 14 (right) – Reference letter for one Louis Joseph Thomas, a former employee of Lefort, on a letter with a header. Signed by Lefort himself.

By 1846, Lefort had operated a job conversion and his entry in the trade directory now describes him as a toy-maker with premises at 35, rue du Faubourg Saint-Martin. There is no clue as to why Lefort switched from being a song writer to a toy maker and seller but it is likely that writing was not putting enough food on the table and that, with two children now old enough to appreciate toys, the change was for the better. After all, toy-making was still a form of entertainment, even though the audience was a different one, and it must have allowed Lefort not only to spend more time with his children but also to create toys specially for them, something Céline and Georges must have loved. There is very little information about Henri Lefort's activity as a toy maker and seller but a reference letter dated July 10th 1848 and written for one of his former employees, one Louis Joseph Thomas, on a paper with a business header (actually a blank invoice) reveals that, by then, Lefort was already specialising in optical toys, especially dioramas of all sizes and dioramic lorgnettes.

Lefort's interest in optical toys was confirmed on February 21st 1849 when he applied for a fifteen year patent (Number 7974) for "various improvements in the construction of the optical devices known as Polyoramas panoptiques". The main improvements consisted in making the polyorama less cumbersome by using bellows and to allow different effects to be applied to the tableaux inserted in it. Lefort was not the inventor of the polyorama (basically an optical box in which slides painted or printed to give day and night effects, like Daguerre's diorama on which it was based, were inserted and could be either frontlit – daytime view - or backlit – nighttime view) which is often attributed to Pierre Séguin, a professional lanternist. However, as early as 1829, publisher and bookseller Auguste Nicolas Nepveu (1775-1837) was offering a "panorama de salon", followed in 1833 by a "cyclorama" or "autorama catoptrique" and in 1835 by a "diorama de salon", all of which followed the same principles as Daguerre's 1822 diorama. Lefort's 1849 patent begins with the words, "Generally the

polyorama panoptique is a camera obscura by means of which one can see in each of the slides which are introduced in it two different effects, i.e. two tableaux in one", which clearly show the polyorama existed before 1849 and that he never considered himself the inventor of this optical instrument. He did a lot, however, to make it more portable, more user-friendly, more popular and less expensive and on November 29th 1853, then on August 16th 1855, he even applied for additions to his 1849 patent, in which he describes further improvements.

The polyorama and the lorgnette dioramique, also known as "lorgnette pittoresque" (an even cheaper version of the polyorama, using a simple eyepiece at the end of which a round slide was inserted), were Lefort's way of opening the world to his contemporaries. Dioramic slides of various European cities were available (Paris, London, Venice, etc.), as well as images of more exotic places like Gibraltar, Moscow, or Napoleon's grave on the island of Saint Helena. Before photography and the stereoscope, they allowed armchair adventurers to escape to other countries without any of the usual risks associated with travelling.

Illustration 15 – Slide for a lorgnette pittoresque of the lake at the Bois de Boulogne (left) and slide for a polyorama panoptique showing the house at of King Henri II of France and of his mistress, Diane de Poitiers, at La Rochelle (right).

On August 25th 1852 Lefort, now described as a maker of optical instruments, was back at the patent office to apply for a patent (Number 14365) for an optical device of his own invention, which he called the Eidoscope [12]. By then, however, Lefort had become deeply interested in another optical instrument, the stereoscope, which had originally been invented in Britain by Charles Wheatstone (1802-1875), before being modified by David Brewster (1781-1868). Brewster's stereoscope was then improved by French optician Louis Jules Duboscq (1817-1886), before being officially launched at the Great Exhibition, the first of its kind, which was held in London from May 1st to October 15th 1851 and attracted over six million visitors.

Ilustration 16 – “The Transept of the Great Exhibition, looking North. Engraved by W. Lacey from a daguerreotype by Mayall.” From J. Tallis & Co.’s *History and Description of the Crystal Palace, and the Exhibition of the World’s Industry in 1851*.

PART TWO – Lefort's stereoscopic career

It is, unfortunately, impossible to know when and how Lefort took an interest in the stereoscope. However, being a maker of optical instruments himself, he must have been aware of what was going on in his field not only in Paris but also abroad, and must have seen Jules Duboscq's first instruments and images as soon as they were released in the French capital, towards the end of the year 1850. I could not find out whether Lefort made the trip to London for the Great Exhibition but there is no doubt that by the end of 1852 he was already selling stereoscopic pictures. These were not photographs but coloured lithographed drawings, making stereoscopy available to a larger public [13]. Duboscq, in France, and Frederick Hale Holmes, in Britian, had been the first to create and publish sets of lithographed geometrical figures and the former had later produced lithographs from the stereoscopic daguerreotypes he had made. Lefort, at least at the beginning, did not use photography but drawings. Although there is no direct evidence to confirm it, it is my belief that he himself drew the images he sold. One must not forget he had been a painter and a draughtsman, as well as a toy-maker and that he knew about optics. He was therefore, more than capable of understanding the principles of stereoscopy and of applying his artistic skills to the production of those remarkable pictures. Most of the lithographs he produced show toys and games: a horse tricyle, a poodle on wheels, a drum-beating rabbit, also on wheels, toy gardening tools including a wheelbarrow and a rake, a string-puppet, a doll, a set of bricks, a toy theatre, dominoes, skittles, a target with some darts on it, as well as some paper cocottes (by far my favourite in the set) [14].

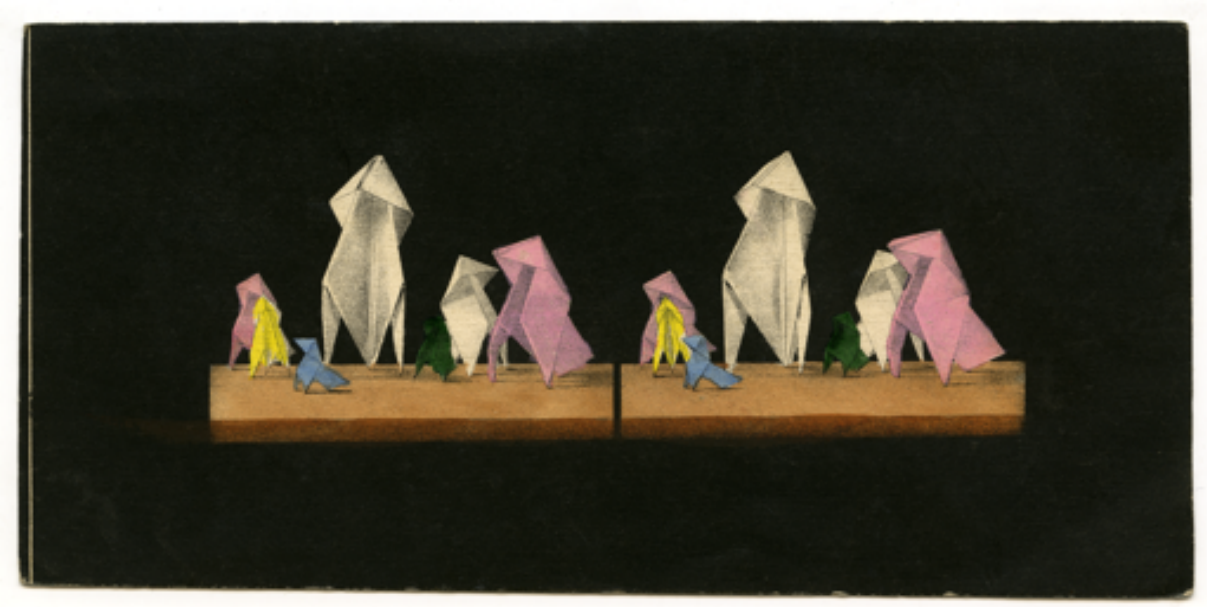

Illustration 17 – Stereoscopic lithograph by Henri Lefort. Paper cocottes.

There are also a couple of musical instruments (a trumpet, a drum with its sticks) a few astronomical ones (a telescope, an orrery), and two striking compositions featuring optical toys. The first one shows two Brewster-type stereoscopes, a Polyorama panoptique with bellows, and Lefort's own eidoscope. It is shown in the book "Stereoscopy: the Dawn of 3D", authored by yours truly, edited by Dr. Brian May and published by the London Stereoscopic Company. The second image is even more striking and although it shows but one stereoscope on its stand, it is displayed inside a transparent volume – made up of six octagons and eight triangles – on the faces of which one can read: Stereoscope des Enfants; Polyorama

Diagraphique, Jeux Pyriques; Étrennes 1853, Eidostrope; Optique amusante, Paris, Polyorama Panoptique, Lorgnette enchantée. I know of two versions of that image, the first one being but a draft of the more elaborate and better drawn lithograph.

