



Chapter 24

Émile Gsell (1838–79) and Early Photographs of Angkor

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Abstract

The earliest photographs of Angkor in Cambodia were taken by the Scottish photographer and geographer, John Thomson (1837–1921). Starting from Bangkok on 27 January 1866, “to photograph the ruined temples” (Thomson 1875: 118) Thomson journeyed to Angkor, “in consequence” as he himself admitted, “of the interest excited in me by reading the late M. Mouhot’s¹ ‘Travels in Indo-China, Cambodia, and Laos,’² and other works to which I had access” (Thomson 1867: 7). Thomson states that he used a “photographic apparatus and chemicals for the wet collodion process” (1867: 7). On the way, at “Ban-Ong-ta Krong” (1875: 128), about ten days before reaching his destination, Thomson had a “sharp attack of jungle fever” (1867: 7–8; 1875: 128). Were it not for his fellow-traveler, H.G. Kennedy from H.B.M. consular service, Thomson would “have met the fate of M. Mouhot, and perished in the jungle” (1867: 8). The precise dates of Thomson’s stay at Angkor or, in the words of Thomson, Nakhon, are not known. The same must be said about the duration of his stay: “several days” (1875: 150). On 31 January, he arrived at Paknam Kabin (1875: 124) and cannot have reached Angkor before March, since he “spent over a month in lumbering across the country” (1875: 128). Thomson must have left Angkor on 26 March at the latest, as on that day he “landed at Campong Luang” (1875: 155). Apparently, Thomson was not the only European researcher at the site: “When I attempted to photograph this object [1867: plate XV; 1875: 151], a tribe of black apes, wearing white beards, came hooting along the branches of the overhanging trees, swinging and shaking the boughs, so as to render my success impossible. A party of French sailors, who were assisting the late Captain de Lagrée³ in his researches into the Cambodian ruins, came up opportunely, and sent a volley among my mischievous opponents; whereupon they disappeared [...]” (1875: 152). Thomson also met French officers, who were “awaiting the return of M. de Lagrée from Siamrap” (1875: 152). It seems that on this occasion Thomson had shown his photographs of Angkor to Ernest Doudart de Lagrée (Ghesquière 2001: 224).

Ernest Doudart de Lagrée, apparently deeply impressed by Thomson’s views of the old monuments, asked Emile Gsell, enlisted with the French army since 1858 and staying at Saigon, if he would be prepared to accompany the *Commission d’exploration du Mékong* as their photographer. Gsell, who had learned the art of photography to serve military purposes, agreed (Garnier 1871: 6). Accordingly, he was released from military duties to photograph the monuments.

The French party reached Angkor, riding on elephants, on 24 June 1866 (Garnier 1871: 10) and left it, by elephant, on 1 July 1866 (Garnier 1871: 32). Marie Joseph François Garnier,⁴ who accompanied the expedition, mentions that (by 1870) the photographs of Angkor of “M. Thompson [sic]” were known, though only through the woodcut illustrations in the French edition of James Fergusson’s (1808–86) “A history of Architecture in all Countries, from the earliest Times to the present Day” (1871: 22). That Fergusson, “that most distinguished authority on architecture” had Thomson’s photographs at his disposal is confirmed by Thomson himself (1875: 140).

Introduction

Gsell must have founded his photographic atelier by October 1866, to become the first professional photographer in Saigon. At the instigations of Louis-Marie Joseph Delaporte (1842–1925), who already

accompanied the 1866 expedition to Angkor, Gsell returned to Angkor again as a photographer during the second half of 1873. In Delaporte's report, the "Mission d'exploration des monuments Khmers" started on 23 July 1873 (1880: 17). Although at least 14 illustrations were made after Gsell's photographs taken at Angkor,⁵ the main text of Delaporte's report mentions the photographer only once: "[...] il faut étudier attentivement au verre grossissant les vues photographiques placées au musée et provenant pour la plupart de la riche collection de M. Gsell de Saïgon, collection dans laquelle nous avons puisé plusieurs fois pour l'illustration de ce livre" (1880: 249).

