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Seventy-five calotypes and collodion prints enable us to rediscover Louis Plantet, one of the little-known pioneers of photography in Algeria whose work was singled out by Félix Moulin in 1856. The set comes from the photographer’s family and bears witness to the Algeria of the 1850s and to the age of distinguished amateurs which preceded the onset of professional studios there.

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Family Provenance

This exceptional collection assembled by Adnan Sezer and Bruno Tartratin comes from the family of Louis Plantet (1828-1880) and his brother Hippolyte (1829-1882). Began in 1853-55, it is an excellent illustration of the type of production that Moulin was referring to, whose praises were sung in La Lumière, and which remains relatively unknown. Among the names cited by Ernest Lacan’s review we can thus find those of Thomas John Elmore (1823-1896), the “Lemore” mentioned by Desprez, Adrien Berbruger (1801-1869), the director of the museum of Algiers since 1838, Louis Desprez, Adrien Berbruger (1801-1869), the director of the museum of Algiers since 1838, Louis Louis (1814-1871), the deputy superintendent, whose name Moulin spells “Huant”. And a certain Plantet who is, of course, our Plantet.

In 2019, a calotype portraying an eminent figure from Algiers was mistakenly attributed to Hippolyte. Hippolyte Plantet, a painter who trained with Gleyre and Félix Ziem, is known to a few specialists of orientalist painting for his Courtyard of the Doge’s Palace in Venice which was exhibited in the 1870 Salon and for a landscape held by the Musée d’Orsay. The Plantet family considered Louis a man of learning, but for them Hippolyte was the artist in the family. A careful study of his work reveals obvious links with the photographs of Algeria in his possession and that the family also put up for auction 11. A painter who owns a large stock of photographs for use as documentary material or to economize on sitters is not at all rare, although the order of influence inferred is not always true to reality. Nor is it exceptional that a painter practices photography himself. Daguerre painted and Horace Vernet made daguerreotypes. But Hippolyte Plantet was not just a painter, and Louis Plantet especially had a passion for photography.

Louis and Hippolyte Plantet in Algeria

Marie Louis César Plantet was born in Lons-le-Saunier on January 21, 1828 11. And it is to him and not to his brother that his descendants attribute the photographs presented by Adnan Sezer and Bruno Tartratin. From a wealthy family, Louis Plantet lost his father in 1884. He studied law, qualifying in 1851. When he became Tax Collector of the Department of Registration and Estates, he had already received his inheritance. From then on, this man of learning was able to devote himself to his leisure pursuits: music (he composed for the organ) and numismatics (in 1855 he co-authored an essay on currency in Burgundy, Essai sur les monnaies dans le comté de Bourgogne) 12. As for photography, it was probably around 1850 that he made the acquisition of his substantial photographic equipment 13. Photographs by Louis taken in the Jura, the Pyrenees, Strasbourg, and Provence (in Gordes where Louis lived between 1856 and 1857) are kept by the family.

Louis Plantet traveled a lot, therefore. And it was around 1855, in other words shortly before Félix Moulin’s mission, that he discovered Algeria and began to join his brother there regularly. Before devoting himself to painting, Hippolyte had studied law to become a barrister. Called to Algiers around 1853 to defend one of his clients, Hippolyte rented an apartment there at 50bis rue de la Lyre, an apartment he was to keep until his death. At the time, rue de la Lyre, parallel to the rue Bab Assou, was called rue Napoleon; a long straight street with arcades, it was to become in the 1860s the address of several important names in photography such as Bertrand, Emile, Ferdinand and Portier. Nothing is known of the frequency or the duration of Louis’s stays, but it can be imagined that he avoided the discomfort of the extreme heat in summer. Later Algiers would grow into a winter resort for tourists…

Louis Plantet was of poor health, and he died very young on May 7, 1860, at age 32. He had a son called Eugène Plantet (1855-1934), who became embassy secretary

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Footnotes:

7. “Chef proba” (“Peach leader”), i.e., Albums are not presented separately, 21 x 15.5 cm. Catalogue Gov-Delitte, June 2019, page 78.
8. Galerie Edith Davidson, Saint-Ouen.
10. Laval Auctioneers, Sale October 20, 2022, Expert Antoine Romand.
11. I would like to thank M. Xavier Plantet for the valuable unpublished information he has kindly provided in addition to Antoine Romand’s notice for the sale of the family photographic collection.
12. Edited in Lons-le-Saunier, the volume was re-edited in Dijon in 1885. At the time, Louis Plantet was corresponding member of the Côte d’or archeological commission.
and wrote several works on the relationship between North Africa and France: *Correspondance des deux Algérie avec la cour de France* (1889). *Correspondance des hays de Tunis et des consuls de France avec la cour* (1893), *Mouley Ismaël et la princesse de Conti* (1893), *Les consuls de France à Alger avant la conquête* (1936). Eugène kept a large collection of photographs; for instance, to illustrate his *Colonial Atlas* in 1902, he made available to the Larousse Publishing House a picture of the door of the French consulate in Tunis. Certain of the annotations on the bottom right of the pages on which the photographic prints are mounted are in his hand, but most of them were written on the bottom left by Eugène’s son Jean. The state of conservation of the collection is thus greatly indebted to the care with which the photographs were handed down from generation to generation. However, all the questions concerning their attribution are not necessarily settled.

Three of the prints here for example match photographs from Félix Moulin’s catalog. Clearly from collodion negatives, they are ‘ethnographic’ studies of Algerians staged in a familiar way – placed in front of the great draperies that Moulin, in lieu of an actual studio, used to close off his photography space. Two scenes from the Algerian area, one of which is also printed in reverse, bear the following captions by Moulin, *Maraques et nègres d’Alger (coutume d’intérieur)*: ‘Moorish woman and Negress from Algiers in interior dress’) and *Nègresse marchandes de pain et de poissons* (‘Negresses selling bread and fish’).

Taken in the same location, these are the only photographs of the set where, notwithstanding the incorrect caption by Moulin written on the second, we find a Moorish woman in a veil, in ‘semi-formal dress’ as it was called. These three prints by Moulin were purchased in 1866 by Louis or Hippolyte. If the Plantet brothers did meet Félix Moulin in Algiers – which is quite likely, through Berbrger notably – we know that, even before November 1856 and the photographic exhibition in Brussels17, Moulin sent a large number of pictures to France.

The Mystery of the Blind Stamp: “Marville and Algeria”

The presence of Charles Marville’s blind stamp on the pages of no less than nineteen prints18 enables us to reopen an old question: are the works by Marville? In 1999, Marie de Thézy identified just seven prints19. In 2007, Ken Jacobson published another20 – which is to be found in the collection – to be followed by Pierre Zaragozi in 201921. Seven photographs had sufficiently to say that Marville, who was necessarily the one who took them, had crossed the Mediterranean in 1851 or 1852; but, such a lot of effort for such a small result nonetheless continued to raise some doubts. We now know that Marville sold calotypes from Egypt by Ernest Benecke (1811-1899) and the reality of his trip to Algeria has been contested22. The hypothesis that Marville went to Algeria to be published by Blanquart-Évrard has given way to a consensus around the distribution with Marville’s Parisian stamp of other photographers in Egypt but also in Algeria.

For Algeria, the name of Jean-Baptiste Antoine Alary (1811-1899) was initially suggested23. Alary had indeed vigorously refuted a letter by Moulin published in *La Lumière* implying that no professional photographer from Algiers was selling views of Algeria which had not been purchased in Paris24. The magazine did not judge it opportune to publish Moulin’s reaction, considering it too offensive to Alary; but it is curious that the latter did not argue that far from buying them from Paris, it was he who sent them there. Had he not exhibited at the French Photography Association (the SFP, Société Française de Photographie) as early as February 1856? Moreover, in his reply to Moulin when he talks of his work, he mentions views of Algiers, but no ‘ethnographic’ studies of Algerians, no views of Southern Algeria, nor even any ruins. Later he would say that it was “in 1857 (at the same time as Mr. Moulin) and every year after that… (that) I made long and tiring excursions through North Africa… in Algeria from Tlemcen, through Laghouat and Biskra to Tunis”25. In 2009, comparing Alary’s prints to those distributed by Marville, Frances Terpak added a stylistic argument: “The photographs are markedly different in tone and character”26.