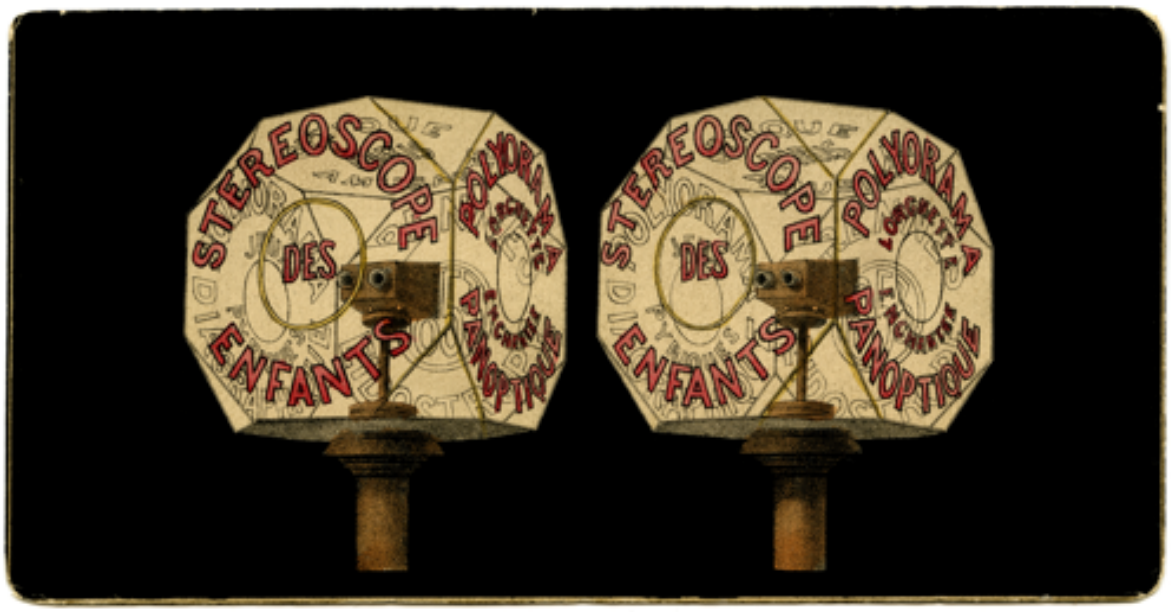

Illustration 18 – The more elaborate version of the Stereoscope in the transparent polyhedron.

"Étrennes" are gifts which were given on New Year's Day and "Etrennes 1853" clearly indicates these images were made by the end of 1852, ready to be bought as gifts, along with a stereoscope specially adapted to children. The texts on the faces of the volume all describe things Lefort was selling at the time, some of which, like the "Lorgnette enchantée" and the "Polyorama panoptique" he actually specialised in. The set has long been attributed to Duboscq but there are so many clues pointing to Lefort as its maker that I have no doubt he was behind it, which makes perfect sense.

It is unclear when Lefort started taking his own stereoscopic photographs. In the trade directories he is still listed as a toy-maker up to the year 1856 included. His address, however, changed from 35 to 33, rue du Faubourg-Saint-Martin in the 1851 Bottin but that is the only notable modification and since number 35 seems to have disappeared chances are Lefort remained in the same building which simply got a new number.

On January 1st 1854 Lefort was mentioned in relation with Levassor, in an article published in the musical magazine *Le Ménestrel* under the title "Le Polyorama". On Sunday December 25th 1853, Levassor was invited to sing at a soirée organised by the Countess de S*** and performed, among other pieces, Lefort's new composition, *Les Plaisirs du Village*, to a score by the late composer Antoine Jean Michel Romagnesi (1781-1850). When the song was over, he gave the name of the lyricist, whom he described as the well-known author of *Le Touriste et la Bergère*. The audience asked for an encore but Levassor's vocal chords being in need of a well-deserved rest [15] he rang for his groom, a young Frenchman with a very English-like type:

– “John,” he said, “show the *polyorama panoptique* to these ladies.”
And John brought a sort of cute portable mahogany theatre, with four compartments; everybody took their seat and their turn, some looking over their neighbour’s shoulders. […]
Levassor then said:
– “John, show these ladies Peace.”
And one coud see rich harvests, busy plowmen, a pure sky and villagers dancing.
– “John, show these ladies War.”
And a cry of alarm escaped from every mouth. Without changing the tableau, without even touching it, John had set fire to the farmhouses, devastated the fields; there was fire everywhere and one could see there must be cannons nearby; dying soldiers had replaced the plowmen; and what had happened to the merry dancers ?
– “Ladies,” Levassor continued, “this is the theatre of surprises and wonders. It was made by the author of *Les Plaisirs du Village* who is not only a lyricist and a poet but also a double view painter in all the sense of the word. Thanks to his palette you can see the Hippodrome without leaving your home and if the cart of the Hippodrome is too slow for you, John, with a flip of a finger, will take you to the aerobatics of the Circus as fast as thought travels; and it will cost you nothing, ladies, nothing but the pleasure of admiring this charming box M. Lefort managed to make as small as a pair of opera glasses. During the lengthy recitatives of our great opera singers, you can sneak away to Switzerland, Germany, or Saint-Petersburg, right in the middle of the Stemboch arcade, which is gaslit like every arcade in Paris.”
– “M. Lefort, ladies, is currently writing a song about this indispensable addition to every evening spent in our largest theatres, and you will be the first to hear it from me.”
– Then Levassor was gone … A few minutes later he was playing *Saturnin Prudhomme à la recherche d’un logement* (Saturnin Prudhomme looking for lodgings) in the salons of Count M***. He is a clever man who can say what time of the evening and where exactly Levassor will be next. He is everywhere and nowhere. He is perpetual movement personified.
L. H. [16]

It is a real shame Lefort does not seem to have completed the song Levassor is mentioning as it would have been interesting to know his thoughts on the subject of the polyorama. Maybe he could not make fun of an invention he had contributed so much to improve and promote. Or perhaps his song was too similar to the “optical scene”, with lyrics by Ernest Bourget (1814-1864) and music by one J. B. Josse, Levassor had performed in 1840 at the théâtre des Variétés under the title *Tire la ficelle ma femme* (Pull the string woman). My guess is we will never know.

Illustration 19 – Music Sheet Cover for *Tire la ficelle ma femme*, sung by Levassor.

On 6 April 1855, first at the mairie of the former 5th arrondissement then at Saint-Laurent's Church, Lefort's daughter, Céline Léontine, married a young engraver from Chaumont, Haute-Marne, by the name of Paul Nicolas Deverdun. Levassor was one of the witnesses who signed the wedding certificate.

A couple of months later, Lefort was exhibiting under number 4904 at the Palais de l'Industrie, where the 1855 Paris International Exhibition was being held. The short entry devoted to Lefort in the official catalogue simply reads:

> 4904 Lefort (P.-H.), à Paris, r. du Fg-St-Martin, 33. — Optique amusante ; polyoramas ; stéréoscopes ; eïdostropes. Dioramas avec appareil diagraphiques

Fortunately, a longer, if somewhat rather cryptic, description of what Lefort was exhibiting at the Palais de l'Industrie was published by one Henri Boudin on pages 95 and 96 of the guide book he devoted to the Paris exhibition, *Le palais de l'industrie universelle: ouvrage descriptif ou analytique des produits les plus remarquables de l'exposition de 1855.*

> **LEFORT, faubourg Saint-Martin, 33, à Paris.**
> Optics for entertainment
> The polyoramas and dioramas exhibited by M. Lefort offer, whatever their dimensions, the widest range of effects. Day and night effects, Moonlight effect, gaslight, illuminations, firewords, volcanic eruptions, fires, etc. Animated tableaux – Wind, leaves, sun, thunderstorm, lightning, waves, snow. – Polyoramas with cameras obscura.
> These polyoramas have a double instrument, in which one can see the effects on the tableaux as in the simple panorama. They can be used to draw from life. They come with a portfolio including all the equipment needed for drawing. These instruments are very portable. – Stereoscopes. – Dioscopes. – Paris at night. – Fire and Water. – Travel wherever you wish ! – Cylinder optics, etc.

> All the articles exhibited by M. Lefort, whether serious or for entertaining purposes, bear the mark of a thorough scientific knowledge of his art. [17]

Less than two months into the exhibition, on June 21st, Lefort's father died at Corbeil, aged eighty-one years old. Lefort himself signed the death certificate along with one of his cousins, Eugène Pierre Jacques Jassenne.

Before the year was over, Lefort's name was mentioned in the photographic journal *La Lumière* in an article written by Ernest Conduché about the photographic instruments exhibited at the Palais de l'Industrie. In the short section he devotes to the stereoscope, Conduché mentions Duboscq, Lueille and Lefort as makers of good instruments. [18]

Illustration 20 – The statue of Napoleon III at the eastern entrance of the Palais de l'Industrie, where the 1855 exhibition was held.

The year 1856 started tragically for Lefort. His only daughter, Céline Léontine, who had just got married the year before, died in childbirth at her parents' house on January 30th. She was two months short of twenty ! The child she was bearing did not survive either.

Unsurprisingly, nothing is heard of Lefort in 1856 but he is still described as a toy-maker in the Bottin trade directory. In 1857, however, his name leaves the Bimbeloterie category to be listed under Optics. Note that the entry is very similar to the one used in the catalogue of the 1855 exhibition.

> Lefort (P. H.), optique amusante, polyoramas, stéréoscopes, eïdostropes, dioramas avec appareils diagraphiques et autres, expos. 1855, Faub.-St-Martin, 33

Two years after the death of his wife Céline, on May 27th 1858, Paul Nicolas Deverdun married again. His second wife's name was Anastasie Doublet and the wedding took place at the mairie of the third arrondissement. The reconstructed certificate unfortunately does not mention the names of the witnesses.

Although there is nothing to confirm the hypothesis, my guess is Lefort started taking stereo photographs around that period. By then he was renting at 69, rue de la Grange-aux-Belles, a very large studio which was actually a former factory. He had at his disposal a huge space which he made the most of. It is important to underline that Lefort is, to my knowledge, the only stereo photographer to have taken staged photos in such big surroundings. Artists like Alfred Silvester, in Britain, have some of their compositions packed with people but they were made in rather tight spaces. Lefort often used a lot of models but so big was his studio that there is usually a lot of space between them. I do not know who taught him photography or what sort of camera he used but three things must be made clear at once:

- all of Lefort's staged stereos were made with sequential exposures,
- all are rather hyper (exaggerated depth)
- none were taken outside.

In this and other respects, Lefort has a lot in common with illusionist, actor and film maker Georges Méliès (1861-1938), about whom his grand-daughter, Madeleine Malthète-Méliès, wrote: "if he refuses to shoot outside it is because he does not want to break the enchantment of a world where everything is but an illusion" [19]. This actually makes a lot of sense since, when you work inside, you can hold sway over everything, whereas in the open there are lots of things which escape your control. And one must not forget that Lefort was familiar with the theatre and how things operated there. He was probably feeling more at ease staging his scenes like a stage manager arranges the actors, the props and the sets for more effect. His way of working anticipates by several decades the first film studios.