Gsell produced two albums; the "Ruins of Angkor" and "The mores, customs, and types of the Annamite and Cambodian populations" (Ghesquière 2001: 224). These albums were sent to the Vienna International Exhibition, which commenced on 1 May of that year and lasted till 2 November 1873. The albums arrived in due time and Gsell was awarded a medal of merit. Gsell, who accompanied further French expeditions, never saw Angkor again. He died at Saigon on 16 October 1879, aged 41.

The Catalogue of Gsell's Angkor Views

Gsell, much in contrast to Thomson, did not publish anything on his travels. But he produced a printed catalogue of the views he had taken at Angkor. This catalogue, which seems to not have been quoted in the literature available to me, lists about 163 photographs of different sizes. It was mentioned by a certain "Geheimrath Dr. med. C. Clouth in Wiesbaden und Generalarzt in Warschau". "Dr. C. Clouth" is not known but for an occasional mention in a passenger list for the steam-ship *Rhein*, leaving New York for Bremen (*The New York Times*, 18 July 1883). His manuscript, written in ink, contains 18 folios with an average of 15 lines per page. The text on the back of each folio is written in another hand and in pencil. The back of the first folio is filled by an entry written by a certain "Heinrich Leonhard jun.", apparently a librarian who states that 17 photographs, the numbers of which he lists, are missing.⁶ Heinrich Leonhard gives the title of the portfolio which contained the photographs: "Ansichten der Ruinen von Angkor-Wat" (Views of the Ruins of Angkor Wat). The photographs once served the purpose of illustrating a lecture, the title of which is given on top of the cover page that also mentions the name of the lecturer, Dr. C. Clouth: "Vortrag über die Ruinen / von / Angkor-Wat (Alexandropolis)". Clouth informs the listener / reader on how he got these photographs: "Almost 20 years ago, on my way back to Hongkong, during a stay of several days' duration at Saigon, the capital of Cochinchina, I had the opportunity of acquiring those photographs, of which I have the honour to present to you today. Unfortunately I lost the *Catalogue* of the numbered views [...]" (italics added).⁷ On 28 April 2010 in Königstein, Germany, the manuscript and the portfolio with the photographs were sold at an auction⁸ and due to the benevolence of a French dealer, Monsieur Philippe D., I had the chance to see the whole lot before its dispersal at auctions in Paris⁹ and sales at other places. The importance of these photographs lies in the fact that not a single view is either signed and / or numbered in the negative by Gsell or anybody else. The numbers on these photographs were written on small paper labels which were pasted in the lower right corner of each photograph [see Figs. 24.1 and 24.4].

This sufficiently shows that it was only at a later stage that Gsell signed and numbered his larger views of Angkor and numbered the smaller ones.¹⁰ These signatures on the print may either appear in white or in black script. In case of the latter, the signature was incised, mirror-reversed, on the negative: the layer on the glass plate was accordingly scratched out, a process which is irreversible. In case of the former, the signature was written normally on a piece of thin transparent material, such as a sheet of mica, and affixed to the plate at the place where the signature and / or number was to appear. This type of signature and / or numbering mostly appears on Gsell's views taken at Angkor (*Des photographes* 2001: 148 for Gsell 160; 152–3 for Gsell 44; 159 for Gsell 116; 168 for Gsell 102; 181 top for Gsell 27).¹¹ For a white background on the print it was advisable to scratch the signature onto the plate, so it would come out black in the print. In case of a black background the second method was applied. These were the original processes for permanently marking and numbering the prints on the front.

