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ESHPh. EUROPEAN SOCIETY FOR
THE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

PhotoResearcher



Private Photo Collecting

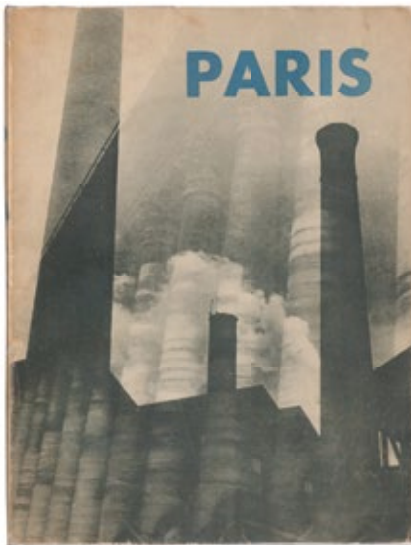
Edited by Uwe Schögl



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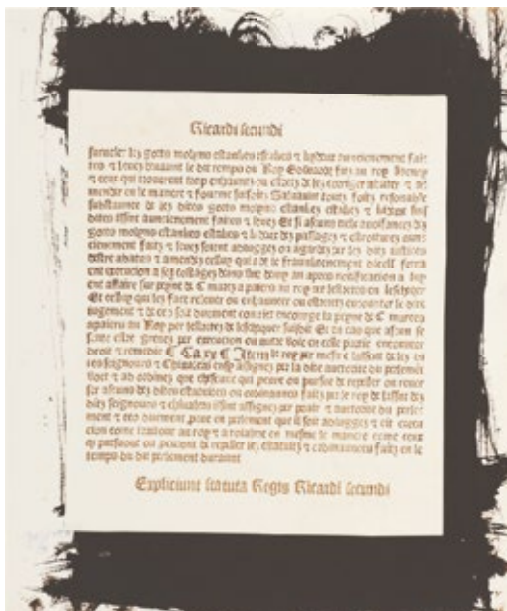
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Editorial

Today, cultural and socio-political communications are more intricately linked than ever before. These mainly take place through the digital networks and function as a multifaceted system of productive and creative interests, with cyber-attacks as the downside. In the global world, old systems of order are successively losing their canonical status, and political and economic interactions are becoming less transparent. Unexpected occurrences, such as the current pandemic, or changes like global warming, are seen as burdens – although both have been caused by human activity – and considered paradoxical and as not fitting in with the global model of a linear optimistic future-oriented mindset in any way at all. Today's world is faced with numerous challenges that will become even greater in the future.

The concept for *PhotoResearcher* no. 36 was developed during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and against the backdrop of these volatile perspectives for the future. The premise was to document the effects of this traumatic turning point from the personal perspective of those persons who are so decisively involved in this cultural context. We are talking about the private photo collectors who use the holdings of their important collections to both initiate and participate in international exhibitions and research projects, as well as promote the discipline, and are also a significant factor on the art market and in cultural politics.

Nine internationally renowned photo collectors – *Frédérique Destribats, Manfred Heiting, Judy Hochberg & Michael G. Mattis, Serge Kakou, Michael Loulakis, Anna Morelli, Christian Skrein*, and last but not least *Michael G. Wilson* – accepted our invitation to be interviewed for this edition of our journal and pass on their knowledge and experience, as well as describe their successful projects. All of the interviews are included in this extensive volume.

The interviews took place in the form of e-mail correspondence or as tele-conferences in the period between January and July 2021. The results of the conversations held with the (photo)-historians *Roberto Caccialanza, Delphine Desveaux, Vreni Hockenjos, Simone Klein, Kristina Lemke Moritz Neumüller, Thorsten Sadowsky, Miriam Szwest and Katrin Unterreiner*, are a series of distinctive statements made at the interface between the private and public sphere that provide us with previously unknown insights into the individual concepts of collecting and its genesis, structures, and strategies.

A fundamental question dealt with the understanding of “private collecting”, which was often described as an attempt to bring order into a chaotic world. On the one hand, collecting can represent self-reflection and, on the other, be more of a game, or a path to communication.

Each interview begins with an entrée – a personal statement, of varying length, by the interviewer. An exception was made in connection with the “photo collector” Empress Elisabeth of Austria (1837–1898). For the first time, the personal photo albums she assembled in the brief period between 1860 and ca. 1865 are investigated going beyond the photo-historical perspective to include a study of the development of her personality that occurred during the same period.

