



*Photographic history  
of the great Sphinx  
of Giza*

[ TRAVEL DIARIES ]



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## TRAVEL DIARIES



## *Photographic history of the great Sphinx of Giza*

Photographers have always been drawn to enigmatic monuments, to such an extent that the photographic history of said monuments has become quite enigmatic itself.

The Great Sphinx of Giza is a prime example of that phenomenon. Discussions regarding its age and initial aspect are still ongoing, although first Egyptian historian Manetho's account on the matter is more widely accepted now. Going over the history of photography means travelling through time and unfinished stories, much to the joy of dreamers and treasure hunters.

The research began with a magnificent, unidentified photograph from ancient times, acquired in an auction. Well, how about a journey aboard imagination? Let us see the Sphinx through the gaze of all the different travellers who contemplated it, immerse in the progress made by scientists over generations, be astonished by the merits and boldness of pioneers.

This journey revolves around three generations of artists, categorised by the materials they used to portray the Sphinx: glass, paper and metal. Starting in the 1860s, photographers used fragile, sometimes massive glass plates coated with collodion.

The paper photographers preceding them were often taught the calotype process by its very inventors: Henry Fox Talbot in England, Gustave Le Gray in France. In the 1850s, travelling was rough. Photographers carried light, flexible sheets of sturdy paper coated in beeswax.

The 1840s pioneers were itinerant alchemists. They took immense risks and travelled through Egypt – which was severely lacking infrastructure – lugging around silver plates and hazardous chemicals such as iodine, chromium or mercury.



## Chapter One: Glass Sphinx

Here, the Sphinx seems buried in sand and encased between two pyramids whose presence is merely suggested. The nose is already broken. The clear skies suggest time is standing still. A perched silhouette provides a scale for dimensions.



**Félix Bonfils, Gizeh, c. 1871, albumen print n°5 (private collection)**

In the lower left corner of the print, a signature reveals the name of the photographer. It is Félix Bonfils, a protestant man from the southern-central region of the Cévennes, France. He was deployed to Lebanon in 1860, then held on to his ambition and went back to Beirut in 1867 to open a photo studio.

Félix Bonfils is considered to be Beirut's prime photographer in the 19th century: "Félix Bonfils worked in bookbinding and printing, then went on to learn photography with Claude Félix Abel Niépce de Saint-Victor. France deployed him to Lebanon in 1860, where he set up shop in 1867 with the "Maison Bonfils" photographic studio in Beirut. While Bonfils was no pioneer, he became the first Frenchman to open a studio in that city. His wife, soon joined by their son

Adrien (1861-1929), took care of portraits and genre scenes while Félix travelled through Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Turkey and Greece to produce photographs." (Sylvie Aubenas, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF)). His classic production seemingly inspired future commercial photographers, thus creating a universally-known archetype for the representation of the Sphinx.

From the 1870s, the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869 led to a tourism boost. A local business began offering souvenirs and albumen prints to the ever-increasing flow of travellers. Compared to the 1830s, photographers were definitely starting to have it easier.

The next print portrays the Emperor of Brazil, who went to see the Sphinx for his very first outing. As his ministers feared a potential revolution, they advised him to remain within the confines of his palaces for over sixty years. On his left is the stately Auguste Mariette, guide to the Emperor's trip.





#### Emperor of Brazil

M. Delie & E. Bechard, Pedro II of Brazil in Egypt, 1871 (private collection)

On this print from the same year appears a mobile car with the photographers' names parked on the left of the massive head.

Georgios & Constantinos Zangaki, Gizeh, c. 1870,  
albumen print (private collection)

An ancient dispute for plagiarism provided historians with the car owners' identity. The dispute in question likely was the first ever to involve the Sphinx, and had to be quite baffling to the Egyptian justice of the 1870s.

The Zangaki brothers were Greek photographers whose activity began with the inauguration of the Suez Canal. They specialized in historical scenes and Ancient Egypt. The Zangaki brothers worked in a horse-drawn photographic van and sold their productions to travellers. Once in a while, they worked with French photographer Hippolyte Arnoux, who lived in Port Said.

"[...] (I)n 1874, [...], Arnoux instigated litigation against the Zangaki brothers and one Spiridion Antippa, accusing them of usurping their intellectual property." Arnoux was successful, and despite the lack of relevant laws in Egypt, "as on 29 June 1876, the Court of Ismailia recognized them as "guilty of usurpation of artistic and industrial property and unfair competition." (Wikipedia). They were sentenced to pay 800 francs in damages to the plaintiff.



