Article

Egyptian postcolonial territory on behalf of royalty: A photographic survey by Fred Boissonnas 1929-1932

SOHIER, Estelle

Abstract

Although Egypt had been photographed in the tiniest detail since the invention of the medium, the mission undertaken by Fred Boissonnas (1858–1946) in the country in 1929–1930 is exceptional in many regards. In 1929, the Genevan photographer started a final major international project in the service of the Egyptian government that commissioned a photographic work on the country from him. Published in 1932, "l'Egypte" represents one of the culmination points in his photographic and publishing oeuvre. The aim of this article is to question the perspective on the city of Cairo and the entire territory of Egypt carried by these photographic documents. We will also look back at the objectives behind this commission in the context of political transition marked by the end of the British protectorate and the country’s official independence in 1922. The volume "Egypte" and the Boissonnas collection offer an alternative perspective on the history of the medium in Egypt, and on the definition of its space and history through images.

Reference


Available at:
http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:99363

Disclaimer: layout of this document may differ from the published version.
The City and the Territory
Imagining Cairo and Egypt
Guest Editor: Harald R. Stühlinger

5 Felix Thürlemann
Observing vs. Experiencing
Everyday Life in Egypt in Tourists’ Photographs of the Late 19th Century

20 Mercedes Volait
A Unique Visual Narrative of Historic Cairo in the 1880s – Unveiling the Work of Beniamino Facchinelli

30 Charlotte Malterre Barthes
Manipulative Iconographies of Nile Dams
The Political Image

36 Estelle Sohier
Egyptian Postcolonial Territory on behalf of Royalty: A Photographic Survey by Fred Boissonnas 1929-1932

46 Marlies Dornig
Conquering the Territory: The Suez Canal and its Early Depiction in Photography

57 Heba Farid
An Illustrated Reflection on Private Snapshots from a Mid-Century Notion of Territory

68 Milica Topalovic and Bas Princen in Conversation with Charlotte Malterre Barthes and Harald R. Stühlinger
The Visible and the Invisible World
Egypt, Landscapes and Territories

84 Harald R. Stühlinger
Myth and Phantasm
Egypt and Cairo in Photography now
Although Egypt had been photographed in the tiniest detail since the invention of the medium, and has even been qualified as the “ideal homeland of photography,” the mission undertaken by Fred Boissonnas in the country in 1929–1930 is exceptional in many regards. Trained as a portraitist, Boissonnas (1858–1946) started his career in his family’s studio in Geneva in the 1880s before progressively extending his business by taking over studios abroad (in Paris, Marseilles, Reims, Lyon and Saint Petersburg) and diversifying his activities. Thanks to his approach to the alpine landscape, his Pictorialist views and his photographs of architecture, his work earned the reputation of technical mastery beyond the boundaries of Geneva – notably, at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900 where he was awarded a gold medal. During the three decades that followed, he carried out different missions in Europe and the Mediterranean in collaboration with writers, and in the service of archaeologists and politicians. He photographed, for instance, one of the castles of the German Emperor Wilhelm II and worked – more substantially – for the Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos for whom he masterminded an international image propaganda campaign in the 1910s.

In 1929 – at more than 70 years of age – he started a final major international project in the service of the Egyptian government that commissioned a photographic work on the country from him. After En Grèce par monts et par vaux (1910) and Des Cyclades en Crête au gré du vent (1919), l’Égypte (1932) represents one of the culmination points in his photographic and publishing œuvre, both in terms of his approach and the realised objects.

Similar to the two earlier works that served as models for his concept, l’Égypte is a large-format art book measuring 52 centimetres in height. It contains 40 plates and 280 heliograph in-text photographs taken by Boissonnas, has six chapters written by different authors and concludes with a geographical map. The colophon of the printed volume stresses the care devoted to its production with the assistance of artisan processes and an international team: “This volume was begun in the year 1930 and printing took place in the month of November of the year 1932. The typography in 18-point Naudin characters was executed by Ducros et Colas, master printers in Paris. The illustrations were engraved on copper and hand pressed intaglio by Leblanc et Trautmann, printmakers in Paris. The paper with the ‘Egypte'..."
watermark was especially handmade by Van Gelder in Amsterdam. The parchment binding was entrusted to Jacques Wendling, artistic binder in Paris. The numbering of the work and the explanatory text underlined its rareness: “300 copies with printed numbers in Arabic figures from 1 to 300; 37 non-trade copies with printed Roman numerals from I to XXXVII.” The views realised for this work represent only a fraction of the 200,000 phototypes in the Boissonnas collection preserved today in the Centre d’iconographie of the Bibliothèque de Genève. In addition to some one hundred autochromes and about one thousand slides, this collection includes around 4000 black-and-white contact prints in the formats of 6 x 9, 9 x 12, 13 x 18 and 18 x 24 cm devoted to Egypt. Realised in a few months in the years 1929 and 1930, this ensemble comprises 3400 numbered views complete with legends, sometimes in two or three variants, and forms a coherent, homogenous and well-structured overview of the territory of Egypt. The duplicates of a part of these documents were placed in the Royal Geographical Society of Egypt in 1932, when the book was delivered to his commissioner, King Fouad I.