Uwe Schögl

Vienna, October 2021



Collecting is a Great Adventure

Serge Kakou in Conversation with Delphine Desveaux

Being able to question a collector about his or her motivations is a wish that is rarely fulfilled. A collection is a space of its own, and even an art in itself. Whether the practice is secret or public, the collection is an intimate compilation, a presentation of oneself, of one's means. The two can coexist, or evolve over time. And time itself also has a profound impact on the collection.

Asking questions becomes an additional challenge when the collector's profession is dealing in what he collects. Is it possible to separate the two inside oneself, to distinguish between the obligations of the one and the desires of the other? Do the collection and what is for sale influence each other?

The history of dealers as well as of collectors has nourished the history of art. The history of the collector-dealer of photographs Serge Kakou sheds light on the history of photography from two perspectives, even if it is only the collector who has been invited this time ...

Photographic beginnings

Delphine Desveaux: *In a few words, can you describe what photography represents for you ?*

Serge Kakou: Photography is the main focus of my life, studying it is my university, and my status as a collector is my armour.

How did this attraction for photography begin?

I have often asked myself that! Yes, why did I decide to look at such a specific subject? Origins are always mysterious, and attempting to explore them takes us to intimate places. As I have tried to look back, I think I have identified my first photographic emotion. It was the one I felt when I opened a box covered with tartan fabric that was full of family photos. In this precious reliquary I must have found comfort in seeing people who were no longer there. I was nine years old. A few years later, I started collecting postage stamps. This first passion proved to be formative: the search for images (already!), nuances of colour (vermilion, bistre), buying and selling, trading at school ... so actually all the ingredients necessary for becoming a collector of photographs a few years later.

fig. 1
Adolphe Terris, Caryatids from the
Longchamp Palace in Marseille,
sculpted by Jules Cavalier, c. 1866,
cyanotype 37.5 × 29.5 cm.
Courtesy collection Serge Kakou.

Did you already have an eye for that? Any formal training?

To my regret, I received no training. Nobody was interested in art in my family, and there were no books at home – only a television and a record player. We never went to the theatre or the cinema. Even though we were near Paris, it was a real cultural desert! And since I was hardly a brilliant student in the various schools I attended, the school of resourcefulness completed my training. In the afternoon, my friend Jean-Pierre Hansen and I would distribute posters of painting exhibitions for Parisian galleries. After a few months, we earned enough to buy cameras – Jean-Pierre a Nikon F2, and me a Canon F1, the state-of-the-art at the time, each with its respective range of lenses. Our cameras never left our sides. We roamed the streets, always looking for the decisive moment. Cartier-Bresson was our idol. We liked to climb up onto the rooftops in Paris to discover the city from a new angle. We strolled along the banks of the Seine to do a photo story for the Compagnie des Bateaux Mouches. One day, we showed our photographs to Jean-Claude Lemagny (curator of Prints and Photographs at the National Library), who was regarded as the supreme eye at the time; he politely advised us to keep on persevering. That said, although my short career as an amateur photographer more or less sharpened my eye, it never led me to look as far back as the 19th century.

Can we talk about your life in Denmark?

I had just turned nineteen when I left France to live by myself in Denmark, in 1973. I stayed there for three years and led a nice, bohemian life. At the time it was easy to make a living from occasional jobs. Meeting Floreck, a Polish bric-a-brac dealer, was decisive. He introduced me to collecting old objects, and I set out to explore the cellars and attics of Copenhagen. It was a prosperous time. During the last six months of my stay in Scandinavia, I found a spot at the flea market where on Saturday I sold the things I had discovered during the week. As I went, I picked up family pictures that were of no interest to anyone. Searching for these orphaned images brought me closer to a vanished era, and also allowed me to recompose an absent family of sorts, as I think about it later.

In the meantime, your parents had left Paris and moved to New Caledonia. You dreamed of the North, but then you joined them in Noumea in 1976!