At a later stage, the numbers were crudely incised onto the plate and could appear almost anywhere on the print. This probably must have happened after Gsell had passed away, especially since these plates suffered from additional, unintended scratches, visible as black claw marks on the prints (*Des*



Fig. 24.1: E. Gsell's Angkor views, catalogue number 20, unsigned, but numbered on a paper label, lower right. June–July 1866 (h. 21.6 x w. 29.7cm) [Private collection].

photographes 2001: 173 for Gsell 142, 175 for Gsell 133). Occasionally, one comes across prints with the original signature and number in white in addition to the later, crudely incised number in black (*Des photographes* 2001: 156–7 for Gsell 139; for the same, produced on the basis of a lantern slide and hence cropped print, see Loiseau 2006: 155). Gsell's photographs were not reproduced in a publication with actual, tipped in views, which was the privilege of Thomson and his first book. They were transformed into xylographs which illustrated the reports published by Garnier and Delaporte. These xylographs or woodcuts seem to document the approximately 163 views of the Gsell catalogue taken during Gsell's first stay at Angkor in 1866. Amongst the approximately 163 numbered views no photograph shows members of the second expedition under Delaporte. The first report, published by Garnier in *Le Tour du Monde* in 1871, reproduces woodcuts after the following photographs of Gsell's Angkor catalogue: 1871: 1 = Gsell 16; 5¹² = Gsell (number not known; for a reproduction see Borgé and Viasnoff 2002: 140, bottom) similar to Gsell 20, [our Fig. 1]; 9 = Gsell 122; 13 = Gsell 116; 16 = Gsell 42; 19 = Gsell 119; 21 = Gsell 50; 29 = Gsell 163. These woodcuts are unreliable in comparison to the photographs which they intend to reproduce. The same photograph engraved by two different artists may result in two rather different illustrations. To give an example, a xylograph after Gsell's catalogue no. 116 (*Des photographes* 2001: 159) appears in both Garnier 1871: 13 and in Delaporte 1880: 11. The version published in Garnier 1871 adds two monks in the lower right hand corner, which are not in the original photograph. Delaporte's rather simplified version has no monks but adds mythical beings to the architecture, which are also not in the original. Similar differences are apparent in the treatment of Gsell's cat. no. 119 reproduced by both Garnier (1871: 19) and Delaporte (1880: 215). The situation becomes even more difficult, when the engraver produced a woodcut which, in comparison to the model, is mirror-reversed. This happened to Gsell's cat. no. 163, most reproductions of which are cropped (Le Bonheur 1989: 248, Dagens 1989:

49, Lacouture 2005: 38). The woodcut based on this photograph is a mirror image (Garnier 1871: 29). Without any commentary, this reversed image is reproduced to this day as an illustration of the six leading members of the 1866 expedition to Angkor (Huber 2009: 11). Since some authors identify the six persons on the basis of the original photograph (Gsell 163) and some on the basis of the woodcut, the resulting confusion is perfect as the identification of these six persons may change from one author to another. The most magnificent photographic reproduction of Gsell 163 (Lacouture 2003: 38) gives the names of the sitters in the wrong sequence.

That Gsell's Angkor catalogue was not just hand-written but actually printed as shown by various albums, in which the printed identification that appears below Gsell's photograph was clipped from the printed text of the catalogue and pasted below the view as in our Figure 24.4, the label of which reads:

“131. [= Gsell's cat. no.] Angcor-wat: Côté droit de la façade (vue / prise du haut du grand escalier)”.

Gsell's signature and number appear in white script in the lower left corner of the view, but that might not be visible in this reproduction. At times, the titles given below the woodcuts closely resemble the titles in Gsell's catalogue. Gsell's Angkor photo cat. no. 116 is titled in his catalogue: “116. Angcor-wat: Angle extérieur où se trouve / l'escalier conduisant du 1^{er} au 2^e étage”. The woodcut based on this view is identified: “Angcor Wat: Angle exterieur des galeries qui conduisent du premier au deuxième étage” (1871: 13). Gsell's Angkor photo no. 149 is titled in his catalogue: “149. Angcor-wat: Tour d'angle du 2^e étage”. The woodcut based on this photograph is labeled: “Angcor Wat: Tour d'angle du second étage” (1871: 19).

