

**Elisabeth Francart, ‘Madame Disdéri’, a pioneer of photography
erased by history (and a scraper)**

**Elisabeth Francart, “Madame Disdéri”, una pionera de la fotografía
borrada por la historia (y por un raspador)**

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Abstract:

Eclipsed by her husband’s fame, Elisabeth Francart, M^{me} Disdéri (c.1818-1878), is best known for her work as a photographer in the city of Brest (Bretagne) from 1850 onwards. In addition to her importance as a pioneering woman who ran several photographic studios bearing her name, this research now brings to light her intense and unpublished activity as a partner, administrator and photographer at Disdéri & C^{ie}, the famous establishment opened by her husband André in Paris in the years of the implementation and triumph of the *cartes de visite*. This important participation, which presents Francart as co-responsible for the success of the revolutionary format, has been overlooked by history, while her husband’s merits – from whom she was de facto separated – have been magnified. In the same vein, M^{me} Disdéri’s name was even methodically scraped from the *cartes de visite* that recognised the authorship of her work.

Resumen:

Eclipsada por la fama de su marido, Elisabeth Francart, M^{me} Disdéri (c.1818-1878), es conocida principalmente por su actividad como fotógrafa en la localidad de Brest (Bretagne) a partir de 1850. A su importancia como mujer pionera en regentar diversos estudios fotográficos a su nombre, esta investigación recupera ahora su intensa e inédita actividad como socia, administradora y fotógrafa en Disdéri & C^{ie}, el famoso establecimiento abierto por su marido André en París en los años de la implantación y triunfo de las *cartes de visite*. Esta relevante participación, que presenta a la fotógrafa como co-responsable en el éxito del revolucionario formato, ha sido ignorada por la historia a la vez que se magnificaban los merecimientos de su marido –del que se encontraba separada de facto–. En la misma línea, el nombre de M^{me} Disdéri llegó a ser raspado metódicamente de las *cartes de visite* que reconocían la autoría de su trabajo.

Keywords:

Photography; Woman photographer; Madame Disdéri; Geneviève Elisabeth Francart; Brest; Paris; *carte de visite*.

Palabras clave:

Fotografía; fotógrafa; Madame Disdéri; Geneviève Elisabeth Francart; Brest; París; *carte de visite*.

1. Introduction

Until very recently, the photographer Geneviève Elisabeth Francart, Madame Disdéri (c.1818-1878), [F1.1] has been little more than a footnote in her husband's biography, André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri (1819-1889), [F1.2] the famous photographer who patented in November 1854 a system to lower the production costs of *cartes de visite*, the small albumen portraits mounted on cardboard (10.5 x 6.2 cm approx.) that revolutionised the photographic industry at the end of the same decade¹.



F1. *Cartes de visite* by Disdéri & Cie, c. 1860. CCØ Paris Musées / Musée Carnavalet - Histoire de Paris: 1. *Portrait of M^{me} Disdéri / Portrait of André Disdéri*.

Forgotten during a century, the presence of the signature 'M^e Disdéri' on some prints in Gabriel Cromer's prominent collection of nineteenth-century photography (George Eastman Museum) made the photographer's name timidly appear in the specialised literature from 1969 onwards (White, 1969; Mann, 1975). However, it was not until the publication of Elizabeth Anne McCauley's seminal study about André Disdéri – firstly as an article in the

¹ *Brevet d'Invention [...] pour des perfectionnements en photographie, notamment appliqués aux cartes de visite, portraits, monuments, etc.* Dossier 1BB21502, Institut National de la Propriété Industrielle, Courbevoie.

French journal *Prestige de la Photographie* (McCauley, 1978), and later as a book (McCauley, 1985) – that the most significant biographical developments were made. This researcher established the essential chronology of the marriage by bringing to light their documental records both in the civil registers of Paris and Brest, for the latter with the assistance of archivist Jean Foucher. She also pointed out that in the photographic establishment shared by the couple in Brest in the early 1850s under the name 'Mr. et M^{me} Disdéri', he was the operator who made the first daguerreotypes, while she was responsible for illuminating them with 'delicate, hand-applied gold highlights' (McCauley, 1985, p. 9)². According to the same biographer, the political and financial problems of the impulsive M^r Disdéri apparently led him in 1852 'to leave his wife, family and photographic business in Brest and travel to southern France', returning after a year to Paris, where he set up a large studio at Nr. 8 Boulevard des Italiens. For her part, M^{me} Disdéri, 'presumably with the assistance of several other employees and family members', continued to manage the former family business and produced 'a series of views of *Brest et ses environs* around 1856-58' (McCauley, 1985, p. 14). [F2] Finally, recalling the photographer's opening of a last studio in Paris around 1872 – still under her brand name, 'M^{me} Disdéri' – McCauley again had doubts as to her ability to do it alone: 'Whether she was assisted by Disdéri's son Jules, who had also become a photographer, cannot be determined' (McCauley, 1985, p. 215).

This vision of Elisabeth Francart, first subordinated and then apparently distanced from her husband's Parisian establishment, has been the basis for the brief references to the photographer in the recent bibliography (Buerger, 1989, p. 213; Rosenblum, 1994, p. 45; Korda, 2008, p. 420; Nilsen, 2011, p. 181; de Font-Réaulx, 2015, p. 55; Hudgins, 2020, p. 187). Still, it is worth noting that no evidence has been found about the way the Disdéri's divided up the work in their shared studio in Brest, nor do we have details of their separation and subsequent relationship – apart from a mention of Francart as a silent partner in Disdéri's Parisian establishment between 1857 and 1862 – (McCauley, 1985, p. 44). It is also unclear whether Francart had any

² Quotations are reproduced in the original English, otherwise translated from the French by the author.

collaborators (male or female) in her various photographic studios. Paradoxically, M^{me} Disdéri's personality is best defined by that which is not documented: a wife who helped her husband to delicately illuminate the daguerreotypes, who was abandoned, and who presumably did not have the capacity to run a studio on her own.



F2. *Ships anchored in Brest* (from the album *Brest et ses environs*), c. 1856-58. Albumen print by M^{me} Disdéri, 24.7 x 35.5 cm. © Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF).