The time had come for me to leave the northern greyness for the sun of the Pacific. In New Caledonia, I was immediately fascinated by the last colonial houses. Empty or full of objects, those buildings with closed shutters were like time bubbles that transported me to another dimension. Discovering them was a real delight that still endures when I think about it. I became attached to the history of the country, and I started to look for photographic documents of everyday life, slave labour, and Kanak life (— fig. 2) – subjects that had especially inspired photographers. That was when I realised the historical value of these images, their fragility and their evocative power.

Did you start buying and selling photographs?

No. I wanted to keep them, and in any case there was no market or interest there except for in postcards. Most of the old photographs I acquired in New Caledonia were given to me by the descendants of the photographers. I took advantage of my long stay

in Oceania to search for photos in Australia and New Zealand, and even went across the Pacific to California, where Sean Thackeray sold me my first travel albums in 1980. I am grateful to him for having shown me two stunning images by Fenton. All of these efforts made it possible for me to gather several hundred images. This embryonic collection, which I completed over time, made it possible for me to publish *Découverte photographique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1848–1900*, with Actes Sud in 1996¹. This study inventoried the first photographers in New Caledonia and revealed two precursors: the Marist missionary André Chapuy, who made daguerreotypes starting in 1848, five years before France took possession of the islands, and a remarkable itinerant calotypist, Eugène Bourdais, the secretary of the Governor of the French Establishments of Oceania, who in 1857 started documenting the rudimentary installations of the new colony.

And then?

Living on an island paradise is delightful, as everyone knows, but after six years a sort of numbness set in. There was no longer enough space to satisfy my desire for images. I dreamed of a larger hunting ground. In 1983, my companion Françoise Jauneau and I settled in Brignoles, in the Var region of the south of France. The following year, I became a dealer in ‘curiosities’ at the Marché aux Fleurs in Nice. I combed through more than a hundred flea markets and antique shows every year: a real case of bulimia. All this time, I was always looking for photographs, which I kept. Starting in 1986,

I made regular visits to the London auctions of Christie’s and Sotheby’s, and every month I went to Paris. The prices that appear ridiculously low today seemed exorbitant to me at the time, and I had to fight against wealthy enthusiasts just to get a few lots. Also in 1986, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris exhibited the sublime works of Henri Le Secq, which once and for all opened my eyes to the aesthetic dimension of photography and considerably enlarged my field of investigation, which until then had been focused on travel photography.

1 — Serge Kakou, *Découverte photographique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1848–1900*, Actes Sud, Arles 1996.



fig. 2
Ernest Robin, *Cuisant di taro – Timanda – Côte Nord Ouest* (Group of Kanak cooking taro), New Caledonia 1867, albumen print from a glass negative 19.5 × 12.5 cm. Courtesy collection Serge Kakou.



fig.3
Anonymous, Hand with flint,
c. 1880, albumen print from a glass
negative, image 16 × 22.6 cm,
mount 31.1 × 24 cm. Courtesy
collection Serge Kakou.

We can see that you instinctively knew how to find, buy, and sell. At the age of thirty, and after almost ten years, you had been living with a flow of objects and of encounters. It must have been exciting to see so many things and people go by, an education?

Being face to face with the works is of course incredibly stimulating, but meeting people who share the same passion is especially enriching. If you pay attention, you learn from each. My competitors at auctions and flea markets have often become my friends. Little by little, I made a place for myself in the community, so much so that Philippe Néagu, then curator at the Musée d'Orsay, came to visit me in Brignoles in 1989 to ask me to lend several works for the magnificent exhibition *L'invention d'un regard*,² organised for the 150th anniversary of photography. André Jammes and I were the only French collectors to participate in this event as lenders. (— fig. 3) I didn't think much about it at the time, but in retrospect I am better able to appreciate the opportunity Philippe Néagu gave me.

And, in 1997, you became a member of the Compagnie Nationale des Experts, and moved to Paris.

Yes. As in all fields, Paris centralises the driving forces of the profession, and it draws most of the photographs discovered across France. It was absolutely necessary to get closer to this, and moreover, Paul Benarroche, a photography specialist from Provence, asked me to join him in appraising lots consigned to the Tajan auction house. That is how I became an official appraiser in photography – a digression that lasted ten years and gave me a different approach to the market. I have always liked the tension of auctions, so participating so close up was something ... But looking

² — *L'invention d'un regard (1839–1918). Cent-cinquantenaire de la photographie*, exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 4 October – 31 December 1989.

back, only the sales of the collections of my friends Paul Benarroche and Pierre-Marc Richard have given me complete satisfaction, because each involved presenting the entire collection of an enthusiast with a real eye.

