

MARCH 19, 2021

A Claude Glass



Contributor: Ellen Harvey

Location: Brooklyn, New York, USA

Description: Looking at this photograph of my husband holding a Claude glass reflecting Manhattan as seen from our Brooklyn rooftop, I can't help thinking how much my feelings about both the view in the mirror and the mirror itself have changed. For the last months, during the lock-down, Manhattan has hung like an inaccessible mirage across the river, first uncannily silent, now backed with the low drone of the protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd. A dark mirror means something different in dark times.

The object in question is a small, black, slightly convex, portable mirror in a leather and steel case. Closed, it looks as though it might contain a daguerreotype, flip it open outdoors on a sunny day and you fall Alice-in-Wonderland-like into a strange and heightened vision of reality. The convexity of the glass both compresses and expands the view, creating a surprisingly wide field of vision and the illusion of an almost theatrical distance between the various planes of the landscape. The image produced directly on the surface of the opaque black glass is so sharp, saturated and contrast-rich that it is startling; it reveals just how much detail and color is lost in conventional mirrors where the light has to travel back from the silver tain through the glass to our eyes. The mirror that we think of as providing an “objective” view of our world seems lacking and unbeautiful in comparison and very obviously made to function in an interior setting. By contrast, the black mirror is above all a mirror made for the outdoors; it needs lots of light to function. And it likes to look far into the distance; it’s not a mirror in which you can check your makeup. In a pre-photographic world, when mirrors of any kind were luxuries, it must have seemed even more magical.

The origin of these mirrors is obscure. Although they harken back to the early direct mirrors of obsidian or metal or the black mirrors used for divination, this incarnation with its careful grinding and travel case, intended for the sole purpose of landscape appreciation, seems to have been first popularized in England in the late eighteenth century in conjunction with the rise of landscape tourism, particularly in the Lake District. As Arnaud Maillet points out in *The Claude Glass*, both Thomas West (1720-1799) in his *Guide to the Lakes* and William Gilpin (1724-1804) recommended the use of such mirrors, (1) perhaps not surprisingly, as they are literally machines for creating the picturesque, compressing and transforming the unmanageable world into a comprehensible aesthetic experience, supposedly reminiscent of the paintings of Claude Lorrain. Despite their name, there appears to be no evidence of Lorrain having ever used or encountered one. They seem to have been made in both oval and rectangular form and to have been considered an essential accoutrement of any gentleman of aesthetic pretensions. The poet Thomas Gray (1716-1771) famously recounted in his *Journal of a Visit to the Lake District* what we now easily recognize as the first selfie-accident: falling while using his mirror to admire a sunset. (2) Then, as now, turning your back on reality is not without its perils.

Rather disappointingly, on my visit to the Citadel Park, I saw no signs of any unsavory activity, possibly because it was raining heavily. I had been reading Gilpin and I felt that he would have been sympathetic. He too seemed to have been frequently stymied by inclement weather. In an attempt to entice residents back to their park, I ended up writing a Gilpinesque guide (complete with watercolor illustrations). (6) This pastiche was translated into Dutch and mailed to all the buildings surrounding the park, inviting residents to attend tours, complete with Claude glass viewings and a discussion of Gilpin's critique of the park's many inadequate gestures towards the picturesque. These tours, which I gave with Alex McKay, a Canadian artist who makes contemporary Plexiglas Claude glasses, collapsed in groveling apologies on my part when I discovered to my dismay that both my translator and many of the participants were deeply offended to discover that the guide (purported to have been written in 1799 for a park built as part of the World Expo in 1913) was in fact a fraud. (7)

In retrospect, the narrative disaster initiated by my first use of this Claude glass seems to anticipate the elusive meaning of such a mirror today. At a moment when so much of our reality is produced in the screens of our various devices, this little portable mirror can seem oddly prescient in the way in which it provides a mechanism for controlling and framing experience, making the world small and manageable and unchallengingly scenic. At the same time, the dark distorted view of the Claude glass also reminds us that while the allegorical figure of Truth may carry a mirror, that mirror may not in fact reflect the truth. The picturesque world view traditionally plants the white male aesthete squarely in its center, doling out aesthetic judgement in a way that ignores both the use-value of the landscape and the interconnectivity of humanity with its habitat. As an artist, I cannot help thinking that if art is a mirror it's always a failed one, hampered by the artist's inevitable subjectivity. Of course, it's also important to remember that the black mirror is traditionally used for magic, in particular for seeing the future. So maybe it's worth taking yet another look and hoping that the future will indeed be a more beautiful one for everyone.

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Date: unknown

Creator: unknown

Media: black Glass, leather-covered steel frame,

Media rights: Photograph: Ellen Harvey, 2020.

Footnotes

1. Arnaud Maillet, *The Claude Glass*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 15 – 22.
2. Jen Rose Smith, *The 18th Century Phenomenon of Putting a Filter on a Sunset for Likes: Before Instagram there was the Claude Glass*, May 25, Atlas Obscura, 2017, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/claude-glass>
3. Maillet, *The Claude Glass*, 27 -35.
4. Steven Jacobs & Frank Maes, ed., *Beyond the Picturesque* (Ghent, Belgium: S.M.A.K., 2009), 102-107.
5. Ellen Harvey, *The New York Beautification Project* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2005)
6. Ellen Harvey, *Observations Relative to the Picturesque Beauty of the Citadel Park* (Ghent, Belgium: S.M.A.K., 2009) <http://www.ellenharvey.info/Projects/picturesque/booklet.html>
7. *The Citadel Park in Ghent*, 2009, <https://visit.gent.be/en/see-do/citadelpark-ghent>

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ERA's online research project, **Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)** launched in summer 2017. The virtual exhibition is designed to address both an academic and a general audience as an interdisciplinary project showcasing and sharing Romantic texts, objects, and places through collaborations between academic researchers, museums, galleries and other cultural groupings. It is now supported by BARS (the British Association for Romantic Studies) and is the core research project of the AHRC-funded project *Dreaming Romantic Europe* (PI Professor Nicola J. Watson, Open University) and Professor Catriona Seth (Co-I All Souls, Oxford).