Curiously, shortly before McCauley's book appeared, the aforementioned archivist Jean Foucher published a brief article devoted to the Disdéri couple in the local magazine *Les cahiers de l'Iroise*, where he offered an alternative view of Elisabeth Francart. According to his narrative, after the breakdown of the marriage, M^{me} Disdéri rebuilt her sentimental life with a close family friend and science teacher on the Borda training ship, Eugène Collet-Corbinière, spending large sums of money on a property of stately taste 'to shelter her love affairs' in the suburbs of Brest (Foucher, 1984, p. 61). After the sale of the property in 1868, the couple moved to Paris to live in the rue des Feuillantines, the 'Mecca of Romanticism'. This line of research has been taken up more recently by the scholar Marie-Françoise Bastit-Lesourd, who has been collecting in her blog *Ellesaussienbretagne* a large amount of information about the Disdéri's (Bastit-Lesourd, 2013), which has served as a starting point

for other digital publications (Padín Ogando, 2017). Finally, some recent papers have addressed the photographer's work from the perspective of feminist and postmodern theory (Barr, 2021), or as a pioneer of photography in Brest (Guengant, 2022).

In order to clarify as far as possible the artistic achievements of M^{me} Disdéri, this study has undertaken a careful review of known documentation, which is interpreted without certain gender stereotypes now happily outdated. In addition, meticulous research has led to the discovery of previously unpublished sources of information on the photographer, as well as *cartes de visite* showing that Elisabeth Francart played a leading role in the Paris studio of Disdéri & C^{ie}. These findings reveal a new dimension of M^{me} Disdéri's work for the history of photography, which will be discussed below in detail.

2. The early years

Geneviève Elisabeth Francart was probably born in 1818 in Paris and died in the same city on 16 December 1878, according to her death certificate³. In this document, her middle name, Elisabeth, appears in first place, as it was the name she used regularly, and which is recorded – together with the more familiar 'Elisa' – in the population census of Brest for the years 1851, 1856 and 1861⁴. These documents, which respectively give her ages as 32, 38 and 43, suggest that she was born in the first half of 1818 and not in 1817, as seems to be deduced from her death certificate, which probably indicates by mistake she passed away at the age of 61 rather than at the age of 60⁵. Francart's family lived in the town of Grenelle, near Paris, where her father worked as a carpenter. According to the first biography of the photographer (Lauzac, 1861), a young André Disdéri performed at the local theatre in the same town between 1839 and 1840. Therefore, it is possible that Elisabeth and André met in the area of Grenelle before their marriage in the 5^e *arrondissement* of Paris on 8

³ Archives de Paris, 5^e arr., V4E 3061, nr. 3232. Her birth certificate has not been located.

⁴ Archives départementales du Finistère, 6 M 134, 138, 140. The shortened name 'Elisa' appears again in her husband's death certificate. Archives de Paris, 14^e arr., V4E 7106, nr. 3249.

⁵ Also, the record erroneously states that her middle name was 'Genitien'.

March 1843⁶. André ran an embroidery business at the time, followed by a lingerie business, which soon went bankrupt with a loss of between 7,000 and 8,000 francs (McCauley, 1985, p. 8). This first financial fiasco may have been the reason for Elisabeth to apply for a separation of property against her husband in 1845, which was granted by the Civil Court of La Seine on 18 July of the same year. In the liquidation of assets that followed the separation, M^r Disdéri was ordered to pay his wife a sum of 50 francs and to bear the costs of the proceedings⁷. After a new business failure, this time focused on hosiery (Rouillé, 1989, p. 170), in 1848 the Disdéri family moved to Brest, where Elisabeth's elder brother, Prosper Francart, was deputy commissioner in the provisional government of the Second Republic that had just been established. During this short period of democratic progress, André Disdéri joined the Société des Droits de l'Homme de Brest founded by his brother-in-law Francart, where he curiously called himself 'citizen Disdéri-Francart', linking his surname to that of his wife's family⁸.

The date and circumstances surrounding the Disdéri couple's interest in the daguerreotype – publicly presented in 1839 – are uncertain. However, the first biography of André states that he began studying it in 1847, perhaps while still living in Paris, and after having tried other artistic disciplines such as drawing for engraving and, even earlier, painting (Lauzac, 1861, p. 100). Nevertheless, according to the Garde Nationale de Brest registers dated 15 May 1848⁹, after settling down in the city, Disdéri worked as an accountant, probably in the fertiliser company mentioned in the report of one of his bankruptcies (Rouillé, 1989, p. 170). The same source reports that he was unsuccessful in this position, and it would be at this point when he set up his first photographic establishment with the help of 'some members of his wife's family'. A notice published in the newspaper *L'Armoricaïn* on 12 May 1849 announced to those who had 'expressed the wish to have their portrait made in daguerreotype' that M. Disdéri had the honour of informing them that in a few days he would be

⁶ Their wedding record has not been located in the Archives de Paris.

⁷ *Procès-verbal tendant à la liquidation des reprises de M^{me} Disdéri*, 30 August 1845, Archives nationales, MC/ET/LXXXII/975.

⁸ *Société des Droits de l'Homme de Brest [...] Séance du mardi 28 mars 1848*. See *Les Murailles Révolutionnaires de 1848*, vol. 3, p. 276.

⁹ Archives de Brest, 3H33.

leaving Brest for '3 or 4 months', most likely with the intention of working as an itinerant daguerreotypist. The address mentioned in the advertisement, rue Saint-Yves 43, also corresponds to the family home address and matches the first one listed in the Garde National registers. No labels with this address have been found on the back of the photographer's early daguerreotypes, while some examples are known of those used as advertisements on his business trips, where he appears simply as 'Disdéri, de Brest', with a blank space to fill in the place where he set up his portable studio and the number of days he would stay there¹⁰.