That was the year when you began working as a photography dealer.

Yes, little by little, photographs took the place of objects until finally they took up all the space. I had already stopped doing markets, but once a year I took part in the photography fair in Bièvres, where photography enthusiasts came together. That is where I would sell everything I had accumulated, and it was a great place for discoveries.

Your collection of photographs must have already become quite sizable?

Yes, each year the collection grew with new acquisitions, but images also left it.

You are happy to present yourself as someone who carefully ponders what he decides to keep and what he resolves to part with, but didn't it affect you to separate with beautiful objects that you chose, kept, had in your home? I know that I am provoking you a bit.

Of course, ideally, there are pieces that I would have liked to keep, but sometimes circumstances force you to sell. It is also a healthy approach. A collection needs to remain alive, in motion, and be regularly questioned. The idea of an exponential accumulation is suffocating. Ultimately, there are very few pieces I sold that I still think about – such as a superb portrait of the scholar John Herschel by Julia Margaret Cameron, or a masterpiece by Camille Silvy. But they are in good hands now, so that comforts me.

Do you live with your collection?

The photographs accompany my life. I cherish some prints more than others because we share a story. For example, an incredible masterpiece by Gustave Le Gray, a nocturnal impression of the cloister in Moissac, from 1851 (— fig. 4). I spotted it from thirty metres away one morning at a flea market in Nice. An unforgettable chance encounter!

And you freely share your perspective on your collection, which isn't something that is very common.

That's true. (As he says this, Serge Kakou goes to look for a box containing dozens of large photographs, mounted and unmounted, and he comments on each print and its subtleties.)

Collecting photographs or photography?

Your attachment to different techniques and processes is evident. It's a pleasure to listen to and to see.

My collection is founded not only on the images but also on the diversity of the processes used and the nuances that result from them. I always try to select the

