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THE REPETITION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC SUBJECT MATTER IN THE 19TH CENTURY

A Selection of Images from The Fouad Debbas Collection

They all deal with the same subject matter! Félix and Adrien Bonfils, Tancred Dumas, and Jean-Baptiste Charlier all share a more or less identical repertoire of images. Like tourists checking off visited sites, in the 19th century, photographers based in the Middle East roamed the land with the aim of sharing views from across the Orient with a Western audience. In this way, Baalbek, Palmyra, Beirut, Damascus, and Jerusalem became topoi, or commonplaces. Prints of these sites – some inhabited, some desert – proliferated with each new visit, and met certain criteria aiming to evoke either a Bedouin Orient frozen in time, or on the contrary a modernizing Orient. Whatever message these photographers intended to convey, they all copied each other, contributing thereby to the creation of a common imaginary.



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In the 19th century, photographs of the Orient were often visual stereotypes of a bygone, static space and time. At first glance these images seem alike, adhering to the same aesthetic of ruin and “grandiose chaos.” For Elias Sanbar, they are “cliché-images,”¹ combining a certain archeological curiosity and a dominating gaze – of the westerner? Of the photographer? – on the native that has been planted in the scene, as if he were an integral part of the ruins. These images were mastered in such a way as to produce clichés, offering the viewer, through compositions that the photographers studied carefully in advance, a preconceived impression of the Orient. The Western photographers who made the journey to these distant lands with the mission of documenting the Orient in its entirety, seemingly did not need to experience the Orient in order to reproduce it. Their images are pre-constructed, in the manner of *readymades*. Whether consciously or unconsciously, this construction of the Orient took inspiration from the paintings and etchings that the Western world had seen several centuries before the advent of photography. This collective imaginary was therefore not new to photography; it could also be found in Orientalist paintings and in travelogues and their illustrations.

In this context, does 19th century photography merely mimic painting? Does a certain friction exist between painting, etching, and photography, three distinct artistic practices that nevertheless present similar images?

What options does the photographer have at his disposal to “do things differently?” Is photography simply cliché?

¹ Élias Sanbar, “À défaut de Tour, l’expo” in *Syrie, Liban, Palestine, Le Grand Tour*, Isthme éditions, Nicéphore Niépce Museum, 2005.



Let us take a few moments to consider the expression “point of view,” which was first used in English in the early 1700s and is a calque of the French expression “point de vue.” The point of view refers to the framing of the image; to the point from which the view is taken and the image captured by the camera lens. At Baalbek, the point of view most often selected was from the surrounding fortifications, from where the whole site could be captured. Another angle often chosen depicted the Temple of Bacchus, whose six impressive columns evoke the majesty of the site and its colossal scale. In Beirut, the favored point of view was from the hill of the American University of Beirut (formerly the Syrian Protestant College); it offered a view of the city, port, and mountain chain, and one can even discern Karantina, and beyond it, the coastline leading to Jounieh. In Jerusalem, the photographers reproduced the Wailing Wall, the Damascus Gate, the Mount of Olives, and the Valley of Josaphat, all of which lend themselves well to photography. Certain photographers would settle for producing a catalogue of images that responded to the commercial imperatives of the time, such as Maison Bonfils. Others, however, experimented with composition and the technical possibilities that photography offered in order to stand out and give their images a personal touch. Herein lies the ambiguity of the term “point of view,” which can also infer a certain consciousness, assertion of a position, or declaration of intent. Tancredè Dumas’ views of Baalbek are dizzying in their low-angle shots, whilst Jean-Baptiste Charlier uses a lengthened, unconventional format to center a column leaning on the temple of Jupiter, or to frame, like in a painting, the details of the capitals.

If 19th century photography seemed to impose conventions and a certain typology of themes – including architecture, genre scenes, landscapes or picturesque archetypes – derived from painting and its formal canons, photographers at the time did nevertheless operate from within their own individual space-time, which allowed for the transmission of a certain sense of immediacy. Despite sharing a similar technical *modus operandi*, the different photographers’ shots could not contain the same memory of time nor capture it in an identical way.