After Alary, it was the name of Benecke – whose photographs of Egypt were as we have rubbished both by Blanquart-Évrard27 and Marville – that held the favor of several specialists, even if this meant putting into doubt the places where some of the photographs were taken.

15. The image corresponds to one of these three numbers in the Moulin catalog: 73, 74, 75.
18. In the case of four photographs of the Blida area, photographs 19, 84, 85 and 93, the number has been reversed.
22. Zaragozi bases his hypothesis on the seal ‘AM’ to be found on certain prints which he reads ‘Alary-Marville’. But for Gilles Dupont, this is indeed the signature of Alfred Magny, a member of the SFP in 1861: *photographesdebiskra.blogspot.com*
23. DE MONDENAARD Anne: 2003, page 110 and Pierre ZARAGOZI 2019, page 80. ZARAGOZI bases his hypothesis on the seal ‘AM’ to be found on certain prints which he reads ‘Alary-Marville’. But for Gilles Dupont, this is indeed the signature of Alfred Magny, a member of the SFP in 1861: *photographesdebiskra.blogspot.com*
24. MOULIN: “Professional photographers, of which there are not many in Algiers, make portraits using glass plates and all photographs purchased in Paris” (*La Lumière*, April 5, 1856).
25. Alary’s prints were those distributed by Marville – that held the favor of several specialists, even if this meant putting into doubt the places where some of the photographs were taken.
27. BfM (French National Library) and Getty Center Collections.
Hence a photograph by Benecke, today captioned *Jeune nubienne à la jarre* (“Young Nubian woman with a jar”) at the French National Library (BnF), is the print that Marie-Claire Adis and Pierre Zaragozi in their Algerian anthology had entitled *Jeune africaine*. But in another pose and reframed from the front, this same “young African woman” is part of the Plantet collection; we have the same sitter whose clothes cover her body and head, her left hand delicately emerging, and a worried expression that is particularly poignant – a “black servant” at a time when, despite its abolition in Paris in 1848, the slave trade continued to cross over the borders into French Algeria. For the two photographs seem to us indeed to be of Algeria: in photographs taken in the 1860s, and already in the work of Moulin, the same piece of clothing can be found on a great number of female figures from sub-Saharan Africa, an item described by Claudius Portier as “a big cotton mantle with blue and white squares” called the *melta*.

Prints of two other photographs in this set were also attributed to Benecke during auctions in Paris, notably the one in June 2014. These are the outdoor scene with the camelid (to which our set adds a picture with the camel-holder) and a rather unusual portrait of an elderly “couple” (perhaps a rabbi and his wife?). It is true that certain prints are difficult to situate – is this Algeria or Egypt? But in 2002, Sylvie Aubenas stated that it was Benecke who not only took Marville’s Egyptian photographs but also his Algerian prints: “views of Algeria (1851) must be attributed to Benecke, though they were published under the name of Marville”. Such an early date would thus rule out Plantet, but, since then, the presence of the latter’s signature on a print at the Getty Center of the *Café des planteurs à Alger* may have prompted the BnF to correct the attribution of its print of the same photograph bearing Marville’s stamp. And despite Sarah Kennel’s great advances on the biography, we still do not have any biographical element that would attest to a trip to Algeria by Marville – or even by Benecke.

The collection held by his descendants thus places Louis Plantet at the head of the list of candidates eligible as the photographers published by Marville. We should nonetheless underline the presence of a photograph by Moulin in the present set – this is a Moulin edited by Marville, or a print mounted by the Plantet brothers? It must also be pointed out that the “Marville” prints from the Plantet collection are glass plate photographs. Marville used the blind stamp present on our mounted prints between 1851 and 1858. A more precise dating of the distribution in Paris of Marville’s Algerian prints would obviously enable us to cross these dates with the beginning of the Planet brothers’ trips to Algeria but it is likely that Marville gradually took over from Egerton, after the latter went bankrupt in February 1856. Finally, just as Blanquart-Evrard published several photographs in the Middle East, the hypothesis that Marville did the same for Algeria seems the most likely. That was the hypothesis suggested by Sarah Kennel as early as 2013 when she already proposed the name of Plantet. She also spoke of “an unidentified calotypist” – she did not entirely rule out Akyar, but why not Langlet, Elmore or Huaut? – “as well as another maker of Orientalist genre scenes – whom we now think might be Plantet himself.”

