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# The Characterization of the Photographic Production of Dèsirè Charnay on His First Trip to Mexico

Liliana Dávila-Lorenzana and Estibaliz Guzmán-Solano

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a summary of a research project done in 2013-2014 by faculty of the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía (ENCRyM) in Mexico City. The project was funded by the Mexican government, through the Programa para el Desarrollo Profesional Docente (PRODEP). The research focused on a visual examination of the photographs taken by explorer Dèsirè Charnay, on his first trip to Mexico (1858 and 1860). Technical aspects of nine copies of *Cités et ruines Américaines, Mitla, Palenque, Izamal, Chichen Itza, Uxmal* [*American Cities and Ruins*] and four copies of *Album fotográfico mexicano* [*Mexican Photographic Album*], from collections in Mexico, the United States, and France, were compared. This project involved the examination and identification of the materials and techniques used to create multiple prints of the same image in different processes, albums, and bindings. It deepened the knowledge of photography in Mexico and helps to define the relationship Mexico had with the rest of the world in the late 1850s. The research also led to more questions related to the printing and publication of not only Dèsirè Charnay's work, but of photographic albums in general.

## INTRODUCTION

Claude Dèsirè Charnay's photographic work in Mexican archeology is some of the most complete and frequently consulted in the history of photography. Charnay's photography, especially the images from his first expedition in American lands, profoundly impacted the knowledge and conception of the most notable archaeological sites in Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Yucatan. Photographs from this early stage (1857-60) show the architectonic profiles and characteristics of temples and buildings in and around Mexico City, beginning a long tradition of photographic Mexican views and the construction of photographic albums.

From a material and technical point of view, Charnay's early Mexican work corresponds to a moment of transition in photographic practice, in producing both negatives and positives. While some of his prints were created with paper negatives and sensitized salted paper, others were taken using the more common photographic technique of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, collodion wet plate negatives and albumenized paper.

The broad geographical dissemination of Charnay's work, which is found in some of the most renowned public and private institutions, makes it difficult to know which photographs were made as paper negatives/salt prints and which with glass plate negatives/albumen prints. Previous studies of his prints in Mexican collection often omitted identification of the printing processes used by Charnay. This lack of information is problematic for conservators, as the preservation needs of the processes are different. This study aimed to identify and outline similarities and

differences in the printing characteristics of multiple sets of Charnay's work, in Mexico and abroad. This allows a deeper understanding of his print production after returning from Mexico. Print comparison included characteristics such as texture, printing technique, and negative retouching.

Four copies of *Mexican Photographic Album* (circa 1858) and nine copies of *American Cities and Ruins* (circa 1862), both containing photographs from Charnay's first trip to Mexico, and printed shortly after, were compared. Though containing images of Mexico, the albums examined as part of this project primarily belong to institutions in France and the United States. Each is somewhat different in materials and techniques, having different compilers and bindings.

Table 1. *Mexican Photographic Album*

Collection	Location	Characteristics
Fundación Televisa	Mexico	Unbound; with some explanatory text
New York Public Library	United States	Bound; with explanatory text
Bibliothèque Nationale	France	Bound; presentation copy for Emperor Napoleon III; includes two panoramic photographs
Musée du quai Branly	France	Bound; with explanatory text

Table 2. *American Cities and Ruins*

Collection	Location	Characteristics
Mapoteca Orozco y Berra	Mexico	Bound; handwritten captions
New York Public Library	United States	Unbound; edited by Gide with text by Viollete-Le-Duc text; printed captions
New York Public Library	United States	Unbound; edited by Gide with text by Viollete-Le-Duc text; printed captions
Getty Research Institute	United States	Unbound; smaller dimensions than are standard; commercially printed by Julio Michaud; typed captions
Bibliothèque Nationale	France	Bound; presentation copy for Emperor Napoleon III; handwritten captions
Bibliothèque Nationale	France	Unbound; edited by Gide with text by Viollete-Le-Duc text; printed captions
Institut Catholique de Paris	France	Bound; handwritten captions
Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève	France	Unbound; edited by Gide with text by Viollete-Le-Duc text; printed captions
Musée du quai Branly	France	Unbound; edited by Gide with text by Viollete-Le-Duc text; printed captions

Charnay's negatives, located at the Musée du quai Branly in France, were also examined. Most of the images from these negatives correspond to prints within *American Cities and Ruins*. The retouching and image manipulation present within the negatives was fundamental in understanding many of the characteristics observed in the final positive prints.

