



Erotic Art Photography

Alexandre Dupouy - Private Collections

Erotic photo art has lost much of its exquisite soul since Playboy and other girlie monthlies repackaged the human body for mass-market consumption. Like much painting, sculpture and engraving, since its beginning photography has also been at the service of eroticism. This collection presents erotic photographs from the beginning of photography until the years just before World War II. It explores the evolution of the genre and its origins in France, and its journey from public distrust to the large audience it enjoys today.

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Alexandre Dupouy Erotic Photography

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Monsieur X, gelatin silver print, 24 × 18 cm (9.6 × 7.2 in), c. 1935



1 – Henri Oltramare, № 192, gelatin silver print, 11,7 × 15,7 cm (4.7 × 6.3 in), c. 1900













2 – Albert Wyndham, negatives proposed on the interior pages of catalogue of photographs of *Études Académiques de Nu*, Floris Editions, 1925



3 – The Artistic Nude, № 12, November 1, 1904

Preface



4 – Anonymous, gelatin silver print, 18 × 23,6 cm (7.2 × 9.4 in), c. 1900



5 – Anonymous, blank-backed postcard, 14 × 9 cm (5.6 × 3.6 in), c. 1925

Could a passion for collecting things be hereditary? This serious existential question was soon resolved as far as I was concerned when, having been obliged to give up playing games outside because of the summer storms of 1966, I sought refuge in the enormous attic of the family home. Thousands of old postcards were strewn all over the floor. As I began picking them up, I suddenly entered an unknown world, where gentlemen in top hats rubbed shoulders with ladies collapsing under the weight of enormous many coloured hats. I discovered professions no longer practised, old fashioned advertisements extolling the virtues of quack medicines and airship disasters.

Fascinated by this immersion in another time, with my grandmother's blessing I took this antique correspondance away. I then began to study these pictures and strove to classify them by subject matter in order to make this world more coherent. Thus began a real passion, replacing my first vocation for archaeology. However, was I really so far from my former interest? In fact, I was going to become an iconographical archaeologist.

The attics of all the people I knew became my excavation sites, and on these 'forays' I acquired a very different knowledge from that taught to me by my teachers. I began to accumulate a treasure trove of old papers: stamps, books, photos and of course those famous postcards. They were a testament to the facets of history, those of princes, wars, and events, but especially of everyday life. Reading the correspondance and the captions on my little bits of card gave me an insight into the intimate lives of the authors and their everyday worries, pleasures, sadnesses and loves. Especially loves, as love letters have always been the richest form of correspondance, and the beginning of the 20th century proliferated with those rather sickly sentimental postcards known as 'fantasies' which proclaimed melancholy expressions of emotion. Then, to my surprise I discovered among them pictures of smiling naked women!

Most of these voluptuous missives were addressed to soldiers during the Great War by female pen-friends who identified with these suggestive effigies.

I was still only an adolescent, and of course I experienced a great deal of turmoil which both revealed and refined the path I would take in life. I decided to specialise in the history of eroticism and particularly in photography.

The casual jobs I had then allowed me sufficient time to discover the secrets of the auction house l'Hôtel Drouot, the Mecca of collections. In 1973 it was not yet the modern building that we know today but an old 19th century building with smells and wooden floors that reminded me of the attics. It was swarming with a bustling crowd oblivious to any form of courtesy, a closed world with a moral code which was difficult for the novice to understand, where each looked after his own interests. I was astounded by the amounts of money spent in a second by the lifting of a finger by gentlemen who appeared at first glance to be insignificant. The heroes of my childhood were at once replaced by these curious characters, and for a long time I showed a lack of interest in any form of elegance. I discovered in this building crammed full of history that education and fortune have nothing to do with obvious signs of wealth. At this time, postcards and photographs were not listed in the catalogues and no-one dreamed of selling them individually. They were sold by the handful, in large square wicker baskets which could contain up to three or four thousand examples. If I remember rightly, you could pick one of them up for no more than forty francs. I began to build up a collection, and together with anything to do with books and 'old papers', I thus became a well known dealer. A dealer yes, but first and foremost a collector.

Having been bitten by the bug of eroticism, I have since acquired a large number of erotic pictures. The little naked woman from the Great War is now surrounded by thousands of sisters, each one more fantastic than the others. The volume of this visual documentation is such that there remain many enigmas that I am striving to resolve.



6 – Anonymous, № XXXIII, albumen print, 21 × 27 cm (8.4 × 10.8 in), c. 1870

Introduction



7 – Monsieur X, gelatin silver print, 24 × 18 cm (9.6 × 7.2 in), c. 1935



8 – Anonymous, gelatin silver print, 18 × 13 cm (7.2 × 5.2 in), c. 1935

The aim of this History of Erotic Photography is to present previously unpublished images, taking care to avoid those well known images taken by famous photographers which have already been the subject of monographs or numerous publications. The selection made here has no encyclopaedic value, and is based on eminently suggestive criteria. It is neither about presenting an exhaustive inventory, nor a specific objective. Choosing images is above all an expression of

one's own personal tastes, one's infatuation for those women of old-fashioned charms, who, thanks to the wonder of the photographic miracle, have been preserved from the ravages of age and time.

