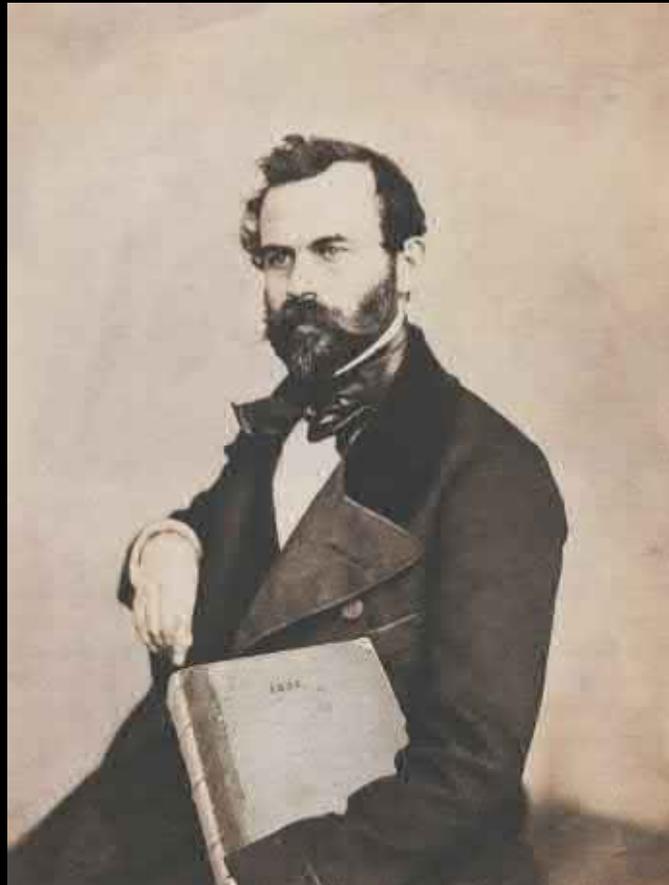


# The Secret of Edouard Baldus



**Young man from Gruenebach**  
**Master of Photography**  
**Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur**

...

**Peter Lindlein**

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My thanks to  
Malcolm R. Daniel and the  
Metropolitan Museum of Art  
New York

2010/2021

## 1. Eduard Baldus – A Young Man from Gruenebach

1813: In the hamlet Grünebach in the parish Kirchen live only a few dozen families. For several generations, the Baldus, have house and some land there. These are turbulent times in Europe and also in our homeland. Sayn-Altenkirchen belonged for several years to the Duchy of Nassau, which had joined the 1808 Confederation of the Rhine, which supported Napoleon Bonaparte.

In these unstable times, on Sunday, the 5th of June 1813 in Grünebach a son is born to Johann Peter Baldus and his wife Elizabeth, nee Weber Mudersbach. Two days later he is baptized in Kirchen on the name 'Eduard' - a most momentous naming. The name, although originating from the Germanic-speaking world, is taken from the French, Edouard, and originally meant "guardian of the treasure." Eduard was their heir, and after the daughter Catherine their second child - and six more should follow until 1832.<sup>1</sup>



