

CORKIN GALLERY

Édouard Baldus

French, 1813 – 1889

In 1838, Édouard Baldus studied painting in Paris, shortly before Louis Daguerre first showed his photographic images. The self-taught Baldus worked outside the École des Beaux-Arts and atelier system, but submitted work to the annual Salons of painting and sculpture. As a painter he met with little success, but when Baldus abandoned the easel and took up the camera he created a body of photographs now considered early masterpieces. In 1851 the Commission des Monuments Historiques cited Baldus as one of the five best architectural photographers and he was commissioned to record the monuments of France for what became known as the Mission Héliographique.

By 1855, Baldus and his pictures drew much public attention and critical notice at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. That same year, Baron James de Rothschild commissioned Baldus to produce an album of the highest quality. Showing views along the rail route from Paris to Boulogne-sur-Mer, the album was intended as a gift for Queen Victoria, a souvenir of her passage on the line during her state visit to Paris. The beautifully composed and richly printed photographs of cathedrals, towns, and railroad installations included in the album are among his finest.

Baldus not only documented the modernization of Paris but also travelled widely through France recording modernity and new construction, including new railways and aqueducts, as well as the building of the new Louvre. His photographs are inextricably linked to the principal ideas of his age. Beginning with the Mission Héliographique, his views of historic monuments presented the vestiges of the past with unromanticized clarity for the architect, archaeologist, historian, and armchair traveler. Baldus' photographs of the construction of the New Louvre celebrated the glory of the Second Empire and created an art of the archive. And his presentation of a landscape transformed by modern engineering confidently espoused a belief in technological progress.