CLICK, CLICK



Previous page

James Graham

Baalbek, columns of the Temple
of the Sun, Circa 1856-57
Albumen print mounted on board,
30×23 cm

Left

Jean-Baptiste Charlier

Baalbek, south side of the
Temple of Jupiter and leaning
column, Circa 1875

Albumen print mounted on board,
29,8×19,9 cm

Next page

Félix Bonfils

Baalbek, Pierre du midi,
Monolith, Circa 1867-76

Albumen print mounted on board
in an album, 35×47 cm

With photographic practice, one sees the world in a sequential way. Images are produced in sequence, and repeated until the camera operator is satisfied. This operator is a photographer-scenographer, who deconstructs the gaze and multiplies the shots taken from the same angle, sometimes proposing variations. Photography does not only look to reproduce, but to divide, carve up, and fragment. Walter Benjamin deplors the withering of the aura of a work of art in the possibilities for reproduction offered by photography.²

Let us look more closely at the notion of reproduction through the images in The Fouad Debbas Collection, focusing on the production of Maison Bonfils. Three aspects can then be considered.

First, prints were reproduced in a commercial tactic of updating the studio's catalogue. Félix Bonfils himself, then his son Adrien, would travel for a second time to a site of which an earlier shot had been taken, pressing the shutter once more to satisfy the demands of a clientele seeking a more recent print. To keep the business going strong, Maison Bonfils had no choice but to revisit the same sites photographed ten years earlier and take up the same angle, as close as possible to the shot that had already been commercialised. No matter if the view had slightly changed, or if the archaeological site had been further uncovered; the main subject remained unchanged.

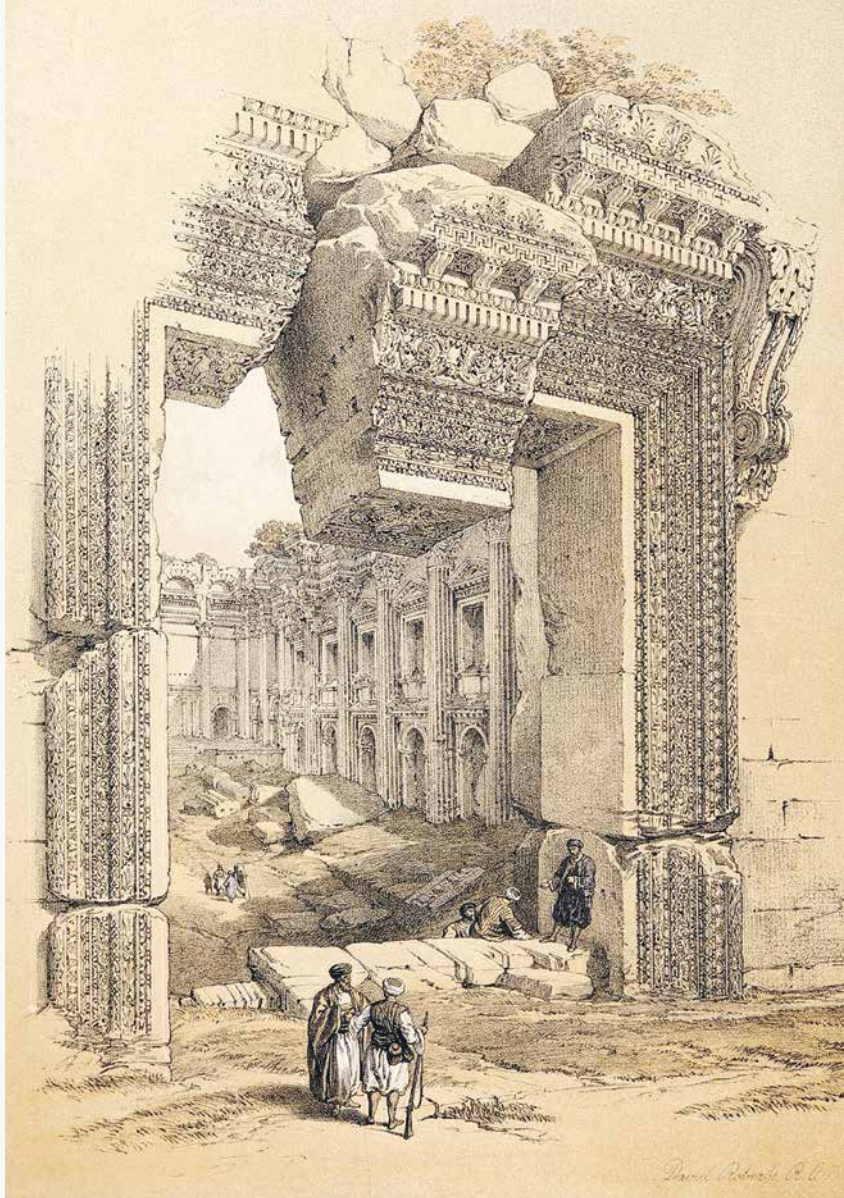
Second, the repertoire of images was expanded, based on a rationale of diversifying and so increasing supply. Studios such as Maison Bonfils gave clients a choice of several views of the same site. Thus, the panorama of Baalbek taken from the opposite hill at times includes a Bedouin man looking into the distance, or else is without any human activity, whilst the circular exedra of the large courtyard, also referred to as the "square chamber," becomes the backdrop for a scene featuring only a Bedouin, or local dignitaries clad in western dress and wearing tarbooshes. Sometimes, the site is photographed for its own merits, devoid of any artifice. The photographer proposes variations on a conventional view already produced by his competitors. He works henceforth in series, at the risk of "exhausting his subject," by introducing very slight modifications to his angles in order to surprise his audience.