The aim of this article is to question the perspective on the city of Cairo and the entire territory of Egypt carried by these photographic documents. We will also look back at the objectives behind this commission in the context of political transition marked by the end of the British protectorate and the country’s official independence in 1922. The recent historiography on photography in Egypt and the Middle East actually invites us to explore the holdings of archives to question and delve deeper into the vision placed on orientalist photography in the numerous works inspired by the thoughts of Edward Said. It is especially a matter of moving beyond the debate on the complicity of European photographers with the colonial project and the imbrication between economic domination, spatial management and the colonial view, as well as the works analysing photography as a sole means of resistance to colonization for the local authorities. Realised by a Swiss photographer and publisher, advised by Egyptian dignitaries, with the help of Swiss and French authors, commissioned and financed by the Egyptian government, acquired both by Egyptian dignitaries and enterprises, and foreign diplomats and booklovers, the volume Egypte and the Boissonnas collection offer an alternative perspective on the history of the medium in Egypt, and on the definition of its space and history through images.

Photographic survey of the territory

On 4 April 1929, Fred Boissonnas and his publisher, Paul Trembley signed a contract with the representative of King Fouad I to realise a deluxe photographic work giving “an exact and vital overview of Egypt and its millennial past.” The private funds of the king were...
committed to a subscription of 50 copies of the book at a price of around 1000 francs each. The commission also asserted both the form and contents of the work since article 1 of the contract stipulated that the choice of specialists who would be entrusted with editing the texts and captions would have to be “submitted to the agreement of H. M. the King” before any action was taken. Fouad was the person behind the commission: known for his love of books, he also contributed a great deal to the support the Egyptian representatives of power granted to artistic and scientific production in the country. Furthermore, this continues in the tradition of the utilisation of photography by the Egyptian elite since the days of the Khedive Ismael Pasha, a utilisation that – in certain aspects – parallels that of the Ottoman authorities since the 19th century, in the form of official portraits and photographic surveys as a counterpoint to the approaches of European and colonial orientalists. All of the means necessary to facilitate the photographer’s mission throughout the country, accompanied by his Arabic-speaking publisher, Paul Trembley, were put at his disposal: an official letter guaranteed their welcome by the political and religious authorities in the different regions, as well as by the directors of cultural and heritage institutions (museums, excavation sites). They were provided with means of transportation, principally automobiles and boats to sail up the Nile. The geographical map published at the end of the book retraces the routes travelled by the two men and the expanse of the territory covered. The town of Cairo was the point of departure for expeditions into the Delta region, Upper Egypt (covered twice, in the spring and autumn of 1929), to the Suez Canal, to the shores of the Red Sea and to the Sinai Peninsula. Deviating from the main tourist paths, the two collaborators went to various oases not yet frequented by foreign tourists, photographing desert valleys along the way. The subjects covered were just as diverse as the regions they travelled through: towns, villages, monuments, farming areas, oases, remote cultic sites, diverse forms of infrastructure, rivers and canals were all photographed in a methodical manner, from detailed views to panoramas, where the objects were placed in their geographical environment.


This photographic campaign can be seen in the perspective of the official commissions realised in Europe, the USA and Canada, and in the European colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries to provide an inventory of, and highlight, elements of the different national heritages and landscapes that were currently in the process of being defined. The photographic series commissioned by these countries made the landscape – as a form of knowledge and representation – a special instrument in the definition and control of the territory, as well as their colonial project. In a way, they continued the spatial management accomplished with the help of cartographic surveys financed by European states since the modern age. Beyond their practical role, the photographic surveys aim to a symbolic control of the territory by arousing new territorial understandings and shaping shared "geographic imaginaries." Using a parallel approach to the photographic surveys commissioned by European states and private associations – in which he himself had participated in Switzerland – Boissonnas methodically photographed the major sites and monuments belonging to diverse periods of the Egyptian history. The temples of ancient Egypt – especially Giza, Saqqara, Beni Hassan, Abydos, Deir el-Bahari, Dendera, Karnak, Luxor and Thebes – are documented, as are the Valley of the Kings and Valley of the Queens, El-Tod, Edfu, Kom Ombo, Philae and Abu Simbel. The photographer made use of the technology and knowledge he had acquired during the campaigns on Greek monuments that he carried out in the service of archaeologists – of the Parthenon, for example. The precision of his views and the sharpness of the details obtained as a result of his work in the darkroom are combined with overall views that gave an impression of the monumentality of the sites. Moreover, the photographs constructed on the interplay of sunlight and on sharp contrasts highlight the symmetry and harmony of the interior and exterior architecture of the monuments (figs. 2, 3 & 4). By virtue of the systematic character of his approach and the formal quality of the images attained, Boissonnas made a contribution to the nationalist Pharaonic movement, a political, ideological and artistic movement of the 1920s to re-appropriate the country’s ancient heritage that touched on all the fields of art in Egypt.