Even after examining these albums, questions related to the printing and editioning still existed. Attempting to answer them allowed for some clarifications of the production and distribution of photographs in Mexico at this period in time.

### MEXICAN PHOTOGRAPHIC ALBUM

*Mexican Photographic Album* contains images of buildings and sites in Mexico City and surroundings. The images were sold individually with an accompanying text by Manuel Orozco y Berra, a Mexican friend of Charnay. The photographs were advertised as for purchase in an 1858 newspaper, *La Sociedad*, and bear the editorial mark of Julio Michaud. As the images were sold individually extant albums, bound and unbound, are actually compendiums of images selected and purchased by often unknown compilers. *La Sociedad* advertised twenty four photographs for sale: there is no album containing all of the photographs listed in *La Sociedad*.

Each of the four copies examined is different in content, binding style (if bound), image sequence and type of accompanying text. It was found that all of the photographs in all copies of the *Mexican Photographic Album* are salted paper prints with an unidentified coating: the coating is easily observed with the naked eye.

It was hypothesized that if a copy containing all of the images existed, it would be the album that Charnay presented to Emperor Napoleon III, at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF). When this copy was compared with the other versions, it was found that it was lacking four images. Instead it contained four prints from Charnay's trip through Canada and two panoramic photograph, one of Mexico City and the other of Puebla.

The panoramic photograph of the city of Puebla does not exist elsewhere, and there is only one other known version of the Mexico City panorama, which is held by the Mapoteca Orozco y Berra in Mexico. The rarity of these prints raises new questions. Why is there only one panoramic print of Puebla? Why are there only two copies of the Mexico City panorama, each of which is printed, mounted, and finished differently? Regarding the Mexico City panorama, it is hypothesized that the Orozco y Berra print was made as a test sample before correctly printing and mounting the panorama for the imperial BnF copy, which is a better print, with editing and retouching not present in the Orozco y Berra version.

It was found that the album was published in two different variation, though it is unknown if both were published simultaneously or sequentially.



Fig. 1. A carelessly applied surface coating visible on No. 2. *La Catedral de Mexico*, *Mexican Photographic Album* New York Public Library, MFZ (Charnay) 11-7854.

In the first variation, the album name, plate number and title, Charnay's image credit, and the editor's name and address are printed on each photograph's secondary support (fig. 2.). The second variation lacks this identifying information. The photographs also have rounded corners, some of which have handwritten graphite inscriptions referencing the locations pictured.

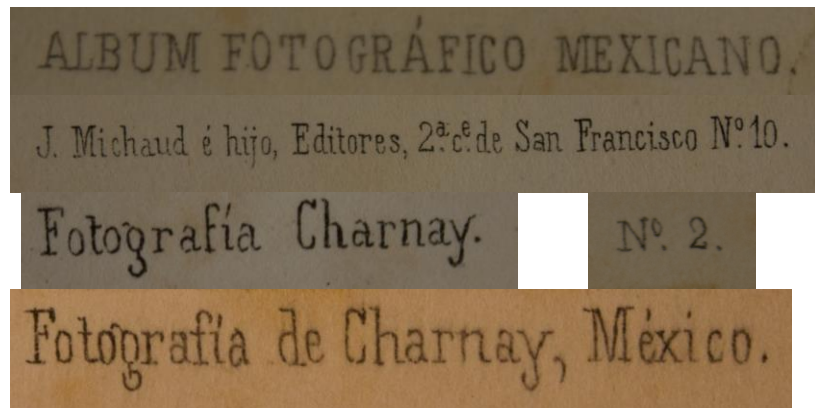


Fig. 2. Identifying information from one published variant of the *Mexican Photographic Album*

The different characteristics of the two sets of prints could be related to the location the prints were sold. La Sociedad had announced that Charnay's photographs could be purchased at two locations in Mexico City: Charnay's studio and the studio of Julio Michaud & Son. Perhaps the photographs were printed as well as distributed by both studios? Perhaps there was a third, unknown printer or distributor in France?

The imperial BnF *Mexican Photographic Album* was historically thought to have been printed in France. However, after careful examination of its printing characteristics, it is clear that some of the prints were actually created in Mexico.