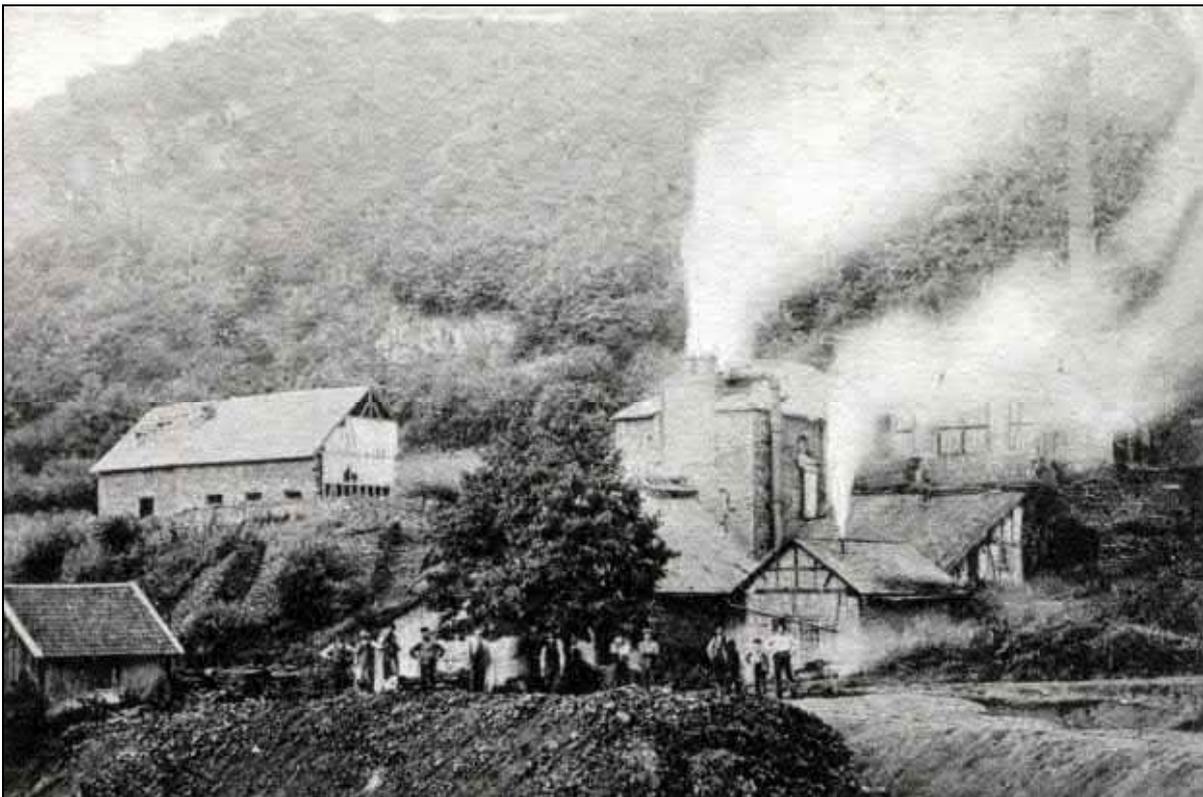
Birthplace of Eduard Baldus - House of the Baldus Family in Grünebach

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<sup>1</sup> Personal data was adopted from the notes in the work of Malcolm Daniel, who got his information from communication with pastor Hartwig Honecker at the Catholic Church St. Michael in Kirchen (Sieg) in 1990, who had sent him corresponding information from old parish registers.

At the time of Eduard's birth Napoleon's grenadiers had occupied parts of Sayn-Altenkirchen in the Duchy of Nassau in Germany. However, in those days nobody imagines that France will be Eduard's destiny. Why should it? Napoleon's Russian campaign fails and with the wars of liberation still in the course of Edward's year of birth, Blücher's Prussians with their allied Russians march into the area. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815 the region of present-day district Altenkirchen and thus the hamlet Grünebach is handed over from Nassau to in exchange of territory making the region as well legally a part of Prussia.

Almost nothing is known about Eduard's childhood and youth in Grünebach, where everyday life was dominated by agriculture, handicrafts and the hard and hot smelting works in the Grünebacherhütte.

