

Albert-Kahn Museum

Albert Kahn's Archives of the Planet

Albert Kahn was born in 1860 in Marmoutier, Alsace. Coming from a family of merchants, he made it to the top in the banking world and settled in Boulogne-sur-Seine in 1892. Passionate about horticulture, he gradually built there a four-hectare landscaped garden and made it the nerve centre of his philanthropic enterprise. A laboratory for reflection, production and sociability, this Eden was a spectacular embodiment of the banker's ideals. Albert Kahn lived at a time of great upheaval and tried to understand the world in order to better influence its progress. The foundations he initiated and financed, such as Autour Du Monde travel grants, Autour Du Monde society, National committee for social and political studies, etc., promoted knowledge as well as action.

Marked by his travels around the world starting back in 1898, Kahn endeavoured to establish Archives of the Planet, a universal visual inventory intended to “capture all aspects, practices and ways of human activity, the fatal disappearance of which is only a matter of time.” He equipped operators with the latest photographic and cinematographic innovations developed by the Lumière brothers, and sent them to some fifty countries in order to chronicle the ever-changing world. A total of 72,000 autochromes, 4,000 stereocopies and 180,000 metres of film were collected. The autochrome was an early colour photography process patented in 1903 by the Lumière brothers in France and first marketed in 1907. It produced glass plate positives that could be viewed using diascope or projectors.

In 1912, the scientific direction of the Archives of the Planet was entrusted to the geographer Jean Brunhes, who chose to focus the taking of pictures on the relations between man, society and environment and emphasized the documentary significance of the collection in his lectures. The images were also shown to political, economic, intellectual and religious elites from around the world, invited by Albert Kahn to his residence. During their visits, these privileged guests immersed themselves in the cosmopolitan garden landscapes before exploring faraway places via autochromes and films gathered in the Archives of the Planet. A whole world was at their fingertips.

Following the stock market crash of 1929, the banker went bankrupt. His numerous projects were gradually abandoned and his Boulogne property, including the collections of photographs and films, was bought by the Seine Department in 1936. Albert Kahn died at his home on 13 November 1940 at the age of 80.

Following its creation in 1968, the Hauts-de-Seine Department became the owner of the site and the collections, and transformed the whole into a museum in 1986.

A New Museum

In autumn 2021, the new Albert-Kahn Departmental Museum will open in Boulogne-Billancourt, the cradle of the Archives of the Planet. It is a flagship project within the Vallée de la Culture in the Hauts-de-Seine Department, enabling us to understand Albert Kahn's legacy in a historical and intellectual context and to see the coherence of his documentation effort promoting peace and intercultural dialogue. The complementarity of the garden and the image collections, as well as innovative techniques aimed to make both yesterday's and today's visitors experience the diversity of the world, will also be highlighted.

A new building designed by Kengo Kuma will be erected on the grounds of the museum, the historic home of Albert Kahn since 1892, now owned by the Hauts-de-Seine Department. Inspired by Kahn's interest in Asia, the project presents features of traditional Japanese architecture, reinterpreted in harmonious dialogue with the garden and the historical buildings, which were renovated so as to accommodate the new tour of the museum whose scenography was entrusted to Scenorama studio.

The promise of a new museum, a place to “share the world,” builds on the banker's original philanthropic intentions. However, this sharing is no longer limited to an enlightened elite capable of influencing planetary governance, as Albert Kahn had suggested, but it opens up to the general public, providing the key to understanding our ever-changing world from the first decades of the 20th century to the present day.

Now on display at the Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine in Paris:

Paris 1910-1937. Promenades through the Albert-Kahn collections

Exhibition outside the walls of the Albert-Kahn Departmental Museum, open until 12 January 2021

Fruit of a collaboration between the Albert-Kahn Departmental Museum and the Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine in Paris, the exhibition offers a new perspective on the French capital, based on an atypical collection of images taken in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century by the operators of the Archives of the Planet.

Albert Kahn's photographers and filmmakers roamed the city's streets for almost three decades, gathering nearly 5,000 autochromes and 90,000 meters of black-and-white film and building up one of the most important collections about Paris of the early 20th century.

The exhibition highlights the collection's close links to the major urban issues that accompanied the transformation of Paris between 1910 and 1937. The autochromes and films take the visitors on a poetic walk through the City of Light, captured in its duality, between *Persistences* and *Metamorphoses*. They depict the shift from a timeless capital going through the process of heritagisation - valuing its past - to a modern metropolis eager for progress.

Viewed through the prism of autochromes, Paris appears undeniably strange, as if deprived of its inhabitants - offering a striking parallel to the recent lockdown. Complementing the still images, the black-and-white films show the pulse of the capital, the effervescence of its Grands Boulevards, festivities and public events punctuating the daily lives of the locals.

Albert Kahn's collections paint a rare portrait of Paris - a multifaceted city of disturbing and fascinating beauty.

Operators' bios

Paul Castelnau (1880-1944)

After studying geography, Paul Castelnau worked for the Archives of the Planet from 1917 to 1919. Member of the Geographical Service and of the French Army Film and Photographic Unit during the first world war, he co-directed the ethnographic documentary *Voyage en Terre de Feu* (Journey to the Land of Fire) in 1926, commissioned by the French Geographical Society.

Georges Chevalier (1882-1967)

Trained in photography and recommended to Albert Kahn by Auguste Léon, Georges Chevalier entered the service of Kahn in 1913 and completed a number of assignments for him. He was the head of the Archives of the Planet from 1936 to 1949, appointed by the Seine Department, which became the new owner of the Albert-Kahn collection.

Fernand Cuville (1887-1927)

Cuville was a professional photographer and a member of the French Army Film and Photographic Unit. Between 1917 and 1919, he took part in an autochrome mission co-financed by Albert-Kahn, who then employed him until 1921.

Roger Dumas (1891-1972)

Framer and later professional portrait photographer, Roger Dumas entered the service of Albert Kahn at the age of 29. He worked for the Archives of the Planet from 1920 to 1931 as master of autochrome and cinematography, and later he invented an industrial process of colour film.

Frédéric Gadmer (1878-1954)

Frédéric Gadmer was a professional photographer who worked for Kahn from 1919 to 1932. He mastered both autochrome and black-and-white cinematography, which he used especially on his missions in Dahome (today's Benin) in 1930. After the end of his collaboration with the Archives of the Planet, he worked as a photographer for a postcard company.

Auguste Leon (1857-1942)

First professional operator recruited for the project of the Archives of the Planet in 1909, he became the head of Albert Kahn's photographic laboratory in 1919. Thanks to his extraordinary technical skill, he was able to produce black-and-white photographs, stereoscopic images (creating the illusion of depth) and autochromes at the same time.

Stéphane Passet (1875-1941)

A soldier by training and an adventurer at heart, Stéphane Passet worked for the Archives of the Planet from 1912 to 1919, and from 1929 to 1930, travelling the steppes of Mongolia as well as various regions of India. He later directed two fiction films: *La Belle au bois dormant* (Sleeping Beauty, 1922) and *La Damnation de Faust* (Faust's Damnation, 1925).