In the absence of further information, these early references to Monsieur Disdéri as a self-employed photographer suggest that his wife was at first kept on the sidelines – or perhaps in a secondary role – regarding the new photography business. At the same time, one might suspect that it was his activity as an itinerant daguerreotypist that encouraged Elisabeth Francart to take care of the commissions in Brest during what seem to have been prolonged absences. In any case, the census carried out in 1851 (Archives de Finistère) recorded that at that time both were already practising the profession of 'Artiste topographe', an amusing confusion certainly referring to 'Artiste photographe', and which could be explained by the ignorance of the new term by the official in charge of compiling the registry. The new family home was at 42 rue du Château, where Elisabeth's mother, a four-year-old daughter who died shortly afterwards, and a maid were also listed. Several labels have been preserved from this second studio-domicile in Brest, which specify the joint participation of the two photographers: 'Daguerréotype / Mr. et M^{me} Disdéri. Rue du Château, 42 / Brest.'¹¹ [F3.1]

¹⁰ BnF, RES PHOTO EG5-695; Private collection, France.

¹¹ George Eastman Museum, 1976.0168.0034; BnF, RES PHOTO EG3-206; Archives départementales du Finistère, 4Fi.806, 4Fi.807; Chiesa-Gosio collection, Brescia.



F3. Labels and signatures on photographs by M^{me} Disdéri: 1. *A.R. Viot en uniforme...*, Brest, 1851. Daguerreotype. © BnF. / 2. *Portrait of a Young Man*, Brest, c. 1856-58. Salted paper. Author's coll. / 3. *Ships anchored in Brest*, c. 1856-58. Albumen print. © BnF. / 4. *Portrait of the Davidan family*, Brest, c. 1860. Carte de visite (Cdv). Author's coll. / 5. *Portrait of doctor Ricord*, Paris, 1862. Cdv. Author's coll. / 6. *Portrait of Rosa Bonheur*, Paris, 1862. Cdv. Author's coll. / 7. *Portrait of a Man*, Paris, c. 1875. Cdv. Author's coll.

Between 1851 and 1852 André began a new business venture in partnership with the painter Joseph Diosse to create a large diorama of views of Switzerland, based at the studio in the rue du Château. Inaugurated in mid-July 1852, the enterprise turned into another failure that resulted in considerable losses and may have influenced the photographer's decision to leave Brest and travel to Nîmes, where he devoted himself to the new technique of collodion on glass negative (McCauley, 1985, p. 14). The photography business in Brest therefore remained in the hands of Elisabeth, who soon moved again, since in the 1856 census she appears residing at 53 rue de Traverse as 'artiste photographique' and 'chef de ménage' (head of the household), accompanied by her son Jules – the only one to reach adulthood – her mother and a new housemaid. From this location, a label has recently been found attached to the frame of a salted paper portrait of a young aspiring sailor, which bears the commercial name of the photographer, now acting on

her own: 'Photographie sans retouches / & Daguerréotype, / 53, Rue de Traerse [sic]. / M^{me}. Disdéri / Brest.'¹² [F3.2 & F4]



F4. *Portrait of a Young Man*, 55, Rue de Traverse, Brest, c. 1856-58. Salted paper by M^{me} Disdéri, 24,3 x 19 cm. Author's collection.

Around the same time, Francart produced the aforementioned views of *Brest et ses environs* on albumen paper. The George Eastman Museum has an unbound volume of up to 28 different views, while the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Archives de Finistère and a private collection in Brest hold single copies of the series¹³. Some of them are hand-signed as 'M^e' or 'M^m Disdéri'. [F3.3] This was the photographer's most ambitious project, which required the use of glass plates of considerable size – probably 30 x 39 cm – as

¹² Photograph found on the Ebay France auction site in October 2023. See <https://picclick.fr/RARE-Grande-Photo-32-X-26-par-Mme-126155925527.html>. An image of its label has been included in Bastit-Lesourd (2013). At least two other portraits on salt paper made by M^{me} Disdéri in Brest have been preserved (Coll. Gérard Berthelom).

¹³ George Eastman Museum, 1980.0256.0001-0028; BnF, EO-19-FOL. I am grateful to Flora Triebel for her help in accessing the four photographs from the series held in this collection; Archives départementales du Finistère, 4 Fi 785, *L'Anse de Porstrein...* Unidentified until now, it is a gelatine print of the first view of the album held at the George Eastman Museum; Regarding Brest's private collection, see Foucher (1984, p. 61).

some of the proofs reach 35 and 36 cm on their long side¹⁴. An advertisement in the newspaper *L'Océan*, published on 19 January 1866, shows that around 1865 she produced a second 'Album historique' entitled *Vue du Borda et de ses Annexes*, designed by two colleagues of Eugène Collet-Corbinière, drawing teachers on the *Borda* training ship: Auguste Mayer and Prosper Saint-Germain (Delouche, 1980, p. 63)¹⁵. Until now, no surviving copies of the album have been found, nor any photographs signed by Francart of the *Borda* and its auxiliary vessels, *Sylphe* and *Bougainville*, have been identified. However, among M^{me} Disdéri's photographs held at the BnF, there is a view of *Ships from the seashore* which is not included among the 28 views in the George Eastman Museum and which may therefore be part of the photographer's second album. [F5]



F5. *Ships from the seashore*, Brest, c. 1856-58. Albumen print by M^{me} Disdéri, 26.5 x 33 cm.
© Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Meanwhile, at the end of 1853 André moved to Paris, and in the middle of the following year he managed to open a large studio at Nr. 8 Boulevard des Italiens by creating a company 'Disdéri & Cie', mainly financed by Jules Michel

¹⁴ At that time, printing was done by contact, so the size of the negative corresponded to the size of the paper, although a few centimetres were always lost due to imperfections of the glass plate.

¹⁵ The advertisement is reproduced in Roudaut (2019, p. 22)

Chandelier (McCauley, 1985, p. 24). This first venture was followed by a 'Société du Palais de l'Industrie', backed by Messrs Pariset and Rapeaud, which focused on photographic works for the Universal Exhibition of 1855 (McCauley, 1985, p. 38). Suspension of payments and consequent bankruptcy of these two businesses led to legal proceedings where one witness testified that 'M. Disdéri had made withdrawals that exceeded the authorisation granted to him by [the company's] statutes' or that 'he had sent products [from the Paris studio] to M^{me} Disdéri in Brest', concluding that the photographer 'had not properly understood his position as administrator, having considered in excess the company's assets as if they were his own property'¹⁶. Disdéri was eventually declared guilty of simple bankruptcy and sentenced to fifteen days in prison, but regarding his wife, it is worth noting that after the separation he continued to maintain at least a commercial relationship with her.