However, the iconic, ancient heritage was not the only aspect to be dealt with. The vestiges of the Roman, Byzantine, Islamic and Ottoman periods were equally photographed to comply with the commission even if these sites were not always easy to reach or especially photogenic,

17. Nous redescendons des ruines de la forteresse byzantine de Sabagoura. On n'imagine pas l'effroyable désolation de ces villes abandonnées dont il ne subsiste que quelques pans croulants, des parois lamentables percées de brèches... le tout gisant en immense pierraille sur les flancs de la falaise... Trouver dans ce chaos une vue intéressante n’est pas chose aisée. Il est bon de se munir d’une arme défensive car le promeneur solitaire est exposé à de fâcheuses rencontres... une faune détestable, cobras et vipères noires: Typewritten letter from Fred Boissonnas as Boissonnas stated in his private correspondence: “We went back down to the ruins of the Byzantine fortress in Sabagoura. It is hard to imagine the horrifying desolation of these abandoned villages that now only consist of a few crumbling frames, of lamentable broken walls full of holes... the recumbent effigy of loose stones on the cliff side... It is no easy matter to find an interesting view among all this chaos. It is a good idea to be armed with a defensive weapon seeing that a solitary stroller is exposed to unfortunate encounters... disgusting fauna, cobras and black vipers.”

Nevertheless, any testimony of the period of the British protectorate is scrupulously eliminated from both the images and texts of the book; an omission that indicates the fundamentally anti-colonial dimension of the project. The more-or-less famous vestiges of the past are only one aspect of the studied national heritage; the photographer worked to transform other traces into icons and create other markers on the national territory.

### Images of a lived-in space

In the history of geographical thought, the concept of territory is closely linked to the idea of appropriation and generally articulates two distinct levels in interaction: a material appropriation through the action of societies on the material support of their existence, and a symbolic appropriation through the systems of representation helping to semiotize a space. The order transmitted by the Egyptian royalty to Fred Boissonnas is a demonstration of the symbolic command of the national space by the new government, as well as the Egyptian society’s control of its territory. In contrast to the colonialist images of Egypt taken in the 19th century, which were characterised by the lack of any human presence, his pictures show places...
that are lived in, worked in and travelled in – not by tourists, who are completely absent from the compositions, but by Egyptians. Although the cities of Cairo and, to a lesser extent, Alexandria are methodically photographed by Boissonnas, the Genevan also portrayed the villages along the Nile, in the Delta and as far as Abu Simbel, in the context of the surrounding landscape (fig. 5) or in the interior (figs. 6 & 7). It seems the commissioners of the work had requested that the interiors of the dwellings be shown, because the photographer was criticised for the lack of images of Arab interiors at the end of his campaign.19

In addition, various social strata, from the peasant to the King, are represented in the book, as well as several communities from the Delta to Nubia. Searching for cultural diversity, it seems that military personnel had to help with photographing the Bedouins. In a letter, Paul Trembley deplored the difficulty of photographing nomads not working for the tourist industry: “There are hardly any real (Bedouins) except far away in the desert. Those that you see photographed everywhere have been trained near Aswan to be used by foreigners and maybe even Americans!”20

The Christian communities are represented, but the Jewish community and numerous foreign societies living in the country are not present in the book, nor can they be found in the photographic collection; cosmopolitanism was not compatible with the definition of a national portrait at the time.