It should be pointed out that the first decades of erotic photography were essentially French. The main reason for this is that photography was first developed in France, where research into new procedures of iconographic reproduction began in the 18th century. In the 19th century liberalism was more widespread in France than elsewhere. Licentious French images were imported into Italy, Spain, the United States, Germany and Great Britain, as their own production was much more limited due to the fact that it was more severely repressed.

As far as the first century of the history of photography is concerned (1839–1939), all the international collections both old and contemporary comprise mainly French images. When the English authors Graham Ovenden and Peter Mendes entitled their work “Victorian Erotic Photography”, it was in fact largely made up of works of Parisian origin from Belloc, Braquehais, Durieu, Vallou and Villeneuve. When the American, Richard Merkin, professor at the Rhode Island School of Design, presented his collection in the work entitled “Velvet Eden”, the majority of the images are French. The first American images that he selected date from 1920, the first German ones from 1930, and together they only represent a tiny fraction of the total number. It is the same thing with such prolific collections as those of Uwe Scheid, the Kinsey Institute or even French collections both at museum level (the prints exhibition room of the National Library of France) and those in private hands.

One of the leading reference works in the field of erotic photography “Die, Erotik in der photographie” (three volumes published by half a dozen eminent doctors in Vienna in 1931) brings together the best of the German collections of the period and includes several hundred reproductions, the minority being German and Austrian, whereas the French production accounts for the majority of the period preceding the First World War.



9 – “Au trèfle” brand, phototype, printed-back postcard, 14 × 9 cm (5.6 × 3.6 in), c. 1908

However, this French particularity and specificity lessens throughout the 20th century and has nowadays completely disappeared. The same goes for all themes covered by photography.

Whatever the reason, the history of this French specificity could not have been told without the protection of this heritage by a number of passionate collectors (it may be a lewd and playful heritage, but it is representative of the morals and mentality of each period).

In paying homage to them we should mention especially:

Pierre Louÿs (1870–1925) writer, booklover, obsessed by the written word, was an untiring researcher into sexuality. He used his collections of photographs in order to draw up curious tables and reports for the “Ethnological observations of Parisian women of the lower classes”. The author of “Aphrodite” thought nothing of going behind the lens to capture the facial expressions of his mistresses Lucie Delormel and Marie de Regnier or even his Algerian housekeeper Zohra. As luck would have it, his death did not entail the burning of his collections by the family as is often the case in the estates of collectors of eroticism. His heirs were more interested in money than in morality, and put up for auction around eight hundred kilos of documents of a more or less pornographic nature, much to the pleasure of collectors. A large part of this collection was photographs.



10 – Monsieur X, gelatin silver print, 24 × 18 cm (9.6 × 7.2 in), c. 1935



11 – A. Noyer Editions, № 204, blank-backed postcard, 14 × 9 cm (5.6 × 3.6 in), c. 1925



12 – Anonymous, blank-backed postcard, 14 × 9 cm (5.6 × 3.6 in), c. 1905

Paul Caron (19th century) of whom we know little, left most of his collection to the National Library of France. This included several hand written descriptions on the backs of some of the images, when he received information about them.

André Dignimont (1891–1965) painter of Parisian women of loose morals, costume designer for the theatre, and eclectic illustrator who could go from Oscar Wilde to Francis Carco, Dignimont was also a great collector of different types of historical documents. He had amassed a collection of which pride of place went to the sign of a brothel which used to be located at 106 avenue de Suffren. This object, decorated with cherubs and the symbol of the resistance of those who were nostalgic about the great brothels, had been immortalised by the photographer Eugène Atget followed by the painter Clovis Trouille. Erotic photography occupied pride of place in this large collection. He was a friend of Michel Simon and an accomplice of Galthier Boissière and his team at the journal “Le Crapouillot” where “big Dig,” as Colette used to call him, collaborated on several articles on eroticism and sexuality. One of his friends, the painter Yves Brayer, described Dignimont as “being part of that generation of the First World War who believed themselves to be happy as a reaction to the war.”

Michel Simon (1895–1975) The famous actor did not hide his infatuation for all things sexual and did not hesitate to describe himself as a lover of debauchery. After his death, his heirs found in his house at Noisy-le-Grand a veritable Ali Baba’s cave full of books, objects and photographs. He had acquired part of the estate of Pierre Louÿs. Most of this collection, the most important in the world in terms of quantity and quality, was broken up for auction in 1977 in Paris and Lyon in several sales which were presented as the “secret collection of a well – known connoisseur,” where the photographs were sold by the thousand in single lots, something which would upset collectors today.