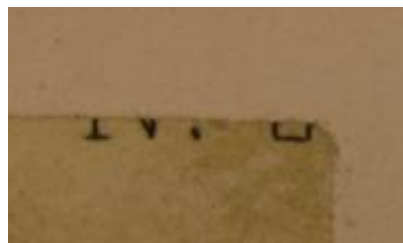


Fig. 3. *Iglesia de la Santísima*, *Mexican Photographic Album*, overall (left) and detail (above) Bibliothèque nationale de France, FRBNF3400934 [8]

There are letterpress marks from the inscription “ALBUM FOTOGRAFICO MEXICANO” on the left edge of the print *Iglesia de la Santísima* (fig. 3). This inscription was typically used by Julio Michaud and is found printed at the upper left of secondary supports of photographs sold by his establishment in Mexico City. Also, at the upper right corner of the print is a remnant of the printed plate number, also applied to prints created in Mexico City.

*Puerta Lateral de San Francisco* also has the faint ink transfer of “EDITORES SEGUNDA CALLE DE SAN FRANCISCO” (see figure 2 for images of the stamped labels, figure 4 for images of ink transfer onto other pages), from being placed into a stack of freshly inked plates. Again, this phrase corresponds to Michaud's studio address in Mexico City. It is also possible to read the word “Mexico” on the surface of the same photograph, once again transferred from some other print with a freshly inked stamp.

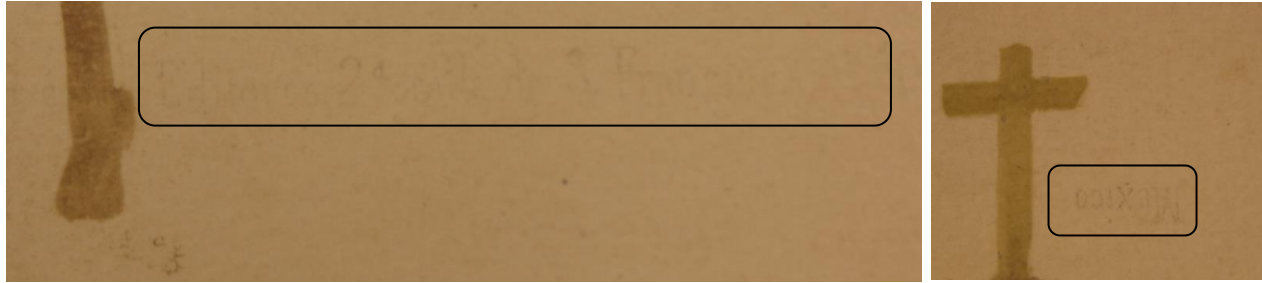


Fig. 4. Details of transferred ink (in rectangles) from *Puerta Lateral de San Francisco, Mexican Photographic Album*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, FRBNF34009340 [13]

These traces of Julio Michaud's studio practice in some of the photographs in the imperial BnF album indicates that these prints, and perhaps the entirety of the album, was printed by Michaud in Mexico and not by a French studio.

### AMERICAN CITIES AND RUINS

*American Cities and Ruins* contains images of pre-Columbian buildings, taken during Charnay's explorations in Mexico. It contains forty-nine photographs of the sites at Mitla, Palenque, Chichen Itza, Uxmal, and Izamal, as well as *Arbre de Santa-Maria del Tule* and *Piedra del sol (Calendrier aztèque)*. *Piedra del sol* is also part of Mexican Photographic Album.