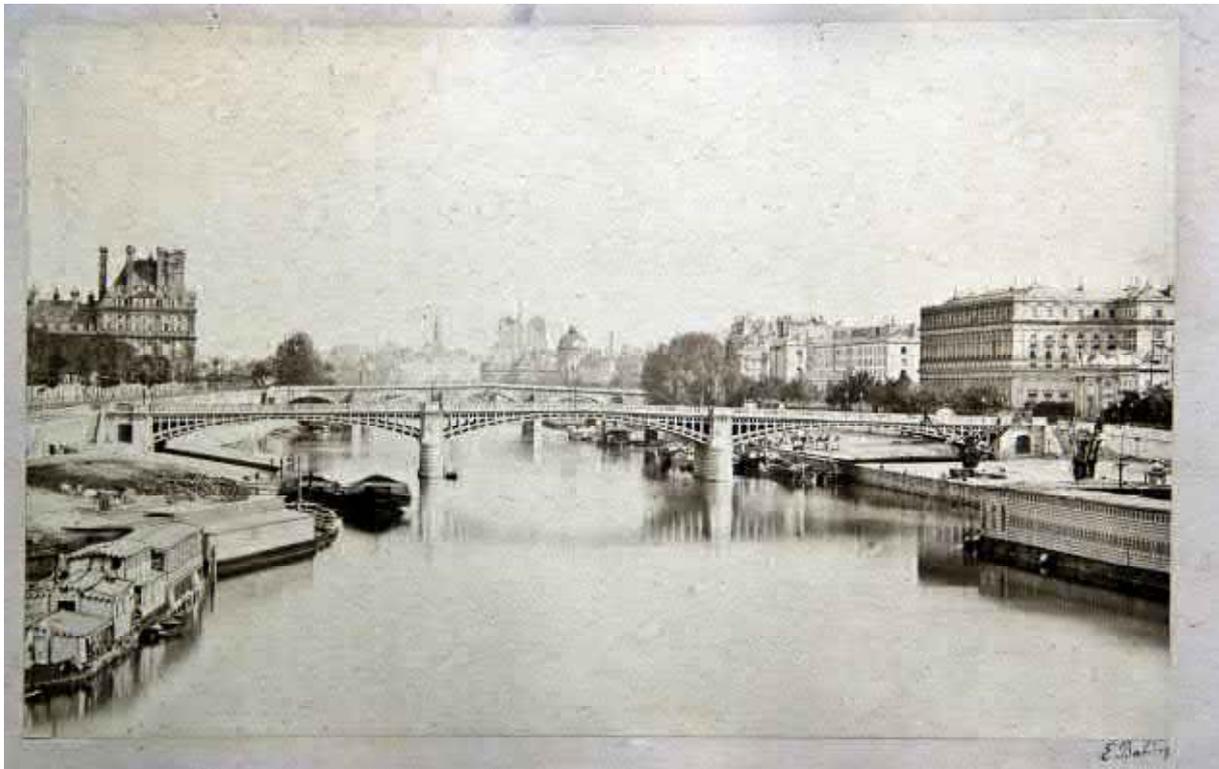


Smelting works in Gruenebach (postcard 1909)

Probably, Eduard attended the Catholic school, which Grünebach and Sassenroth operated together. Since in Prussia each man of twenty years of age was liable to military service for years anyway, it seems that Edward as a young man used the opportunity to join voluntarily the army already earlier. Now he is a soldier, a bombardier in the Prussian army in the Rhine Province, one of the gunners who served the mortars and howitzers, had the rank of Chief Gunner and was subordinate to the officers. But this is not the life Eduard Baldus had dreamed of. And so, it is no the risk of his job as a soldier, which nearly will cost him his life and becomes the starting point of an almost unbelievable life story. He leaves the army and Cologne...

## 2. Edouard Baldus – Painter, Photographer and Member of the Legion of Honour

Eduard Baldus is now 25 years old and has arrived in Paris, and adjusts his name to the French spelling: Edouard.