The curious and obsessional minds of these collectors ensured the protection of a heritage for which the institutions had no interest for a long time. It is in the light of these private initiatives that a history of erotic photography takes shape whose beginnings can be defined in four distinct periods.

1850–1860 The daguerreotypes were intended for a wealthy clientele. Afterwards, different photographic procedures, especially on paper, enabled the duplication of images.

1861–1913 Imperial and republican censorship obliged photographers to work in an academic atmosphere hypocritically aimed at helping the traditional fine arts of painting and sculpture, or in total anonymity, indulging in sheer abandon when intended for lovers of pornography. This anonymity was unavoidable in order to escape the wrath of justice and the discomfort of prisons, but was profitable when it came to illustrating the most shocking subjects.

1914–1918 With postcards nude photography became a common sight. Hundreds of thousands of these little cards depicted the comforting image of a desirable woman on the front with the tacit approval of the authorities.

1919–1939 With the war over, women, having suffered a number of difficulties and sorrows in remaining at home by themselves, became emancipated. They discovered, among other things, that they were fully capable of doing a man’s job. Their attitudes changed. For the photographer, they no longer posed in an academic manner in order to serve as models for hypothetical artists. They were free and this feeling showed in their images.



13 – M. Boulanger, Idea 386, printed-back postcard, 14 × 9 cm (5.6 × 3.6 in), c. 1915



14 – M. Boulanger, Idea 627, printed-back postcard, 14 × 9 cm (5.6 × 3.6 in), c. 1915

The Academic Alibi



15 – Anonymous, hand-painted stereoscopic daguerreotype, 8 × 17 cm (3.2 × 6.8 in), c. 1853



16 – Anonymous, hand-painted stereoscopic daguerreotype, 8 × 17 cm (3.2 × 6.8 in), c. 1853



17 – Anonymous, hand-painted stereoscopic daguerreotype, 8 × 17 cm (3.2 × 6.8 in), c. 1853



18 – Anonymous, hand-painted stereoscopic daguerreotype, 8 × 17 cm (3.2 × 6.8 in), c. 1853

Whether it be painting, sculpture, engraving or lithography, all of these forms of art have been at the service of eroticism from their beginnings. Photography is no exception to the rule. The first photographic processes, the daguerreotypes, were enriched from conception by nudes, which offered an imagery reminiscent of the painting of the time, albeit in a more realistic and crude manner.

On the 19th of August 1839, Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre, having given up his activities as a painter and set decorator, presented his invention during a public meeting of the Science Academy. It was a huge success and he was granted a pension, which he shared with Isidore Niepce, the son of his partner Nicéphore, who died in 1833.

In exchange, in a display of generosity never to be seen again, the French State acquired the rights of the process and placed them graciously at the disposal of apprentice photographers the world over.

Describing the conception of the first photographic images leaves one a little lost for words. How were researchers able to come up with a formula so hard on the sense of smell; that magic formula allowing the reproduction, in two dimensions, of what the naked eye offers daily basis? The operation is complicated and the number of manipulations and substances to complete it seems limitless. In order to produce a daguerreotype, you need a copper plate, which is then silver-plated and then cleaned and polished meticulously with pumice stone powder. The plate is covered with a thin coat of silver iodide in an iodising box. This has to be done by candlelight or with a slightly open door, in order to avoid any premature sensitisation to light. It is then placed in a dark room in order to be exposed for an undetermined period of time, defined only by the artist's instinct, the result depending on the temperature, humidity, the weather and the exposure time. The plate has still not changed.



19 – Anonymous, albumen print mounted on board, visiting card, 10,3 × 6,5 cm (4.1 × 2.6 in), c. 1860

The image is revealed by holding it above a burner giving off mercury vapours (particularly nauseating and dangerous) that settle on the exposed parts. The operation comes to an end by washing the plate with very hot salty water. Colour is added by sticking on dry pigments using liquid Arabic gum. The daguerreotype was followed by the discovery of the ferrotype and ambrotype, positive processes with a one-off print, which like their predecessor were expensive to make, expensive to buy and therefore only intended for a well-off clientele.

Photography was born in France. The very first images are only of landscapes or reproductions of objects. It was very difficult to photograph nudes or take portraits given that a posing time of several minutes was required. However, this duration was reduced to tens of seconds shortly after. While the process became international, France retained its hegemony particularly with regards to erotic photography, which appeared immediately. The first nudes must have been taken as early as 1840. According to Sylvie Aubenas in her preface for “Obscenities,” a certain Noël-Marie Paimal Lebours, optician by trade, maintains he photographed a nude in 1841, while being very careful about appearing to be “the” precursor. The same year, Talbot discovered the calotype. This was the first negative, forefather of our modern celluloid films. As the calotype was on paper, the process was complicated, not very reliable and not very practical.