The Angkor Views of Gsell and Thomson: A Few Similarities

A number of Gsell's views of Angkor recall some photographs by Thomson, taken only a few months earlier. Gsell 116 (*Des photographes* 2001: 159) bears a striking resemblance to Thomson 1867: plate VIII. Thomson included a Western gentleman in his view (Mr. Kennedy?), which is probably the reason why in one of the corresponding woodcuts (Garnier 1871: 13) two men were added by the graphic artist. Gsell 20 [Fig. 24.1] is reminiscent of Thomson 1867: plates I–III, a view composed of three prints in parallel, which is probably the reason why the corresponding woodcut (1871: 5) appears to be somewhat horizontally stretched, as Gsell's view is based only on one exposure. Thomson's plate IX is echoed by Gsell's cat. no. 115, while Gsell's cat. no. 114 reminds us of Thomson's plate XVI. Plates X–XII, another view composed of three prints (“Westward View from the Central Tower”), is also repeated in three parallel views by Gsell, nos. 129, 130 and 131 [Figs. 24.2, 24.3 and 24.4]. Whether Gsell was asked by de Lagrée, who had seen Thomson's views, to produce the same composition or whether this was Gsell's own idea will probably remain an unsolved question.

Gsell's “Backup Copies”

A few of Gsell's views of Angkor seem to be duplicates. A closer examination, however, reveal that they are not. A backup copy is generally a second photograph taken of a particular view, but, compared to the “first” negative, it is often produced on a smaller surface, i.e., its glass plate, and hence also the print obtained from it, is of smaller dimensions. This was done to avoid a total loss in case of an accidental drop of the box with the glass plates, as a large glass plate was more likely to crack than a small one. Gsell's cat. no. 32, showing some of the habitations of the Siamese monks at Angkor [Fig. 24.5], also exists in an apparently somewhat smaller version, titled “Habitation des Bonzes, intérieure” (Lacouture 2005: 40, centre). Thomson also took smaller sized views (about 9 x 8cm) at Angkor, which did not make it into his first publication. One of them shows the “Huts at Nakhorn [sic] Wat” (Ginsburg 2000: 45, no. 23c) as well. Of some of Gsell's smaller prints of sculptures — or fragments thereof (see Lacouture 2005: 42 bottom for Gsell's cat. no. 109) — two similar photographs may exist. Gsell's cat. no. 21, a kind of a “bejewelled Buddha”, to give an example, exists in two slightly different versions, apparently only one of which became part of Gsell's catalogue of Angkor views.



Fig. 24.2: Gsell's cat. no. 129. Signed and numbered, lower left: "Gsell 129." Left part of a three-part panoramic view. June-July 1866 (h. 17.3 x w. 24.0cm) [Private collection].



Fig. 24.3: Gsell's cat. no. 130. Neither signed nor numbered. Central part of a three-part panoramic view. June-July 1866 (h. 17.4 x w. 23.3cm) [Private collection].





Fig. 24.4: Gsell, cat. no. 131. Signed and numbered, lower left: "E. Gsell / 131." [Right part of a three-part panoramic view with clipped title from Gsell's printed catalogue. June-July 1866 (h. 17.5 x w. 23cm).]



Fig. 24.5: Gsell's cat. no. 32. Unsigned but numbered on a paper label, lower right. June-July 1866 (h. 20.4 x w. 26.6cm) [Private collection].



Gsell's Second Visit to Angkor

From the 163 numbered views about a dozen are not known to me, but it seems unlikely that any of these photographs were made during Gsell's second visit in 1873. By that time, Anna Leonewens's book had already been published (Leonewens 1870), illustrated with images of Angkor based on Thomson's photographs. Leonewens's claims (1870: title page) that she received the photographs from "the king of Siam" is probably not entirely true, as Thomson himself mentions that she got the photographs from him (Thomson 1875: 130: "We regret, however, to discover this authoress, when she describes the Cambodian ruins, falling into a number of grave errors which might, some of them, have been avoided had she studied my photographs more carefully when she did me the honour of selecting them to illustrate her work").¹³ In any event, these woodcuts enjoyed a wide circulation, while the French researchers, possibly due to the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) could publish their engraved photographs of Angkor only in 1871.

