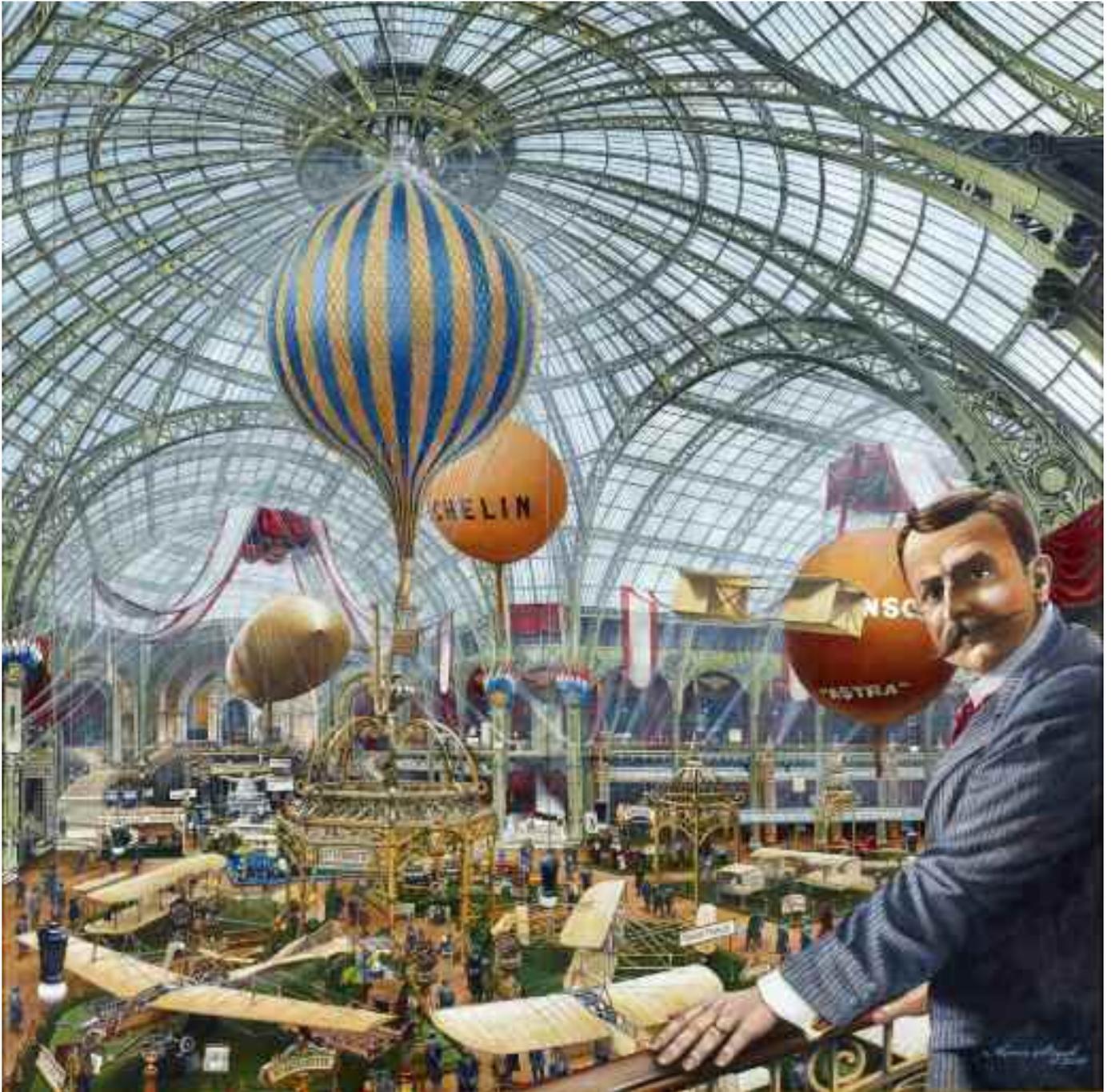


# Louis Blériot lors du premier Salon de l'Aéronautique à Paris, 1909

by Norm Siegel



An examination of the creative process in this epic painting by Norm Siegel:  
*Louis Blériot lors du premier Salon de l'Aéronautique à Paris, 1909*

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fig 1  
AV-Week  
100th  
Anniversary  
issue



On June 15, 2009, Aviation week magazine published the Paris Air Show 100th Anniversary issue (fig 1). On the contents page was an old inset photo of the first Paris air Show in 1909 held indoors at the Grand Palais de Champs-Élysées originally built for the 1900 World's Fair.

