

FROM ENCYCLOPAEDIC PROJECT TO EDITORIAL PRACTICE

The Autochrome collection of the ‘Archives de la Planète’

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[EN]

Abstract

This paper pretends to inquire about the encyclopedic nature of the ‘Archives de la planète’ (1908-1932), one of the biggest Autochrome collections in the world. Indeed, its constitution appears to be more empirical than systematic. Furthermore, besides gathering documentation of foreign countries, this project builds up the personal and national image of its founders.

Keywords

Autochrome; operators; social circles; auto-representation.

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Resumo

Este artigo reflete sobre a natureza enciclopédica dos *Archives de la planète* (1908-1932), uma das maiores coleções de autocromos do mundo. Com efeito, a sua constituição revela características mais empíricas do que sistemáticas. Ademais, além de coletar documentação de países estrangeiros, o projeto também constrói a imagem pessoal e nacional de seus fundadores.

Palavras-chave

Autocromo; operadores; círculos sociais; autorrepresentação





Introduction

The *Archives de la planète* (1908-1932), the biggest archive of first color photographs in the world, have often been presented as an encyclopedic and universal project. Indeed, the words of Albert Kahn in 1912 are meaningful:

«Stereoscopic photography, projections, especially cinematography, this is what I would like to operate in a large scale to fix once and for all some aspects, practices, and modes of human activity whose fatal disappearance is only a matter of time».¹

This article proposes to question a different aspect of the *Archives de la planète*. Their constitution appears to be far more empirical than systematic, thanks to the part taken by operators. Furthermore, even though their name itself is suggestive, the *Archives de la planète* appear to build up the personal and national image of its founders. These are the two characteristics that I intend to develop, but first of all, a few words are to be said about the genesis of this ambitious project.

Genesis and actors

Albert Kahn was born in Marmoutier, head of the canton of Bas-Rhin, in 1860.² In 1871, when Alsace-Lorraine was annexed to Germany, he chose French nationality and moved to Paris in 1876. Two years later, he began his first job at the Goudchaux bank. His talents of intuition and audacity ensure him a fast-professional advancement. He became a partner at Goudchaux before creating his own bank in 1898. He knew back then that this success was not an end: as he wrote in 1887 to his coach and friend Henri Bergson, success in business is “not my ideal” (Coœuré & Worms, 2003, p.76). It had however the advantage of introducing

Kahn to the intellectual circle of the Goudchaux. Evolving within the republican elites, Kahn met a philanthropist and secular environment that paid acute attention to progress and education. Thus, his fortune assured, Kahn immediately committed himself in multiple philanthropic works, characterized by the prolific creation of documentary tools and financial support to various areas such as university and medicine.³ In 1898 begins the story of Kahn's foundation, with the creation of the "Bourses autour du monde". These scholarships allow young fellows intending to become teachers to travel for a year. Eyes "wide open," awardees are invited to «enter into sympathetic communication with the ideas, feelings, and life of diverse nations»⁴. Soon after, in 1906, was born the "Société autour du monde", which we will have the opportunity to present later on.

Photography appeared in Kahn's documentary project in 1908, during a trip that took him to the United States, Japan and China. Albert Dutertre, his mechanic-driver accompanied him. Before leaving, Kahn took care to offer the latter training for film and photographic techniques, black and white and color, provided by a specialist in the School of Pharmacy.⁵ For this first experience, which is as much a business trip as a photographic expedition, Kahn deployed substantial resources that already indicate a particular interest. Both men brought back over 4,000 stereoscopic views, black and white and color. The three-dimensional and instant technique of stereoscopy, but also color and sound are used according to Albert Kahn's desire of an exhaustive representation of reality.⁶ On his return, Kahn organized the installation of a laboratory on his property in Boulogne and recruited a professional photographer, Auguste Léon. Shortly after, the latter probably joined him on a trip to South America and Scandinavia. A second operator, Stéphane Passet, was probably hired in July 1911.⁷ Kahn then decided to develop his project with the help of a Scientific Director and hired on this purpose Professor Jean Brunhes (1869-1930), following the advice of a mutual friend, the geographer and geologist Emmanuel de Margerie. Brunhes was given the responsibility to ensure the scientific and methodological coherence of the *Archives de la planète*. In exchange, Kahn provided funds for the creation of a chair in Human Geography at the Collège de France, held by Brunhes. New photographers-travelers, some of which were also