3. Elisabeth Francart, Partner at Disdéri & Cie in Paris

This association was strengthened in 1857 by the establishment of a renewed company 'Disdéri & Cie' with Elisabeth Francart acting as a silent partner – her liability being limited to the financial participation made – with a contribution of 12,000 francs in cash¹⁷. Eugène Collet-Corbinière, a friend of the family and perhaps already at that time Francart's romantic partner, participated with the same status and the same financial contribution to the company. André Disdéri, who certainly did not provide any capital because of his previous debts, and the photographer and lithographer Désiré Lebel, from Amiens, who contributed a further 12,000 francs, acted as managing partners. Thanks to this new financial injection, the Parisian studio on the Boulevard des Italiens – acquired after the bankruptcy, together with its contents, by the illusionist Hamilton in a public sale¹⁸ – was rented by the managing partners and reopened its doors in September 1857 in what was to be its only period of splendour. This partnership lasted for five years, being dissolved in March

¹⁶ *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires*, 1 July 1856, p.2.

¹⁷ Archives de Paris, D31U3 205, n° 2418. I am grateful to Vincent Tuchais for his help in obtaining a copy of the company's registration act from the Tribunal de Commerce.

¹⁸ He was the owner of the Robert Houdin theatre in the same building as Disdéri's studio. See *Procès verbal d'adjudication au profit de M. Chocat Hamilton*, 24 December 1856. Archives nationales, MC/ET/XXXI/897. Quoted in Durand (2013, p. 350).

1862 by mutual agreement between the associates, with M^r Disdéri remaining in charge of the studio until 1865.

Having first-hand knowledge of her husband's disastrous business background, Elisabeth Francart's reasons for joining him in a new venture might have been based on the experience she acquired over a period of five years managing her own photographic studio in Brest, and maybe also on the belief that the Paris *atelier* could succeed if the right decisions were made. It is significant in any event that the deed of the new company expressly prohibited the managing partners from 'creating any promissory notes or accepting bills of exchange or other commercial instruments in the name or on behalf of the company', a preventative measure which would have given the partners greater control over M^r Disdéri's inclination towards indebtedness. Moreover, although the status of silent partner did not give Francart the capacity to manage the studio, on the same date that the company was established, André Disdéri signed before a notary an 'authorisation to manage' ('Autorisation pour gérer'), which gave his wife the power to do so on his behalf¹⁹.

One of the first decisions taken with the reopening of the business was to set up a system of customer and works registration, which began on 19 September 1857²⁰. Another strategic decision was to privilege *cartes de visite* over other less profitable products, thus anticipating a commercial revolution that was about to explode. Although Disdéri had registered a patent in November 1854 'pour des perfectionnements en photographie, notamment appliqués aux cartes de visite...', hardly any of this kind of portraits have survived dated before 1857. Moreover, the identification of some of the photographer's presumed early specimens is problematic as they are not mounted on a cardboard bearing his name²¹. Whatever the case, this scarcity suggests that between 1854 and 1856 Disdéri produced a small number of *cartes de visite*, a format whose authorship is still attributed to him, although this idea has been

¹⁹ *Répertoires du notaire Jules César Trépagne*, MC/RE/XXXVI/14, sig. 222 r^o-265 r^o, 19 September 1857. Archives nationales. Quoted in Durand (2013, p. 351).

²⁰ The customer record book is now kept at the BnF, as well as five reference albums of plate prints classified according to their negative number. BnF, RES PHOTO Z-102-BOITE FOL, RES PHOTO NZ-202 (1-5)-BOITE FOL. On this issue, see Aubenas (1997).

²¹ Reproduced in McCauley (1985, p. 32-33).

proved wrong on many occasions (Gernsheim, 1955, p. 224; McCauley, 1985, p. 27; Frecker, 2024, p. 31). Dodero in Marseille and Aguado and Delessert in Paris experimented with small portraits mounted on cardboard before Disdéri, whose merit lies in having made a decisive commercial commitment to the format, which he managed to impose at once while expanding the photographic medium from a small elite to a broad spectrum of society.

Back to Elisabeth Francart's professional career, in September 1857 she took part in the *Deuxième Exposition des Produits de l'Industrie* in Laval (Mayenne), winning a bronze medal ('mention honorable') for her photographic materials (Maignan, 1857, p. 193). This reward was quickly adopted by the Paris-based company Disdéri & C^{ie}, who placed it at the top of the documentation generated by the studio, together with the medals won by Monsieur Disdéri at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1855 and the Amsterdam Photographic Exhibition held in the same year. For her part, in an advertisement of her studio in Brest, published in the newspaper *L'Océan* on 8 August 1858, M^{me} Disdéri stated that she had those same '3 médailles d'Exposition', and also announced the use of a new photographic paper patented by the 'Maison Disdéri et C^{ie}, de Paris'²². In addition, a document kept at the Société Française de la Photographie states that around this time Francart was also in partnership in Brest with Eugène Collet-Corbinière, himself an amateur photographer²³. M^{me} Disdéri's journeys between this city and Paris to attend her interests in both businesses must have been constant, although unfortunately the lack of documentation prevents us from knowing her precise activities.

The following year, in 1859, M^{me} Disdéri moved her studio in Brest from 53 rue de Traverse to 65 rue de Siam. This new studio-domicile²⁴, which was advertised in the press as a 'Succursale' [branch] of the 'Maison Disdéri et C^{ie}

²² The advertisement is reproduced in Roudaut (2019, p. 24 and 30). We have also found another, more concise advertisement in *L'Océan* of 14 August 1857, p. 4. (Archives de Finistère).