Questions of style:

On some photographs in the collection…

In the pictures of Constantine and of the Rhummel River, whose gorges offer such varied angles, in the pictures around Blidah, where Moulin had met that other “distinguished amateur” Louis Huaut, or again in the archaeological images of Medracen, Lambasie or Djemila, certain details distinguish the photographer’s gaze from that of Moulin and others: a slightly different viewing angle, or the presence sometimes of a silhouette in the distance that humanizes the composition or enables the viewer to measure the exact scale of the monumental ruins without over-romanticizing them. Certain calotypes belong to the great French tradition in the medium showing a softness and a simplicity that characterize the photographic technique so dear to aesthetes. This is especially true of the remarkably restrained and balanced images of the South of El Kantara (where we also find Greene in 1856) and of Biskra, of course, which had already been discovered by the painter Fromentin and whose fort inspired the photographer to create a composition in every respect remarkable. As for Bou Saada, where lighting was still going on in 1849, and which Moulin had not been to, the mausoleum of Sidi Mhamed ben Brahim is distinguished by a hand-written caption. The exact location of the view of the desert bearing the caption “Dans la région de Bou Saâda” (“In the Bou Saada region”) is obviously difficult to determine.

32. ADER-NORDMANN, Auction June 14, 2014.
34. Source: Xavier Plantet.
36. The BENECKE notice published in 2010 in the Bnf catalog on Early Photographers mentions trips to Egypt, Sudan, the Lebanon, Palestine, Greece and Italy but not to Algeria.
nothing less than the first known photograph of the municipality, no doubt taken thanks to the setting up of a French military circle (1855), shortly before the opening of a French school (1857).

Three other photographs are worth singling out. In *Cimetière maure près de Blidah* (‘Moorish Cemetery near Blidah’), doubtlessly carried away by the spectacular view of the gorges of the Oued el-Kébir River, Moulin had provided a wide view devoid of any real charac-
ter[42]. Plantet’s variant not only cuts out the gorges and the sky, focusing on the branches with their silky light and bringing out the white of the funeral monuments, but it is also as if there was a ghostly silhouette hovering around the tombs! A truly involuntary ghost effect! Other ghosts appear in *Essai de photographie instantanée, arabes en marche* (‘Arabs walking, an experiment in spontaneous photography’); even if the building behind them is European, these soft-focused figures are a grip-
ting testimony to life in Algeria at the time; the photo-
graph, which was probably taken in the lower part of the Casbah, is like an artist’s on-the-spot sketch. For his portraits, as we saw, Moulin created a studio by closing the space with drapes. Plantet adopts the collo-
dion print but also sets himself apart from his colleague – and from the studios of the 1860s – by using natu-
ral locations too. A rug with large stripes hanging on a wall next to a window and to a wooden balcony over-
looking a patio can hence be seen in three photographs.

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Is this the house of the white-bearded bourgeois smoking a long tobacco pipe and posing with what may be his wife? The latter is wearing the sarmâh, an astonishing-
headdress that was originally worn by the Jewish women of Algeria during the period of the Ottoman occupation[46]. We have here a very rare photographic representation of a headdress which quickly went out of use after the French took over Algeria, as much for practical reasons – it is eighty centimeters tall! – as for the gradual Europeanisation of the way in which the Jewish community dressed.

On another photograph taken in this house, the man sitting to the left of a young woman in a décor full of Oriental accessories (‘too oriental to be true’, we would now say) also poses lying down on his own; this is the photograph previously published by Ken Jacobson[44]. It is obviously legitimate to wonder about his quite “un-oriental” appearance. His partner is found else-
where next to a baby covered in embroidered blankets lying in a crib in richly ornamented as the walls of the room he inhabits – whether real or completely fake, is this not the very first maternity scene photographed in Algeria[45]?

We are especially struck on three photographs by a man, still young, with very fine features. A well-furnished and rather bushy beard. Long smoking pipe and tobacco. Far more convincing in his elegant bourgeois costume than the previous European sitter, the man is portrayed in front of a large curtain, just like in Moulin, but endowed with a naturalness rarely found in the thousands of visit-
ning-card portraits of the 1860s. Gaze, relationship with the camera, social status – everything separates this port-
trait (some took it for a self-portrait) from the young sub-Saharan woman in the *metla*...

