

DISCOVERY ALBERT LEVY

Abstract

The current article will introduce Albert Levy's photographic work. Despite this American photographer has his work in the most important museums, he is quite an unknown photographer for the specialists on the history of photography.

Levy's work is mainly focused on architectural photography and this is the reason why his work is in architectural museums or public libraries. This may explain why his work is quite hidden in the collections of these places. His magnificent photos are very detailed in albums with a specific format where architects, owners and places are described in the index. He made a wide number of photos, but we have few nowadays due to the price of these photo-albums in the 1880's and because there was a reduced number of copies of them.

Albert Levy

The George Eastman House has one of the best photographic databases of the world. There we can read only little information about Albert Levy. However, this information is not completely correct, as the United States census for 1880's demonstrates that he is French.

Name: Albert Levy

Nationality: United States (*incorrect: French*)

Active c. 1870s-1890s => New York 1876s & Paris, France 1880s-1890s.

Place of birth: New York ?

There we can also find several museums which are said to have work by Albert Levy:

Metropolitan Museum, Boston Public Library, George Eastman House and Avery Architectural and fine arts Library.

We can read more information about Albert Levy in the book "Photography and the American Scene. A social history (1939-1889)" by Robert Taft. This book identifies Albert Levy as "Albert Levy of New York, who began the manufacture of gelatin dry plates in 1878".

The first album I found by Albert Levy was "L'Architecture Americaine. 2^{eme} serie". This has 40 24x20cm album photos of houses in New York, Boston, Chicago and Albany. This album belongs to a serie of three which has been deeply studied in the book "American Victorian Architecture" by Arnold Lewis and Keith Morgan. The photos are described in the book as "unusually fine photographs".

The three series of L'Architecture Americaine are structured as follows:

- .-First serie: Public Buildings
- .-Second serie: Private Urban Residences
- .-Third serie: Suburban Homes

Each serie contains contains 40 albums of 24x20 cm and an index detailing the name of the architect of each house and the owner. None of the photos has a blindstamp neither a signature with the name of the photographer in the index.

Each of the photos shows very different aspects of the buildings: front, details, inside and location in the street as if they were human beings. The photo of the building is as a portrait of a person with the disadvantage that this giant doesn't smile or pose. However, Levy is able to find the best angle to take the beauty of these "huge persons". From the information I got reading "American Victorian Architecture", I found that this work by Levy is also in the Library of Congress, series 2nd and 3rd, and they are looking for the 1st serie.

The way Levy work with a building is similar to the way a painter draws still life. It is show "as is", the building is the main part of the photo and people is just a small part completing the whole picture.

In his photos Levy shows the reality of the best architectural buildings of those ages. He shows the time when the houses were being built, those buildings that will last for decades. The criteria for selecting the buildings consists on choosing the best artists (architects) and richest owners (like the Twin Houses of Vanderbilt, the richest man in the world those days). This makes his work different from others who took pictures of old monuments only.

But his work is not only related to these 120 photos (40x3), but with the collection know as "Albert Levy's Photographic Series of Modern American Architecture". These series of album contain 24-30 photos each. This means that there are at least 1000 photos made (most of them) between 1870 and 1880 because there is documented a 36th serie. So, here we have one of the earliest and biggest photographic serie in America's history. Just to compare, the Mission Heliographique had 259 photos.

There are identified and located the following albums of these series:

- .-Albert Levy's Photographic Series of Modern American Architecture: First Series: Private City Dwellings.
- .-Albert Levy's Photographic Series of Modern American Architecture: Second Series: Country Dwellings.
- .-Albert Levy's Photographic Series of Modern American Architecture: Fifth Series: Messrs. Vanderbilt's Mansions.
- .-Albert Levy's Photographic Series of Modern American Architecture: Ninth Series; Street Fronts.
- .-Albert Levy's Photographic Series of Modern American Architecture: Tenth Series: Sea Shore Cottages and Country Houses.
- .-Albert Levy's Photographic Series of Modern American Architecture: Twelfth Series: Modern Street Architecture of Berlin, Street Fronts and Apartment Houses.
- .-Albert Levy's Photographic Series of Modern American Architecture: Sixteenth Series: American Private City Dwellings.
- .-Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series: Thirty-Fifth Series, Sea Shore Cottages And Country Houses, Bar Harbor, Mount Desert, Maine : Lévy, Albert 1895
- .-Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series: Lévy, Albert 1895
- .-Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series: Thirty-Sixth Series, Sea-Shore Cottages, Etc., Newport, R.I., And Long Branch, N.J : Lévy, Albert 1895

- .-Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series: Street Fronts, Stores, Office Buildings, Etc: Lévy, Albert c1884
- .-Albert Levy's Photographic Series of Modern American Architecture. : Lévy, Albert 1883

The museums which own these albums are the CCA (Centre Canadien d'Architecture) and the Art Institute of Chicago in its Halic (Historic Architecture and Landscape Image Collection) archive. As we can see, the series are located in architectural museums (CCA) or in the architectural sections of big museums (Art Institute).