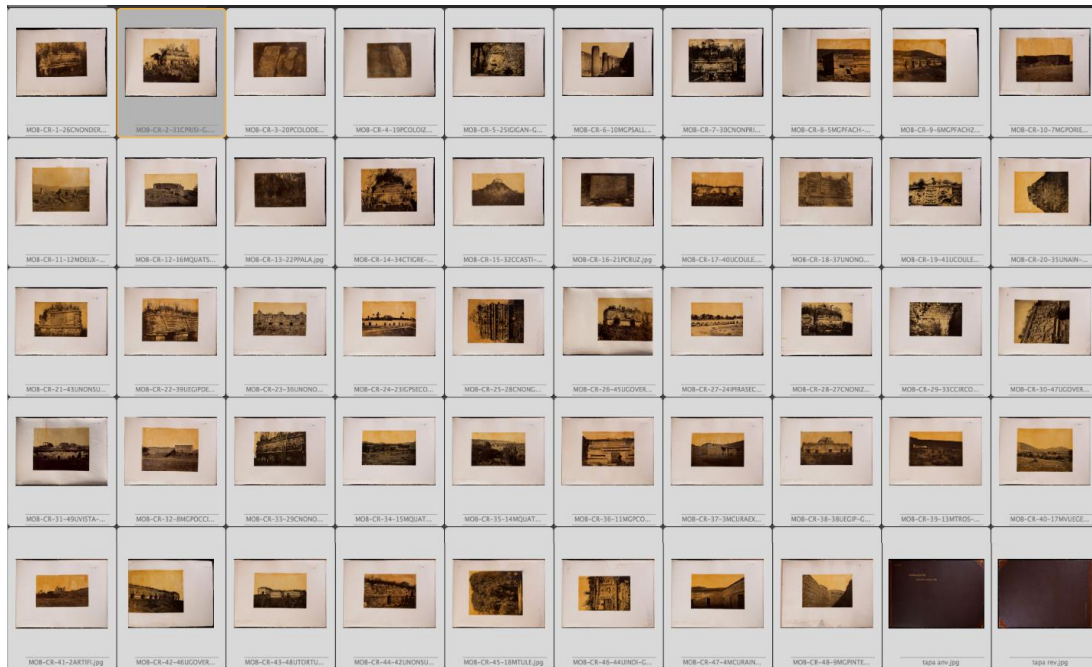


Fig. 5. Slide images of *American Cities and Ruins*, Mapoteca Orozco y Berra, México

Unlike *Mexican Photographic Album*, which consists of salted paper prints, *American Cities and Ruins* was made using albumen print. Again, there were two published variations: prints without publisher's information and a clearly commercial version, printed by Gide with a title page and introductory text by Viollete-Le-Duc.

As with *Mexican Photographic Album*, the multiple versions of *American Cities and Ruins* are slightly different.

Two versions of *Grand palais à Mitla, façade orientale* exist: one in which a tree was not retouched, and one in which the same tree is retouched (fig. 6).

Charnay's signature is present in only three prints: *Grand palais, à Mitla, façade orientale*, and *Palais des nonnes, à Chichen-Itza, façade principale*, both of which belong to the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, and *La prison à Chichen Itza* at the Mapoteca Orozco y Berra.



Fig. 6. Detail in normal light on a black backing (left) and transmitted light (right), *Grand palais à Mitla, façade orientale*, *American Cities and Ruins*, Musée du quai Branly, PV0023014

While it was originally thought that the signatures were part of the negatives, the lack of a signature on the majority of prints suggests otherwise. It is now hypothesized that it was added to the image during printing by inserting a signed piece of tracing paper into the printing frame during the exposure. As all of the signatures are slightly different, the same signed tracing paper was not used to create all of them.

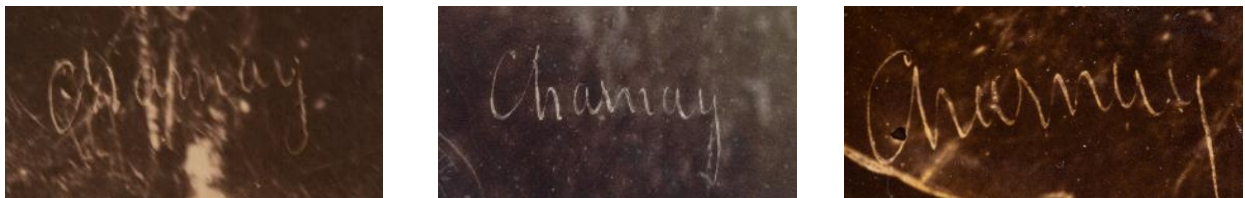


Fig. 7. Details of Charnay's signatures from *American Cities and Ruins*: *Palais des nonnes, à Chichen-Itza, façade principale* (left), Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris, FOL G 351 INV 494 RES; *Grand palais, à Mitla, façade orientale*, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève (center,) Paris, FOL G 351 INV 494 RES; *La prison, à Chichen-Itza* (right), Mapoteca Orozco y Berra, Mexico City, L3-A3-06 [31]

There are irregularities throughout the albums that become evident once the negatives are examined. *Arbre de Santa-Maria del Tule* is printed from one of two different negatives. Other negatives, such as *Figure gigantesque, à Izamal; au bas de la seconde pyramide*, were badly damaged. By the time Gide came to print the commercial album, damage to this negative was so extensive that he was forced to print it not as an albumen photograph, but as a photolithograph.

Observations of historic damage in the negatives as related to the prints, as made by Musée du quai Branly curator and head of the photographic collections Christine Barthe, may enable the

development of a printing chronology for certain prints. Tracking the damage to the negative that was captured by the prints, it is possible to determine the printing sequence for *Figure gigantesque, à Izamal; au bas de la seconde pyramide*. Taking this into consideration, it appears that the Orozco y Berra print is the earlier of the many variants.

These comparisons not only highlighted the individualities of each object, but have brought new questions to light: Why are there two different prints of *Grand palais, à Mitla, façade orientale*? Which one is the earlier print? Why are only a few copies signed? Are all variations of this album printed in France? Who published the first non-commercial prints?