It was not until 1853, however, that real progress was made when the Englishman Frederick Scott Archer invented the negative on glass, which permitted reproduction on paper in unlimited quantity. From this date on, certain photographers made nudes their speciality. They mimicked artists and painters by making pastiches of their compositions and the use of accessories such as draping, columns and fabric. In fact, most of the precursors of photography came directly from painting. The interconnection between the two processes seemed obvious: photographers were inspired by painters, and painters made use of photography. With photography, artists no longer had to put up with models who either did not turn up or were late. Unlike models, who can often be offhand, photographic images are always at your disposal and are hardly ever late. Delacroix, ardent champion of the new art, was inspired by the images of his friend, the photographer Eugène Durieu, for his works. Ingrès appreciated “this automatic process”.



20 – André Disdéri, annex 652, albumen print mounted on board, visiting card, 10,3 × 6,5 cm (4.1 × 2.6 in), c. 1860



21 – Anonymous, albumen print mounted on board, visiting card, 10,3 × 6,5 cm (4.1 × 2.6 in), c. 1860

“How beautiful, how beautiful!” he declared to his students when contemplating a large print of antique marble. “Photography is such an admirable thing! Look, Gentlemen, who among us would be capable of such faithfulness, of that assurance in the interpretation of the lines, of that delicacy in the contours? Ah yes, to be sure Gentlemen, photography is very beautiful. It is very beautiful but we mustn’t say so!” Unlike the other fine arts, the very nature of photography means that it cannot idealise its subject, and when faced with a naked body, the boundary between art, the nude, eroticism and pornography is very difficult to define given that the differences are so much a question of culture and education.

It is obvious that what is erotic for some will be considered pornographic for others. From the very beginning of photography there was, on the one hand, a pornographic production; and, on the other hand, there was a production that was recorded and registered at the Print room of the Imperial Library under Napoléon III. This was later to become the National Library from the third republic on, in order to obtain authorisation to commercially exploit the negatives as “studies for painters” or “nudes” (“nude” refers to an undraped human figure, used since antiquity in painting and sculpture). The master forerunners of nude photography were all French. They were the heirs of the miniaturists of the 18th century. Their names were Auguste Belloc, Vallou de Villeneuve, Felix-Jacques-Antoine Moulin, Bruno Braquehais and Alexis Gouin. They worked in Paris, lived in the same district around the Grands Boulevards, knew each other and swapped their models, accessories and sometimes even their images, thus drawing a red herring across the trail of the police and making it difficult nowadays to attribute to one or the other these images that they wanted to be anonymous.

The appearance of the photographic nude, which was cruder than that of sculpture or painting, had difficulty in becoming a feature of artistic practice. With photography, the body is the reflection of reality and could no longer be touched up. Each image freezes a moment of truth, and it is sometimes better not to know the truth.

As proof of this, Félix Moulin was prosecuted and condemned by the authorities in 1851 to one month in prison and a fine of one hundred francs for affront to public decency for having taken “pornographic” daguerreotypes. Pretending to tow the line, the following year he deposited some sixty odd works on paper at the Print room of the Imperial Library thus allowing him to exploit these images commercially. Artists were relatively protected, as creation was not considered a crime in itself. Models and those selling images were more often and more severely condemned. In 1857, four models were each sentenced to six months in prison and a hundred franc fine.



22 – A. P. Schelchta, archimboldesque caricature against Napoléon III, albumen print mounted on board, visiting card, 10,3 × 6,5 cm (4.1 × 2.6 in), c. 1860

In spite of these difficulties, images were produced in France where they were circulated more freely than in the rest of the world and were exported to the rest of Europe, in particular to Victorian England where the climate was still more puritan. Most erotic daguerreotypes were composed of two almost identical images which, when placed in a stereoscopic viewfinder gave the impression of contours. This procedure enhanced, among other things, the plump curves of the model, and was a great success. With the arrival of paper as a medium, production and demand grew. The paper used changed with different discoveries. First there was salted paper, paper soaked in a solution of sodium chloride, a five percent solution of simple kitchen salt to which starch or gelatine was added. Then it was allowed to dry out before soaking it in a fifteen percent solution of silver nitrate. It was then left to dry out again, and then darkened directly, that is to say, the sheet of paper was in direct contact with the negative and exposed to sunlight. The process could take several hours in overcast weather. The operation was completed by fixing the image in a bath of sodium hyposulphite. It was sometimes toned beforehand with the help of gold salts and then washed with running water, preferably low in mineral content. This procedure by direct contact did not permit enlargement, as the size of the print obtained was the exact replica of the negative. Photographers were obliged to resort to large format cameras if they wanted to obtain large negatives.

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