

# ARTISTIC PROJECTIONS IN BELGIUM

## Part II. Song Slides by Gustave Marissiaux

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Gustave Marissiaux (1872-1929) was part of the 'pictorialism' movement in photography.<sup>1</sup> Living in Liège, Belgium, he made a living as a studio portrait photographer. He also had a passion for painters such as Rembrandt and Corot, both of whom influenced his photographic style and his use of colours, as mentioned in one of his *causeries* ('chats' or 'informal talks') for the ABP *Bulletin*.<sup>2</sup> From 1903 onwards, Marissiaux also developed his own lantern projections. *Venise* ('Venice'), a very successful show with monochrome colours added to the slides, first took place in the large hall of the Conservatoire in Liège.<sup>3</sup> Marissiaux commented on the scenes depicted in his work while also acting as the lanternist.<sup>4</sup> The popularity of his projections was further confirmed with *La Houillère* ('The Coal Mine'), a series showing the hard work of coal miners in beautifully composed black-and-white photographs.<sup>5</sup>

Marissiaux spent time in Brittany in 1906, inspired by his reading of Pierre Loti's 1886 novel *Pêcheur d'Islande* ('An Iceland Fisherman') at a time when the region was still poor, isolated and difficult to access, but the landscape was already an inspiration for artists.<sup>6</sup> For the slide series *La Bretagne* ('Brittany') Marissiaux modified his style and used songs.<sup>7</sup> The subtitle of the series evoked an operatic "poème dramatique en six parties, esquisse de la vie Armoricaine" ("dramatic poem in six parts, a sketch of Armorican life" – Armorica is the ancient name for the province encompassing Brittany). The music was composed by Charles Radoux and the poetry written by Richard Ledent. Preserved by the Musée de la Photographie in Charleroi, this series is unfortunately incomplete as only four numbered slides (square format) have survived.<sup>8</sup> However, a printed programme from the Brussels Municipal Theatre session of 1908 reproduces the entire song cycle.<sup>9</sup> The cycle tells the story of a Breton mother who loses her husband at sea after a storm. She dies of grief, but her newborn son is raised on a farm. As an adult, the son falls in love with the farmer's daughter, but he is drawn to the sea: "it's an ancient will that hovers over mine." He sets off by boat from the Bay of the Dead. The abandoned farmer's girl dies of grief.<sup>10</sup>

In this respect, the slide (no. 101) 'La Baie des trépassés' from part VI represents the sea at night thanks to a blue tint covering the inside of the glass.<sup>11</sup> This monochrome print may have been produced by chemical reaction, or the glass slide could have been purchased pre-tinted.<sup>12</sup> A bright moon illuminates the sea, and the surprising sharpness of the wave suspended in the foreground demonstrates Marissiaux's technical mastery. The view appears to be a 'day for night' effect where the sun looks like the moon. This simulacrum undoubtedly allows for the representation of folklore legends, specifically the 'bay of the dead' in Finistère. It is said that, on certain nights, the souls of the dead wait on a boat for living sailors hoping to take them aboard.<sup>13</sup> The blue tint perhaps represents a form of 'attractive nothingness'.<sup>14</sup>

Next (no. 105), a young Breton woman stares contemplatively at a port, seen from behind in a melancholic pose, in black and white. The last slide (no. 107) of this fragmentary series shows, from the cliff of the Raz de Sein, a sailing boat moving away towards the horizon. The golden yellow tint seems to refer to a divine force, and the last stanza of the poem reads:



Programme for *La Bretagne* with images by Marissiaux (courtesy of Musée de la Photographie, Charleroi)

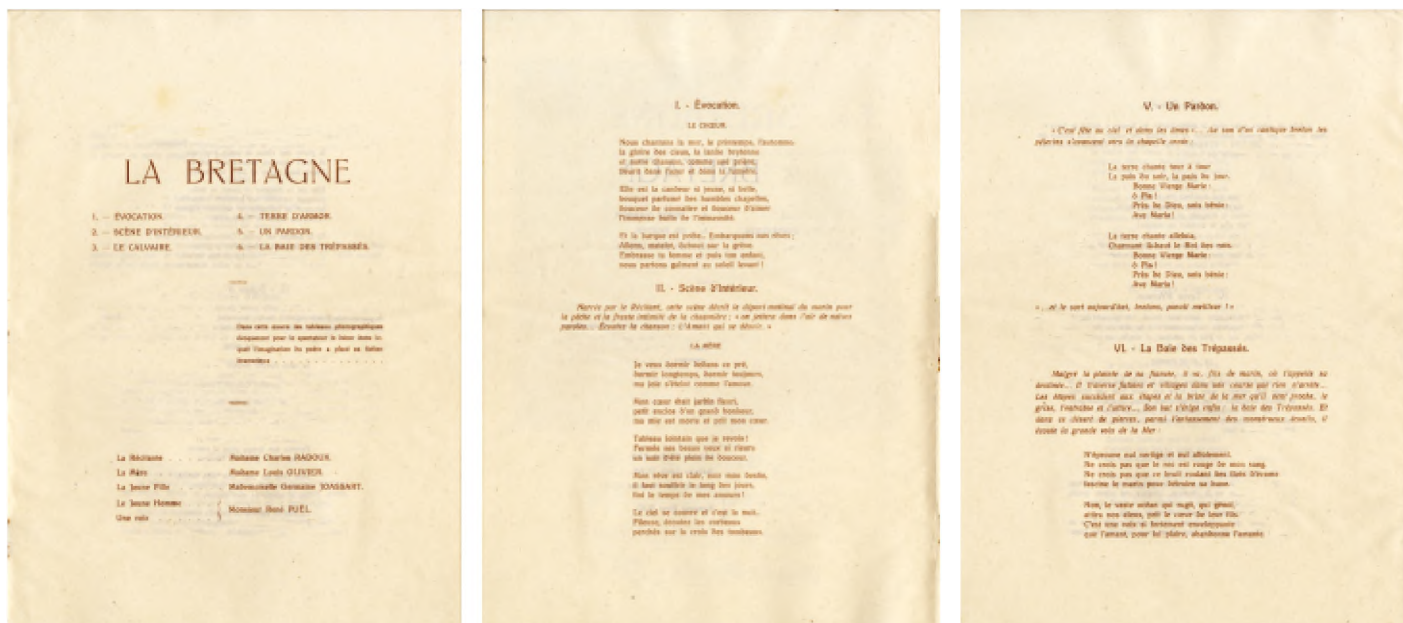
"Thus at dawn he set out in his turn with companions whose mad song lulled his love to sleep [...] He did not see on the shore the poor infatuated girl who had followed him from afar [...] She whispered his name, without courage, closed her eyes, gave up her soul [...] prayed for him in Paradise..."<sup>15</sup>