²³ *Letter from Pierre Péneau to the secretary of the Société française de la Photographie* (SFP), 22 May 1858. SFP_DA_PENA_1. As for Collet-Corbinière, he joined the SFP in April 1859.

²⁴ In the 1861 census, Francart appears as a 'photographe' and 'chef de ménage' (head of the household) in the rue de Siam with her son Jules, aged 10. Her mother Geneviève Joséphine Thernois, also a 'chef de ménage', and a maid lived in an adjoining house. Archives départementales du Finistère, 6 M 140.

de Paris'²⁵, was focused on making *cartes de visite*, many of which have been preserved, especially in private collections. The careful staging of these portraits is very similar to that of the parent studio, [F6.1] and also the design of the back of their *cartes* followed the model used from 1857 onwards by Disderi & Cie. [F3.4]



F6. *Cartes de visite* by M^{me} Disdéri. Author's collection: 1. *Portrait of the Davidan family*, 65, Rue de Siam, Brest, c. 1860. / 2. *Portrait of doctor Ricord*, 8, Boulevard des Italiens, Paris, 1862. / 3. *Portrait of a Man*, 146, Rue du Bac, Paris, c. 1875.

The customer record book of the Boulevard des Italiens studio provides an insight into the evolution of the Paris establishment, which increased its production exponentially as the *cartes de visite* became increasingly popular (McCauley, 1985, p. 228). Whilst in the first five months after its reopening the studio had a monthly average of 79 poses²⁶, two years later, between November 1859 and February 1860, the average had risen to 570, and from March to June 1860 it reached 959 poses per month. The reason for this spectacular increase of 1114% was explained by Nadar in his memoirs, where he recalled that in 1859 'the enthusiasm for Disdéri turned into delirium' when Emperor Napoléon III, who was leaving for Italy at the head of his army, 'stopped in front of Disdéri's establishment to have his photograph taken' (Nadar, 1899, p.

²⁵ See note 15.

²⁶ For this estimate, the *cartes de visite* of Abbé Moigno (nr. 4398) were used as a reference, which according to his own testimony were taken on 15 February 1858, some 400 poses after the cliché nr. 4002 corresponding to 19 September 1857. See *Cosmos*, 12 March 1858, p. 285.

211)²⁷. The success of these portraits and the satisfaction of Napoléon III was such that on 26 July 1859 he granted Disdéri the titles and patents of 'Photographe de l'Empereur, du prince Jérôme et du prince et de la princesse Napoléon'²⁸, which were advertised in all kinds of media by Disdéri & Cie.

The great success achieved by the Paris *atelier* in the second half of 1859 led to the idea of its renovation and enlargement, and for this purpose it closed its doors at the end of December 1859, to be reopened at the beginning of April the following year. Even though most of the chronicles gave exclusive credit to Monsieur Disdéri for the luxurious new presentation, *Le Siècle Industriel* remarked on the contrary that the entire decoration of the main salon in Louis XV style, 'as an idea, belongs to M^{me} Disdéri; it is a marvel of good taste'²⁹. This is the only reference found in the press about Francart's activity in the Paris establishment, corroborated by an engraving of the same salon published in *L'Illustration*, where she appears attending a female customer, while her husband Disdéri, in profile, does the same on the right side of the composition³⁰. [F7]

The identification of M^{me} Disdéri is based upon two portraits (or maybe self-portraits) of the photographer taken in the Paris studio, where she wears the same dark dress with ruffles and the same hairstyle shown in the engraving³¹. [F1 & F7] In addition, the absence of a bonnet – as opposed to the female clients – indicates that this lady has not accessed the salon from the street, but rather belongs to the studio staff, as do Disdéri and the gentleman in the background on the right. The Musée Carnavalet preserves two further photographs of Francart from Disdéri & Cie dubiously identified as the dancer Lola Montez³², while in the Biblioteca Pública de Pontevedra there is a *carte*

²⁷ About this visit – questioned by McCauley (1985, p. 45) – see *La Gazette de France*, 11 May 1859, p. 2; *Le Pays*, 12 May 1859; or *Figaro*, 14 May 1859, p. 7.

²⁸ *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, 8 August 1859, p. [3].

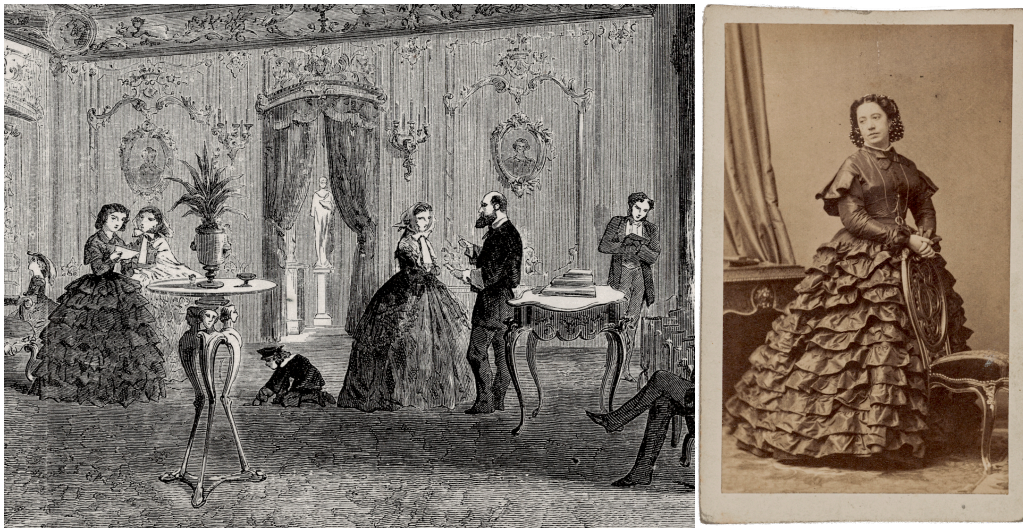
²⁹ *Le Siècle Industriel*, 24 March 1860, p. [3].

³⁰ *L'Illustration, Journal Universel*, 2 June 1860, p. 353.