familiar with film technique, joined the ranks of Kahn's employees. Among them, Georges Chevalier entered in Kahn's service in 1912; Paul Castelnau and Fernand Cuville in 1917; Frédéric Gadmer in 1919; Roger Dumas in 1920. The project also expanded with occasional operators such as Marguerite Mespoulet and Madeleine Mignon and Léon Busy. But the *Archives de la planète* suffered the impact of the economic crisis of 1929, and soon Albert Kahn was not able to fund travels anymore. The project begins to wither. The latest mission abroad was conducted by Frédéric Gadmer in Algeria and Tunisia in 1931. All in all, nearly 4,000 stereoscopic plates, 70,000 Autochromes and a hundred hours of film rushes corresponding to 183,000 meters of film were gathered from fifty countries on all continents, except Oceania. Although this brief chronology invites us to see the *Archives de la planète* as a two-headed project with a universalist aim, such an understanding would neglect the major part taken by operators in this vast undertaking.

An empirical gathering method: operators' personal initiatives

Albert Kahn employed eleven photography and cinema operators for the *Archives de la planète* between 1909 and 1931. Twenty others have contributed occasionally. It appears that Kahn's incomplete personal archive and the scientific and individual commitments of Brunhes are not the only way to trace back the project's history. Indeed, we have come to forget that the operators are its first craftsmen. Several elements lead us to the reassessment of the amount of freedom given to the operators, and to consider them as key protagonists, just like Brunhes and Kahn.

Mariel Jean-Brunhes Delamarre, daughter of Jean Brunhes, remembered the conditions of preparation to each trip. Jean Brunhes received the operator in Auguste Léon's laboratory, and provided him guidance based on various documentation materials: «Survey maps, geography volumes, guides, photographs» (Bonhomme & Delamarre, 1993, p.206). As far as we know, these indications left no trace. However, Brunhes referred to this type of meeting in a letter addressed to Kahn:

«It is well understood that the information I provided to M. Passet should serve him as inspiration; these are general tips that are intended, in my mind, to allow travelers from different parts of the world to cooperate in a common enterprise, but it goes without saying that this is not a kind of limiting rule. M. Passet must have his eyes always open and take everything as it may deem some interest; *the more he manifests thoughtful initiative, the more we will be satisfied with his services*».⁸

“Travelers” were therefore expected to show autonomy. In this letter, Brunhes describes two principles that structure the *Archives de la planète*: the first one is collaborative. The second is individual and gives operators significant freedom. This double structure reminds us the Farm Security Administration surveys which later took place in the USA. Indeed, as Olivier Lugon recalled: «if the FSA was not originally an initiative of photographers, it is them who will fix its lines» (Lugon, 2011. p.120). We can also think about photographic agencies that developed in the second half of the twentieth century, and the special status they reserved to authorship (Bouveresse, 2017). In a radio interview, Georges Chevalier, who became the first director of Kahn’s Autochrome collection after his death, refers to the same sense of initiative encouraged by Brunhes:

«There was a program but also great flexibility. The general orders were to take everything that could serve to the story of human life: monuments, ruins, tools, types, etc... This means that everyone was expected to have intuition and be able to make a choice among the documents that his lenses could reach».⁹

How did the operators deal with such “flexibility”? An example will be given to us by Stéphane Passet’s first trip, which led him to China in 1912. In a letter, he exposes Brunhes his own methods of shooting. We can notice the didactic effort that feeds his photographic approach:

«Since I was in Beijing, I spent my first days taking in pictures the city’s attractions, which are many and interesting. I have traveled around part of the temples, I took their exterior and interior appearance, so that one can very well realize what I see, for example, I am taking a Buddhist temple’s photographs, I picture the hall, the court, the series of temples which follow, the different steps, the entrance to the main temple, the altar and finally the Buddha. My shots are all developed from day to day, so I am certain of what I do and then pass to something else the next day».¹⁰

In a letter dated 17 July 1912, Brunhes shows how much he appreciates Passet's method. Saying he is very satisfied of the latest news, he adds that he has no further recommendation.¹¹ A letter sent by Passet, this time from Morocco in 1913, provides another example. The latter describes bold practices, staging events for documentary purposes:

«Before I left Fez, General Gouraud agreed at my request to hold a military exercise during which I took interesting film scenes [...] I have also taken in color photography the General and all troops gathered behind him. This session obviously no longer has the same documentary interest, but I thought it was still good for recording to show troops charging to conquest and in my opinion a military scene will not be superfluous. I wanted to benefit from General Gouraud's thoughtfulness».¹²

At the stage of production, the *Archives of the planet* do not follow a systematic logic, but rather are the result of individual and simultaneous choices. In his study about the photographic surveys conducted in the United States in the nineteenth century, Robin Kelsey notes that «The question of which statements or pictures the geographical and geological archive could permit looks different from the position of the employee than from that of the employer» (Kelsey, 2007: 11).