Here we have to highlight the fact that we can see 97 samples of Albert Levy's photos in the Art Institute in the link <http://rbarchives.artic.edu/fmi/iwp/cgi?-db=newHALIC&-loadframes>.

Having a deep look into the photos of the Halic archive we find that several photos of "L'Architecture Americaine" belong also to these series. This means that we are in the position to suppose that L'Architecture Americaine is a selection of the best of Levy's photos to present his work in Europe. This was made by Albert Levy himself or maybe the French editor Andre, Daly fils & Cie. Anyway, this demonstrates that the author of L'Architecture Americaine is Albert Levy, which is an important fact remembering that his signature was not in the album.

Having another look into the Halic archive we can classify these compilations the following way:

.-Public Buildings.

Wall Street New York. N° 79 and 80 in the Halic
Church of the Covenant. N° 14 in the Halic

.-Warehouses and commerce

The Casino New port. N° 83 de la Halic
Bradstreet Merchantile agency Boston N° 12 in the Halic
Store Buildings Boston. N° 18 and 19 in the Halic

.-Private urban residences

Vanderbilt Residence. N° 76 in the Halic
Appleton Thomas G. Residence, Rhode Island. N° 81 in the Halic

.-Suburban residences

Stables massachussets. N° 19 in the Halic
Residences Boston. N° 28 y 29 in the Halic

Levy is one of the first photographers that clearly shows, in a systematic way, new commerce and skyscrapers from the incoming industrial society that was growing in the latest XIX.

His systematic photographic labour is as detailed and wide as the one done by Bernd and Hilla Becher 100 years after. They documented, in black and white, the history and development of industrial buildings in Europe and the United States, but Levy is the pioneer of these kind of photographic collections in the United States.

In all his photos, people are in a secondary part of the scene (despite few exceptions), and they appear in more or less the 20% of the total. Normally we can see policemen or pedestrians. In the few occasions where people is a key part of the scene (like in the second serie of "L'Architecture Americaine"), we can find that workers of the house are as much important as the building itself. Some times the person is at the window looking nowhere reminding us of some pictures by Edward Hopper (n° 11 of the 2^{eme}

serie de L'Architecture Americaine). It is worth to mention, as one off, the photo n°47 of the Halic archive, "Broadway and Exchange place", which remind us of "La rue" of Balthus, where people is standing at both sides of the street waiting for something unknown to happen.

Despite all the facts described above regarding quality and quantity of photos, L'Architecture Americaine and the Photographic series are not the only works made by Albert Levy.

Actually, he had two studies opened at the same time in the United States and Paris as it demonstrates the catalogue that we can find in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF):

"Catalogue de photographies d'architecture européenne & américaine ancienne et moderne...", Albert Lévy, 19 rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin, Paris ; 34 1/ 2 Pine Street, New York, 1887.

This catalogue has 2500 titles.

In those ages, few photographers had two studies at the same time at both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. We could mention Alphonse Liebert, but he didn't have such a big number of titles as in the catalogue described above.

Other albums by Levy that show his work in Europe are:

.-"Recueil photographique des nouvelles habitations pittoresques de France urbaines et rurales en pierre, brique, bois, ...". (Base Joconde France)

It has three series of 36 album photos each. The second serie has the title "Villas et Chalet pittoresques", the index describes the place and architect and also indicates "Photographies par A.Levy".

.-Levy, Albert. Monmory, Felix.: Nouvelles Maisons à Loyer et Hôtels Particuliers à Paris, Comprenant Vues d'Ensemble, Plans et Détails.

Paris. 1895. 2 vols. Folio. pp. 1. Volume 1 contains 28 photographic images & 22 plans; volume 2 contains 26 images & 24 plans. Green morocco-backed boards, gilt titles on spine, marbled end-papers. Photographies par A. Levy written in the index.

Apart from this, the BNF also has several cyanotypes.

In Europe, the only complete copy of the three series of "L'Architecture Americaine" can be found at Architektur Sammlung of the Technische Hochschule, in Munich.

We can also find Levy's photos with architectural buildings from England, as we see in the CCA:

.-Portfolio of views of English Cottages on the South Coast of England, at Birchington, Margate, Hastings, and various other towns. There it is written "Albert Levy photographe". Librairie de l'architecture et des arts industriels Eugene Bigot. 22 rue de La tour d'auvergne 22 Paris.

Finally, we have to highlight one of the last findings on Albert Levy's life: his nationality is given as French by the Boston Public Library, that references this information to the New York Passenger lists (1820-1957). He arrived to New York on

1873. According to the United States census for 1880 his national origin is also given as French and listed as bookseller at 4th Bond Street in New York City.

So we can say that we are in front of a French photographer that collected the best of American architecture (New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore...) and also Europe.

His work is not very well known and the aim of this article is to present and show part of his important photographic merits that, due to its size and quality, will surprise many people. Just the “Albert Levy’s Photographic series” would deserve a deep study by historians and specialists on XIX century photography because of its rareness, quality, size and the history recorded.

A.A.R.