The other pictures of women differ both in décor and in “cast”: the “Moorish” women are always photographed in pairs, creating a costume variation (the long-sleeved ghīfah ihjwahîlaîî in brocade woven with silk-thread, the haik, or veils of a simpler cut) or an ethnic contrast that make the scene more picturesque. The photogra-
pher even boldly goes as far as to show two women lying down together – are we still in a noble house-
hold? Prostitutes, Jewish or “Moorish” women, these various stand-ins remind us of the difficulty for pho-
tographers to approach Muslim women. On three other

42. *Catalogue Moulin 1859*, n°65.


44. Sarmâhs can be seen in Algiers at the Antiquities and Islamic Arts Museum, and in Paris at the musée d’Orsay and in the Museum of Jewish Art and History.


46. Under the signature of Marville, the picture was sold in 2013 with the caption *Juive de Constantine avec son enfant* (‘Jewish woman from Constantine with her child’).
photographs the setting is also less cluttered – a few pictures hanging on a wall, mats and curtains in keeping. String and percussion instruments join the tea and the siesta to complete the female accessories pertaining to the burgeoning art of photographic Orientalism. One of the musicians, in fact, re-appears in Hippolyte Plantet’s painting *La jeune fille au Koutira* (‘Young Girl With Kwitra’, 1858)… but then didn’t Louis also compose music?

Over and beyond the various questions of attribution and of style, the Plantet collection illustrates the moment of the decisive switch from the calotype to the collodion print, a transition evoked by Marville in March 1856: “amateurs of photography practice with enthusiasm and skill the various processes of photography”. The 1850s were indeed ripe with invention, and photographers experimented with new processes without always giving up previous ones. Some traces of encaustic can even be found on prints in the collection leading his biographers to conclude “Le Grays’s circle”. It is true that many travelers continued to practice the calotype until quite late, for esthetic as well as practical reasons. But amateur aesthetes, whose prints were sometimes sold by the first industrialists of photographic reproduction, would soon abandon their practice of the calotype due to the growing number of professional studios aiming at the greatest possible productivity – did it not take several minutes to develop a calotype in the sun and just some seconds for a collodion plate? Views of Algeria by Moulin can thus be found on photograph cards, the *cartes de visite* invented by Disdéri that would make the fortune of the Alary-Geiser studio and so many others in the 1860s; an esthetics of reiteration that the rareness and delicacy of the calotype could not rival, despite its having established certain codes of representation.

Perhaps one day the names of Liogier, of Elmore, of Huaut and others too, will reappear – could they be here already among our collection? Meanwhile, because one of the pioneers of photography in Algeria, the mysterious “Plauter”, is now back in full view through his photographs and through the Plantet collection, because the body of work distributed from Paris by Marville has sizably grown in calotypes and in collodion prints, and because this collection of seventy-five photographs now comes next after Marville’s catalogue as the most representative of the Algeria photographed in the 1850s, offering some remarkable previously unpublished images, we cannot but rejoice that, thanks to Adnan Sezer and Bruno Tartarin, this invaluable body of work has not been irremediably dispersed.

Michel Megnin

_In memory of Pierre Zaragozi_

47. “Elmore and Liogier, none of whose prints has turned up”, as Anne de MONDENARD wrote in 2003. The proximity of the Liogier family with Louis Adolphe Humbert de Molard is attested through notarial documents and by a portrait of Liogier by Humbert de Molard himself (Marc Durand : *De l’image fixe à l’image animée 1820-1910*, Archives nationales, Paris, 2015). Attested too is the proximity of Molard with the optician Charles Chevalier from whom Liogier bought his photographic equipment. This is a line of investigation that has, to my knowledge, and in the absence of visual evidence, not been truly explored as to the links Liogier might have forged with Marville. As for Elmore, one of his photographs was included by Moulin in his 1859 catalogue (Lambèse, Ruines du temple d’Asclépius, ‘Lambaesis, Ruins of the Temple of Asclepius’, n°237).