40 years ago I had stood in that space under the dome.

My first thought—what a painting that would make. So began a one and a half year love/hate relationship trying to make this painting happen.

### Will The Real 1909 Paris Air Show please stand up?

First stop was the computer to download all the photos and history I could find about the 1909 exhibition.

Hurdle #1: apparently all 1909 Paris Air Show photos are not of the 1909 show. Though the captions may say 1909, they appear to be of the 1908 Auto show that featured some airplane displays; as well as the 1910 and 1911 airshows. The 1909 show also featured among the nearly 400 exhibitors of aircraft and aircraft suppliers —autos and boats as well. So with artistic license in hand, I selected what a majority of captions designated as the 1909 show with a dash of the 1910 and 1911 shows thrown in (fig 2).

There were many recent photos of the interior and roof taken from dozens of vantage points, many supplied by ASAA member Vincent Meslet as well as the French translation for the title of the painting (fig 3). Even with all this source material I found it necessary to play games with perspective to achieve the composition I had in mind.

I chose a square format of 36". The shape would not only allow me to show the floor exhibit panorama, but the glass roof and dome which I felt was necessary to give the painting a "sense of place". And what a place: 775,000 sq. ft. of floor space capped by a 162,000 sq. ft. of glass and steel roof. The main "knave" that runs north and south is nearly two and a half football fields long. (That's American football) The canvas size would allow me to indulge my obsession for detail.

I did several tissues until I felt it looked right to my eye. Again, employing artistic license, with the help of my IMac, I was able to figure out how to incorporate the various aircraft, dirigible and balloon exhibits that would make for a satisfactory composition.

Hurdle #2: the color palette had to be pure guesswork based on B&W glass plate photos that were not panchromatic; meaning that not all colors were translatable into black, white and shades of gray. I did find one early autochrome color photo (fig 4). Autochromes consisted of three glass plates em-

fig 2  
Historic Reference



fig 3  
Grand Palais today

fig 4  
Paris Air Show  
autochrome



bedded with light - sensitive vegetable dyes. It served as a starting point for me to choose my palette. The steel girders and supports were always painted in “Mignonette Green” though it is not evident in the autochrome.

After completing a tissue I was OK with and about to transfer to canvas, two events cropped up during my ongoing research that represented hurdles three and four. One in 1909, the other in 1993.

Hurdle #3: Just 8 weeks prior to the opening of the “Salon” on September 25, 1909, Louis Blériot soloed across the English Channel in his Blériot XI “La Manche” on July 25, 1909. He returned triumphant to Paris and though many photos of Blériot exist, during this time period, I couldn’t find one taken at the Salon. I just assumed he was there, because the actual “La Manche” he soloed in, was there.

I felt Blériot should be part of the painting (fig 5). The tissues were still fine but I had to introduce him into the painting in a way that made sense within the scope of the composition. Placing him behind the balcony railing above the “La Manche” display, that runs all around the Grand Palais interior, seemed to do it. I also felt this helped the overall composition by giving it a foreground point to play against the background.

Blériot’s head is grafted onto my body. (Sorry Louis)

Hurdle #4: In 1993, a glass panel as well as rivets fell from the ceiling; launching a ten year renovation. Therein lies a problem; my finished tissue shows a network of servicing catwalks based on the recent photos I used as source material. It seems that all the early photographs I was able to locate never showed much of the roof. Those that did show small portions of the roof, did not show any catwalks. I assumed the catwalks were installed to implement the 10-year renovation. If not, I decided to play the artistic license card once again and remove them from the final painting.

Six months after starting, I had a working tissue and began “pushing paint” (fig 6, 7, 8, 9).