³¹ Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Ph. 49648 and Ph. 57492. The first portrait is identified on its verso as 'M^{me} Disdéri', while other copies, also identified, are known to be in private collections such as that of François Boisjoly. The verso of the second portrait mistakenly identifies the sitter as the famous opera singer 'Madame Viardot'.

³² Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Ph. 54157 and Ph. 54158. The inscriptions read: 'Lola Montes?'

de visite by photographer Alfred Neveu of a 'Madame Disdéri'³³ not corresponding to the image of Elisabeth Francart³⁴. This could be a common case of misidentification, or perhaps it might be the portrait of André Disdéri's mother, Louise Eugenie Merigó, who according to the Paris directories ran a guesthouse for young ladies under her married name and did not die until 1881, at the age of 81³⁵.



F7. Reception salon of M. Disdéri (detail), Paris, 1860. Drawing by Lancelot and Bertall, engraving by L. Dumont. Author's collection. / Portrait of M^{me} Disdéri. Carte de visite by Disdéri & C^{ie}, Paris, c. 1860. CCØ Paris Musées / Musée Carnavalet - Histoire de Paris.

4. Elisabeth Francart, also photographer at Disdéri & C^{ie}

Reports of Mme Disdéri's involvement as a co-partner, manager or decorator of the Boulevard des Italiens studio prove that she also played an important role in the establishment's success. For this contribution to be complete, it would only be necessary to add her work as a photographer, which has also been confirmed after the chance discovery that led to the present investigation: a *carte de visite* from the Paris studio with the inscription 'Mme Disdéri, phot...' in the place usually reserved for the plain 'Disdéri'. It is a portrait of Dr.

³³ Available at: <https://bvpb.mcu.es/ca/consulta/registro.do?id=490428>. It belongs to a photo album in the Muruais collection (nr. 499). I am grateful to Pilar Fernández Ruiz, Director of the Library, for providing me with several images of this portrait.

³⁴ On this issue, see also Onfray (2023, p. 234), who in her PhD thesis already observed the existence of two different M^{me} Disdéri, though being unable to determine which of them was the 'impostor'. I am grateful to the author for the opportunity to access the unpublished text of her brilliant thesis.

³⁵ Archives des Hauts-de-Seine, nr. 362.

Philippe Ricord³⁶. [F3.5 & F6.2] The fact that this discovery has gone unnoticed until now is surprising, as the photographer's name is clearly visible on the cardboard support of the photograph's recto. And yet, an intensive search among several thousand *cartes de visite* from the Parisian studio has confirmed its rarity, as only seven specimens signed by M^{me} Disdéri have been found, representing the courtesan Giulia Barucci (nr. 18951, from 1860, Paul Frecker collection)³⁷; General Joseph Bernelle (nr. 31592 or 31593, from 1861, private collection); the politician Alejandro Mon y Menéndez (nr. 20052 or 20053, from 1860, in commerce); the aforementioned doctor Philippe Ricord (nr. 32877, from 1862, Author's collection), the lawyer Jules Senard (nr. 16036 or 17753/54, from 1860, Author's collection) [F8.1]; and the American politician Thurlow Weed in two different poses (nr. 33519, from 1862, George Eastman Museum, 1981.3345.0029³⁸, and Author's collection). [F8.2]



F8. *Cartes de visite* by M^{me} Disdéri. 8, Boulevard des Italiens, Paris. Author's collection: 1. Portrait of Jules Senard, 1860. / 2. Portrait of Thurlow Weed (recto & verso), 1862.

These photographs were taken between 1860 and 1862, but the design of the *cartes de visite* bearing M^{me} Disdéri's name correspond to that used by the studio after February 1865, when a new company 'Collet-Corbinière & Cie' was

³⁶ Photograph found on the website 'todocoleccion' in August 2023. Available at: <https://www.todocoleccion.net/fotografia-antigua-cartes-visite/disderi-paris-ricord-siglo-xix~x179069175>.

³⁷ Available at: <http://paulfrecker.com/?page=LibraryDetails&itemid=8294>.

³⁸ Available at: <https://collections.eastman.org/objects/517507/man>.

created to manage the holdings of 'Photographie Disdéri'. This partnership – dissolved a year later – was led and managed by Georges Collet-Corbinière, a law graduate and son of Eugène Collet-Corbinière, who was also listed as a partner. Photographer Désiré Lebel, businessmen Camille Léonard and Émile Lion and journalist Théodore Degrave were also partners in the business. Collet-Corbinière Jr. provided the partnership with his work and knowledge, while the other 'silent partners' contributed with the sums currently owed to them by André Disdéri: 409,808 francs, which constituted the share capital, together with a further 23,000 francs 'in cash' contributed by the associates 'to facilitate the operations of the company'³⁹. Elisabeth Francart did not join this new company, nor did André Disdéri, who since September 1864 had settled in Madrid, where he first occupied the Conde de Vernay's studio on calle Pontejos and from February 1865 his own studio on calle del Príncipe. The latter establishment operated for a few months, but in December of the same year the photographer was already in London where he opened two new branches, and did not return to Paris until March 1866, where once again took control of his original *atelier* after the dissolution of the Collet-Corbinière & Cie partnership⁴⁰.

Although André Disdéri advertised in the newspapers that he 'operated himself' in the studio, it is well known that he also had operators who helped him in the task of taking portraits and did not sign his photographs, but assumed, as was common practice, the name of the studio for which they worked. Therefore, the inclusion of the name M^{me} Disdéri in a very limited number of *cartes de visite* represents a complete surprise. While trying to find an explanation, a closer analysis of the *cartes* issued during this 'Collet-Corbinière Jr.' period – characterized for having Napoléon III's imperial coat of arms on their versos – [F8.2] has revealed that some of them actually were signed 'M^{me} Disdéri, Phot...', although at some point the abbreviation 'M^{me}' was methodically scraped off the cards⁴¹. After this removal, the resulting 'Disdéri,

³⁹ *Société pour l'exploitation de la photographie Disdéri sous la raison Collet-Corbinière & Cie*, 11 February 1865. Archives nationales, MC/ET/XXXVI/987.

⁴⁰ *Le Grand Journal*, 18 March 1866, p. 4.

