

A personal view on Albert Levy's photographs

Charles Nègre claimed that “when visiting an architectural site he would take three kinds of photographs: for the architect, a general view "with the aspect and precision of a geometric elevation"; for the sculptor, close-up views of the most interesting details; and for the painter, a picturesque view capturing the "imposing effect" and "poetic charm" of the monument”.

Albert Levy's photos can be put in this third classification described by Charles Nègre. Levy's vision equals a painter's view that tries to find the best angle or the most astonishing side of the object in the picture.

A building, mainly an urban building, is one of the most difficult subjects a photographer can choose. Their lack of expressivity, without any pose, makes the “person in the portrait” very hard to be photographed.

There is also the disadvantage of the distance needed to take the picture which is impossible to find sometimes in urban residences. The photographer has to find the best angle to show the beauty of the building. He is trying to find a vision from the corner to get the whole picture, sometimes with a low angle, and in other occasions it is necessary to take the picture from above to capture the picture and its surroundings.

On the other hand, Levy's artwork is somehow hidden by the importance of the building being photographed which overcomes the labour done by Albert Levy, as is the picture itself. The consequence of this is that these photographers, their pictures, were included in libraries and museums of architecture. They had to wait until the XX century when their work was rescued from those collections and shown to the public in general.

Somehow, this is what happened to Albert Levy, as he “disappeared” in these places, and most of his work can be found in architecture museums where we should highlight (because of the quantity of photos), the Centre Canadien d'Architecture (CCA) and the Art Institute of Chicago. Both museums gather the labour and studies of architecture done by Albert Levy. The CCA is a museum dedicated to this, and the Art Institute keeps Levy in his HALIC (Historic Architecture and Landscape image collection) Ryerson and Burnham archives.

Architecture was chosen as the main subject, for its historic labour, by the governments. The Missions Héliographiques, assigning regions to the pioneer photographers chosen by the Historic Monuments Commission. Charles Marville was commissioned to record the huge demolition work carried out under Baron Haussmann in his urban renewal scheme for the city of Paris.

Nevertheless, some photographers of the XIX century also became editors and booksellers of their own and others work. A well know example is Louis Désiré Blanquart-Evrard, who established in 1851-1852 a printing and marketing establishment to produce books, albums, and individual prints that could be ordered from a catalogue, which tended to repress idiosyncratic approaches in order to attract a variety of buyers.

1880's United States census shows that Albert Levy's main activity was bookseller, so he sold several types of editions from his own work.

Another characteristic of Albert Levy's artwork is the way he developed his photographic albums or thematic series. These series are another reason why there is so little acknowledge of such a high quality artwork. The albums were mainly focused to a very

special audience, new millionaires that could see their economic power and good taste in quite expensive photographic albums.

However, on Levy's own words, as we read at the beginning of his catalogue, his photos were supposed to be "cheap" for the big audience:

« Je réclame pour ma collection de photographies, aujourd'hui composée de plus de 2500 sujets différents, et qui s'augmentera progressivement :

1° La bon choix des sujets ;

2° La qualité et la finesse des détail ;

3° Une conservation indéfinie ;

4° L'uniformité de grandeur

5° Le prix modéré »

We have to keep in mind that Albert Levy never signed his photos, as the never had a stamp or name printed or embossed (at least, as far as we have researched before 1887. After these days, the Bibliotheque Nationale de France (BNF) confirmed that he signed on the back of the photos). This means that his work became anonymous when the album is split and the photos are spread in several locations. Levy shows his signature, not all the times, in the index of each album, where the name, location, owner and architect are usually described too.

The only way to identify each of the photos would be comparing the building in the photo and the number of the photo from the catalogue of the BNF. This would only be possible for photos earlier than 1887, but he was active until 1905.

This taste is another characteristic of the photos which show the new architects designing impressive buildings for these new rich men. Some of these buildings clearly show the influence of the École de Beaux Arts of Paris, especially on the Eastern Coast of the United States.

The Photographic Series done by Albert Levy between 1873 and 1885 are one of the first (and for sure one of the most extensive) collection of the cities of the United States, mainly New York.

Possibly, because being born in France, Levy was the introducer of these series in the United States, as these already existed before in Europe. He completed these European series with buildings of the United States in a similar way Cesar Daly developed his architecture books.

The labour of Levy is "hidden" behind the object in the picture. If the one looking at the photo is an architect or historian, he will see the building and he will tell us its story. But, if the one having a look is a photography collector or critic he will realize that he is in front of a piece of art. From each photo we know, as I said before, all the important data: place, owner and architect.

It is also important to say that Levy was one of the few French photographers to have to studies opened at the same time at both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (Alphonse Liebert was one of the others).