² Benjamin, Walter, and J.A Underwood. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2008.





CLICK, CLICK



David Roberts

The Doorway, Baalbeck

Etching, 28.4×20.3 cm

Published in London, 15 December 1855 by Day & Son, Gate Street, Lincoln Inn Fields

The third and final aspect is equally related to the Bonfils' commercial activity. With mechanical reproduction, prints could be modified in terms of their toning or format. From its early days, the professional photographic studio – one of the first in the region – possessed a detailed catalogue and would produce numbered paper prints from glass plates 30-40, 24-30, 18-24, in addition to *cartes de visite* and stereoscopic views from “Vues photographiques de l’Orient [Photographic Views of the Orient].”³ In an updated catalogue from 1907, the widow Lydie Bonfils

*“informs amateurs and tourists that, thanks to a dedicated facility, and in keeping with the constant advances in modern photography, she is now able to provide all the views from her collection in the 24/30 format, and larger. She can respond to all your photographic needs: Development of glass plates and films; Prints on gloss or matt paper, bromide, platinum, etc. Various tints: bistre, sanguine, sepia, etc. Prices for these special services are assigned at fixed rates, and depend on the dimension and the number of items requested.”*⁴

The beginnings of photography in the Orient were marked by a common aesthetic which evoked a common imaginary, imposed several centuries earlier by the paintings of the Orientalist masters and the accounts of travellers. Photographers did indeed attempt to reproduce the same landscapes and take up similar angles to those of their colleagues. However, photography quickly found its autonomy in the technical possibilities offered by the medium. The subject lost its quasi-religious aura and came to be infinitely reproduced. The site of Baalbeck hugely influenced artists and photographers active at the end of the 19th century, who multiplied their ensemble and detail views in an attempt to appropriate the gigantic site. The question of point of view and the *repeatable* in photography is perfectly illustrated in this selection of images from The Fouad Debbas Collection.

3 *Catalogue des vues photographiques de l’Orient : Egypte, Palestine (Terre sainte), Syrie, Grèce & Constantinople*, photographed and edited by Bonfils, Félix, Alais (Gard), 1876. The Fouad Debbas Collection.

4 *Catalogue général des vues photographiques de l’Orient : Basse et Haute Egypte, Nubie, Palestine, Phénicie, Moab, Syrie, Côte d’Asie, les Sept églises d’Asie, Caramanie, Anatolie, îles de Chypre, de Rhodes, de Pathmos, de Syra, Athènes, Macédoine, Constantinople*, Agencies in Jerusalem, Baalbek, the widow Lydie Bonfils, Beirut (Syria), 1907. The Fouad Debbas Collection.