In both cases it seems that the blue or golden yellow colours express a supernatural mood. The suggested presence of ghosts and invisible forces makes us think about the supernatural, since the colours are paired with dramatic songs about dead souls (ghost stories were featured in various lantern entertainment performances of the time).

Marissiaux was also a traveller; he may well have attended lantern projections in England at the Royal Polytechnic or elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> The phenomena of projections accompanied by an orchestra can be traced back to many influences of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One also wonders if the American genre of live model illustrated song slides could have been an influence on *La Bretagne*.<sup>17</sup> However, the ABP slides were not made as commercial promotions for songs or



Three of Marissiaux's images for *La Bretagne* (courtesy of Musée de la Photographie, Charleroi)



Three more pages from the programme for La Bretagne (courtesy of Musée de la Photographie, Charleroi)

future records. The monochrome colours of Marissiaux's slides undoubtedly help to construct a 'scenario' during projection by increasing a sense of temporality, much as silent cinema did by using tinting and toning. The tones also set a mood that differs from those seen in the live model illustrated songs, where the vivid intensity of the brush-applied individual colours increases the rather dramatic feeling. In this sense, for Marissiaux, colour has a romantic and symbolic status, as characterised by his restrained palette.<sup>18</sup> But neither did he minimise the importance of colour, since he patented his own colour process with Joseph Sury in 1911 for photography on paper. He also used the Lumière Autochrome process for slides, albeit with little recognition.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. On the photographic material used by the pictorialists, see Julien Faure Cornoton, *Visions d'artistes: nouvelles perspectives sur la photographie pictorialiste industrielle en Europe 1890-1960*, exhibition catalogue, Chalon-sur-Saône, Musée Nicéphore Niépce, 2018
2. Gustave Marissiaux, 'Comment un Artiste photographe peut-être un Photographe artiste: causerie faite à la Section Liégeoise de l'Association Belge de Photographie, le 8 mars 1898', *ABP Bulletin*, March 1898
3. Marc-Emmanuel Mélon, *Gustave Marissiaux: La possibilité de l'art*, Musée de la Photographie, Charleroi, 1995, pp. 12-14
4. The *ABP Bulletins* report on Marissiaux's screenings between 1903 and 1908, without giving any details about the type of lantern used.

5. Marc-Emmanuel Mélon, 'Projections photographiques et cinéma des premiers temps: *La Houillère* de Gustave Marissiaux et les origines du cinéma minier', *Intermedialités*, No. 24-25, Fall 2014–Spring 2015
6. Mélon, *Gustave Marissiaux*, p.13
7. Some of Marissiaux's images of Brittany were published in his book *Visions d'artiste* (Vaillant Camarne, Liège, 1908).
8. If the slide numbering starts from 100 this set seems to be attached to a longer programme where *Venise* was screened before *La Bretagne*.
9. We could not find in the Marissiaux archives any documents giving a numbered list of the slides.
10. The lyrics of the song avoid the notion of suicide by just saying that she is closing her eyes.
11. A label with a title is stuck onto the slide. A programme presented with the *Venise* series at the Théâtre Communal in Brussels, on 31 March 1908, is in the Musée de la Photographie in Charleroi.
12. M.H. Fournier, *Les positifs sur verre: théorie et pratique*, Gauthier-Villars Fils, Paris, 1892, p. 172. Thanks to Richard Crangle for suggesting the possible use of pre-tinted glass slides.
13. 'La Baie des trépassés' ('the Bay of the Dead') has been the subject of literary publications bringing together many legends. See Pierre-Jakez Hélias, *Légendes du Raz de Sein*, Edition d'Art Jos Le Douaré, Châtaulin, 1972 – available online
14. Based on the description of the colour blue by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Traité des couleurs*, 1810 (Triades, Paris, 2006) p. 270
15. If fate repeats itself, the son will die at sea like his father – and perhaps he is already dead at the end of the story.
16. Marissiaux most probably went to London in 1900 for the exhibition *The New School of American Photography*, dedicated to American pictorialism and organised by F. Holland Day at the Royal Photographic Society.
17. See, for example, Nancy and Margaret Bergh, 'The Live Model Illustrated Song American Style', *New Magic Lantern Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 3, January 1983, pp. 2-8
18. 'The restrained mode' refers to the muted colour palette defined by Natalie Kalmus' style during the Technicolor era of cinema in the 1930s. See Wikipedia, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natalie\\_Kalmus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natalie_Kalmus), for more discussion.