Spain, September 2007

Presentation of several artwork by Albert Levy

(Note: when referring to the number of a photo in the [HALIC](#) collection, just do a search for “Levy” and so the results will be classified according to these numbers).

Photos with people

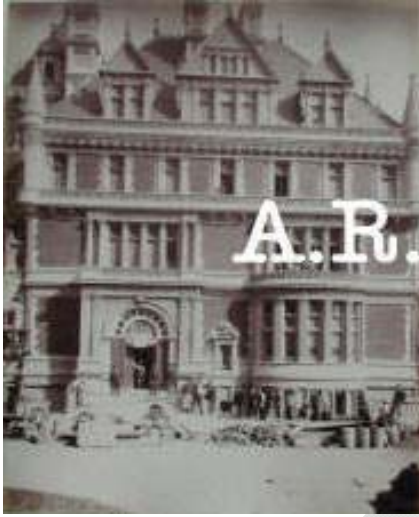
- In photo **number 3** of the ones we can see in the HALIC archive (view from across the street, with a man and boy standing in front; from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 16, No. 60), we find a man and a boy posing in front of the camera, which is very hard to find in Albert Levy's pictures.
- Chicago (from L'Architecture Americaine). A carriage and a man.



In this picture we can also see, as an additional object two persons on the left hand side and another boy on the right. Number 35 of the HALIC collection (view from across the street with man at left of image leaning on fence and child at right; from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 2, No. 184).

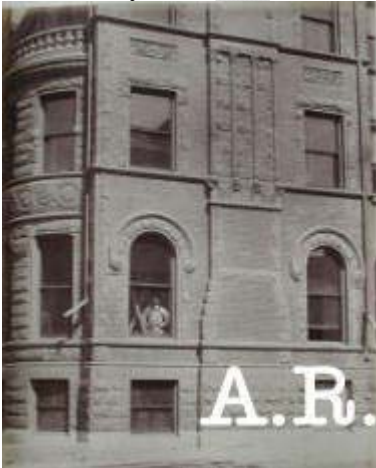
- **Number 44** of the HALIC archive. View from across the street, with children and bicycles at the sidewalk; AIC #36.
- **Picture number 51** of the HALIC (view south, with people on stairs; from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 16, No. 273)

- M. Vanderbilt residence with workers (from L'Architecture Americaine).



Edward Hopper like photos.

- **Number 8** of the HALIC collection (from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 2, No. 180)
- **Number 29** of the HALIC archive (front; from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 2, No. 204; demolished).
- **Number 30** of the HALIC archive, where two humble houses make a charming Picture (front exterior of house on left and perspective view of side of house on right; from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 2, No. 178)
- A person inside a building looking to the outside is very characteristic of Hopper works. We highlight this picture from L'Architecture Americaine (number 11), which may be the most similar one to a Hopper picture.



High Angles.

- Bradstreet Merchantile Agency- view from above street level. **Number 12** of the HALIC archive. Levy tries to find a high angle to capture this impressive mercantile building.
- The same happens with picture **number 13** (Bryant and Stratton Schools). This oblique and high angle lets Levy capture the whole building.

Low angles

- In many occasions, work with this angle along with an oblique perspective allows the photographer to take the whole building.



From Villas et Chalets pittoresques

Views of several buildings.

- Store Building -Babcock, John B., and Co. Building, **number 92** of the HALIC archive. A high point of view allows Levy to include also more buildings as well as the streets that give deepness to the picture.
- **Number 90** of the HALIC archive. It includes a building under construction and also a person (from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 16, No. 63)
- View from Beekman St. **Number 71** of the HALIC archive.

A special photograph

- **Number 47** of the HALIC archive. Broadway and Exchange Place. In this photo, the people in it are as important as the buildings themselves, which is quite rare in Levy's work. It reminds us of painter Balthus pictures because of the mystery in the way the people pose who seem to be waiting for something to happen.

Some of the photos from L'Architecture Americaine also belonging to the Albert Levy's architectural photographic series.

Some of the photos that can be found at the HALIC collection in Internet from the photographic series are also part of L'Architecture Americaine album. This makes us think that "L'Architecture Americaine is a selection of the Photographic series.

Find below few examples:

- **Number 56** of the HALIC archive. View from across the corner, with no number or cross-street name visible; from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 16, No. 71.
- **Number 76** of the HALIC archive. south facade; from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 16, No. 74.
From L'Architecture Americaine we read: Vanderbilt, William Henry, Residence Twin houses.
- **Number 73** of the HALIC archive. Perspective view from across the street; from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 16, No. 78
- **Number 72** of the HALIC archive. Perspective view of Tilden and neighboring houses, with man at window of house on right; from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 16, No. 274
- **Number 61** of the HALIC archive. View from across the street during construction; from Albert Levy's Architectural Photographic Series, Series 16, No. 271