Gsell's views from 1873 show, amongst others, a dozen European people and three local men around Delaporte, who is the fourth from right, at Angkor Wat, a place where Gsell had taken one of his best-known views [Fig. 24.1] seven years earlier [Fig. 24.6]. In another view [Fig. 24.7], Delaporte appears as the only freestanding, bearded man with his hands at the back. In his book, Delaporte apparently mentions less than 12 French individuals who accompanied him to Angkor.¹⁴

The Fate of Gsell's Views of Angkor After His Death

It appears that a certain "O. Wegener" succeeded Gsell as the professional photographer at Saigon (Ghesquière 2001: 225). After him, a certain "Vidal" or "Salin-Vidal" continued the business until his passing away on 4 December 1883 (Ghesquière 2001: 225). It was probable that M[ax?] Martin, an Austrian photographer from Vienna (Vincent 1997: 40–1), already had a studio in Saigon during the late



Fig. 24.6: E. Gsell: Members of the "Mission d'exploration des monuments Khmers" at Angkor. 2nd half of 1873 (h. 12.1 x w. 17.0cm) [Private collection].



Fig. 24.7: E. Gsell: A local Siamese monk with members of the “Mission d’exploration des monuments Khmers” at Angkor. 2nd half of 1873 (h. 15.4 x w. 21.2cm) [Private collection].

1880s (Vincent 1997: 27). Later he moved to Haiphong, Tonkin, from where he received orders from the local French government, a fact that enraged another, albeit later, French photographer of Angkor (Dieulefils 1909), Pierre-Marie Alexis Dieulefils (1862–1937) at Hanoi, Tonkin. Martin claims on the back of his cabinet card-photographs, that he is (or was) photographer to “S[a] M[ajesté] Le Roi des Siam, S[on] A[ltesse] I[mpériale] l’Archiduc d’ Autriche” and “S[on] A[ltesse] R[oyale] Le Duc de Gênes”. Apart from having worked for these illustrious people, Martin also claims to have taken photographs at Angkor, especially since his signature in white lettering, “M. Martin” cannot be overlooked [Fig. 24.8]. This view, however, was not taken by Martin, but by Gsell; it is number 28 from his catalogue of Angkor views and even has the clipped title from Gsell’s catalogue below the photograph: “28. Angcor-wat: Esplanade de la grande / façade”. Martin must have got hold of this otherwise unsigned and unnumbered but mounted print, which he had photographically copied in order to produce prints with his signature from this newly made copy-negative. As expected, Martin’s version, in comparison to Gsell’s original, is cropped on all four sides. Besides, it was not copied properly, as the horizontal line in Martin’s copy [Fig. 24.8], appears to be tilted. How many of Gsell’s Angkor views Martin actually copied in order to market them as his own product is not known, but it is certain that Martin assimilated quite a number of Gsell’s prints in this way. Another, more evident example is presented here by Figure 24.9. The white signature “M. Martin” appears in the lower part of the view, to the left of its centre. To the left of this signature a clumsily incised black lettered “40” becomes apparent. This number coincides with Gsell’s catalogue of Angkor views. Here, Martin got hold of a later print, which was already marked by the numbers which were crudely scratched into the negative. Needless to say, Martin’s copy is cropped in comparison to Gsell’s original print.