**Gaston Braun & Amédée Moulleron, 1869, carbon print  
(Colmar – private collection)**

Among Ismail-Pacha's guests, who accompanied Empress Eugenie de Montijo for the inauguration of the Suez Canal, were two photographers. Both were members of Braun & Cie, which was based in (still-French-at-the-time) Mulhouse. They travelled through Egypt with great photographic chambers and negatives in order to offer carbon prints to the picture libraries of European museums. Gaston Braun (1845-1928) is patriarch Adolphe's son. He operated their great photographic chamber, producing "mammoth" glass-plates negatives in 40x50cm or even 60x75cm formats.



**Gaston Braun & Amédée Moulleron, 1869, large-format carbon print  
(Colmar – private collection)**

Gaston and Amédée brought back dozens of great collodion-coated glass negatives from Egypt. The negatives allowed the by-contact creation of large monochrome carbon prints. These Braun signature prints were recently exhibited in Munich. At the time the prints were produced, photographic enlargement techniques still had to be perfected.

Such a technical prowess came true thanks to the exceptional logistics in place for Empress Eugenie's Suez Canal trip. The two photographers had an exclusive for the event.

The drilling of the Canal led the first resident photographers to gather in two communities near Cairo and Alexandria's first hotels.

"In Cairo, studios were gathered in El Mousky, surrounding Ezbekie gardens. On this site stood the Shepherd Hotel, Hotel Zeg and the Pyramids Hotel. Photographs such as J. Pascal Sebah from Turkey, Henri Béchar, Emile Brugsch and Ermé Désiré from France, Otto Schoefft from Germany or G. Lekegian from Armenia conducted business on site in the 1860s and 1880s."

"In Alexandria were the Hôtel de l'Europe and the Peninsular and Oriental Hotel on Place des Consuls, the Victoria Hotel near the Latin convent or the Hôtel du Nord on the main square." (Nicolas Le Guern, "L'Égypte et ses Premiers Photographes" ("Egypt's First Photographers"), MPhil diss.)



**Antonio Beato (1825-1903), Sphinx, c.1865, albumen print**

"Antonio Beato was Italian, born in Malta and raised by the church along with his brother Felice. Both were probably taught photography by James Robertson, whom they met in Malta around 1850. In 1857, Antonio became one of Egypt's first resident photographers. His production was one of the most extensive of the country. In 1862, he ran a studio on Mousky Street, Old Cairo." (Le Guern)

**Wilhelm Hammerschmidt, The Great Sphinx at Giza, 1870  
(courtesy of Luminous Link)**

Regarding later prints, Wilhelm Hammerschmidt was a promising figure. This talented artist exhibited ten prints of Egypt and Cairo at the Société française de photographie in 1861.

"In 1865, the paper *Der Photograph* related the assault of Wilhelm Hammerschmidt near Cairo. He was mauled and injured by locals at the confines of the desert while he was taking photos of pilgrims in a caravan headed for Mecca." (Le Guern)





**Gustave Le Gray, The Sphinx of Giza, 1865, albumen prints**  
(courtesy of Paris auction)

Gustave Le Gray probably was the most enigmatic, tragic photographer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

He spent twenty-four years in Egypt; in comparison, his career in France had only lasted twelve years. Information on his chaotic life was first gathered during the preparation of the 2002 BnF exhibition.

"The photographer's pension file from the National Archives of Egypt was a potential information source. Le Gray took on various functions under the Pasha's command: he was the Pasha's son's art teacher, carried out official photography orders, then became the professor of perspective drawing at the preparatory school for the Polytechnic School in Cairo. As any civil servant, he had to have a file in the Khedivate archives. Here is content of the sort, extracted from complex, intertwined monetary equivalents and concurring Coptic, Hegira and Western calendars.

Le Gray was first registered as a professor at the preparatory school for the Polytechnic School in Cairo from July 18, 1864, with monthly earnings of 25 Egyptian Lira. From then on, he was a full-time civil servant until the day he died, with either an auxiliary or supernumerary status. Beyond accounting technicalities, the file contains reports of unfortunate events throughout his career. His wages were suspended from November 1875 to August 1876 as an Italian grocer, Giovanni Costanzo, was waiting for Le Gray to clear his debt to him. At the end of the year, he was also reprimanded a first time for his constant tardiness at school.