Charnay arrived in Mexico already a knowledgeable photographer. In his notebooks he mentions the difficulties and vicissitudes of using collodion wet glass plate negatives. The plates examined show evidence of Charnay's skill with this complex process and of the difficulties he had using it in Mexico's climate: the plates had a very thin collodion layer, though with many surface imperfections.

Charnay's negatives also show his interest in creating high quality images, showing an intention that goes beyond simply documenting the architecture of a location. This is evident in the retouching, hiding any imperfections in the negatives. Skylines were blacked out with paper or black paint, both of which prevented any light from passing through the negative (fig. 8). Transitions between blacked out areas and unobscured portions of the negatives were made by applying red paint, which partially blocks the light, and yellow paint, which blocks only enough light to soften the edges of a transition (fig. 9).

The albumen prints found in *American Cities and Ruins* exhibit different manufacturing techniques. The binder was either applied by floating the paper onto the albumen solution or through brush application. Some prints have the thick, glossy albumen layer that double-coating



Fig. 8. Black paper masking over the sky of *Panorama de México en quatre chichés* detail, Musée du quai Branly, PV0023015



Fig. 9. Detail showing red and yellow paint applied as masking to the glass side of the negative, *Palais du gouverneur, à Uxmal; maison des tortues*, Musée du quai Branly PV0024645



will provide while others have bubbles or brush strokes visible in the surfaces. Primary paper support thicknesses varied, as did the type of secondary supports. Characterization of Variations of *American Cities and Ruins*:

#### Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Imperial Presentation Album

The imperial BnF album contains albumen prints with very little trimming, which show a significant quantity of the imperfections often occurring along the outer edges of a glass plate negative. In this case, the imperfections have been expertly retouched. The image tonality and excellent condition indicate that the prints are probably gold toned. All photographs are mounted onto secondary supports with brief captions handwritten in French. The album is also unbound.

A lesser degree of retouching to the negatives suggests that the album is an early version. The skies are not retouched, and bushes and weeds pictured at the archaeological sites are not eliminated from the images. The image of *Grand palais, à Mitla, façade orientale* also has a complete tree. In all other versions excepting the one at Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève the tree has been removed.

#### Mapoteca Orozco y Berra Album

The Mapoteca Orozco y Berra album contains albumen prints, all of which are adhered to thick cotton paper with Spanish captions written in ink. The tree has been removed from the image *Grand palais, à Mitla, façade orientale* and most prints have had their skies modified to print blank. Some of the photographs appear to be printed at the same time as the BnF imperial album, though the *Figure gigantesque, à Izamal; au bas de la seconde pyramide* was likely printed earlier, as the image has evidence that the negative had a smaller fracture during this printing than when it was printed for the BnF album. One photograph in this album is signed by Charnay.

#### Gide's Commercially Printed Albums

The commercial versions printed by Gide are alike, as expected for a commercial production. All of them have identifying information printed onto a label adhered to the secondary supports. *Piedra del sol (Calendrier aztèque)* and the *Figure gigantesque, à Izamal; au bas de la seconde pyramide* are photolithographs, though the rest of the images are albumen prints. The Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève and New York Public Library albums both contain forty-nine images. Two photographs from the album at Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève have Charnay's signature and *Grand palais, à Mitla, façade orientale* is not retouched.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The examination of Charnay's photographic production in Mexico answered some technical and material questions about his work, and allowed for a new interpretation of an album that exists

are multiple different variations, despite the copies having been produced at roughly the same point in time.

New questions relating to the intent of the album's production have arisen. Charnay was not the only individual involved in the production of *Mexican Photographic Album* or *American Cities and Ruins*. There is an argument for the idea of "artist's intent" to expand to include the photographer, printer, editor, publisher, compiler, etc.

What economic, technological, and social aspects influence the different productions of *Mexican Photographic Album* and *American Cities and Ruins*? Do Charnay's images show evidence of tensions between the occupying colonial power and the pre-Columbian?

Why did Orozco y Berra, who was a friend of Charnay, have the sample print of the Mexico City panorama? He likely knew that the other, finished copy was intended for presentation to Emperor Napoleon III. As the holdings of the Mapoteca Orozco y Berra is built upon the collection of Orozco y Berra, why doesn't it contain a copy of *Mexican Photographic Album*?

The information gathered during this project has been compiled into a database. The authors would like to share the database with colleagues, inviting collaboration, to ultimately enable a better understanding of the many variations of these magnificent publications.

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