On August 2nd 1859, Lefort brought to the dépôt légal ninety-four staged scenes to be copyrighted. Censorship had been re-established in France in 1852 [20] and everything that was published, whether books, engravings, lithographs, plays, or even photographs, had to pass through the hands of the censors to be approved. Lefort's first ninety-four images were numbered 1 to 181, with several missing numbers. It was not uncommon then for photographers to bring to the dépôt légal a selection of their production and not the whole of it. Lefort's images were registered under numbers 4894 to 4988, with this short and vague description: *Scènes diverses nº 1 à 181* (Various scenes no. 1 to 181).

Eighteen days later, on August 20th, Lefort was back at the dépôt légal with an additional eighteen scenes which were entered under numbers 5397 to 5415 and described as "Scènes diverses nº 1 to 213". It is not difficult to see that out of two hundred and thirteen images Lefort had made by then, he only registered one hundred and twelve, which leaves out one hundred and one images we know nothing of. There is a lot to say against censorship, but in the case of Lefort's and other French stereo photographers' production, it does have its advantages as it allows the historian to know that the photos thus registered were made before a specific date and in what order they were copyrighted. And since the photos have been carefully kept, we know which scenes were staged in 1858-9 – if not all of them, at least a fair proportion of them – and which ones were made after that period.

Illustration 21 – Henri Lefort. One of the stereoscopic cards copyrighted in 1859. One of several staged scenes featuring laundry girls.

It will not be a surprise for the reader to learn that, from 1859 onwards, Lefort's name appeared in the trade directory in the category Photographers (Artists), although the description in the 1859 directory was still the same as the one from 1857. In 1860 it changed to "Lefort (P.-H.), Faub. St-Martin, 33", while from 1861 to 1865 it read: "Lefort (P. H.), épreuves stéréoscopiques, groupes, intérieurs, églises, vues pittoresques sur cartes et dioramiques, Faub.-St-Martin, 33" (*Lefort (P.-H.), stereoscopic slides, groups, interiors, churches, picturesque views on card and dioramic, Faub.-St-Martin, 33*).

The dioramic cards mentioned in the directory are better known these days under the name of "tissues". They were photographic images printed on very thin paper and painted with watercolour on the back. The back was then protected by a kind of tissue paper – hence the name – which diffused the light. The print and the tissue paper were sandwiched between two cut-out cardboard mounts. When frontlit the photograph appeared in black and white but when backlit the image, like the paintings of the diorama, was seen in full colour. Effects could be added to give the illusion of a night scene and sometimes figures were painted on the image which were only revealed when it was held to the light. Such "surprises" could include a train on a bridge, a balloon in the sky, a ship on the sea, etc. Very often too the highlights of the images, be they candles, chandeliers, or jewels, were pricked with a pin and since they were letting more light through, they appeared brighter than the rest of the picture. Sometimes small portions of the image were cut out and covered with coloured gels to give the illusion of a lit window, a lantern, an open door, etc. Lefort used his experience with the polyorama panoptique to create lots of different effects in his stereoscopic images and was one of the first to publish tissue cards. His very first tissues often had only one piece of cut out cardboard on the front, none on the back and a large piece of coloured gel covered the whole surface of the image. Lefort's later tissues are usually very easy to recognise as he would also often paint the back of the tissue paper with grey or blue paint.

Illustration 22 – Henri Lefort. One of Lefort's tissues (back and front)

I must say that, although Lefort's tissues are some of the best that were made at the time, I personally prefer it when his photographs are simply mounted on a cardboard mount. There is a very simple reason for this: with tissues, the photographic image is much smaller than with ordinary cards and there is consequently less to see. Lefort's scenes abound in props and figures and a lot of these are unfortunately lost in tissues. Below is the same scene – actually two variants of the same scene – published as an ordinary stereo card and as a tissue. It will be easy for the reader to see my point.

Illustration 23 – Henri Lefort. The same scene published as a normal card (top) and as a tissue (bottom).

After these general considerations, why not have a closer look at some of the staged scenes Lefort copyrighted in 1859 ?

The first of these were set in a much smaller space than his later compositions, a setting which I like to describe as a drawing room with an eagle clock (actually a clock on top of which is the figure of an eagle with spread wings which can be made out in each and every single image). As with each of the many sets Lefort used throughout his photographic career, several different scenes were staged there which, again, feature fewer people than in later photographs (no more than three to eight). It seems to me that, like the eagle figure on the clock, Lefort was just spreading his wings and testing what could be achieved.

Illustration 24 – Henri Lefort. One of the scenes featuring the “eagle clock”. Note that this is a later print, with a B.K. (Adolphe Block) mount. French mounts can be very misleading.

The drawing-room was then converted into a bedroom with a four poster bed for a dozen more rather intimate scenes showing a lady being visited by some friends in her sick chamber, a young woman having her hair brushed, etc. In some of these images a cradle occupies the centre position and is used effectively for scenes involving a baby which is obviously just a doll. Interestingly, Lefort, who was apparently fond of children (would not make toys for years if you didn’t ?), often used dolls and dummies when he had to feature children in his scenes. We must remember that his photos were taken sequentially which means his sitters had to freeze for the time it took to expose the plate twice. Most young children would have been incapable of keeping still that long and Lefort was taking no chances.

Illustration 25 – Henri Lefort. One of the scenes featuring the four poster bed. The young woman having her hair brushed is Joséphine Dehm (1839-1876) who features in a fairly high number or Lefort staged scenes prior to 1860. I have written about her in a book entitled “History of Nudes in Stereo Daguerreotypes”.

When he was satisfied that he could stage convincing scenes, Lefort started experimenting with what became his trademark: tableaux set in a huge room and featuring dozens of people. One of his first attempts was a series of images in a singing café or music hall, with a small stage on one side and people sitting at table and being served drinks. On the stage can successively be seen musicians, a singer and some ladies forming what was then called la corbeille (the flower basket). Before the 6th of January 1864 act which deregulated spoken and lyric theatres nationwide it was forbidden in singing cafés or music halls to use sets and to have more than one or two performers on the stage. To give the audience something nice to look at managers of such places would often have a group of young women sit on the stage with nothing else to do than smile and look pretty.

Illustration 26 – Henri Lefort. One of the scenes supposedly set in a singing café. Note the female singers and the ladies forming the "corbeille".

For his next experiments Lefort organised things in a big way. First he staged a masked ball then a salon or ballroom, both of which cleverly used the two steps and the two different levels of his factory studio. Most of the costumes seen in the masked ball images are typical of the time and appear in lots of lithographs by Gavarni and other illustrators depicting Carnival time in Paris. Masked balls were very popular then and were organised everywhere, even at the Tuileries Palace. Some of the costumes are very elaborate. One of my favourite – but probably not the easiest one to dance in – is the baby in his walking chair. Carnival was the only time of the year when women were allowed to wear trousers, but only as part of a costume. The "débardeur" (docker or longshoreman) outfit was consequently one of the most popular and can be seen not only in numerous cartoons and lithographs of the period but also in several of Lefort's images. In one of them it is sported by the same model who appeared in the bedroom set having her hair brushed. A close examination of Lefort staged scenes reveals that he used the same models repeatedly. I happen to know the name of the particular sitter I have just mentioned because she later sat in the nude for some other photographers, was arrested, and her photograph was pasted in a police register, which miraculously survived the destruction of most of the Parisian archives in the fires lit by the rebels of the Commune in 1871. Joséphine Dehm (1839-1876) features in dozens of Lefort's photographs but only in the first batch of stereo cards he copyrighted in 1859. She was arrested, tried and sent to the Saint-Lazare prison in 1860 and her modelling career stopped after her release [21]. Her

features are easily recognisable and it has become a hobby of mine to play "Where's Waldo/Joséphine?" in every genre scene I come across. I wish I knew the names of some of the other models whose faces appear in some of Lefort's views. One day, maybe.

Illustration 27 – Henri Lefort. The Masked Ball with the man dressed up as a baby in his walker being spoon fed.

Two slight variants of the masked ball set include a very big flag on which can be read either "Guerre aux Hommes" (War on Men) or "Guerre aux Femmes" (War on Women), depending on the sex of the model holding it.

Illustration 28 – Henri Lefort. *Guerre aux hommes*.

One set Lefort must have been proud of was the drawing-room/ballroom/concert-room one. It is, to my knowledge, the only one he photographed without any models in it, and it was used in dozens of variants.

Illustration 29 – Henri Lefort. One of the scenes set in the ballroom/concert room/drawing-room.

Of the other sets used by Lefort before May 1859 can be mentioned the one showing a billiards room, a prestidigitator performing his tricks in a middle-class parlour, a fabric shop where Joséphine appears successively as a customer and a shop assistant, a milliner's workshop with the word "Modes" (Fashions) written on top of its front window and a Marchand de Coco (Coco seller) in some of the variants [22], a restaurant, an attic where a dozen laundry girls are working … and playing, Joséphine being one of them, a smithy, also featuring Joséphine, a set with an open window, a rural interior and a painter's studio. The latter set is of particular interest because it is meant to represent the interior of a typical painter's studio, a place Lefort must have been very familiar with in his brush and palette days. The beauty of this set is how cluttered it is. Stereoscopy loves clutter and this set makes a perfect example of how the eye can explore the different layers of the image and linger on each and every prop, whether the traditional stove, an ancient helmet or the previously mentioned clock which has now lost the bronze eagle that surmounted it. There is also a small stage, empty in some variants or occupied by a male or a female model in others. There are also some paintings on the walls or on some easels. Among them can be recognised a sketch of one of the works by Paolo Veronese (1528-1588), or one of his pupils, showing Esther fainting in the presence of Assuerus, and a copy of *The Fountain of Love* by Jean Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806). The originals of these paintings are respectively at the Louvre Museum, Paris, and in the Wallace collection, London. In some of the images can be seen a close up of two heads. It took me some time to recognise them as a small detail of a very large work (4.72 metres high by 7.72 metres wide), *Les Romains de la Décadence* (The Romans in their Decadence), by Thomas Couture (1815-1879), which can be seen in all its glory at the Orsay Museum, in Paris. The heads are those of the two philosophers watching, from the right hand side of the composition, a scene of debauchery and drunkenness which constitutes the subject of this painting, exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1847. We will return to that painting and to another one by the same artist at a later stage.