When he died, apart from the uncounted prints and paper negatives, only 322 glass negatives were found in his home, which is not much considering he worked as a photographer for twenty-four years. However, considering the hours spent at the school and his level of exigence, it is still a significant amount.

Yet these indirect, posthumous documents are not transparent; Le Gray is only envisioned in an administrative light. How could two decades of an artist's life be reduced to a curt pension file?" (Sylvie Aubenas & Mercedes Volait, *Dernières nouvelles du Caire*, ("Latest news from Cairo"), 2002).

Was Gustave Le Gray's work on the Sphinx diverse? In the Cairo archives, only two 1865 photos of Giza, of which three or four albumen prints are known, were found – along with evidence of negatives.

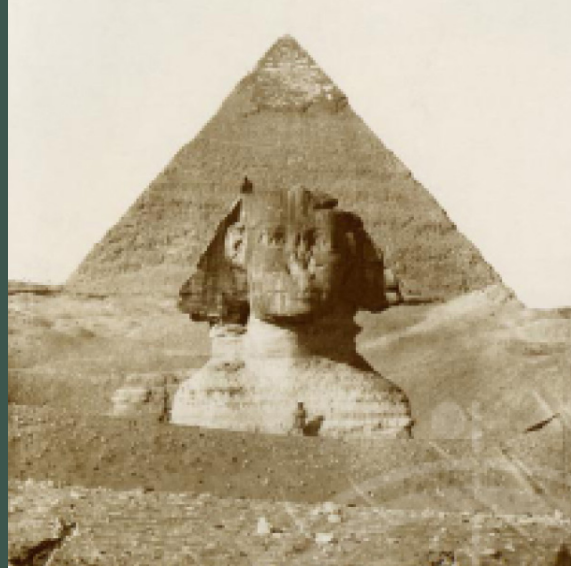


**Charles Piazzi Smyth, 1865, projection lantern glass plate  
(private collection)**

The Sphinx gazes at the Levant. This photograph was taken by a Scottish astronomer in the early hours of dawn. At first, the eye does not notice the pyramids are not portrayed.

Charles Piazzi Smyth, Astronomer Royal at the Calton Hill Observatory in Edinburgh, became famous for solving the problem of taking photos inside the Great Pyramid, in the pitch-black room containing the sarcophagus of Cheops. Its location is too far from light sources to be able to use a relay of mirrors inside the labyrinth.

This took place in 1865; steamboats came along with European papers and a solution to the problem: magnesium-powered light, experimented with by Nadar and other pioneers.



**Armand Athanase de Banville, The Sphinx, 1863, albumen print**

In 1863, viscount Aymard Athanase de Banville used the wet collodion process for over five months in Egypt with Egyptologist Emmanuel de Rougé.

His axis-based focus on the Sphinx is now a classic. He seemingly was the first photographer to portray the Sphinx in such a way.





#### Aerial view of Giza and the first streets of Cairo (2020)

To help the reader/traveller find his bearings and know the time of day, azimuth and sun position, here is a North-oriented frame. The Sphinx is located at the lower right entrance.



#### Francis Bedford, The Holy Land, Egypt, 1862, large albumen print

Francis Bedford (1816-1894) was born in Thebes. In 1862, he travelled with the Prince of Wales, becoming the first photographer to accompany a royal tour.

The logistics ensuring a comfortable trip for the Prince of Wales allowed the photographer to travel with fragile glass plates, which was a first.

Bedford is almost the only one to get on site late in the day – perhaps a result of the royal schedule.





**Francis Frith, The Great Pyramid and the Great Sphinx, Giza, 1857-1858, albumen prints (private collection)**

Francis Frith (1822-1898) has to think big to fulfil his ambitious goals of photographing the known world. He sails a yacht on the Nile to move his glass plates and laboratory. Hence, he worked in Egypt between September 1856 and July 1857, then published famous photography books between 1857 and 1859 titled *Egypt and Palestine photographed and described by Francis Frith*.

The legend regarding the Sphinx plate is somewhat unconventional and proves photographers can hate their own subjects.

"The Sphinx, whose base has more than once of late years been, to a greater or less extent, uncovered, is again almost entirely hidden by the drifted sand, and the entrance to a small temple excavated in the sandstone rock between its fore paws, is, in consequence, no longer visible. The profile, as given in my view, is truly hideous. I fancy that I have read of its beautiful, calm, majestic features; let my reader look at it, and say if he does not agree with me, that it can scarcely have been, even in the palmiest days, otherwise than exceedingly ugly."