By the early 20th century, Gsell’s name was forgotten, but not his work. The same periodical that published xylographs after Gsell’s views of Angkor in 1871 printed an article on the ruins of Angkor by

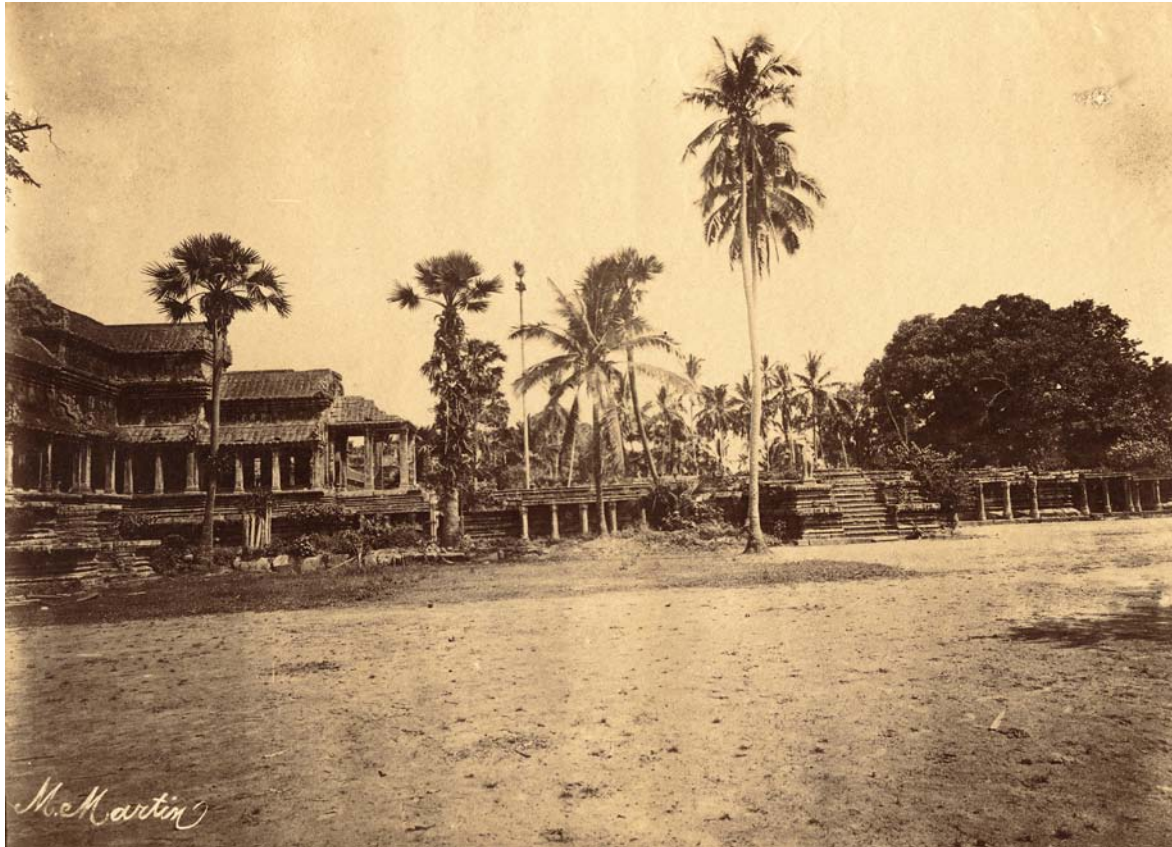


Fig. 24.8: Gsell's cat. no. 28, recycled by M. Martin, Haiphong, with his signature "M. Martin", lower left (h. 16.7 x w. 22.9cm). [Collection: Günter Heil.]



Fig. 24.9: Gsell's cat. no. 40, recycled by M. Martin, Haiphong, with his signature "M. Martin", lower left (h. 19.3 x 24.3cm). [Collection: Günter Heil.]



a certain Vicomte Bernard de Miramon-Fargues (1866–1908) on 5 August 1905. The first page of this paper informs the reader that the photographs reproduced in this issue are from Madame la Comtesse de Miramon-Fargues (Miramon-Fargues 1905: 361). The majority of the reproduced photographs, however, stems from Émile Gsell, who is nowhere credited for his work. 1905: 361 top is Gsell's cat. no. 127; 361 bottom = Gsell 24; 362 = Gsell 134; 366 = Gsell 35; 367 top = Gsell 37; 367 bottom = Gsell 20 [Fig. 24.1]; 368 = Gsell 46; 369 = Gsell 137; 370 = Gsell, unnumbered view outside Angkor; 372 = Gsell 9.