Illustration 30 – Henri Lefort. One of the scenes supposedly taking place in an artist's studio.

Although none of them are present in the images copyrighted in 1859, Lefort also photographed at the same time several scenes showing a sculptor's studio, a variant of the painter's one, where plaster casts and statues replace the paintings.

Illustration 31 – Henri Lefort. The sculptor's studio. One of several variants.

There are other images which, though not copyrighted, must have been made around 1859. That year the opera *Faust* by composer Charles Gounod (1818-1893) opened at the Opera in March. Lefort may have seen it and been struck by it as he started working on a series of twelve views [23] that were published under the title of *Faust and Marguerite*.

The most striking scene of the series is the very last one. Faust and Mephistopheles are in Marguerite's cell and can see that God has forgiven her and that she is now in heaven, surrounded by angels and the souls of other pure women. In order to render the scene, Lefort

has made a hole in one of the walls of his prison set and placed the models playing Marguerite and the pure souls behind it. He also added two dummies with wings to represent the angels flying above the group of women. There is a lot of depth in the tableau and since the edges of the hole are not sharp one can imagine the vision has been superimposed on the wall of the prison. Very clever indeed !

Illustration 32 – Henri Lefort. Last card from the *Faust and Marguerite* set.

Lefort's prison set was used for some other scenes which were inspired not by operas this time but by paintings. It is important to emphasize here that a lot of Lefort's compositions, and it is not really surprising when one starts thinking about it, draw on his former experience as a songwriter, a playwright and an artist. One of the paintings Lefort was inspired by, and by far my favourite composition of his, was Paul Delaroche's *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, which was first exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1833 but is now at the National Gallery, London. Lady Jane Grey was a young noblewoman, the great granddaughter of King Henry VI and a first cousin once removed of King Edward VI. When the latter knew he was dying he made a will nominating Jane as his successor. After his death, Jane was proclaimed Queen on July 10th 1553. However, one of Edward's half-sisters, Mary Tudor (1516-1558), who is best remembered by her nickname of Bloody Mary, lost no time gathering supporters and by July 19th Mary was officially made Queen while Jane was deposed. Her reign had lasted nine days ! At first Jane was held prisoner in the Tower of London but since she constituted a permanent threat she was eventually executed, shortly after her husband, on February 12th 1554. Delaroche's painting shows Jane kneeling on a cushion next to the execution block after she blindfolded herself. Her hands reach out, unable to find the block and a man, identified as John Brydges, 1st Baron Chandos, is helping her. The executioner, who just seconds before asked for Jane's forgiveness, is standing on the right his head down, while, on the left, the ladies-in-waiting of the "Nine-Day Queen" are crying.

Illustration 33 – Henri Lefort. The excution of Lady Jane Grey, after Paul Delaroche's painting.

Lefort made some changes to Delaroche's composition and shows the executioner kneeling, his right hand on his heart, begging for forgiveness, while Jane is standing with her hands stretched out, looking for the block and supported by Brydges. Since all the stereo photographs Lefort took were made sequentially, his models had to freeze for about one minute and the young woman playing the part of the deposed Queen would not have been able to keep her outrstretched hands still. In order to help her keep the pose, Lefort tied two strings to the ceiling of the studio which were ended by two little sticks that the sitter placed under her fingers and could lean on, thus keeping her arms and hands perfectly still. The strings can barely be made out in the original image but there are definitely there although they can easily pass unnoticed. It is not the only trick Lefort used to help his sitters hold a difficult pose. In one music hall scene showing cancan dancers kicking one of their legs up, Lefort makes very good use of dummy legs on wooden stands hidden under the ladies' ample skirts to give the illusion that the dancers have been captured instantaneously.

Illustration 34 – Henri Lefort. The "wooden-leg trick".

The second scene set in the prison is loosely based on Charles Louis Müller's 1850 composition "L'appel des dernières victimes de la Terreur" (The Roll Call of the Last Victims of the Terror), now at the Art Institute of Chicago, and is supposed to take place towards the end of the darkest period of the French Revolution. It shows the prison warden reading out the names of those who are to be guillotined. Lefort made several variants of the scene. In one of them a man about to be executed is saying his goodbyes to his crying family.

Illustration 35 – Henri Lefort. A scene set in a prison at the time of the French Revolution. After a painting by Charles Müller.

Since I am examining staged scenes based on paintings, here is a good place to mention another one of Lefort's compositions, inspired by a canvas and an artist I have already alluded to, Thomas Couture's *Les Romains de la Décadence* (The Romans in their decadence). It is by no means an easy task to fit such a huge landscape composition featuring so many characters into the portrait format of a stereoscopic image but Lefort, undaunted as ever, took up the challenge and did not do too badly. Photography is not really at its best in allegorical or mythological scenes which usually end up looking more like tableaux vivants than convincing renditions of the original paintings. Lefort's efforts, laudable as they are, are no exception and one fails to get the same feeling when looking at his tableaux and comparing them to Couture's masterpiece. As was usually the case, Lefort tried several variants of the composition and two are quite close to the Couture's original one, although, for some reason, he chose to put the two philosophers on the left instead of on the right, while keeping the character holding a cup of wine to a statue in its original position on the right. Being of the format of the stereoscopic cards, the composition is squeezed laterally and some characters have been removed. It actually looks as if Lefort's images had borrowed bits of Courture's canvas and arranged them differently.

Using the same backdrop, Lefort also borrowed the character of the money-lender from another of Couture's paintings, entitled *La Soif de l'Or* (The Thirst for Gold), now at the Musée des Augustins in Toulouse, France, and built a composition around him. Note how the hands of the main character in Couture's canvas and Lefort's model on the right are in the same position. There is no doubt Lefort admired Couture and one may wonder whether he ever studied with him, or even under him.

Illustration 36 – One of Henri Lefort's versions of Thomas Couture's *Les Romains de la Décadence*.

Illustration 37 – Henri Lefort's composition after Thomas Couture's *La Soif de l'Or*.

There is another series of tableaux, which were never copyrighted either, inspired by yet another painting, *Le Départ des pécheurs de l'Adriatique* (The Departure of the fishermen from the Adriatic) completed in 1834 by Swiss artist Louis Léopold Robert (1794-1835) and exhibited at the 1835 Paris Salon, shortly before his suicide [24]. The original canvas, now at the Musée des Beaux-Art, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, inspired Victor Hugo and Alphonse de Lamartine, and is also mentioned by Alexandre Dumas. As with most of the paintings from which he created staged scenes, Lefort used the same setting for different variants of the composition. Below is the one closest to Robert's work and underneath a totally different scene.

Illustration 38 – *The Penny Magazine*, September 15th 1838. Woodcut after Léopold Robert's *Le Départ des pécheurs de l'Adriatique*.

Illustration 39 – Henri Lefort's composition after Léopold Robert's *Le Départ des pécheurs de l'Adriatique*.

To my knowledge, the only photograph based on a painting that Lefort copyrighted was his version of *Napoléon le soir de la Bataille de Champaubert* (Napoleon on the evening of the battle of Champaubert) by Nicolas Toussaint Charlet (1792-1845), now at the Museum of the Legion of Honour, Paris. Although mostly known for his thousands of lithographs, watercolours, sepia drawings, oils sketches and etchings, nearly all depicting military subjects, Charlet also painted some oil canvases and *Napoléon le soir de la Bataille de Champaubert* is attributed to him. It shows the emperor fully-clothed and with his legendary hat still on his head, sitting on a chair in front of a fire with folded arms and stretched legs, gently falling asleep on the evening of the battle that took place on February 10th 1814 against a Russian corps.

Illustration 40 – Henri Lefort's composition after Nicolas Toussaint Charlet's *Napoléon le soir de la bataille de Champaubert*.

There may well be in Lefort's photographs other compositions which are faithful copies of, simply inspired by or borrowing a few elements from other paintings, but they are yet to be spotted. So many nineteenth century artisitic works, famous in their time, have now been completely forgotten and lie concealed in some museums' storage rooms. It is therefore not impossible that, one day, more connections will be made between Lefort and several other artists of his day.

To get back to tableaux which were not copyrighted but must have been made prior to 1859, I would like to mention the several variants of the compositions that centre on the ragpickers, or rag and bone men and women, of Paris, not only because they are striking but also because they show a good portion of the factory-turned-studio in which Lefort worked. Ragpickers were creatures of the night, or rather of the early morning, and with their hook, their lantern, and the basket they carried on their back, were easily spotted. Although it was a job on the lowest rung of the working class ladder, ragpicking was considered an honest and useful occupation and was regulated by law. Ragpickers were a form of early recyclers and still are in some countries. Lefort's compositions clearly show that he had a lot of respect for the ragpickers and for the close-knit community they lived in.

Illustration 41 – Henri Lefort's. The ragpickers of Paris. One of several variants.

Definitely worth a mention, on account of their being quite unique in the stereoscopic production of the time, are some tableaux including what can already be termed "special effects". These can be divided into three categories: beam of light from heaven, split screen and the elements (rain, wind, thunder and snow).

Illustration 42 – Henri Lefort. The adoration of the Magi.