**Chapter Two: Paper Sphinx**

In the late 1850s, in the first edition of Guides Joanne, appeared proof that travelling to Egypt had gotten slightly easier. Ships went from Marseille to Malta in three days, then to Alexandria in four days, for a total of seven days. The most important companies were the French Messageries Impériales, the Austrian Lloyd, and the Imperial and Royal Company, operating on the Danube. When it came to France, a ship left Marseille every other Sunday and made stops in Malta, Alexandria, and more." (Nicolas Le Guern)



Henry Cammas, *The Sphinx and the Pyramid of Kheops, Gizeh, 1861*, albumen silver print from a waxed paper negative (Getty Museum)

Most European amateur and professional photographers used the collodion process, either in wet or dry form. Yet during his nine months in Egypt, French photographer Henry Cammas (1813-1888) preferred dried waxed paper. Such a choice must not be seen as a setback, given the many disadvantages of collodion. "We have always used products shipped from France. Yet Barbet's, the chemist of Rue Franque, Alexandria, and Hammerschmidt's in El Mousky, Cairo, stocked up all the relevant materials, including paper for negatives and positives.



Barbet has set up shop in Alexandria many moons ago and can point out clever workers to repair gear damaged by heat". (Nicolas Le Guern)

Henry Cammas went up the Nile between 1860 and 1861, stopped for a quick visit in Karnak on December 27, 1860, then settled in Thebes from March 19 to April 29, 1861. He published a few copies of his photography book when he came back: H. Cammas, A. Lefebvre, *La vallée du Nil : impressions et photographies, (The Nile Valley, prints and photographs)*, Paris, 1862.



**Théodule Devéria, Sphinx 1859, albumen silver print from a paper negative (only known print), Musée d'Orsay**

Théodule Devéria (1831-1871) was the son of painter Achille Devéria and grandson of lithograph Charles Motte, who worked on the printing of Champollion's Egyptian Grammar.

Devéria was a member of the Institute of Alexandria. From 1858, he completed several photography and archaeology missions in Egypt. He took over for his friend J.B. Greene and worked for Auguste Mariette. Devéria is then considered an expert in ancient funeral texts, especially the *Book of the Dead*.<sup>2</sup> (Le Guern). The calotype is pale, thus making an almost-black negative, taken under harsh sunrays, easy to picture.



**Jakob August Lorent, Sphinx, 1859, calotype (Wikipedia Commons)**

Jakob August Lorent (1813-1884) was born in the United States into a family of German descent. On a trip to London in 1850, he met W.H. Fox Talbot who taught him photography and his calotype process. The shadow under the stone face can be compared to that of Armand de Banville's photography. Here is the outline of this trip, established from the photography books that were found:

- 1853-1857: stays in Venice and Northern Italy
- 1858: journeys to the South of Spain and Algeria
- 1859-1860: journey through Egypt and Nubia
- 1860-1861 and 1862: two trips to Greece
- 1863: trips to Roma and Southern Italy, then Turkey, Syria and Egypt
- 1864: Palestine and Egypt again
- 1865: Sicily



**Francois de Campigneulles, 1858, waxed paper negative  
(courtesy of Paris auction)**

François de Campigneulles (1826-1879) travelled to the East in 1858 and brought back 85 paper negatives from which he produced a few albumen prints. Part of them were exhibited in Paris in 1859 by the Société française de photographie (SFP). His name was forgotten during the Second French Empire, until his negatives were auctioned and identified in Paris on November 8, 2016.

At the time of day the photo was taken, there was no apparent shadow. The paper negative is transparent and presented here in a coherent formation given the other photos. However, the printed version must be imagined as a reversed image, like in a mirror.

**John B. Greene, Excavations near the Sphinx, 1853, salted paper print from paper negative (BnF)**

John Beasley Greene (1832-1856) is a romantic figure of the history of photography. He was born in France into an American family. His father ran the Havre branch of the Welles & Williams Bank.

He had two major passions when he was young, photography and Egyptian archaeology. He inherited from his father in 1850 and became Gustave Le Gray's student in 1852, learning the technique of negatives on dried waxed paper. Egyptologist Emmanuel de Rougé taught him how to decipher hieroglyphs. In 1853, at the age of 21, he became a member of the prestigious Asiatic Society.





