

THE HUMAN SCALE

Archeological Photographs from The Fouad Debbas Collection

What the eye sees, photography attempts to reproduce. It responds to our common desire to tour the world “from the comfort of one’s arm-chair.” In the second half of the 19th century, photographic expeditions to Egypt multiplied, with a view to making an inventory of the Orient.

If sketches made in situ previously sufficed, photography came to be appreciated for its capacities to document, illustrate, and depict monuments and their decors with great precision. Photography thus became a precious tool for archeologists and scientists.

Often, the monumental quality of a site can only be grasped through the inclusion of a human figure. Man is there only to indicate scale, but he inhabits these images which would otherwise be lifeless and frozen in an ancient time, like the ruins we are given to look at.

Photographers frequently turn to the same assistants or travel companions to “populate” their expertly-composed stagings. The positioning of the human figures is rarely left to chance; they are either clearly visible, standing with their backs against columns, seated with their head in their hands, or nearly hidden, squatting next to a rock or springing out from the shadows. Sometimes, the photographer is himself the figure. Would you be able to recognize him?





A descriptive method

Most Egyptian photographic missions were carried out as part of an impulse to produce an inventory of the Orient and report back to the Western world on all its “picturesque” monuments, architecture, and sites. Just like painting or etching, photography was to draw on literary, historical, and biblical references for most of its subject matters.

From its very beginnings, such an “all-seeing” eye, or totalitarian view of a landscape or monument, was one of the primary aims of photography. The photograph is meant to be descriptive. In order to meet certain specifications, a near-systematic strategy for shooting is established. The photographer effects firstly a general view of the monument in order for the lens to capture the integrity of the subject. The choice of composition is conventional and frontal. The camera operator then proposes a series of more detailed views of the sites: the monument is divided into numerous shots. These photographs are in no way aestheticizing; they are of a more encyclopedic nature, and are intended to serve the needs of archeologists, researchers, and historians.

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Attributed to **Felix Bonfils**

First courtyard and second pylon of the
Great Temple, Karnak, Egypt, Circa 1875-85
Albumen print, 29×39 cm

Opposite page

Bonfils Studio

Main entrance of the Luxor Temple, Egypt, Circa 1880-95
Albumen print from Mansell’s album, 28×22 cm

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Bonfils Studio

The Great Sphinx of Giza, Egypt, Circa 1880-95
Albumen print from Mansell’s album, 22×28 cm



a. Bonelli
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Bonelli

Temple of Amenhotep III, Karnak, Egypt









Technical constraints

The earliest attempts at photography in Upper Egypt, carried out by Frédéric Goupil-Fesquent in the company of the painter Horace Vernet, were a resounding failure. The accounts of daguerreotypist Gaspard-Pierre-Gustave Joly de Lotbinière are enlightening in this regard¹:

“Barely had the sun risen than we began polishing our plates; we would come out like bees, one after the other, and return laden with our silver-plated sheets which should have offered the most interesting shots. We ran to shut ourselves away in the dark. Alas! ... we saw only black, not a single one of our plates had been successful, and our only consolation was the knowledge that we had each been just as incompetent as the other.”

Taking a photograph in the middle of the desert in the 1860s and 1870s was no simple task. The extremely heavy and fragile glass plates were transported in wooden boxes on donkey or camel back in small boats, then pulled with outstretched arms by assistants and porters. Besides the fragility of the medium, the harsh climatic desert conditions came into play: heat, wind, sand, dust, rising waters and floods from the Nile, infestations of flying insects like sandflies,² etc.

Once the photograph is taken, it must be fixed in a solution before the negative can be handled. Back in the studio, the photographer can print his photographs onto paper. Based on the views hereby exhibited, it is clear that Félix Bonfils had recently begun and so not yet mastered the humid collodion technique, which was invented in 1851. Several “defects” are visible in the exhibited prints.

1 See the account of Gaspard-Pierre-Gustave Joly de Lotbinière’s expedition (1839-40), commissioned by the architect Hector Horeau, who wished to obtain precise images of the palaces and temples of Upper Egypt with a view to reconstituting them. *Les excursions Daguerriennes* was published by Lerebours in 1842 and would serve as a guide for the creation of colored etchings illustrating the work of Horeau, *Panorama d’Egypte et de Nubie* (1842).

2 Francis Frith mentions phlebotominae, a genus of flying insect. See Francis Frith’s travelogue, *Egypt and the Holy Land in Historic Photographs, 77 views by Francis Frith*, Introduction by Julia Van Haften, Selection and Commentary by Jon E. Manchip White, Dover Publications, Inc. New York, 1980, p.xvii.

The issue of scale, or “Where’s Wally?”

Photographers frequently turn to the same assistants or travel companions to “populate” their expertly-composed stagings. The positioning of the human figures is rarely left to chance; they are either clearly visible, standing with their backs against columns, seated with their head in their hands, or nearly hidden, squatting next to a rock or springing out from the shadows.

Their presence brings to life a landscape that is already – by the very nature of its subject – steeped in melancholy and silence, as if faded and frozen in time. Indeed, nothing seems to suggest life in these landscapes, since even the skies have been covered over by the photographer, who is unable to capture the movement of potential clouds.

However, the main function of these human figures is to create a sense of scale, and to imitate the effect of surprise and monumentality that travelers experience when face to face with Egyptian temples or colossi.

As Maxime du Camp recounts:

“Every time I visited monuments, I made sure to have my photographic equipment accompany me, and I took with me one of my seamen, Hadji-Ismael. He was a strikingly handsome Nubian; I’d send him to climb on the ruins that I wanted to photograph, and so I’d always obtain an exact proportion scale. The great difficulty had been to get him to stay perfectly still whilst I took the photographs. I managed it, thanks to some eccentric trickery [...]

I told him that the leather cylinder of my lens that jutted out of the black chamber was a gun barrel which would send out a hail of bullets if he were unlucky enough to move whilst I was aiming it in his direction³.”

Sometimes, the photographer is himself the figure. Would you be able to recognize him?

³ Maxime du Camp, *Le Nil, Egypte et Nubie*, 5th edition, Paris, Librairie Hachette et Cie, 1889, p.295.





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Attributed to **Felix Bonfils**

Pylon and obelisk of the Luxor Temple,

Egypt, Circa 1875-85

Albumen print, 29×39 cm

Opposite page

Bonfils Studio

Medinet Habu, bas-relief on the right side

of the Great Temple entrance, Thebes, Egypt, Circa 1880-95

Albumen print from Mansell's album, 22×28 cm



Abraham Lincoln has stood in front of the wall of hieroglyphs in the temple of Amenhotep III

The Fouad Debbas Collection

The Fouad Debbas Collection is a photographic collection comprising over 30,000 images from the Middle East – namely Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Turkey – from 1830 till the 1960s. It was built over the course of two decades by Fouad César Debbas (1930-2001), who was an ardent believer in the importance of collecting and preserving images as a means of safeguarding cultural heritage.

Housed in the Sursock Museum, the Collection consists of photographs, postcards, and stereoscopic views, in addition to loose albumen prints, etchings, and books, all of which relate to the region. The Collection, Orientalist in character and replete with commercial clichés, forms an important part of the Sursock Museum's collection, highlighting photography's key role in the development of modern art in Lebanon.