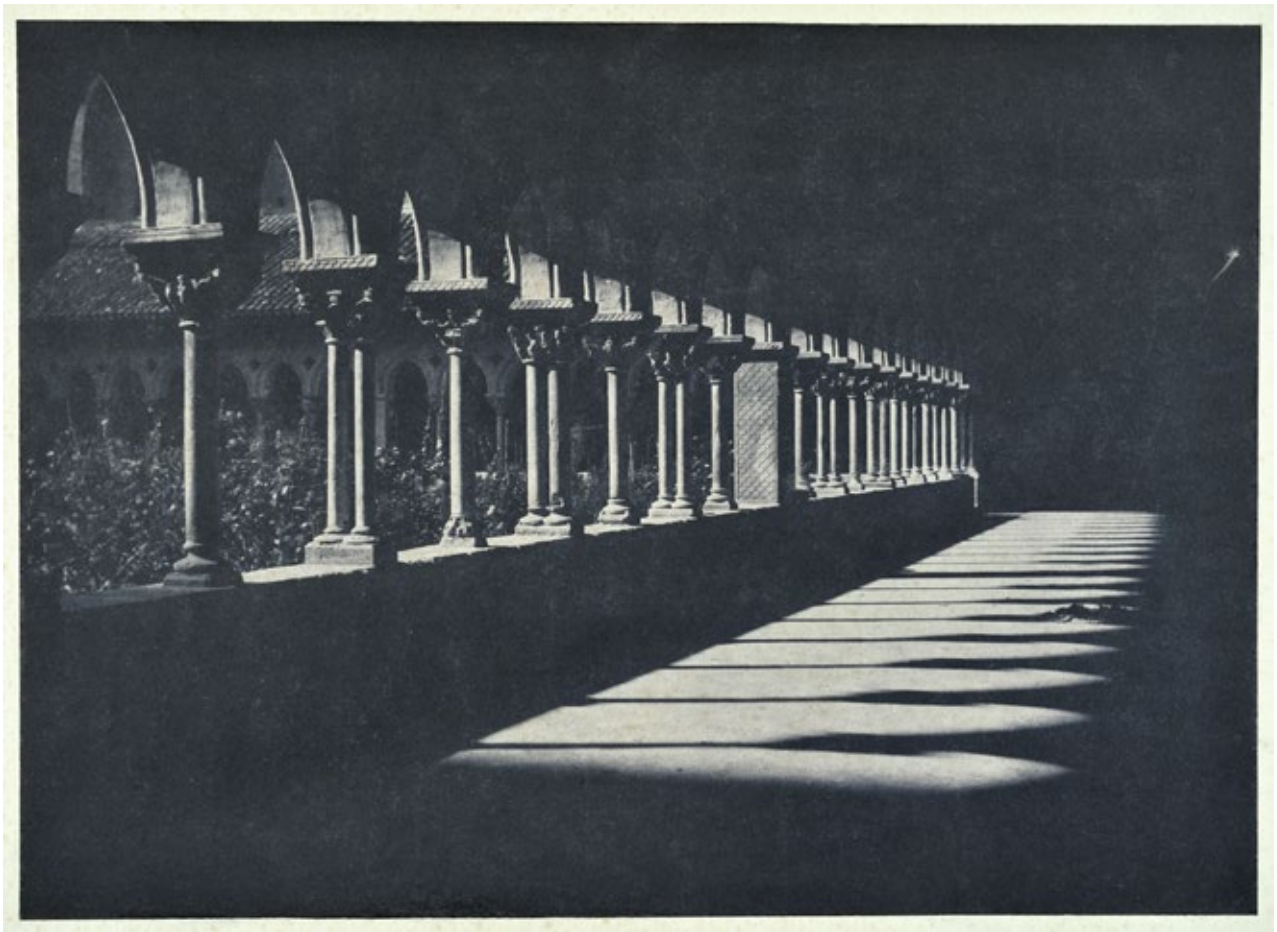


fig. 4
Gustave Le Gray and Auguste
Mestral, Moissac, interior of the
Cloister, 1851, salt print from a paper
negative, image 25.3 × 34.5 cm,
mount 48.2 × 60.8 cm. Courtesy
collection Serge Kakou.

most representative and the most successful prints. One of the cores of my collection, along with travel, is to try to bring together the most beautiful examples of photography in all its diversity.

Even variants of the same image speak to you?

These kinds of variations and nuances are what spice up a collection. In addition, every photographer works with his own *modus operandi*, leaves his own mark. A particular approach to a subject, format, print chemistry (compare fig.1) ... all of these things are all clues that contribute to being able to make an attribution. They constitute what I call a visual signature.

So the fact that this chemistry is part of the object influences your collection?

Absolutely. All the subtleties we perceive in a print give it a particular flavour and make it desirable or not.

First times seem to be important to your understanding of photography.

For me, 'the first times' are when a photographer points his lens at something that is uncharted and remains invisible to everyone else. I am thinking, for example, about some photographs of ballerinas (___ fig. 5) taken around 1890 by an author who still hasn't been identified, and of a series of views of scarecrows by Paul Géniaux (___ fig. 6).



fig.5
Anonymous, Ballerinas at the Paris
Opera, c. 1890, Albumen print from
a glass negative, 9.5 × 12 cm.
Courtesy collection Serge Kakou.

The photographic discovery of the planet is the subject that fascinates me the most, in this respect. The first encounters between a photographer and a diversity of peoples on earth, the first representations of the sites and monuments of the ancient world – these accounts are charged with an intensity that just isn't there later. This is also true for the images made by the first photographers. Regardless of whether they are daguerreotypes or on paper, blurry or faded, these experiments are always so moving, so precious.



fig. 6
Paul Géniaux, Scarecrow, c. 1900,
gelatin silver print 18 × 13 cm.
Courtesy collection Serge Kakou.

Is uniqueness important?

Uniqueness isn't enough on its own. The image also has to be emblematic. When both come together, it is really the holy grail for a collector. For example, the famous view of a photographer's studio reproduced in Lécuyer's *Histoire de la photographie* in 1945 (— fig. 7).³ We only know of one print so far.

Even some commercial images, in theory produced in great numbers, can be exceedingly rare and distinctive – like the stunning glass stereoviews of Ferrier and Soulier showing the streets of 19th century Paris full of people as if in snapshots. So many of these photographs have been lost and broken over the years. These images exist in no other form, and nothing else made at the time compares to them.

Although created to produce multiples, each photograph is distinctive.