He was financially able to travel across the Nile a first time between November 1853 and May 1854 to the Great Cataract, from which he brought back many negatives.

He was a founding member of the Société française de photographie in November 1854. That same year, almost a hundred of his prints were published by Blanquart-Evrard in a photography book entitled *The Nile*, which contained shots of monuments, landscapes, and diverse pictorial musings. This was one of the very first published art portfolios in history, following Maxime Du Camp's.

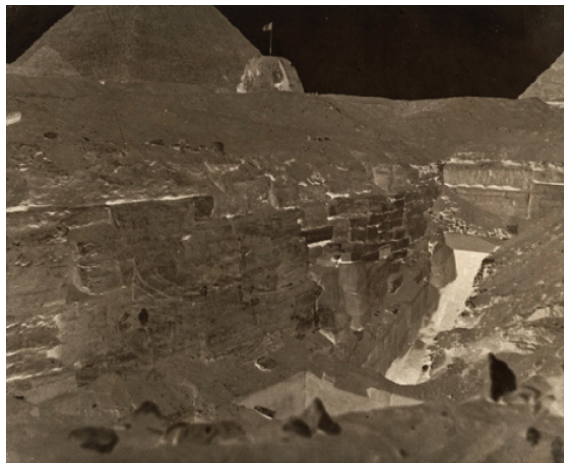
In 1855, Greene and Du Camp were both rewarded during the Universal Exhibition, and received a second-class medal as contributors for their photos of Egypt.

In late 1856, Greene went back to Egypt for further research. This would be his third and final trip; he died in Cairo on November 29, at the age of 24.

#### **John B. Greene, 1853, paper negatives**

The Sphinx appears on these two negatives with a French flag planted on top, indicating Auguste Mariette was conducting excavations at the time. As a founding father of Egyptology, Mariette worked closely with several photographers throughout his career.

In 1850, he discovered the location of an underground necropolis called the Serapeum of Saqqara. At the time, he was not an Egyptologist yet and was simply commissioned to purchase Coptic manuscripts.





**Félix Teynard, Sphinx, salted paper print, 1858, from an 1852 paper negative (BnF)**

Félix Teynard (1817-1892) is a peculiar traveller. His photos were published grandly a few years after his return and were among the first to catch the eye of enthusiasts in the second half of the 20th century.

"Félix Teynard was, just like Champollion, a civil engineer from the French city of Grenoble. He is thought to be one of the first calotype photographers to have taken photos of Egypt. He is also the one on which there is the least available information. No record of official missions to shed light on what drove him; no correspondence; and apart from his photography book, no published material. The figures of Champollion, and of archaeologist Emmanuel de Rougé – who gave lectures in Grenoble during the 1850s – as well as reading material by Dominique Vivant and Maxime Du Camp, and knowing about Auguste Mariette getting to Egypt in 1850, may have prompted him to travel to Egypt from 1851 to 1852. He left Cairo and reached the Great Cataract, taking at least 160 photos during the journey." (Sylvie Aubenas, BnF).

His photographically illustrated atlas with maps and explanations completing *La Description de l'Égypte (The Description of Egypt)* was not released until 1858. It was published in Paris by Goupil & Cie under the title *Égypte et Nubie : sites et monuments les plus intéressants pour l'étude de l'art et de l'histoire (Egypt and Nubia, Relevant Sites and Monuments for Art and History Studies)*. The orotone prints for the book were produced by Madame Adèle Hubert de Fonteny and her lover Ladislas Chodzkievicz's studio.





**John Shaw Smith, Head of the Sphinx at Giza, February 1852, calotype (MOMA)**

Shaw Smith (1811-1873) was an Irish traveller whose archives are kept in Edinburgh and described as "a folder containing a typescript copy of a diary of a journey from Italy to the Holy Land, covering the period 18 December 1850 to 6 September 1852; two microfilms of diaries covering the period 1849 to 1850; and five boxes of photographs showing scenes of Ireland, Paris, Switzerland, Rome, Pompei, Athens, Istanbul, Jerusalem, Cairo, Thebes, Abu Simbel, Nubia, Petra, and more."