The “Salon” itself looks less like an air show than a “Belle Epoque” garden party. Aircraft were displayed on raised green astro turf-like carpeted platforms amidst gazebos, cupolas, benches and numerous floral arrangements. After all this was the first air show and I suspect they wanted to give it an “outdoor” feel in an indoor space.

I had toyed briefly with the title: “Sunday In The Park With Louis”. Too “smart-ass” even for me.

There was no A/C in those days; ventilation was supplied by slats beneath the glass roof. Early photos reveal a “steamy-looking” scene either because of the poor ventilation or the inability of the glass photographic plates to compensate for



fig 5  
Blériot

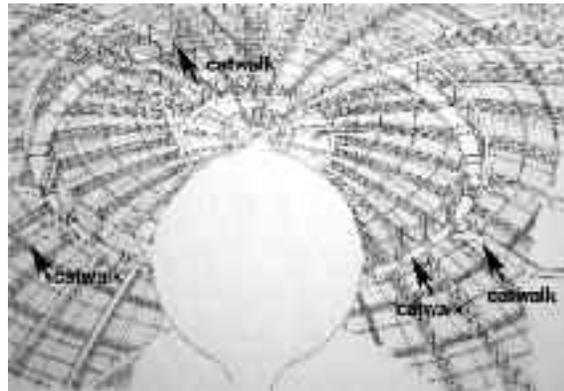


fig 6  
Catwalk  
tissue

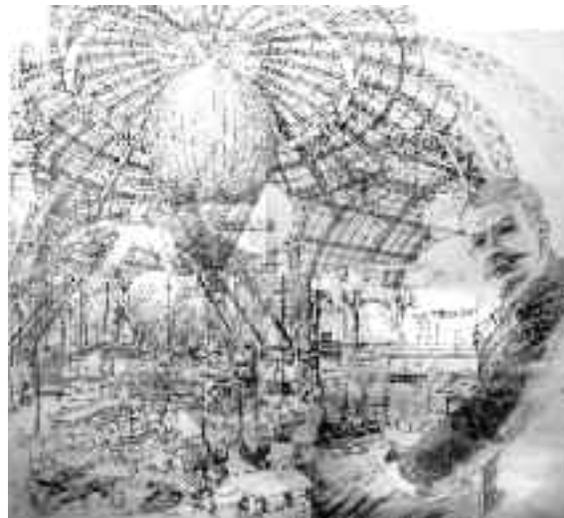


fig 7  
Final  
tissues  
with cat-  
walk



fig 8  
Under-  
painting  
of roof  
and  
Blériot



fig 9  
Blériot start



fig 10 Blocking in the Dome



fig 10  
Blocking in  
roof girders  
detail



fig 11 Detail

the incredible amount of light flooding in through the glass roof. Or a combination of both. I remember the lighting as being flat and the shadows as being quite subdued when I was there. Electric lighting was in its infancy then and the globes suspended from the roof by long wires often failed, necessitating lighting the old-fashioned way: torches

I chose to paint in the “Belle Epoque” style of the time to complement the Salon scene (fig 10, 11, 12). I started with Blériot. Though he was foreground, I figured if I didn’t “nail” him, I had no painting. The roof was a challenge unto itself. To achieve the curves and ellipses, I used various ship-builder curves that I ordered online. The central gazebo under the dome actually did feature biplane displays by the Wright brothers and Henri Farman. Monoplane displays by Santos-Dumont, Levasseur’s St. Antoinette VII and of course, Blériot’s “La Manche”.

Though my paintings appear to be the work of someone who is disciplined, I must confess I am not. I have no ordered way of painting. I usually don’t underpaint. Hardly do I do preliminary color sketches. I just dive in and hope the water’s fine. Allergic to oil and turps, I painted only in gouache until I “found” water soluble oils. Because of my obsession for detail, I tend to get bored with one section and go to another, continually switching back and forth.

I would not make a good art teacher.

Voilà! I finished “Louis Blériot lors du premier Salon de l’Aéronautique à Paris, 1909” late December, 2010.



fig 12 Roof start, balloons and Blériot