CLICK, CLICK



Maison Bonfils
The door of the Temple of Jupiter, Baalbek, Circa 1875-85
Albumen print from Mansell's album, 27.9×21.7 cm

A few brief biographies⁵

Albert-Victor Nau de Champlouis

During his stay in the Orient in 1860 as part of the general staff of the Syrian expeditionary forces, Baron Albert-Victor Nau de Champlouis took many photographs. His waxed-paper prints gained him recognition with the French Photographic Society in 1862, and at the London International Exhibition in London in 1863.

Théodore and Honoré Leeuw

“French daguerrotypist of Dutch origin,” Théodore Leeuw learned photography in Paris before settling in Beirut in the mid-1840s. Leeuw signed his daguerrotypes *Leeuw de Paris* and stamped *Théodore Leeuw, Photographiste à Beyrouth* on the versos of his calotypes. His son Honoré took up the reins of his father’s photographic studio; he was one of the first photographers in Beirut to take portraits in *carte de visite* format, and later moved to Damascus. He is mentioned in the *Joanne* guidebook of 1882.

James Graham

After arriving in Jerusalem in December 1853 as secretary of an evangelical mission, the *London Society for promoting Christianity amongst the Jews*, or *London Jews’ Society*, Graham undertook a photographic expedition to Egypt in June 1856, then travelled around Beirut, Mount Lebanon, and Damascus, before returning to Jerusalem in 1857. Graham photographed biblical sites. He most likely left the Middle East in 1857, and continued to make use of his photographic collection in Europe.

Jean-Baptiste Charlier

Charlier arrived in Lebanon in 1845 with the aim of founding a silk factory in Ain Hamadeh, along with his cousins. In 1867, he opened the *Charlier-Béziès* bookstore in the Al Nasara souk, associating his name with that of his wife. An amateur photographer, from 1860 onwards Charlier took photographs of Beirut and the Metn region, and later produced albums entitled *Vues de Syrie* and *Souvenirs d’Orient*. The views compiled in the albums he published were dated and signed up to the early 1870s.

Tancredi Dumas

An Italian of French origin, Dumas had a career in banking before opening a photographic studio in Constantinople in the mid-1860s. He is thought to have learned photography with Fratelli Alinari (the Alinari Brothers) in Florence. In 1866, Dumas established his studio in Beirut. In 1872, he published a catalogue containing 260 views of numerous countries, from Upper Egypt to India, and in 1878 began to offer several albums of photographs for sale. From 1885, he signed his photographs *Dumas & Fils*, all the while continuing to work as a banker.

5 Fouad C. Debbas, *Des photographes à Beyrouth, 1840-1918*, Edition Marval, Collection-Passion, 2001. See also Ed. Sylvie Aubenas et Jacques Lacarrière, *Voyage en Orient, photographies 1850-1880*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Hazan, 2002.

Francis Frith

A cutlery maker, grocer and printer by trade, Frith came to photography in 1853 and travelled to the Orient several times between 1856 and 1859. His studio was not in situ but rather in England. Frith's studio achieved great success, and produced images of the Orient and other locations until 1971. Frith was experienced, and offered his English clientele views that lacked in originality, but demonstrated great technical finesse.

Giacomo Brogi

The Italian photographer Brogi travelled to the Orient in 1868, visiting Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. Joining forces with the Italian Photographic Society, his views were marketed in Italy. Carlo, Brogi's son, would take over the collection upon the death of his father. Little is known about the photographer to date.

American Colony

Founded in 1881, American Colony brought together Americans who had journeyed to Palestine with the aim of engaging in agriculture and livestock farming. Among them, some were photographers, such as Lars Larsson and Gästgifvar Eric Matson.

Maison Bonfils

In 1867, Félix Bonfils, accompanied by his family, set up his professional photographic studio in Beirut. In 1871, in a letter to the French Photographic Society, he stated that his negatives numbered 591. In 1875, Bonfils moved back to France with his stock of glass plates in order to be closer to his clientele and grow his commercial activity. Maison Bonfils, with Adrien Bonfils (son of Félix) and assistants, undertook several photographic expeditions in the region (Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Anatolia, Greece) in order to diversify its range of prints. Lydie Cabannis Bonfils, the wife of Félix, was to play an important role in the studio. It seems that she took portrait photographs, in addition to managing the studio on an administrative level.