**Leavitt Hunt & Nathan Flint Baker, Great Pyramid and Sphinx, Gizeh, Egypt, 1852, salted print from a paper negative (Library of Congress)**

Leavitt Hunt was an American photographer travelling alongside a family friend, Nathan Flint Baker, a wealthy sculptor from Ohio. Baker had been living in Europe for about ten years when he announced he wanted to travel through the Middle East. Hunt decided to come with him; they met in Florence, Italy at the end of September 1851, spent a few weeks in Rome practicing photography, then sailed from Naples to Malta. They went up the Nile to the Sinai Peninsula, took photos of the ruins in Petra – and were almost the first to do so. They travelled to Jerusalem, – in today's Lebanon – Constantinople, Athens, then back to Paris in May 1852.

Their sixty known photographs are quite fascinating. They picture the Great Sphinx and Giza Pyramids, the temples of Karnak, the Ramesseum in Thebes and the ruins of Philae, the monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai, the tombs and temples in Petra, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the Baalbek Roman Ruins and Athens' Acropolis.

The shadow below the head is short, meaning the photo was taken in the early morning.





**Ernest Benecke, Sphinx, 1852, salted paper print (courtesy of Luminous Lint)**

Ernest Benecke (1817-1894) was born in England into an Anglo-German family of textile merchants. In 1992, 143 of his photos were stumbled upon. Before then, only a couple of his prints were known of.

Ernest Benecke ran his family's wool business in Lille, France, and probably learnt photography in this very city alongside Louis Désiré Blanquart-Evrard. Benecke travelled through Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea in 1852, for either business – his company had an Alexandria branch – or leisure reasons. He framed his Sphinx shot from the same angle and viewpoint than François de Campigneulles, while his negative was as overexposed as Théodule Devéria's.



A couple of clues imply that, although they were not found, prints did exist.

V. Galli Maunier worked in Egypt for about twenty years starting in 1852 doing photography, then pawnbroking and antique dealing. He lived in Luxor at the House of France. Only four of his shots are listed, in the Société française de photographie collections in Paris and the George Eastman House. The prints were produced at Blanquart-Evrard's printing company in Loos-les-Lille.

In 1849-1850, English traveller Claudius Galen Wheelhouse produced photos whose negatives were, according to his diary, lost in a fire: "These photographs were taken by me in the years 1849-50 when in medical charge of a yachting party the photographs were taken by what was then called the Talbot-Type process, a process only recently introduced by Mr. Fox Talbot, and a first endeavour to obtain "negative" pictures, on paper, from which "positive" ones could be printed at will, and as often as desired. They were taken on simple paper, no glass plates or films having, at that time, been invented, and, when completed were made as transparent as possible by being saturated with white wax, with the aid of a warm flat iron and blotting paper, by which means they were also made tough and durable. On the completion of the tour these negatives were given to Lord Lincoln, and were all unhappily, destroyed by a fire by which Blumberg, his Lordship, was nearly burned down in 1879."

The subjects of the saved positives include Lisbon (1), Cadiz (1), Seville (3), Malta (2), Greece (21), Egypt and Nubia (31), Sinai (4), Petra (2), Jerusalem (7), Damascus (2), and Baalbeck (7).

When it comes to France, the most famous traveller of the early days of photography is Maxime Du Camp. He left Paris on October 29, 1849 with his talented friend Gustave Flaubert, then went back from Egypt in October 1850 with 214 paper negatives printed at his return. He exhibited most of them in late June 1851.



**Maxime du Camp, Sphinx, 1850, from the Gide photography book (private collection)**

The viewpoint of his Sphinx photo is distinctive, in that the smaller pyramid of Menkaure appears, seemingly for the first and only time.

Many articles were written about Maxime Du Camp's travelling, the first being the only one mentioned here. In September 1851, Francis Wey published a laudatory piece on the young photographer's work in the first magazine, *La Lumière (The Light)*.

"How fortunate for us to discover Mr Maxime Du Camp's work in the field of photography! Mr Du Camp is a true literary enthusiast with a passion for faraway landscapes and one of the most independent minds in this bourgeois time of ours. His work is not an occasion for us to muse on latest progress, camera lenses, or the urgent matter of bromides, iodides or nitrates properties. [...]

However, to be remorselessly lazy and historically accurate without a mere tape measure, barometer or dip needle, to collect hieroglyphs without abstruseness and tell wondrous tales without exaggeration, Mr Du Camp brought a daguerreotype with paper negatives on this third trip. He thus became a photographer because of circumstances, and as an amateur traveller, – a word that soon supplanted the term "artist", sucked up by profession – he satiated his whims by experiencing the type of risks and exhaustion any remarkable man would only accept to go through for a sizeable sum. [...]