So far I have only seen one example of the first category but what a fine example it is ! The beam of light from heaven was used by Lefort to stage an Adoration of the Magi tableau complete with Baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph – all three with a halo above their heads – the three Wise Men, two shepherds, a couple of other onlookers, an Asian person, and a Roman soldier in the background. There is also a camel which is not real nor taxidermied but a big wooden or cardboard cutout, which also features in some scenes supposedly set in the colonies France had at the time in Northern Africa. Even though stereo photographs are not usually very good at representing allegories, I must say I find this one rather convincing and

well composed. It does not take too much effort for one to suspend one's disbelief. The beam of light from heaven is on the right of the tableau and is made of some sort of see-through and shiny length of fabric, tied to the ceiling of the studio at one end and to the bottom of the crude cradle on which the doll representing Baby Jesus lies at the other end. Simple but terribly effective !Lefort was not the only stereophotographer to use the split screen technique which allows the viewer to see two scenes set in two different places. French stereo publishers and photographers Charles Furne and Herni Tournier used it in a couple of tableaux in which one can observe what's happening on either side of a wall, especially in view number 10 from their series *Les Chansons de Béranger* ("Le Maître d'école"), view number 12 from *La Maison à Paris* ("Au fond du corridor. La porte à droite"), and an early view without a title but bearing number 92 and showing a man in eighteenth century costume looking through a keyhole at a young lady having her shoes slipped on by her maid.

Illustration 43– Furne and Tournier. *Les Chansons de Béranger. Le Maître d'école*.

Illustration 44 – James Eastlake. Saint Giles and Saint James. One of several variants.

In Britain, James Eastlake based his whole series *Saint Giles and Saint James* on the split screen technique. His stereocards show people from the middle class and the aristocracy (Saint James) and people from the lower classes (Saint Giles) in similar or contrasted situations. For example, the young woman from Saint James living a life of idleness and the lower class girl from Saint Giles working long hours, or again children with lots of toys on one side and street urchins playing in the dirt on the other.

What makes Lefort's scenes different from the other photographers' is that there is no partition separating the two worlds depicted, just a pillar and a stand with a jug on it, which could belong to either side of the image. Lefort's split tableaux usually show two different ways of life. The miser on one side and the prodigal youths on the other, spending their allowance on drink and gambling; the hard-working seamstress burning the midnight oil and the idle middle class girl with nothing else to do but look at herself in a mirror; a group of young ladies spending a quiet evening together and couples going several steps further than simple flirting. The title for the latter one, handwritten on the back of the card, is "Débauche et Vertu" (Debauchery and Virtue). In some of the scenes, in order to make his point even clearer, a trumpeting devil on one side and an angel on the other have been added by the photographer to the compositions.

Illustration 45 – Henri Lefort. Two scenes in one. Idleness and Hard work.

The best of Lefort's special effects, in my opinion, are the images he made to simulate a heavy thunderstorm and the ones showing snow falling. Whenever I look at these photographs I am amazed at the amount of time it must have taken to put these compositions together, and I cannot but admire the photographer's patience and dedication. To give the viewer the illusion of heavy rain falling, Lefort used over a hundred pieces of string, attached at one end to a boad on the ceiling and at the other end to a board on the floor. At least four of these boards, on different layers of the composition and slanted at various angles, make a very convincing downpour. Add to it several open umbrellas and people looking miserable and you have the photograph below.

Illustration 46. Henri Lefort's special effects: rain.

To make the elements look even worse, Lefort added lightning strikes and wind. Do not forget that all of Lefort's photographs being sequential, everything you can see in the photo needed to keep still for the time it took to expose the plate twice. Lightning is therefore represented by metal rods bent several times at 90 degree angles. To give the impression that the wind is blowing the crinoline skirts of the ladies in the composition, thick wire under the petticoats does the trick. Add to this an upturned umbrella and you can appreciate the result. One can almost hear the rain pouring and the wind blowing. I must confess I simpy love this image and all the ingeniosity behind it. It is Lefort at his best.

Illustration 47 – Henri Lefort's special effects: rain wind and lightning.

Going further in controlling the weather in his studio, Lefort staged several scenes showing on one side a warm smithy and on the other snow falling over some Italian pifferari and some passers-by. A sign informs us that the smithy is part of an inn belonging to one Pasbeau

(which translates as Ugly), who can not only provide accommodation for travellers on foot, but can also help riders by shoeing their horses. To give the illusion of snowflakes falling, Lefort used some kind of very fine and loose mesh on which pieces of cotton of different sizes were attached. By disposing several of those meshes in various parts of the composition one gets the illusion of a rather heavy snowfall.

Illustration 48 – Henri Lefort's special effects: snow.

In 1860, an event took place that generated a composition by Lefort which, can be said to be unique and ahead of its time. On June 24th 1860, Prince Jérôme Bonaparte, youngest brother of Napoleon I and former king of Westphalia (1807-1813) died in his château of Villegénis, now Massy, Essonne, at the age of seventy-five. His body was brought back to Paris where it laid in state at the Palais-Royal, prior to his burial on July 3rd in les Invalides. The makeshift mortuary chapel which was set up in the "grande galerie" was described in full details in the press, as were the clothes the dead prince was wearing (the uniform of a marshal of the Second Empire) and the various artefacts that had been placed next to the bed, ie, the crown of the king of Westphalia, the grand cordon (sash) of the Legion of Honour with its badge, the sword the Prince was carrying at Waterloo, and his marshal's baton. We also know from the press that an altar had been set up on the right of the bed near which the Abbé Doussot, the Prince's chaplain, and a priest from the Saint Roch Church alternately said prayers.

Shortly after the funeral was over, Lefort pulished a stereoscopic card bearing on a back label the following caption: *Mort du Prince Jérôme Napoléon. Le 1er Juillet 1860. Chapelle ardente au Palais-Royal* (Death of Prince Jérôme Napoléon. July 1st, 1860. Morturay Chapel at the Palais-Royal). It clearly shows the body of the Prince lying in state, nuns praying at the foot of the bed, twelve candles on the sides of the latter and an altar on the right, as well as a soldier and an officer keeping watch. Or does it ? Although the caption even gives the date when the photo was supposedly made, taking photographs in a dark mortuary chapel, only lit by twelve candles, would have been technically impossible at the time. Furthermore, despite the taste for post-mortem images, no photographers would then have been allowed next to the dead body of the prince. What Lefort did – and Georges Méliès did exactly the same in 1902 when King Edward VII was crowned and all cameras were banned from the interior of Westminster Abbey – was to stage the whole scene in his studio, using props that were as

close to the originals as could be found or made. It is even possible Lefort or another person in his employment went to pay their respects to the mortal remains of Prince Jérôme and noted down every particular of the room and of what and who was there. It is important to underline this had never been done before and that, around the same time, one of Lefort's colleagues, who may not have access to props or to models, sold a stereoscopic image with very good depth and showing a very similar scene but in which everything was made of clay. That's what most photographers and publishers usually did then. Whenever they wanted to show something that could not be photographed (the assassination of Archbishop Sibour in January 1857, the discovery of the dead bodies of the victims of Jean-Baptiste Troppman in 1869, the execution of the hostages at La Roquette prison in May 1871, or simply scenes from the operas and plays that were performed on the Parisian stage), they had the tableaux modelled in clay and photographed for the stereoscope. Not so Lefort, who was up to any kind of challenge, however difficult and preferred to restage things in his studio.

Illustration 49 – Unknowns modeller and photographer. The lying in state of Prince Jérôme at the Palais-Royal.

Illustration 50 – Henri Lefort's version of the lying in state of Prince Jérôme Bonaparte.

On September 10th 1860, the comedy in four acts *Le Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon* (Mr. Perrichon's pleasure trip) by Eugène Labiche (1815-1888) and Édouard Martin (1825-1866) opened at the théâtre du Gymnase in Paris. The play, although it made fun of the bourgeoisie who constituted its main audience, was a great success, partly due to the talent of the lead actor, Jean Marie Geoffroy (1813-1883), who was playing the part of Perrichon. Unlike many similar works from the same period, *Le Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon*, was never really off the bill and remained popular all through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As proof of the enduring popularity of the comedy, which was added to the repertory of the Comédie Française in 1906, I am showing a business card sent to Eugène Labiche, some time after 1876, by art critic, historian and Académicien Charles Blanc (1813-1882), asking him for two seats for the following Friday "if Le Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon is performed that day", as well as a photographic-postcard dated 1918 and showing the actors of an amateur performance of the play.

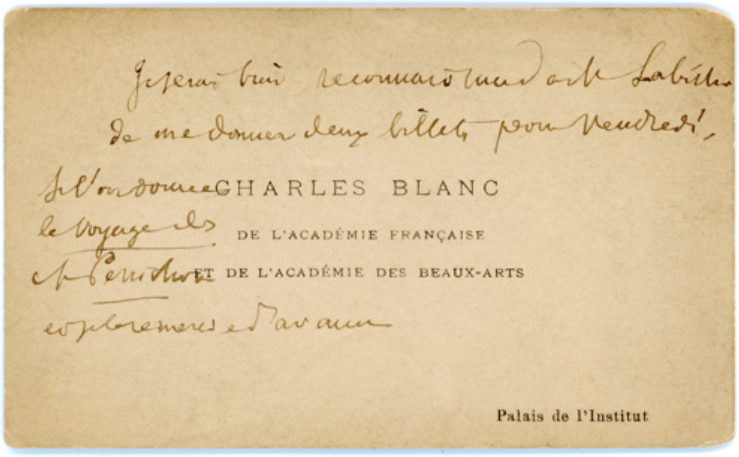

Illustration 51 – Business card sent by Charles Blanc to Eugène Labiche, asking him for two complimentary seats to see his play *Le Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon*.

Illustration 52 – Unidentified photographer. The cast of an amateur performance of Labiche's *Le Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon*.