⁴¹ A similar case is found in other *cartes de visite* by Disdéri & Cie where the title 'Photographes de S. M. l'Empereur' was erased after the fall of Napoléon III in 1870. Regarding the Spanish case with the fall of Isabella II in 1868, see Sanchez Vigil (2018, p. 178), and Celles Anibarro (2024, p. 25).

Phot...' in the more than thirty *cartes de visite* found to date was singularly displaced to the right, whilst in some cases the trace of Elisabeth Francart's authorship still persists thanks to a careless scraping. [F3.6]

The sitters portrayed in these photographs with the erased inscription are once again personalities of the time, such as the politician Jules Baroche (nr. 6871, from 1858, in commerce), the painter Rosa Bonheur (nr. 33697/8, from 1862, Author's collection), the emir Abd-el-Kader (nr. 53141, from 1865, in commerce) or Queen Isabella II of Spain with her children (nr. 1874, from 1865, private collection)⁴², a photograph that was taken in Madrid and therefore suggests that Francart worked at some point with her husband in this new branch⁴³. Every studio preserved all their glass plate negatives in order to reprint new *cartes de visite* on demand, using the prevailing design of the moment. For this reason, the cardboard mount provides information regarding the approximate time of issue of a *carte de visite*, but not about when the photograph was taken – this usually being related to the props used for the pose. Although the brief appearance of M^{me} Disdéri's name corresponds exclusively to the period 1865-1866, the identified photographs have a much wider time range, covering not only the period when Francart was a silent partner (1857-1862), but extending at least to 1865, the year when the customer record book ceased to be updated⁴⁴.

Since André Disdéri had left Paris to attend his affairs in Madrid and London, the responsibility for including the inscription 'M^{me} Disdéri, Phot...' must be attributed to the studio's administrator, Georges Collet-Corbinière, whose father Eugène had been professionally and romantically involved with

⁴² Available at <https://www.todocoleccion.net/fotografia-antigua-cartes-visite/carte-visite-fotografia-reina-isabel-ii-espana-alfonso-xii-e-isabel-disdери-paris-hacia-1865~x100617583>.

⁴³ André Disdéri was accompanied in Madrid by some 20 employees. See *La Correspondencia de España*, 9 October 1864, p. 3. The low numbering of Isabella II and her children's plate (Museo Universidad de Navarra, MUN-001968) may be explained by the fact that it belonged to a missing customer record book of the Madrid branch.

⁴⁴ In addition to those mentioned above, traces of the inscription 'M^{me}' have been found on *cartes de visite* edited in 1865-66 of Arene (actress), Barat (nun), Bazaine (General), Budan de Russé Julien (aristocrat), Canrobert (General), Darimon (politician), Desfontaines (unidentified profession), Fioretti (dancer), Gabrielli (Prince and Princess), Goyon (General), Gueymard (singer), M^{me} Gueymard (singer), Hernanda (actress), Houssaye (writer), Hunyady (Princess consort of Serbia), Mercier (dancer), Montaland (actress), Montaubry (dancer), Murat Achille (Prince), Murat Caroline (Princess), Nelaton (doctor), Nelly (dancer), Nesler (bailarina), Obin (singer), Pepoli (Marquis), Verdi (composer), Vernon (dancer), Villaret (singer), and Willem III (King of the Netherlands).

Elisabeth Francart for many years. After a careful street-by-street search in the 1866 census of Brest and its surroundings, it was not possible to find the couple, who probably moved to Paris around that time, a place where, unfortunately, only later census records are preserved. As for the deletion of the inscriptions, it is unthinkable that the customers themselves were responsible for this coordinated task. The decision was therefore taken again in the studio, after a rectification in the policy adopted regarding authorship. Following this reasoning, only a few of M^{me} Disdéri's *cartes de visite* prepared with the new 1865 designs would have been sold, while among those that remained in stock already mounted on cardboard, it was decided at some point to remove the 'M^{me}', thus associating them all with André Disdéri. In the absence of documentation, it is not possible to determine whether this decision was taken before or after Georges Collet-Corbinière left the studio's management.

For the rest, the forty or so documented portraits, between those bearing M^{me} Disdéri's name printed on the *carte de visite* and those that once did, suggest that many more of Francart's portraits may have been hidden from history under her husband's commercial brand. One of them is an unpublished *carte de visite* of Madame taken in 1858. Its back only shows the Disdéri & Cie stamp, but given the characteristics of the pose - assertive attitude, direct gaze into the lens - it has to be a self-portrait by Francart⁴⁵. [F9] On the other hand, although the identified *cartes de visite* correspond to personalities of the Second Empire, it is likely that during her stays in Paris M^{me} Disdéri also took portraits of children and women. This "female" specialisation was underlined in a press advertisement where the pioneering work of Francart was also recognised:

The female operator [...] like Madame Disdéri and others wanted to prove that men were not alone in their ability to practise this art and that they were even inferior in many circumstances: in fact, a man will never have the required patience to make children pose and attract their attention in such a way as to

⁴⁵ Nr. 5674 in the customer record book. At the BnF, another unidentified portrait from the same session has been found, with the photographer seated holding a book on her lap and looking to one side. BnF, Richelieu, Estampes et Photographie, [Album d'atelier : portraits format cartes de visite], EO-19-PET FOL.

obtain a good proof, nor will he be able to make women's costumes look their best or drape them appropriately. (This is exclusively a female domain)⁴⁶.



F9. *Self-portrait by M^{me} Disdéri (detail), Paris, 1858. Carte de visite by Disdéri & C^{ie}. Author's collection.*

Noting that Francart's participation as a photographer in the Parisian studio of Disdéri will require an in-depth analysis that goes beyond the scope of this work⁴⁷, it is worth highlighting its broad time span (1857-1865), as well as the importance of the sitters portrayed. In this sense, M^{me} Disdéri's global contribution to the Boulevard des Italiens studio could by no means be described as secondary or circumstantial, even after being literally erased by a history little inclined to recognise the artistic merit of women. This would explain why no references to her work as photographer could be found in the Paris newspapers, while in the Brest press only a brief mention appeared in an article written in 1892, although significantly focused on her physical appearance and her way of speaking: 'The photographer's two great assets were his beard and his wife; Madame's hair and Monsieur's beard were as shiny as jet. M^{me} Disdéri, a ravishing little brunette with an angelic face, had a delightful lisp'⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ *Le Courrier du Loiret*, 22 de abril de 1866, p. 4. In the original, 'Madame Desderi' [sic].