The least of his prints are comparable to accurate sketches, and there are but a few of these. The others, which make up three-quarters of the book, are excellent, clear and well-taken. Among the collection, the finish of about twenty-five match that of glass prints. Mr Du Camp [...] was clever in picking viewpoints, his compositions are adequate, with a perfect blend of quaint charm and necessary accuracy regarding studies. He is, and will remain, unmatched. [...] The government surely cannot be indifferent to such a well-crafted, complete, clever work."

Before Du Camp came several daguerreotype photographers. Alas, the mystery of the Sphinx thickens when going further back in time.

### Chapter Three: Metal Sphinx

"In 1840, a trip from Marseilles to Alexandria was about 598 nautical miles long and cost 440 francs for first class, 260 francs for second class and 140 francs for third class. The price of overweight luggage was about 6 francs for ten extra kilos. Three ships left the ports of call each month: the Dante, the Eurotas, the Leonidas, the Lycurgus, the Mentor, the Minos, the Ramses, the Scamander, the Sesostris and the Tancred." (Nicolas Le Guern).

Among the travelling writers from whom clues were gathered, Gérard de Nerval mentions in *Journey to the Orient* one of his painter friends, who purchased a product for daguerreotype plates in 1843 at a chemist's in Cairo: "I was nearing the end of my journey, for, at Castagnol's pharmacy, I met the painter from the French hotel, who was having chlorate of gold prepared for his daguerreotype."

Jean-Jacques Ampère, son of scientist André Ampère, travelled through Egypt in 1844 with illustrator Paul Durand. His official mission was to check the accuracy of data collected by Champollion. He was Jules Itier's childhood friend. While he did bring daguerreotype gear on his trip, he did not manage to use it whilst there.



Maxime Du Camp

Site of Thebes, Egypt



Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey was a famous daguerreotype painter. He stayed in Egypt for two years and most of his productions became well-known. To this day, no Sphinx shot was spotted among them. At Madame de la Taille's, a maid who was polishing the silverware cleaned about fifty plates with a strong product, thus wiping away fragile daguerreotype prints, perhaps with the Sphinx among them.



Jules Itier (1802-1877) was a photographer and customs officer. On his way to China, he shot the Nile Valley up to Philae in December 1845 and January 1846. An invoice was found among the future recipient of his will's neat archives; he bought thirty blank copper plates in Cairo for one franc each in late 1845. He also purchased four blank plates in Alexandria in January 1846, which means there are at least thirty daguerreotype prints of the Sphinx and the Nile Valley to be found.

To complete his photography book, published by Gide, Maxime Du Camp took the same photo as traveller Aimé Rochas. "I must publicly thank Mr Rochas, who agreed to share plates 1, 9 and 52, which were missing from my lot [...]. Mr Rochas is a brave and clever photographer. He travelled through regencies in Tunis and Tripoli, Egypt, European and Asiatic Turkey and brought back a series of daguerreotype plates whose quaintness and historical interest will soon, let us hope, come into being.



**Aimé Rochas, Pyramide de Chéops (Cheops Pyramid), 1849, daguerreotype photographed by Maxime Du Camp**

Among the first travellers on Daguerrean Excursions buzzing around the globe since August 1839, when the invention was released, two noteworthy pioneers met in Egypt. The first is Pierre Gaspard Gustave Joly de Lotbinière, the first Canadian (of Swiss descent) to have a Daguerrean chamber.

Another group came from Paris on October 21, 1839. Horace Vernet (1789-1863) boarded in Marseille with his young nephew Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet (1817-1878) to set sail on Egypt.

Goupil-Fesquet and Joly de Lotbinière purchased gear in Paris at the same optometrist's, Paymal Lerebours (1807-1873), who promoted the Daguerrean Excursions. Both stayed in the Whaghorn Hotel and wished to capture the same subjects.

Joly reported an unfortunate event during these heroic times: in November 1839, he stopped 320 meters away from Cheops Pyramid to submit his plate to a nine-minute exposure. His curious Egyptian aide opened the development box to take a peek. As soon as it appeared, the Sphinx print was sublimated by command of the sun god - Khepri or Atum, which Joly's diary does not specify.

At Giza, Goupil-Fesquet also went through unexplained trouble: "I followed the inventor's process and was deeply ashamed of four or five failed shots."