Similarly, although Kahn's intentions are valuable to describe the initial stage of the project, they appear insufficient to describe the stage of its execution, and it seems necessary to study more precisely, when possible, each operator's background and methods. Other elements are encouraging the hypothesis of an editorial project. Indeed, besides an oscillating structure between group project and individual initiative, the economy of editorial projects is characterized by a rational mode of accumulation according to selective criteria, restricted decision-making actors, and a targeted audience. As for the use of these images, we will then come back to the two sponsors of the project, namely Kahn and Brunhes.

The phenomenon of self-representation within the *Archives de la planète*

Albert Kahn — the art of camouflage

Among nearly 70,000 images, over 34,000 were collected in France. The *Archives de la planète* are therefore half French. One prosaic hypothesis to explain such a disparity would be related to financial issues: it is of course cheaper to send operators in France rather than around the world. However, considering that the year 1919-1920 was the year when Kahn hired the most operators — nine at the same time —, we realize that this year also corresponds to many shooting in France with only three surveys abroad.¹³ Therefore, if Kahn had the means to finance the employment of so many operators, he could have chosen to hire less of them, and send them in remote places. Several elements can be explored in order to study this phenomenon of self-representation, our first example of “editorial choice”.

Let us study more closely the thematic distribution of this corpus. Firstly, we can notice that of these 34,000 images of France, more than 5,000 were taken in Albert Kahn’s properties. These images mostly relate to Albert Kahn’s gardens in Boulogne and Cap Martin. Albert Kahn’s passion for his gardens is well-known.¹⁴ In 1895, he built on his property of Boulogne on 6, Quai du 4-September, a *jardin à scènes*. Across an area of 4.2 hectares are grouped a French garden, an orchard, a rose garden, an English garden, a “blue” forest, a marsh, a meadow and a “golden” forest, as well as a Japanese and Chinese garden, and a “Vosges” forest. Today one can still walk around them thanks to the preservation efforts led by the museum. As for the garden in Cap Martin on the French Riviera, it contains many species as rare as exotic.

Studying the reception context of this ensemble will ease its interpretation. Let us therefore focus on the visits organized in Boulogne for the “Société autour du monde”. Founded in 1906 at the initiative of “Bourses autour du monde” former recipients, the “Société autour du monde” gathered many members of the academic, artistic and political elite. Some were honorary members, other, occasional guests Kahn honored with a projection and a dinner in good company. The guests include the Nobel Prize in Physics Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, mathematician Paul Appell,

but also Paul Valéry, the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, Colette, and Henri Bergson. Few documents tell us about the running of these visits. However, testimonies of doctors who came to visit the Biology Center will give us a glimpse of the context in which these images were shown.¹⁵ After discovering Dr. Comandon's equipment, the group attended a scientific projection. Some views of the *Archives de la planète* were also shown to them:

«Admirable views in color from the *Centre de Documentation* were then shown. The magic lantern actually allowed us to travel in Egypt, Greece, India, Japan».¹⁶

The tour ends with a stroll in the garden:

«Finally, on a beautiful day, visitors could admire the gardens where they passed from large spaces bordered by blue cedars to the fantastic vision of a corner of Japan with a scent of wisteria all enlighten by multicolored azaleas bouquets».¹⁷

Paul Ducellier, former secretary of Albert Kahn, also highlights the magical nature of Boulogne visits and evokes the host's mischievous spirit:

«Oh! There were sometimes surprises regarding the gardens. Sometimes, I would point out to visitors the blue flowers in the French garden as we were walking across it. The time we made the turn by the Vosges and the blue forest, when we returned all flowers were red. The visitors did not understand why but I can tell you, it is because all these flowers were in pots and in the meantime, all twelve gardeners came to remove the blue pots to put red pots instead. These are some surprises Albert Kahn allowed himself... But really it was beautiful and everyone cheered».¹⁸

We can also notice that out of 835 projections between 1913 and 1930, Boulogne and Cap Martin were shown 533 times, the gardens of Cap Martin almost systematically closing each screening starting 1926.¹⁹ The importance in terms of number of this ensemble but also its representation in the context of a very selected audience, associated with the mystery surrounding Albert Kahn's personality lead us to formulate the hypothesis that Kahn was not only discreet, but harbored his own personal image. Part of the French corpus could thus have served as a means for this shy host, whose speech difficulties have often been raised (Tassin, 2015: 11), to

present himself to his guests while withdrawing from the scene. Kahn thus engages a true poetic of concealment, later theorized by Blanchot among others, carrying an important part of literary research of the twentieth century. Photography, on its side, would wait a few more decades, the development of theoretical studies, the end of the photo journalistic myth and new documentary ethics (Poivert, 2010), until the author's ghost reappeared.