Gsell and Thomson were almost of the same age. Gsell photographed Angkor only a few months after Thomson, but the latter outlived the former by about 42 years with the consequence that Thomson still ranks amongst the most celebrated photographers of all times whereas Gsell seems almost to be forgotten. It is high time that Gsell's œuvre be fully documented and made accessible to the public. Once this happens, his photographs will be properly valued and appreciated.

Notes

1. Alexander Henri Mouhot (1826–61).
2. Mouhot 1864. For the description of Angkor ("Ongcor") and surrounding monuments, see vol. I, chapters XII–XIII, quoted here after the reprint published in Bangkok, 2009, by White Lotus Co.
3. Ernest Marc Louis de Gonzague Doudart de Lagrée (1823–68).
4. Marie Joseph François (Francis) Garnier (1839–73).
5. Delaporte 1880 title page / page 222, bottom = Gsell 95; p. 11 = Gsell 116; p. 200 = Gsell 142; p. 212 = Gsell 18; p. 213 = Gsell 45; p. 215 = Gsell 119; p. 217 = Gsell 45; p. 227 = Gsell 47; p. 231 = Gsell 27; p. 321 = Gsell 33; p. 337 = Gsell 93; p. 346 = Gsell 115; p. 316, no. 3 = Gsell 106; p. 316, no. 2 = Gsell [number not known]. The numbers following "Gsell" refer to his catalogue, for which see below.
6. "Diese nummerierten Blätter müssen von früheren Beschauern auf irgendwelche Weise zurück behalten worden sein".
7. "Vor nahezu 20 Jahren hatte ich auf meiner Rückreise nach Hongkong bei einem mehrtägigen Aufenthalte in Saigon, der Hauptstadt von Cochinchina, Gelegenheit, die Photographien zu erwerben, welche ich Ihnen heute vor zuführen die Ehre habe. Leider ist mir der Catalogue der nummerierten Bilder abhanden gekommen [...]".
8. Reiss & Sohn oHG, 61462 Königstein im Taunus, Auction 136, 28–29 April 2010, *Geographie, Reisen, Atlanten* [etc.], p. 47, lot 3105: Kambodscha – Angkor Wat. The online catalogue had three reproductions which are, however, not present in the printed catalogue.
9. Ader-Nordmann / Kapandji Morhange, Paris: *Photographies Anciennes et Modernes et Contemporaines*. Vente du Dimanche 21 novembre 2010, p. 33, lot 106: Emile Gsell (1838–79), Angkor, c. 1866. Temple d'Angkor Vat. Enceintes. Vues des temples (Prasat Kravan, Bayon...). Ruines. Portes. Bas reliefs. Portfolio en tissu, contenant 92 épreuves sur papier albuminé, montées sur cartons avec étiquettes numérotées. Formats des épreuves: de 10 x 8 à 20.5 x 29cm. [With the reproductions of Gsell 116 and Gsell 139].
10. For a published, unsigned, as well as unnumbered view, see *Des Photographes* 2001: 172 which corresponds to no. 145 of Gsell's catalogue.
11. For a cropped print of this small-sized photograph see Borgé and Viasnoff 2002: 94 or Lacouture 2005: 43.
12. A cropped version of this woodcut is published in Reclus 1885: 895.
13. For Thomson's Angkor photographs turned into woodcuts, see Leonewens 1870: illustrations facing pp. 306 [see Ginsburg 2000: 25, 23B] and 310. Thomson, after all, did not protest, when Leonewens (1870: vii) called him an "English photographer". Thomson, born in Edinburgh, was Scottish.
14. M. Bouillet, ingénieur hydrographe; M. Ratte, ingénieur civil; M. le docteur Julien, délégué du Musée; M. le docteur Harmand, médecin de la Marine; M. Faraut, conducteur des ponts et chaussées; M. Filoz, capitaine d'infanterie de marine; M. Penaud, mécanicien; Capitaine Filoz; M. Moura.

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