The reason I am mentioning Labiche and Martin's play is because I have a good hunch that the backdrops used in two of Lefort's compositions featured in this particular comedy. The first one is a backdrop showing the interior of a railway station. Although a sign on the left of most variants advertises the pleasure trains from Paris to Le Hâvre, the station names one can read in the background are not on the way to Normandy, which lies north-west of Paris, but heading towards the south-east of the French capital. Four of the five names that can be made out, Melun, Montereau, Sens, Laroche (actually Laroche Migennes), were stops on the Paris to Lyon line, which left from the Gare de Lyon in Paris, the very same from which Perrichon, his wife, his daughter Henriette and her two suitors, Daniel and Armand, start their journey to Lyon, Geneva, Chamonix, the Alps and the Mer de Glace.

Illustration 53 – Henri Lefort. One of his "station" scenes.

I always suspected Lefort must have been in touch with some theatre as only a theatre would have such huge backdrops as the ones he used. When you know that the manager of the théâtre du Gymnase since 1844 had been none other than Adolphe Auguste Lemoine-Montigny, with whom Lefort had written some plays, and that Lefort's own son, Georges, was an actor at the Gymnase from 1861 to 1870, you will understand why it is my conviction that Montigny provided Lefort with some, if not all of his backdrops, some time after the plays had stopped running. It is difficult to be one hundred percent sure as there are few woodcuts in the press of the time showing the different sets for a play (although there are some for the big operatic productions and even for operettas), but it is a very strong hunch, and it makes a lot of sense as it can explain how Lefort could not only get his backdrops (he could have painted some himself after all, and maybe did), but also his props and most of the costumes his sitters wear.

The second backdrop I think may have been in the play *Le Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon*, is the one featuring in a series of stereoscopic slides set in a room overlooking some snow-capped summits of the Alps. It fits the description of the view seen from the inn at Montanvert, where Perrichon and his family are staying, as printed in the text of the play published in 1860. Lefort used it as the background to a rather posh middle class parlour set in which can be seen, together or separately, a bourgeois couple, local girls in their traditional costume and a servant in his livery.

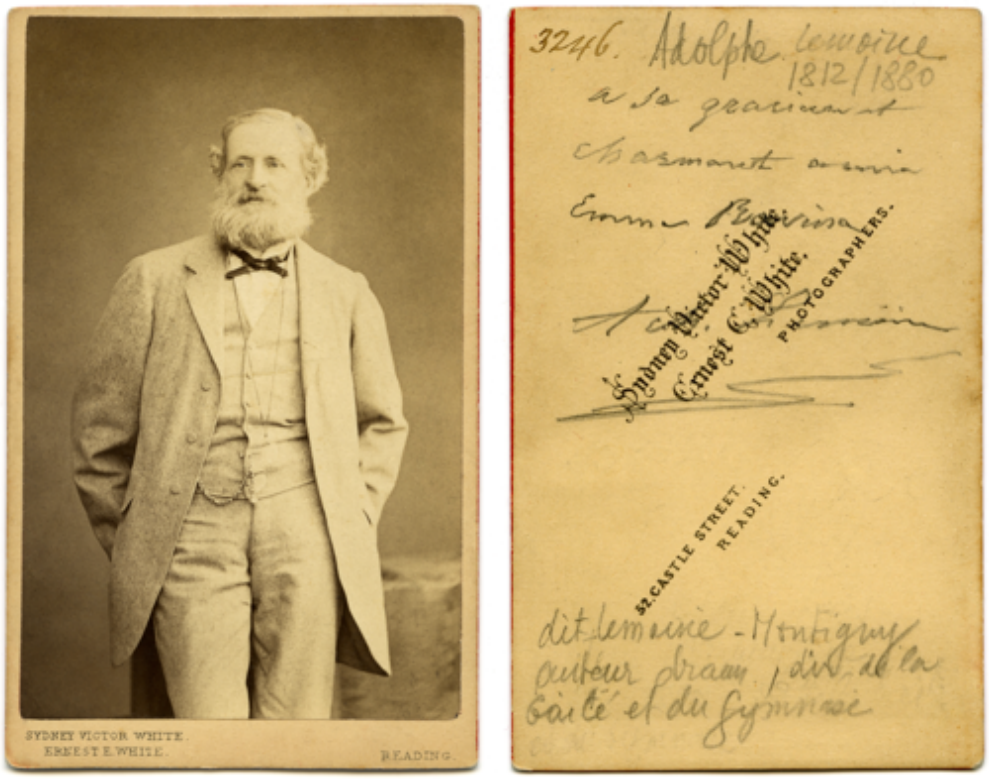

Illustration 54 – Sydney Victor and Ernest E. White. Carte-de-visite portrait of Adolphe Auguste Lemoine-Montigny dedicated to a "gracious and charming friend".

Illustration 55 – Henri Lefort. One of the scenes set in a room overlooking one of the summits of the Alps.

I may add as further evidence that both the series of cards set in the railway station and the one featuring the backdrop showing the snow-capped mountains were not copyrighted in 1859 but the second time Lefort brought photographs to the dépôt légal, on August 24th 1864, nearly four years after Labiche and Martin's play was first produced. On that day Lefort copyrighted 179 "groupes et scènes de fantaisie" (groups and staged scenes), numbered 790 to 961 (with missing numbers) and entered in the dépôt légal register under reference numbers

7745 to 7924. Among the images registered that day were “follow ups” to the scenes in the interior of the railway station, some showing the Station Café where travellers could stop for a drink and a bite, and others the Station Buffet. In the photographs of the Café de la Station the backdrop represents a steam engine coming round a bend and pulling a dozen carriages while in the images of the Buffet one can only see the steam engine and its coal tender. In all of these train related photographs features a sign reading “Train de plaisir Paris-Hâvre”. In one of the images staged to take place at the Café de la Station feature two dummies representing a girl playing the violing and a boy playing the cello. Behind them, playing the guitar, is an older and taller flesh and blood girl.

Illustration 56 – Henri Lefort. One of the images he made with the set of the Café de la Station. Late print on a Léon & Lévy (L.L.) mount.

Illustration 57 – Henri Lefort. Omnibus scenes with dummies on top.

Lefort also used dummies in lieu of passengers sitting on top of an omnibus. These omnibus scenes clearly show how big Lefort’s studio was which could accommodate a vehicle that

size. In some of the pictures from that series cardboard cut-out figures of a couple arm in arm mix with real models in the background. For some reason, none of the omnibus scenes were copyghrighted.

It seems that Lefort was in a reminiscing mood in the compositions he made between August 1860 and August 1864 as some of the tableaux, which he didn't bring to the dépôt légal either, introduce characters from his songs or are set in places he used to be familiar with. By the early 1860s, on account of the fast growth of the railway, postilions were a thing of the past and if there were some left there cannot have been many. Yet, Lefort chose to feature a postilion in a series of tableaux set inside a stable and in another series set outside an inn with the inscription "Vin à 4 sous" on its front.

Illustration 58 – Henri Lefort. Stable scene featuring a Postilion.

Other series that match that retrospective mood are the ones set backstage at a theatre, at a circus and at the Opera during Carnival time. Lefort must have spent some time with, and appears to have had fond memories of, the extras, dancers, stage hands and firemen from his theatrical days. He brings them back to life and lets the viewers stand on the other side of the curtain, where they are not usually allowed, and share the camaraderie, the flirting, the boredom of the long waits, the genuine concern when some accident happens to one of their group. A couple of Lefort's images also feature some extras in action, climbing up an inclined ramp, or performers on horses (papier mâché ones).

The scenes that are meant to take place at the Bal de l'Opéra during Carnival time are interesting, not because of the costumes but on account of the expressions on the sitters' faces. Although Carnival was supposed to be a joyous occasion when everyone was making merry, most of Lefort's models look sad, bored, or pensive. It is my opinion that this was deliberate and that it was Lefort's way of showing how a lot of people were actually pretending or forcing themselves to have fun and were actually feeling very lonely in the midst of the crowd.

Illustration 59 – Henri Lefort. Backstage scene. One of many variants.

Illustration 60 – Henri Lefort. One the scenes supposedly showing the Bal de l'Opéra, during Carnival Time. Note how sad everyone looks !

It is unfortunately impossible to show all of Lefort's sets, but in the images he copyrighted in 1864 I would like to select a couple of tableaux which, I think, are of particular interest.

The first ones show a rowing boat with two to five people in it, floating on the bare floor of the studio, with a big squat tree on the left and generally anglers or lovers in the background. There is something peaceful emanating from these images that must have brought back to the buyers fond memories of rowing and fishing parties on sunny Sunday afternoons.

Illustration 61 – Henri Lefort. One of the “rowing boat” scenes.

My next choice is a rather large series set at a water mill some time during the eighteenth century. One of the images also features a postilion. The most prominent prop is the wooden wheel of the mill and the sluices that bring water to it.

Illustration 62 – Henri Lefort. One of the “water mill” scenes.

Then there is a Breton interior in which matriarchy reigns supreme. Ladies can be seen sitting and chatting while their husbands are doing the laundry, ironing and grinding coffee, or in one particularly striking scene, looking after the children while being ordered about and made to look sharp at the sound of a hunting horn.

Illustration 63 – Henri Lefort. Breton interior. One of several variants.

The stereocards copyrighted by Lefort in August 1864 can be considered his swan song. It is difficult to say when he put an end to his photographic career but it must have been around that time. On June 3rd 1865, Lefort's last surviving child, Georges Aubin Néré, 23, married Marie Célina Chaumont, 19, at the mairie of the 9th arrondissement. In his son's wedding certificate, Lefort is described as a "propriétaire" (a landowner), living with his wife and son, at 19, rue Montyon, while his former son-in-law, Paul Nicolas Deverdun, who signed as one of the witnesses, is written down as a merchant, living at 33, rue du Faubourg-Saint-Martin, Lefort's former address. This clearly shows that by then Lefort had retired and that Deverdun had taken over his business.