The images of the Fellaheen bear witness to the spotlight placed on rural landscapes and spaces (fig. 8). As an old representative of the Pictorialist movement, a champion of the representation of farmers and mountain dwellers of Switzerland, Boissonnas quite clearly photographed them inspired by a combination of orientalist aesthetics, realist painters such as Jean-François Millet and his own work in Switzerland. His approach to the peasantry also coincides with an intellectual and artistic movement born in Egypt that considered the Fellaheen the direct successors of ancient traditions and the “missing link in the chain to the glorious past.”21

Just as in works by contemporary Egyptian painters, the peasant’s hard labour was enhanced and the extreme harshness of the working conditions in the countryside hidden by the photographer’s aestheticizing approach. The portraits of anonymous gleaners at work show the intertwining of formal and ideological references between European painting,

19. Letter from Paul Trembley to Fred Boissonnas from Cairo, 5 May 1931. Archives Borel-Boissonnas, Centre d'iconographie de la bibliothèque de Genève.
20. Trembley 5 May 1931 [reference 19].
et non fours de Bonifas. Il faut donc une initiation. Mais qui donc avant de Saussure s'était avisé de la splendeur des solitudes alpestres ? L’accoutumance s’est faite toute à la douce. Pour le désert c’est la même chose:

Fred Boissonnas, journal (typewritten), 5 April 1933. Fonds Borel-Boissonnas, Centre d’iconographie de la BGE.

23. A première vue et sous l’éclairage implacable du soleil au zénith c’était épouvantable. Il faut en vérité une accoutumance, une longue initiation pour jouir de cette nature désolée. C’est une beauté sévère et terrible comme nos paysages des Alpes au-dessus de 3000 mètres, avec cette seule différence qu’ils sont glaciaires et non fours de Boniface. Il faut donc une initiation. Mais qui donc avant de Saussure s’était avisé de la splendeur des solitudes alpestres ? L’accoutumance s’est faite toute à la douce. Pour le désert c’est la même chose: Fred Boissonnas, journal (typewritten), 5 April 1933. Fonds Borel-Boissonnas, Centre d’iconographie de la BGE.


The photographs of mediaeval Cairo were published in the “L’Egypte musulmane” section, which was written by Gaston Wiet (1887–1971), then Director of the Museum of Arab Art in Cairo. This Arabic specialist, archaeologist and epigraphist, nonetheless wrote a text without any scientific pretence in the form of a stroll through the city on the day of the celebration of a victory over the crusaders. Through visual descriptions of costumes and ceremonies, his narrative was conceived to complement the photographs in which any elements indicating the date they were taken (such as publicity posters on the city gates) had been eliminated from the camera’s field of view or removed during post-production.

This position of suspending any time reference to look at the city, so characteristic of orientalist photography, was also adopted in the first chapter of the work devoted to “Egypte pittoresque” that the photographer himself wrote. One page takes up the literary clichés of the city and depicts the exoticism of the bazaars and mosques of the “indigenous quarters.”

However, in a contrasting interplay constructed by the text and juxtaposition of the images amongst themselves, the accent is also placed on the modernity of the city: the view of a lane with mashrabiyas is associated with a bird’s-eye-view of a square surrounded by modern buildings that was complete with a traffic circle and automobiles (fig. 14). Churches, convents, cemeteries, palaces, villas and hotels in Cairo are also represented. In this way, the work provides a mosaic view of the city and its country by juxtaposing places, epochs, points of view, but also diverse photographic forms, by juxtaposing black and white and colour – through colour prints and autochromes (fig. 15).

In spite of the precision of the metadata associated with each image numbered, dated, localised – and sometimes even briefly described (see the captions) –, the methodical and
systematic character of the approach of the photographer and his publisher and the choice of scientific collaborators to the work and its recipient – the archives of the Royal Geographic Society in Cairo – Boissonnas’ photographic mission hardly offers a tool for deepening the knowledge of the history, society and territory of Egypt. The photographic series, as well as the double and triple views, show that the majority of the images were also conceived as entirely individual entities, sometimes like genuine tableaux, distinguishing his approach from that of archaeologists, heritage specialists and tourists. Historical vestiges, buildings, landscapes and people are aestheticized through the use of lights and highlighted by the effects of the framing and composition. They are placed in their environment only when this appears pertinent. It has been demonstrated that photography was an efficient instrument for fuelling and spreading feelings of belonging to a nation thanks to the ambiguity of the medium, in the field of tension between the imagined and lived, between evidence and magic: the aestheticisation of the real provokes emotions and affects that make the development of a feeling of identification and belonging to a remote national entity possible, while the indexical dimension of the image – reinforced by the addition of detailed metadata – confers it with the status of evidence.31 Boissonnas played with the ambiguity of the photographic image, all the more so that he opened his work to other interpretations. He actually imagined other usages for this ensemble by creating from the same material a reference collection on Egypt in Geneva32 where the images were retailed and opened to other narrations.

Figure 15
Fred Boissonnas, Mosquée, autochrome 13 x 18 cm. Centre d'iconographie de la Bibliothèque de Genève, FBB D13x18 Égypte Auto 03 05. Khanqah al-Nasir Faraj ibn Barquq, City of the Dead, Cairo.*

32. Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Paul Boissonnas from Cairo, 6 April 1929. Fonds Borel-Boissonnas du centre d'iconographie de la BGE.