Jean Brunhes and the rhetorical function of color

If we keep focusing on the places that have most been photographed among the French corpus, we can see that every ensemble of more than a thousand pictures consists in former areas of battle: Aisne, Marne, Meurthe-et-Moselle, Meuse, Oise, Pas-de-Calais, Somme. Indeed, the First World War is largely represented within the *Archives de la planète*, with more than 17,000 images. At that time, several operators were recruited from the photographic service of the army.²⁰ Autochromes taken during wartime photographic surveys were used by Jean Brunhes to illustrate his own lectures in neutral countries, including Switzerland and Spain. They were directed in 1916 with the help of Georges Chevalier for propaganda purposes.²¹ We also know that this ensemble has been used by Brunhes to illustrate his lecture in the Collège de France. Starting 1915, several lessons focusing on the impact of geographical knowledge in contemporary history are illustrated with Autochromes.²² On January, 18th, Brunhes gave free rein to patriotic emotion, and used photographs in order to document «the devastation brought by the German army».²³ He described to his student the city of Senlis as a «type of city-corpse whose image is to stay in front of [their] eyes to give [them] an example».²⁴ In the screening of December, 12th, 1917, Brunhes elaborates, relying on images, a critique of the notion of race. Brunhes argues that the question of human cohesion, which was so important during World War II, is unrelated to the concept of races since, says he, the “French type” is extremely diverse and mixed. As often, the projection occurs at the end of the lesson, as a means of recreation:

«To give you a rest from this very theoretical presentation, [...] I would like today to introduce to you some color photographs which have enriched our collections since last year, and that relate very specifically to the concept of race».²⁵

His speech contains the vocabulary of anthropometry and terms such as “brachycephalic” and “dolichocephalic”, yet, these images are formally very different from this part of photography advocating the hierarchy between individuals according to the analogy of morphological and behavioral criteria. Visual codes are changed, and anthropometric clinical vocabulary (Sekula, 1986) makes place to postcard-like images.²⁶

The use of pictures made by Brunhes in wartime context is the draft of a “micro-story” (Challine, 2014) among many others, whose disentanglement would expose the *Archives de la planète* as a network. However, this case study is less specific than it appears. Indeed, it allows us to highlight the rhetorical dimension of color (Lichtenstein, 1989). Sensitive qualities of Autochrome technique are at the service of a speech whose aim is to move the audience in order to win his accession (Castro, 2017). More than an illustration, color photography is a sensitive argument. According to Brunhes, color could thus be summarized to the goal of moving to teach better. According to this hypothesis, the *Archives de la planète* could be compared to the contemporary cinematic purpose of popularizing History. Let us come back to the genesis of the *Archives de la planète* to anchor such a comparison. Georges Chevalier remembers the enthusiasm of Kahn in front of the projections of Jules Gervais Courtellemont’s photographs. The latter actually probably bought 83 of them at the beginning of the project. From November 1908 to April 1909, Courtellemont presented *Visions d’Orient* at the salle Charras of the Opéra de Paris.²⁷ Strongly impressed by the Autochrome technique, Kahn apparently had the idea to incorporate this new technique in his photographic project. At the time, Jules Gervais Courtellemont was working on behalf of the company *Le Film d’Art*. Founded in 1908 by banker Paul Laffitte and his brother out of a proposal from the members of the *Comédie Française*, the company’s goal was to attract theatre and opera’s educated public, but also, according to cinema’s popularity, to become the «great educator of the people».²⁸ Jules Cleretie (1840-1913), one of the writers of

Le Film d'Art, explicitly states such a dual-purpose of seducing and instructing: a screening resembles «a history lesson, the best one can ever have, a lesson relying on eyes and pleasure» (Carou, 2008).

Aesthetics of accumulation

Announced as an encyclopedic project by its founder, who highlighted its international dimension and called for a systematic method of collecting images, the *Archives de la planète* appear to be far more empirical, due to the personal initiative of operators. Albert Kahn's aim to gather knowledge all around the world therefore describes one aspect of the project, and is enriched by the part taken by other main protagonists such as Jean Brunhes and the operators. The predominance of France in the corpus and the fact these images were shown frequently in Boulogne and in Collège de France is another characteristic that shows that the nature of the *Archives de la planète* is not exclusively encyclopedic. Two tendencies therefore make this project closer to an editorial one: the first one is empirical, the other one is rhetorical and features color as a sensitive argument, pleasing the audience being a means to teach better.