Georges and his bride were both actors at the Gymnase Dramatique, the theatre run by Adolphe Lemoine-Montigny. Georges's career had developed under the care and protection of his stage godfather, Levassor, while Céline Chaumont was the pupil of Virginie Déjazet. Georges, like his father, was also a lyricist and a composer and in 1864 he had published a song entitled *Les Portraits-Cartes* (the Cartes-de-Visite Portraits), about a man who goes through a box which used to contain the photographic portraits of his lovers and friends. Over the years they have all been thrown one by one into the fire until there is only one left in the bottom of the box, that of his dear mother. By 1864 the stereoscopic craze was on the wane and the latest rage was collecting the cartes-de-visite portraits of family, friends and celebrities and exchanging them. If someone offered you their portrait, you were supposed to give them yours in exchange, to place in their album, usually with a short handwritten message scribbled on the front or the back.

Les Portraits-Cartes is but one of the many songs Georges Lefort wrote and/or composed. He is rememberd for a one-act vaudeville called *Le Grand-Papa de la Chanson* (The Grandfather of Songs), which premiered on March 13th 1869, but mostly for sentimental and comic songs with such titles as *Ah ma pauvre fille* (Alas, my poor daughter), *L'astronome et sa servante* (The Astronomer and his maid), *Ivanovna*, *Le chant du drapeau* (The Song of the Flag), *La Première Feuille* (The First Leaf), *La Neige* (The Snow), *Bon Cœur* (Kind Heart), *Déjà!* (Already!), *La Cinquantaine* (Turning Fifty), *Petit Pierre, ça n'est pas bien* (Dear Peter, this is very wrong), *Un Air Favori* (A Favourite Tune), *La Bonne Année* (A Happy New Year), *Le*

Jour de l'An (New Year's Day), *Tra-la-la*, *La Noce à Clémence* (Clémence's Wedding), *Faut-il qu'un homme soit bête !* (How stupid can a man be !), *Une Rengaine* (The Same Old Story), *Les Opinions d'une basse-cour* (Opinion of the Animals of the Farmyard), etc.

Illustration 64 – Some music score covers of songs written by Georges Lefort

A lot of these works were written for, performed by, and sometimes with, his wife, Céline Chaumont, but just like Henri Lefort found his best performer in Levassor, his son Georges's songs were made famous by Lemoine-Montigny's great niece, Anne Marie-Louise Damiens, better known under her stage of Anna Judic (1849-1911), or simply Judic.

Shortly after his brother-in-law's marriage to Céline Chaumont, Paul Nicolas Deverdun wrote a letter in which he announced that on account of his poor health, he had decided to sell his stereoscopic photography business to Charles Gaudin (1825-1905), the owner and manager of the photographic journal *La Lumière* who, with his brother Alexis (1816-1894), had been running a large stereoscopic shop and factory since the early 1850s. Deverdun's letter, dated July 4th 1865, was published in *La Lumière* on July 15th and signed "Deverdun, successor to Lefort".

Illustration 65 – Stereoscopic portrait of Anna Judic, with actors Georges and Désiré, in *La Timbale d'Argent*.

In the same issue of the journal, Charles's eldest brother, Marc-Antoine (1804-1876), mentioned the transaction and wrote that Lefort's firm had been founded some twelve years before, in 1853, which corresponds to the date when Lefort made and sold his first stereoscopic lithographs.

Marc-Antoine Gaudin's short piece is very important as it describes Lefort's stereoscopic production as consisting of 500 images of palaces, 1,500 views of the main capitals of Europe, and 1,200 staged scenes ! Out of the latter, Gaudin writes briefly about the ones involving an omnibus, a railway station and a swimming school and promises the whole collection of these amusing and sometimes farcical scenes will be thoroughly reviewed in a future issue of the journal [25]. This, unfortunately, never happened, although lists of Lefort's topographical views were published in the advertisement pages from March 1866 onwards [26].

So far, I haven't mentioned these topographical images which, although numerically more important than the stage scenes, do not have the same originality, and compare pretty much with similar stereo cards made by other photographers. Although I like to think he did, it is not clear whether Lefort himself took those images. He may have commissioned someone to take them for him, and since they were never copyrighted, we do not know either when they were made. Most of them were issued as tissues, some nicely tinted and with the highlights of the images finely pin-pricked. The views of palaces and imperial residences include the Tuileries, as well as the châteaux of Compiègne, Fontainebleau, Saint-Cloud and Versailles. The other views show Paris, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and even Russia.

After 1865 and his son's wedding, I more or less lose track of Lefort, who became a grandfather on April 1st 1866 when his daughter-in-law Céline Chaumont gave birth to a daughter who was named Léonie Marie (1866-1955). A couple of weeks before, on March 19th, his former collaborator, musician and composer Louis Antoine Clapisson, had passed away in the 9th arrondissement.

Illustration 66 – Henri Lefort. *Résidences Impériales. Les Tuileries. No. 5 Salon de la Paix*. With back label.

On June 16th and July 21st 1868, Charles Gaudin, who now owned all of Lefort's former negatives, brought to the dépôt légal a total of 185 staged scenes, most of which had already been copyrighted by Lefort in 1859 or 1864. This, of course, explains why Lefort scenes can often be found on yellow mounts bearing the mention *Groupes de Genre – Photographie C. G. à Paris*, in which C. G. are the initials of Charles Gaudin.

Illustration 67 – Henri Lefort. Years before Renoir's famous painting, here is Lefort's own version of the *Repas des Canotiers*, published by Charles Gaudin and bearing the latter's initials, C.G.

Since I am on the chapter of mounts, I would like to reiterate the following caution: just like you should never judge a book by its cover, it is imperative, when dealing with French stereoviews, never to give too much credit to the mounts on which they are pasted. Lefort's work is a good case in point since the photographs he took were printed several times, over a period of nearly forty years, and can be found on completely blank mounts, or on ones bearing the initials and/or blind stamps of the following publishers: C. G. (Charles Gaudin), B.K. (Adolphe Block), A. P. (Anatole Pougnet), G.A.F. (Grau Adolphe Frédéric) and L. L. (Léon & Lévy) [27]. Some also come on mounts with the blind stamps of Radiguet & Sons and of Marion A. & Co. Pirated versions were issued by The Universal Stereoscopic View Co., 82 Broad Street, New York, and others appear under such generic titles as *Comics and Groups*, *European & American Views*, or *Groups from Life*.

Illustration 68 – Example of a pirated Lefort view.

The last decade of Lefort's life must have been a rather sad time, and one cannot help wondering how he coped. Firstly, on January 14th 1870, his "partner in crime" and friend of forty years, Pierre Thomas Levassor, passed away. Levassor, who was living then at Dommartemont, near Nancy, had come to Paris for a short visit and to undergo a small operation. He died on Rue Richelieu in the second arrondissement. His son Pierre and his son-in-law, Charles Gabriel Legros, signed his death certificate.

Then there was the franco-prussian war, the defeat of the French army at Sedan on September 2nd, the destitution of the Emperor and the proclamation of the Republic two days later, the siege of Paris from the end of September to the very last days of January 1871, with its terrible lot of rationing and privations. To survive, the inhabitants of Paris had to eat all the horses in the capital, then the dogs, cats, rats, and even the animals from the zoological garden, the Jardin des Plantes. Towards the end of the siege, they even had to live with the terror of shells being fired on the capital. Shortly after the armistice was signed came the Commune, a short-lived revolution which started on March 18th 1871 and ended in a blood-bath in the last days of May.

Less than one year after these terrible events, on February 11th 1872, Lefort's only son, Georges, died of consumption. He was only thirty and had a promising career as a lyricist and actor in front of him ! Lefort and his wife, Elisa Joséphine, must have been devastated, as must have been his wife Céline Chaumont.

Georges Lefort's widow re-married ten years after the death of her first husband and became Mrs Adolphe Bacharach. Her second spouse, who was the manager of the Comédie Parisienne theatre, was better known under his pseudonym of Paul Mussay (1847-1924). Céline Chaumont-Bacharach-Mussay had a successful career and graced the stage with her presence until her retirement in 1897. Even then, she did not entirely renounced her former career though as she became a drama teacher. She died in 1926, aged eighty.

Illustration 69 – Charles Reutlinger (left) full-length carte-de-visite portrait of Céline Chaumont in *La Cigale*. Eugène Disdéri (right), vignette portrait of Céline Chaumont.

On August 7th 1876, it was the turn of Paul Nicola Deverdun's second wife, Anastasie Doublet, to pass away.

Just over a year later, on August 30th 1877, Deverdun married for the third time, at the mairie of the 7th arrondissement. Lefort was there and signed the wedding certificate as one of the witnesses. He is described as being a seventy-four year old "rentier" (living on his own means), and a friend of the groom. By then Lefort and his wife were living at 31, rue de Sèvres, in the 6th arrondissement.

They were still residing there when, on February 20th 1880, Henri Lefort breathed his last at the clinic Marcel-Sainte-Colombe, 10, rue Picpus, where he was being looked after [28]. His death certificate was signed by his former son-in-law, Paul Nicolas Deverdun, and by the

latter's son. Less than two weeks later, in the 16th arrondissement, Adolphe Lemoine-Montigny, the manager of the théâtre du Gymnase, also departed this world.

Mrs. Lefort survived her husband by nearly seven years and quietly passed away at their home at 31, rue de Sèvres, on January 24th 1887. Her death certificate was signed by Léon Marie Havez (1862-1897), who had married her grand-daughter Leonie Marie, the year before, on June 1st. Mrs Lefort never saw her first great granchild, Paul Léon Georges Havez (1887-1915), who was born on April 15th 1887, barely three months after she died. Léonie Marie Lefort-Havez had two other children, Yvonne Marie Juliette (1888-1978), born on October 7th 1888 and Pierre Louis (1891-1975), born on August 26th 1891. Their father died in 1897, aged thirty-five, but their mother, reached the age of eighty-eight and passed on February 13th 1955, the last member of the family to have actually known Henri Lefort.