Yes, even if it isn't obvious at first glance. The longer I observe things, the more it seems like each print has its own specific character, colour, chemistry, condition. And again, it may turn out to be unique in this sense.

What if you know nothing about a photograph? Can you love a photograph for which everything still remains to be discovered?

The majority of photographs are not signed. We proceed first and foremost based on the aesthetic qualities of the image and on its condition, then for the rest it's all a matter of instinct and knowledge. An enigmatic photograph is always a wonderfully attractive challenge.

Because you are also interested in the context of photographs, you have a team – above all, Kim Timby, a specialist and reputed historian – who assists you. You don't stop at just identifying what these photographs present, you try to understand what they represent.

³— Raymond Lécuyer, *Histoire de la photographie*, Paris 1945.



fig. 7
 Mayer and Pierson or Disdéri (attr.),
 Mayer and Pierson's or Disdéri's
 studio, Paris c. 1860, albumen print
 from a glass negative, image
 13.7 × 20 cm, mount 21.1 × 31.3 cm.
 Courtesy collection Serge Kakou.

In documenting my acquisitions and doing further research on them, I am fortunate to be assisted by Kim Timby and Sandrine Chene, two very meticulous collaborators. With the passing years, I find it more and more essential to try to understand what an image contains. After the pleasure of discovering a new photograph, researching it is the other exciting part of this field – working more in depth on the content, the history, the meaning, in addition to the identification of the subject and the photographer. Sometimes it takes decades to put a name on a photograph from which it seemed impossible to extract any information. For example, there was a photograph that I bought because it looked like a very early print, which had a painting of a reclining nude in the background. This painting stayed in the back of my mind, and twenty years later I discovered it in an auction catalogue and the puzzle was solved: the author was Boissard de Boisdenier (— fig. 8). At the time, no image by him was known, and the only trace of his activity was two lines of text saying that he had participated in the second exhibition of the Société Française de Photographie in 1857, where he presented a ‘series of prints from the primitive days of the daguerreotype and the Talbot process’. Visual memory plays a big role in identification.

As a dealer and a collector, your visual memory must be exceptional.



fig. 8
Circle of Boissard de Boisdenier,
Boissard de Boisdenier playing violin
in front of his painting, Pimaudan
hotel, Paris c. 1840–1845, salt print
from a paper negative, image
11.6 × 8.3 cm, mount 19 × 14.1 cm.
Courtesy private Collection.

Yes, it's strange, this visual memory surprises me sometimes. Being able to retain thousands of images and remember in which book they can be found, to store the names and information of hundreds of photographers. When I think back, it's almost like having learned a telephone directory by heart, but effortlessly. Passion pushes your limits.

Ultimately, your collection is built via associations and isn't focused on a specific subject but rather on certain notions and desires. Do you only collect photographs?

Yes, I only buy photographs. It is essential to focus if you want to master your subject, and nineteenth-century photography is already a sufficiently vast field of investigation. It is also a field in which major discoveries can still be made. Despite some sensational auction prices, I must say that photography is still affordable considering its rarity. I have a keen interest in painting as well as in old drawings, which are so similar to photographic creations, but I content myself with just admiring them and learning more by visiting museums.

You don't collect books, magazines, negatives?

I consider negatives photographic works in their own right and collect them as such. Sometimes they are even more beautiful than the prints made from them. Magazines and books, even historic ones, serve as my documentation (___ fig. 9).

Is provenance a criterion when selecting for your collection?

Since their creation, the majority of prints have changed hands many times without anyone worrying about where they come from. Because we don't often know much, provenance is not a criterion for selection, but if information about it exists it is infinitely valuable.

I only have one photograph whose entire line of provenance is known since its creation. It is a Daguerreian plate created by Marc Antoine Gaudin in the autumn of 1841 (___ fig.10) and presented at the Academy of Sciences as having been taken in 1/19th of a second thanks to innovative accelerating substances. This is the earliest known stop-motion photograph. It is a well-documented part of history.

Associations and subtractions

Do you occasionally 'drop' photographs from your collection?