In many ways, this ensemble leads us to consider accumulation as an aesthetic principle, and excess as a form. As stated by Tiphaine Samoyault (1999), excess can take various forms. Encyclopedia is one of them, and we have tried to show that editorial project is another.



NOTES

- 1 Albert Kahn quoted in a letter from Emmanuel de Margerie to Jean Brunhes, January 26, 1912. If not mentioned, all references about correspondence in this article are from the Fonds Jean Brunhes, Archives Nationales, 615 AP / 102.
- 2 For more biographical information, see: Sophie Couëtoux (2015). De l'Alsace à Paris, d'un siècle à l'autre. In Musée Albert-Kahn, Paris: Liénart pp. 19-35.
- 3 For a detailed chronology of Kahn's philanthropic activities, see Marie Corneloup (2015). Au fil des fondations, les fils rouges de l'œuvre: continuités, ruptures, évolutions... In Musée Albert-Kahn, cit., pp. 253-271.
- 4 Unsigned letter to the Rector of the Académie de Paris, June 10, 1898, Archives Nationales, AJ 167020, quoted in Musée Albert-Kahn, cit. p. 256.
- 5 Albert Dutertre, "Journal de route de mon voyage autour du monde, 13 nov. 1908 – 11 mars 1909", Archives of musée Albert-Kahn.
- 6 Sound recording fails due to poor recording conditions.
- 7 Memories of Georges Chevalier, undated document gathered by his granddaughter Monique Rigal, Archives of musée Albert-Kahn.
- 8 Letter from Jean Brunhes to Albert Kahn, May 15, 1912. We stress out.
- 9 "Les Jardins Albert Kahn", interview of Georges Chevalier by Mr Carré and Miss Magnus, typed document undated, Archives of Musée Albert-Kahn.
- 10 Letter of Stéphane Passet to Jean Brunhes, June 28, 1912, fonds Jean Brunhes.
- 11 Letter of Jean Brunhes to Stéphane Passet, July 17, 1912, fonds Jean Brunhes.
- 12 Letter of Stéphane Passet to Albert Kahn, February 1st, 1913, fonds Jean Brunhes.
- 13 Summer 1919: Chevalier in Belgium, Cuville in England. November 1919 – January 1920: Gadmer in Lebanon and Palestine.
- 14 See for example Diane Toubert – Sigolène Tivolle (2015). Le jardin de Boulogne, un conservatoire des arts horticoles à la Belle Epoque. In Musée Albert-Kahn, cit., pp. 125-141.
- 15 The Biology Center was directed by Dr. Comandon, pioneer of microcinematography, hired by Kahn in 1928. See Flore Hervé (2015). Exploration du monde vivant: le laboratoire de biologie. In Musée Albert-Kahn cit., pp. 239-251.
- 16 Archives of Institut Pasteur, fonds Comandon and Pierre de Fonbrune, COM. D, 1929, "Samedi 25 mai, visite du laboratoire de biologie du Centre de documentation", typed document. Quoted by Flore Hervé (2015), cit. , p. 249.
- 17 *Ibidem*.
- 18 Interview of Paul Ducellier for the movie *L'Héritage d'Albert Kahn*, 1976, Fonds Ducellier, Archives of musée Albert-Kahn.
- 19 The register projections of Boulogne set for each session between 1913 and 1930, the date, the names of guests and projected themes. There are 835 sessions, with 75 planned themes.
- 20 Paul Castelnau and Fernand Cuville in 1917.
- 21 "Les Jardins Albert Kahn", interview of Georges Chevalier by Mr Carré and Miss Magnus, typed document undated, Archives of Musée Albert-Kahn.
- 22 Fonds Jean Brunhes, 615 AP 32, Archives nationales. These lectures were described in a paper presented by Anne Sigaud and Nicolas Ginsburger: "Montrer, expliquer et comprendre la Grande Guerre. Les autochromes des Archives de la planète et les cours de Jean Brunhes (1915-1917)",

- Colloquium *Plaques photographiques, fabrication et diffusion du savoir*, Strasbourg, March 16-17, 2016.
- 23 Fonds Jean Brunhes, 615 AP 32, lesson dated January 18, 1915
- 24 *Ibidem*.
- 25 Fonds Jean Brunhes, 615 AP 32, lesson dated December 12, 1917.
- 26 About postcard aesthetics, see for example Christian Malaurie (2003) and Marie-Ève Bouillon (2012).
- 27 See for instance Emmanuelle Devos (2008).
- 28 Statute of the Society, February 2008, quoted in 1895. *Mille huit cent quatre-vingt-quinze*, n° 33, *Dictionnaire du cinéma français des années vingt*, 2001, p. 198.

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