⁴⁷ The Levert collection, which held together the positives on paper from Disdéri's studio, was auctioned in 1995, with the resulting dispersion of its materials in many public and private collections – some of them of difficult access. See Pagneux (1995).

⁴⁸ *La Dépêche de Brest*, 2 December 1892, p. 1.

5. Final years

M^{me} Disdéri's studio at rue de Siam in Brest was transferred to the photographer Edmond Tuffereau probably at the time of Elisabeth Francart and Eugène Collet-Corbinière's permanent move to Paris around 1866⁴⁹. As for the latter's involvement with the Boulevard des Italiens studio, according to the documentation available, the dissolution of Collet-Corbinière & C^{ie} was done in March 1866 by mutual agreement of the partners, with one of them, Camille Léonard, being entrusted with its liquidation and receiving a power from André Disdéri to manage all its assets and business. It is possible that the studio ceased its activity for a while, but it certainly continued its operations from April 1867 under André's direction, as was repeatedly announced in the newspapers. Meanwhile, Elisabeth and Eugène ended up living in rue des Feuillantines (Foucher, 1984, p. 61), where the former professor devoted himself to writing, publishing a *Traité Élémentaire de la Machine à Vapeur* in 1868 and *Leçons de Mécanique Élémentaire* in 1869. Collet-Corbinière died on 16 September 1871 in the above-mentioned address at the age of fifty-six⁵⁰, and was buried in Montparnasse cemetery. Elisabeth Francart opened a new studio under her commercial name shortly afterwards, around 1872, at 146 rue du Bac in Paris. The establishment, which advertised 'Reproductions in all genres' on the back of its mounts, again focused on cartes de visite, in an overcrowded market during an ongoing price war. Those few rare examples of the later *cartes* were made with poorer quality materials compared to those at M^{me} Disdéri's earlier establishments, with the photographs carelessly cropped and faded tones both in the albumen paper and in the imprints on the cardboard. [F3.7 & F6.3]

In 1877, the Disdéri's son Jules, an 'employee' by profession, married in Paris in the presence of his mother and with his father working in Seville in the former studio of Godínez⁵¹. After his umpteenth bankruptcy in 1872, André

⁴⁹ The couple is not registered in the 1866 census of Brest, nor does M^{me} Disdéri in the *Annuaire historique, administratif et commercial [...] de Brest* of 1867, which lists Tuffereau as photographer at 65 Rue de Siam.

⁵⁰ Archives de Paris. 5^e arr., V4E 2981, n. 5216. This act was found in 2023 by Bastit-Lesourd (2013).

⁵¹ Archives de Paris. 17^e arr., V4E 4792, n. 751: 'Disdéri et Auray'. See also *El Español, diario político de Sevilla*, 13 January 1877, p. 2.

finally lost control of the studio at Boulevard des Italiens nr. 8, and after a short move to nr. 6, where he went bankrupt again in 1875 (McCauley, 1985, p. 215), he left Paris to settle in various locations in the south of France, as well as in Seville. As for Elisabeth Francart, the last reference to her studio in rue du Bac dates from 1877 (*Agenda Photographique*). On 16 December of the following year, she died at the Hôpital de la Pitié in rue Lacépède, a charitable institution run by the Sisters of Saint Martha. Her body was buried in a mass grave in the cemetery of Ivry. His son Jules Disdéri died only two years later, on 3 December 1880, his profession now recorded as a 'photographer'⁵². With respect to André Disdéri, after having settled in Nice for a number of years, in 1889 he liquidated his last studio and returned to Paris, where he died in an asylum for indigents, Asile Sainte-Anne in rue Cabanis, the 3rd of October of the same year⁵³. Like his wife, he was buried in a mass grave, in his case in the cemetery of Bagneux.

6. Conclusions

Disdéri is remembered in history as the man who revolutionised the photographic industry by introducing the *carte de visite*, a format he did not invent, but which he took full advantage of thanks to the impulse of Emperor Napoléon III, who visited his studio in May 1859 to have his portrait taken, unleashing the so-called *cartomania*. In a career marked by bankruptcies and failures, André's only major success was sustained by a company partly financed by his wife Elisabeth Francart, from whom he was de facto separated and who had her own career as a photographer in Brest, but who was also authorised to manage the Paris studio on his behalf. M^{me} Disdéri was in charge of decorating the main salon of the establishment in Boulevard des Italiens, and occasionally worked as a photographer there at least between 1857 and 1865, to a degree that seems relevant, but needs to be clarified after conducting a specific research. Until now these contributions have been ignored by a history that overlooked her name – shown in a few *cartes de visite* of the

⁵² Archives de Paris. 18^e arr., V4E 5024, n. 3654.

⁵³ According to Nadar (1899, p. 209), the authorities were delivering Disdéri to this institution for mental patients but he died at the establishment's threshold. Archives de Paris, 14^e arr., V4E 7106, n. 3249.

Parisian studio, while on other *cartes* this deletion was literal by the methodical scraping of the 'M^{me}' that certified her authorship. However, everything seems to indicate that it was to a large extent M^{me} Disdéri's work and administration that triggered the enormous success of Disdéri & C^{ie}'s studio around 1859-60, a temporary triumph that turned into further failures as soon as she relinquished her position at the establishment. A pioneer of photography, owner of four studios under her own name and now – at least – co-participant in the successful introduction of the *carte de visite* in the Parisian market, it is only fair to vindicate her figure, which will have to be done by overcoming time and again the enormous difficulty of documenting that which for centuries was forgotten, erased or ignored⁵⁴.

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⁵⁴ I am grateful to Paul Frecker for his help in translating this article into English, as well as for his relevant suggestions to improve it.

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