Drop? I would say that I part with them, because I can lose interest in them. Over time, some photographs lose their appeal. On the other hand, the same work

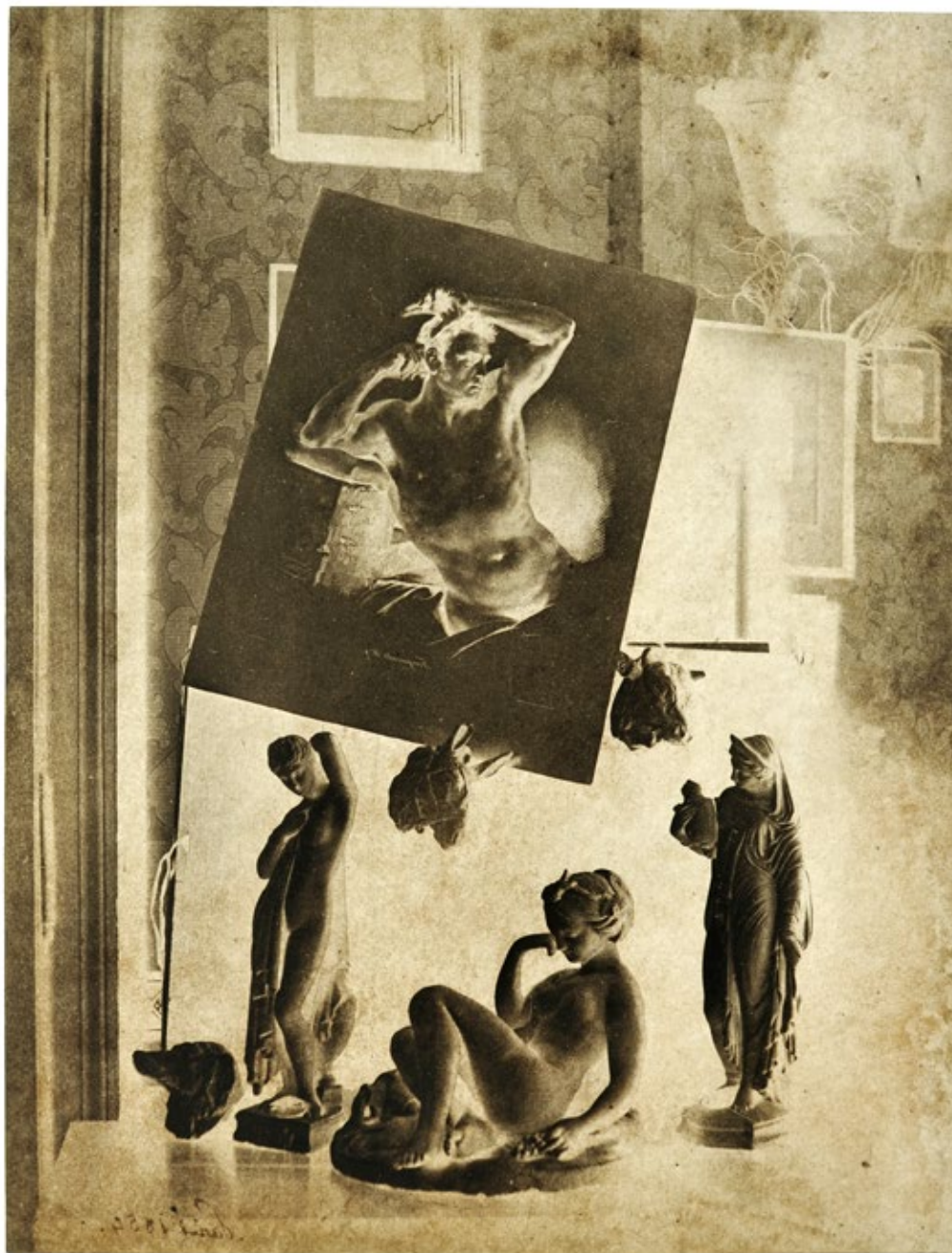


fig.9
Frères Varin, Still life with sculptures
and an image, 1854, paper negative
16.5 × 12.7 cm. Courtesy collection
Serge Kakou.



can appear new and full of meaning to someone else. When this photo has found a new home, I part with it. But some photographs are almost ... inalienable, part of the heart of my collection, like the Gaudin daguerreotype we just discussed.

Where do you buy photographs?

For years, flea markets and other second-hand antique markets were enough. These sources have now mostly dried up, and returning to these places, which once promised so much, is sad and depressing. I buy from former collectors, friends who go to flea markets, and mainly at auction.