Illustration 70 – Henri Lefort. The Comet of 1858, both frontlit and backlit.

The curtain has dropped on the protagonists of this story, but over one hundred and forty years after Lefort's death, his images are still around and very popular with collectors who, even if they generally don't know who the author of the images is, still appreciate the amazing compositions of this precursor of Georges Méliès, of this man of multiple talents who could be dubbed "the Cecil B. De Mille" of the stereoscope. As discussed briefly when mentioning how misleading French mounts can be, Lefort's photographs were printed well into the beginning of the twentieth century, over forty years after the negatives were made. The latter passed into many hands before being broken or thrown away. This longevity of the images is a tribute to the genius of Henry Lefort. His photographs are technically far from perfect, there is no doubt about that, but they transport us back in time into the many different and wonderful worlds he patiently re-created in his studio.

I have one big regret and it is that, to this day, I have no idea what Lefort, his son Georges, his wife Elisa Joséphine and his friend Levassor really looked like. There are several drawn portraits of the latter but, oddly enough, I could never find any photograph of him. Was he afraid, like Honoré de Balzac and a few others, that he would lose some part of his soul every time he was photographed ? We will probably never know. As for Lefort, his wife and their son, my only hope would be in finding some descendants who have cherished and preserved

the likenesses of their ancestors. For all we know Lefort may appear several times in his compositions (I am actually convinced he does) but how can you spot him among all the persons present ? He was already in his fifties when he started producing his staged scenes but that's all we know and it is not much to go on, is it ?

NOTES

[1] Jean Baptiste Nicolas Aubin Lefort was born at Maincy, Seine et Marne, at the beginning of 1774 and baptised there on March 1st of the same year. His father, Jean Baptiste Lefort, was gamekeeper to the Duke of Praslin, the owner of the renowned château of Vaux-le-Vicomte, built for Louis XIV's superintendent of the finances, Nicolas Fouquet (1615-1680).
Angélique Charlotte Jassenne, was born at Corbeil on July 20th 1778 and baptised there three days later. She was the daughter of a locksmith, Jacques Eloi Jassenne, and of his wife Catherine Alexis Michaut.

[2] The rue du Croissant was in the former third arrondissement whereas rue des Dames was in the commune of Batignolles, which was integrated into Paris at the end of 1859. Before 1860 Paris was divided into twelve arrondissements but as the city grew bigger several suburbs were incorporated and twenty new arrondissements were created, which still exist to this day. The boundaries of most former arrondissements changed and these days, for example, the rue du Croissant is in the second arrondissement, not the third.

[3] The great majority of the birth, wedding and death certificates made in Paris were destroyed in the fires lit by the rebels of the Commune in 1871. Only a third of them were reconstructed from 1873 onwards using what documents people had to prove when they or members of their family were born, got married or died.

[4] *Norbert ou le Campagnard* (1832), *Le Doigt île Dieu* (1834), *Une Chanson* (1834), *Un fils* (1836), *Wilson, ou une Calomnie* (1836), *Amazanpo, ou la Découverte du quinquina* (1836), *La Sœur grise et l'Orphelin* (1836).

[5] Born at Paris on August 21st 1799, Charles Barthélémy Chaudesaigues married Rosalie Emilie Rodolphe on May 21st 1821. His first wife having passed away in 1832, he married Sophie Anne Piel who died in Paris on February 8th 1840. He therefore married a third time, on April 16th 1840. His third wife was a music teacher named Louise Charlotte Jung. Chaudesaigues had a brilliant career as a society singer but died suddenly on January 16th 1858.

[6] Adolphe de Leuven had co-written with journalis and playwright Léon Lévy Brunswick (1805-1859) the lyrics of *Le Postillon de Lonjumeau* which Lefort had made fun of in his song *Le Postillon de Mam' Ablou*.

[7] *L'Indépendant, furet des théâtres*, October 4th 1838, p. 2.

[8] The theatrical term "the gods" has its origin either in the fact that the spectators are closer to the ceiling of the theatre, which was usually decorated with paintings representing mythological scenes, or that, like the gods on Mount Olympus surveyed the lives of the mortals, they look down on the actors and the other spectators far below.

[9] Here is an attempted translation of this part of the song
Throw him out … what's that ? … what's that ?
Who gives orders here, if not I ?
Throw him out … what's that ? … Throw him out ? what's that ?
I want to be the one who gives the orders here, yes, I, that's what !

[10] Marc-Antoine Madeleine Désaugiers (1772-1827) was a composer, writer of comedies, operas and vaudevilles, and author of comic and satirical songs.

[11] Un "homme de lettres" is a literary man, an author, or even, as in Lefort's case, a song writer.

[12] The Eidoscope (from two Greek words, eidos, meaning "form" and skopeo, "observer") was an instrument consisting of two perforated disks of metal which revolved on their axes and produced an endless variety of geometrical figures. With the addition of coloured glass discs, multiple combinations of colours could be obtained.
In 1903 the name Eidoscope was given by the French firm Hermagis to a soft-focus lens which was described as being perfect for portraits and was a favourite with some pictorialists.

[13] The first commercial stereoscopic photographs were daguerreotypes, photographs on a copper plate with a silver layer, and were so expensive that they could only be bought by the wealthy.

[14] Paper cocottes are a form of paperfold and were still very popular when I was a boy. They take seconds to make and can be tiny or very big. All it takes to build one is a square piece of paper.
Paper cocottes seem to have been first introduced in the 1820s and were frequently used in caricatures during the nineteenth century, the word "cocotte" also referring to a hen, a horse (especially in the expression "Hue, cocotte"), and to a woman selling her charms and favours.

[15] Levassor's vocal chords had apparently been troubling him for a while. I have, among the documents I gathered in order to write the present book, a letter from him dated November 30th 1853 and addressed to his friend, violinist Léon Lecieux (1821-1873), in which he apologizes for not being able to sing at a concert Lecieux was organising. "My voice is failing me", Levassor writes, before adding "I really don't know how I can perform […] there is no oil left in the lamp ! …"

[16] *Le Ménestrel*, Sunday January 1st 1854, p. 3.

[17] Henri Boudin, *Le palais de l'industrie universelle: ouvrage descriptif ou analytique des produits les plus remarquables de l'exposition de 1855*, pp. 95-6.
LEFORT, faubourg Saint-Martin, 33, à Paris.
Optique amusante.
Les polyoramas et dioramas exposés par M. Lefort offrent, sous toutes les dimensions, les effets les plus multipliés. Effets de jour et de nuit, effets de lune, éclairage, illuminations, feux d'artifices, éruptions volcaniques, incendies, etc. Tableaux avec animation. – Le vent, le feuillage, le soleil, l'orage, les éclairs, les flots, la neige. – Polyoramas avec chambres noires.
Ces polyoramas ont un double appareil, avec lequel on voir les effets des tableaux comme dans un panorama simple. On peut s'en servir pour dessiner d'après nature. Ils contiennent un portefeuille renfermant tous les objets nécessaires au dessin. Ces appareils sont très portatifs. – Stéréoscopes. – Dioscopes. – Paris la nuit. – Le Feu et l'Eau. – Voyage où il vous plaira ! – Optiques à cylindres, etc.
Tous les articles de M. Lefort, sérieux ou destinés à la récréation des salons, portent l'empreinte d'une connaissance profondément scientifique de son art.

[18] Ernest Conduché, *La Lumière*, November 24th, 1855, p. 187. "Revue des instruments photographiques à l'Exposition universelle."

[19] Madeleine Malthète-Mélès, *Méliès l'Enchanteur*. Hachette, 1973.

[20] The history of Censorship in France is like a roller-coaster ride with periods when it is enforced and periods when it disappears. Usually censorship was abolished after each of the successive revolutions (1789, 1830, 1848), only to be re-established a few years later.

[21] I have told the rather sad and tragic story of Josephine and of some other sitters who modelled in the nude in two books: *The History of Nudes in Stereo Daguerreotypes, Collection W + T Bosshard* (2020) and *The "dirty-footed Venues" and their photographers* (2021).

[22] Coco was a liquorice-based soft drink and it was stored in a tin fountain the coco seller carried on its back. Some of the fountains were very ornate and since they could be spotted very easily coco sellers were a great favourite with children (like the ice-cream men later on), especially in the summer. Coco sellers would carry a couple of cups in which they would serve the drink and would then merely wipe before filling them up for the next customers. Not really hygenic but that was before people knew anything about germs.

[23] Lefort actually took more than twelve stereoscopic pairs but only twelve were kept when they were sold as a set.

[24] Louis Léopold Robert slit his own throat before his easel, on March 20th 1835, the tenth anniversary of the suicide of one of his brothers.

[25] Marc-Antoine Gaudin, *La Lumière*, July 15th 1865, p. 51

> Pour compléter autant que possible la collection fort nombreuse de ses clichés pour stéréoscope, M. Ch. Gaudin vient aussi de se rendre acquéreur de la maison de M. Lefort dont la fondation date déjà de douze ans. Outre ses vues des principales villes d'Italie et d'Allemagne, *la collection Lefort* comprend des groupes d'un agencement très curieux, parmi lesquels nous citerons les scènes d'omnibus, de chemin de fer, de bains et écoles de natation ; les scènes amusantes et drôlatiques dont il sera donné bientôt une description détaillée.
>
> En somme, cette collection comprend 1,200 clichés de groupes, 500 clichés de palais célèbres, et 1,500 clichés de vues des principales capitales, et dans l'ordonnancement des groupes il existe un cachet d'originalité bien connu.
>
> Mc-A. Gaudin

[26] The last issue of *La Lumière* was released on March 15th 1867.

[27] There are examples of B.K. mounts in illustrations 24 and 30, of C.G. mounts in illustrations 42, 55, and 67, and one of an L.L. mount in illustration 56.

[28] The clinic specialised in the treatment of mental and nervous diseases.