

CRITIC'S PICK

An exquisite show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art recalls travel before digital maps, when photography was the hottest of new media.

By **Jason Farago**

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Girault de Prangey's image of the Roman Forum, viewed from the Palatine Hill in 1842.
Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin

Can you even remember a time before Google Image Search and Street View, before we all had instant access to far-flung sites like the Parthenon, the Dome of the Rock, a stretch of empty highway in the Australian outback? The whole inhabited world has now been pictured and cataloged, and we have so fully embraced the archive that it feels like an extension of our collective mind. In the infinite scroll of the search results page you can forget that once not every place was visible. Someone, in every place, had to take the first photograph.

In dozens of cases, that first photographer was Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey (1804-1892), a Frenchman of astonishing artistic ambition and considerable tech savvy. In 1842, three years after his countryman Louis Daguerre unveiled the world's first practical camera, Girault set out on an epic adventure across Europe and into the Middle East, lugging custom photographic equipment that weighed more than a hundred pounds. He returned with over a thousand photographic plates, including the first surviving daguerreotypes made in Greece, Egypt, Anatolia, Palestine and Syria.

Girault de Prangey took this self-portrait at his villa outside Langres in northeastern France. Bibliothèque Nationale de France

More than 120 of them are on view in “Monumental Journey: The Daguerreotypes of Girault de Prangey,” a buffed jewel of an exhibition now open at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“Monumental Journey,” organized with the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and curated by Stephen C. Pinson, of the Met’s department of photographs, is the capstone of a strong season of early photography in New York. (Other highlights include Anna Atkins’s botanical blueprints, at the New York Public Library through Feb. 17; and the groundbreaking “Posing Modernity,” at Columbia University through Feb. 10, which includes photographs of 19th-century black Parisians.)

Bibliothèque Nationale de France

National Collection of Qatar

via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Bibliothèque Nationale de France

CAIRO

Ayoucha, 1842-43

GIRAULT WAS AN ARISTOCRAT FROM A CONSERVATIVE STRETCH OF NORTHEAST FRANCE, AND HE RELIED ON A TIDY INHERITANCE TO PAY FOR HIS TRAVELS. ALONG WITH HIS EFFORTS TO CAPTURE AND SYSTEMATIZE THE WORLD'S MONUMENTS — AN ENDEAVOR WITH ITS OWN COLONIAL BAGGAGE — HE ALSO MADE IMAGES OF SAILORS, PORTERS, HORSE DRIVERS AND WOMEN LIKE THIS EGYPTIAN: UNVEILED, SMOKING A HOOKAH, AND LOOKING STRAIGHT FORWARD. THE COLONIAL GAZE FINDS WHAT IT WANTS, AND THE MET SHOW'S MOTTLED, SPECTRAL IMAGES OF CAMELS AND PALM TREES REVEAL HOW GIRAULT INDULGED FRENCH FANCIES OF THE EAST. BUT BY PICTURING THIS WORLD VIA DAGUERREOTYPE, GIRAULT ALSO INSISTED THAT IT WAS NOT A TIMELESS PLACE, OUTSIDE OF HISTORY. IT WAS AS REAL AS PARIS, AND PICARESQUE FANTASIES WERE HARDER TO MAINTAIN IN FRONT OF THE LENS.

CONSTANTINOPLE

Seraglio, 1843

Bibliothèque Nationale de France

French travelers in the late 1830s and 1840s would have kept up with what the newspapers called “the Oriental question” — the international struggle set off by Muhammad Ali, an Ottoman army officer who took control of Egypt and threatened to sack the imperial capital of Constantinople. This first-ever daguerreotype of the city pictures the same sights that tourists in today’s Istanbul glide past with their camera phone’s panorama function: the tiered Blue Mosque on the left, the baroque Nuruosmaniye Mosque at center, the imposing Hagia Sophia at right, and the radiant Bosphorus stretching along the back. Like us, Girault was using the sweep and miniaturization of the panorama to document a roisterous city, where past beauties framed contemporary political troubles.

JERUSALEM

Portal, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, 1844

via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Girault made the first known photos of Jerusalem, which the Ottomans had only retaken from Muhammad Ali a few years before. He failed to gain admission to several of the holiest Muslim sites, but at the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, venerated by Christians as the site of Jesus’s burial and resurrection, he captured the grooved arches and ornate Byzantine columns of the two entranceways — one of which was, and remains bricked shut. This is one of the show’s only photographs to include passers-by, who inscribe the image into the reality of the 1840s. At right is a veiled parishioner, blurred, by the camera’s long exposure time, into a phantasm.

ALEPPO, SYRIA

Viewed From the Antioch Gate, 1844

Bibliothèque Nationale de France

The eastern extreme of Girault's journey was booming, cosmopolitan Aleppo, where he made this daguerreotype of its ancient ramparts; poking out at top center is the minaret of the Great Mosque. After his death the images languished in the custom wooden boxes he designed, passed into the hands of a distant relative, and only gained wide attention when they came up for sale in 2003. As the world's oldest photographic archive, Girault's travel pictures offer a tantalizingly familiar mapping of the world through images, and their modernity pierces sharpest when they picture places razed or renovated in the intervening decades. Some, like this one, picture sites destroyed even more recently. In 2013, during the Syrian army's horrific onslaught of rebel-held Aleppo, the minaret crumbled into powder.

MONUMENTAL JOURNEY: THE DAGUERREOTYPES OF GIRAULT DE PRANGEY

Through May 12 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Manhattan; 212-535-7710, metmuseum.org.

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SLIDE SHOW

Selections From 'Photographers of Genius at the Getty' May 7, 2004

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