The logic of making associations in your collection is immediately visible in your self-published books.

Yes, associating photographs to bring out their multiple interpretations is a creative process that is very important to me. It is also a new task that I have taken on with the idea of sharing this passion that fascinates me so much with a wider audience. Plus, creating these books also gives me the pleasure of giving them to people who have helped me in one way or another over the years.

Even in these publications, you reveal very little about yourself. One has to know you to be able to imagine your thoughts and hear your voice behind these few words there, because there really are only just a few.

(Smiling) Yes, that's true. I am much more a man of images than of words. That is why in the books the commentaries are voluntarily understated to give free rein to the imagination of each reader. I like to combine the photographs so that they communicate with each other and establish an intimate dialogue with the reader. In a certain sense, I use the images like words.

Certain photographs are objects that are more than just a photograph. They go beyond photography.

That is true for a portrait I have of a wounded soldier from the First World War. It is an amateur image placed in a frame simply engraved 'Verdun, April 1916', the back of which is sealed with surgical tape (— fig. 11). This is the epitome of a photographic object. The harmony between the image and its frame multiplies the evocative force. For me, this photographic object alone represents all the horror of the conflict. I don't need any other images. I also collect photographic albums, travel albums in particular. A beautiful album can communicate more than simply the sum of its parts.

From organising to sharing

Does quantity count in your collection?

I don't find it interesting to try to understand a collection by its volume or the number of items it contains.

fig. 10
Marc Antoine Gaudin, Instantaneous
view of the Pont Neuf, Paris 1841,
daguerreotype, diameter 7 cm,
mount 12.5 × 10.6 cm. Courtesy
collection Serge Kakou.



fig. 11
Anonymous, Verdun, April 1916,
gelatin silver print,
image 11.5 × 16.5 cm,
frame 25 × 34 cm.
Courtesy collection Serge Kakou.

What about storage and inventory? Are your photographs organised in a certain way, or indexed?

As soon as I acquire it, each piece is photographed and entered into a customised database. The prints are protected in neutral sleeves and kept in storage boxes according to their format, the part of the world they represent, etc. The most valuable photographs are stored separately. Preserving works for future generations is a duty for every collector.

You don't hide, but you don't really show yourself either. Do you share your collection, do you show it?

I regularly lend to museums and institutions. I wait for people to come to me and am quite willing to show things, but preferably only to people who really 'see' because I often discover something unexpected with them.

Might we hope for an exhibition of your collection?

If an institution wants that, gladly. But it would be on the condition that the exhibition design be a creation in its own right. I really wouldn't be interested in a traditional, "masterpieces" type of show.

Would you like the pieces in the collection to remain together? the heart of the collection to endure?

(Smiling) Obviously. That is a collector's greatest dilemma, and greatest challenge. Today, it is a real question. What should the destiny of this collection be so that it continues to live and my 'heart of paper' keeps beating?

Can a single photograph sum up the collection? Of course not, and all the more so since Serge Kakou has no thematic obsession, no strictly defined orientation except for the underlying appeal of 'firsts'. He can be moved by any number of iconographies, by the nature of the object, its composition or its date of creation, all capable of eliciting desire or a desire for completion. We have to accept that a personal creation remains unexplained in certain fundamental respects.

The collection is a living entity, and its owner takes great pleasure in what he describes as 'shuffling the cards' – or creating associations between works, juxtaposing the pieces to make them speak – but also in sharing his passion and taste. In so doing, as if responding to a giant visual questionnaire, he produces a portrait of himself. His natural and professional discretion elegantly veil a sharp expertise, but clearly the eye of the specialist, associated with the knowledge of the dealer, has worked wonders in the creation of a collection – and continues to do so.

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**Adolphe Terris, Caryatids from the Longchamp Palace in
Marseille, sculpted by Jules Cavalier, c. 1866, cyanotype.
Courtesy collection Serge Kakou.**

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Three-Colour Photography around 1900

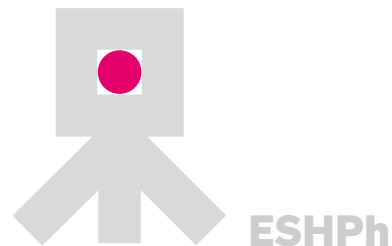
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