It is quite unconceivable that he should come back from Egypt without a plate of the pyramids. He then adopted a new method: "I was patient enough to prepare by myself a dozen plates, polished as fast and as well as I could. I did the exact opposite of what Mr Daguerre recommended, which allowed me to successively produce four and five Sphinx and Pyramid prints by leaving them in the sun for fifteen minutes."

In his Excursions book, Noël-Marie-Paymal Lerebours published a Pyramid photo, possibly made from sketches. Poor Goupil-Fesquet, who was so proud of his daguerreotype shot of the Sphinx!





**From Lerebours' Excursions daguerriennes, (Daguerrean Excursions),  
Pyramide de Chéops, (Cheops Pyramid), 1842**

Four letters regarding the first photographs taken in the East were found, and are now among BnF collections. Young Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet learnt to master the process with Alphonse-Eugène Hubert.

September 7, 1839: "Dear Hubert, you use a daguerreotype with friends. Would you allow Mr Goupil, who is about to leave for the East and wishes to perfect his skills on the matter, to watch you? It would be a tremendous favour for him and for yours truly," Hector Horeau.

October 14, 1839, "Madame Goupil is honoured to greet Mr Hubert and asks whether he may accept her son's sincerest apologies. Mr Vernet left in a rush [...]. Mr Goupil would have enjoyed conversing about the daguerreotype. Mr Daguerre's latest advice was to use diatomaceous earth to polish the plates [...]."

November 7, 1839: "In Alexandria, in the presence of Mehemet Ali, Pasha of Egypt, I produced a good print of the Pasha's Harem in the span of two-and-a-half minutes at 10/11 a.m. On the 16th of the same month, with the same method under the same clear skies, I had no result. On the 20th, I produced a fine shot of the Pyramids and the Sphinx, which are reddish subjects, in nine-and-a-half minute at noon. In the afternoon, it takes 10/11 [minutes] [...]."

May 8, 1840: "I can affirm without bragging that I am the first man who pursued a series of experiences in the East, and the first who brought attention to the major inconvenience of wooden boxes for sea and land travel. I have no talent, but I patiently persevered, while most artists do not... Aboard French ship The Ramses, sailing from Smyrna to Malta on a somewhat agitated sea, the skies were clear, and at 11:30, I produced a wondrous print with a perfect foreground for four portraits, as I solidly tied my gear to the deck [...]. To me, the beauty of nautical prints arises from the salt in the air that suppresses iodine and light, which makes the whole operation easier." (F G-F).

**Dominique Vivant, Baron Denon, 1798**

Now back to the pivotal hour, to the origins of time coordinates, to François Arago's famous speech at the Académie des sciences in Paris on August 19, 1839: "[...] [H]ad we had photography in 1798 we would possess today faithful pictorial records of that which the learned world is forever deprived by the greed of the Arabs and the vandalism of certain travelers. To copy the millions of hieroglyphics which cover even the exterior of the great monuments of Thebes, Memphis, Karnak, and others would require decades of time and legions of draughtsmen. By daguerreo-type one person would suffice to accomplish this immense work successfully... Equip the Egyptian Institute with two or three of Daguerre's apparatus, and before long on several of the large tablets of the celebrated work, which had its inception in the expedition to Egypt, innumerable hieroglyphics as they are in reality will replace those which are now invented or designed by approximation. These designs will excel the works of the most accomplished painters, in fidelity of detail and true reproduction of atmosphere. Since the invention follows the laws of geometry, it will be possible to re-establish with the aid of a small number of given factors the exact size of the highest points of the most inaccessible structures."



**Post Scriptum : Retour sur le nez.P.S.: Back to the nose**

In 1980, German historian Ulrich Haarmann relied on testimonies by Arabian authors of the Rashidi. Ahmad al-Maqrīzī declared the face of the Sphinx was damaged in 779 A.H. (1378 A.D.) by Mohammed Sa'im al-Dahr, an iconoclastic Sufi from the khanqah of Sa'id al-Su'ada, who wanted to destroy what he considered a pagan idol, worshipped by Nile peasants. He hacked at the ears and nose by himself. He was hanged on accounts of vandalism, and his remains were burnt at the stake by said Nile peasants in front of the Sphinx.

The nose was never found, although rumours claim it is kept at the British Museum. Daguerreotypes were not found either, which feeds into collectors and treasure hunters' fever dreams...



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Sphinx's sight beyond the nose,  
November 2019 (courtesy of I.M)