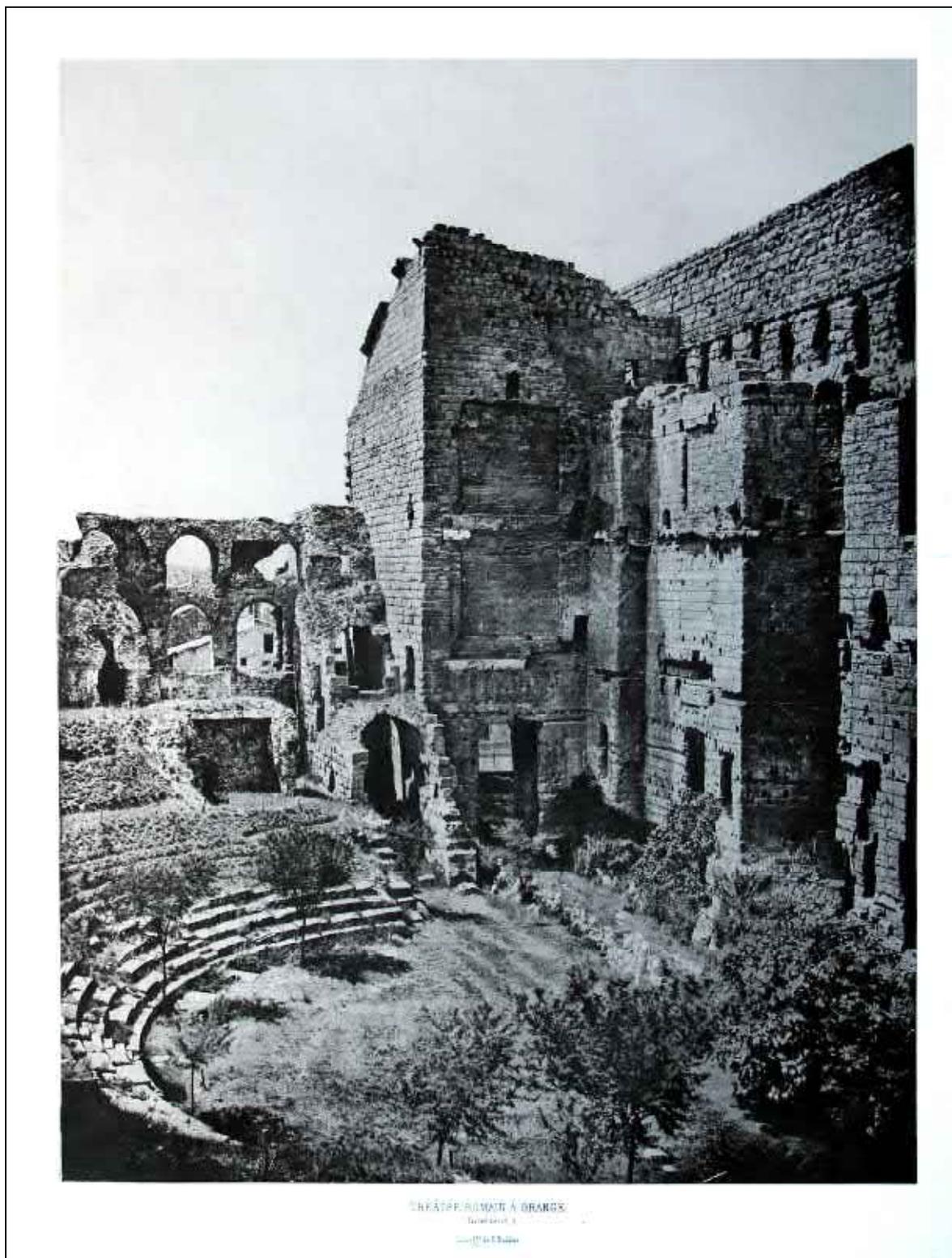
Paris – Photograph by Baldus

He wants to study art, but seems to move quickly to the practice. He tells of his exhibitions in Antwerp, of a tour in the United States as a portrait painter, but today there is no evidence for this. Then as now, his past is a mystery, also because Baldus is making confusing claims about his background: as his native country he names sometimes Germany, sometimes France and even the United States and as year of birth he states 1815. Is this the creative handling of truth by an artist, only the quite usual attempt to picture himself as a more interesting personality? Or is there a secret to hide?

Starting from 1841 for ten years he submits regularly his paintings to the annual Paris Art Salon, but these paintings - often with religious motives - are usually rejected. Just only three of the twenty submitted are accepted and shown publicly and even then Baldus does not have success or attracts major attention. In private life he seems to have more luck: In the spring of 1845, he marries the 22-year-old Elizabeth Caroline Etienne, ten years his junior. Two daughters and a son quickly make them a family that need to be sustained. His wife's dowry is mended by the mother-in-law, the money invested in government bonds, so the young family can live on the interest in some way. Baldus finally recognizes that it is time again to take a different path.

When attempting to reinvent himself again, he takes advantages of an invention, which was made during his first arrival in Paris a decade before, and now just was about to find a wider

public: the photography. The photo technology had made significant progress, shorter exposure time and mobile applications were made possible. Hippolyte Bayard, the actual inventor of the paper print process, had laid the foundations for reproduction and distributed photographed views of Paris since the late 1840s. In 1848, Edouard Baldus also learned this new technique, then finally fully dedicates himself to this new activity and travels in 1849 as a photographer to the south of France.

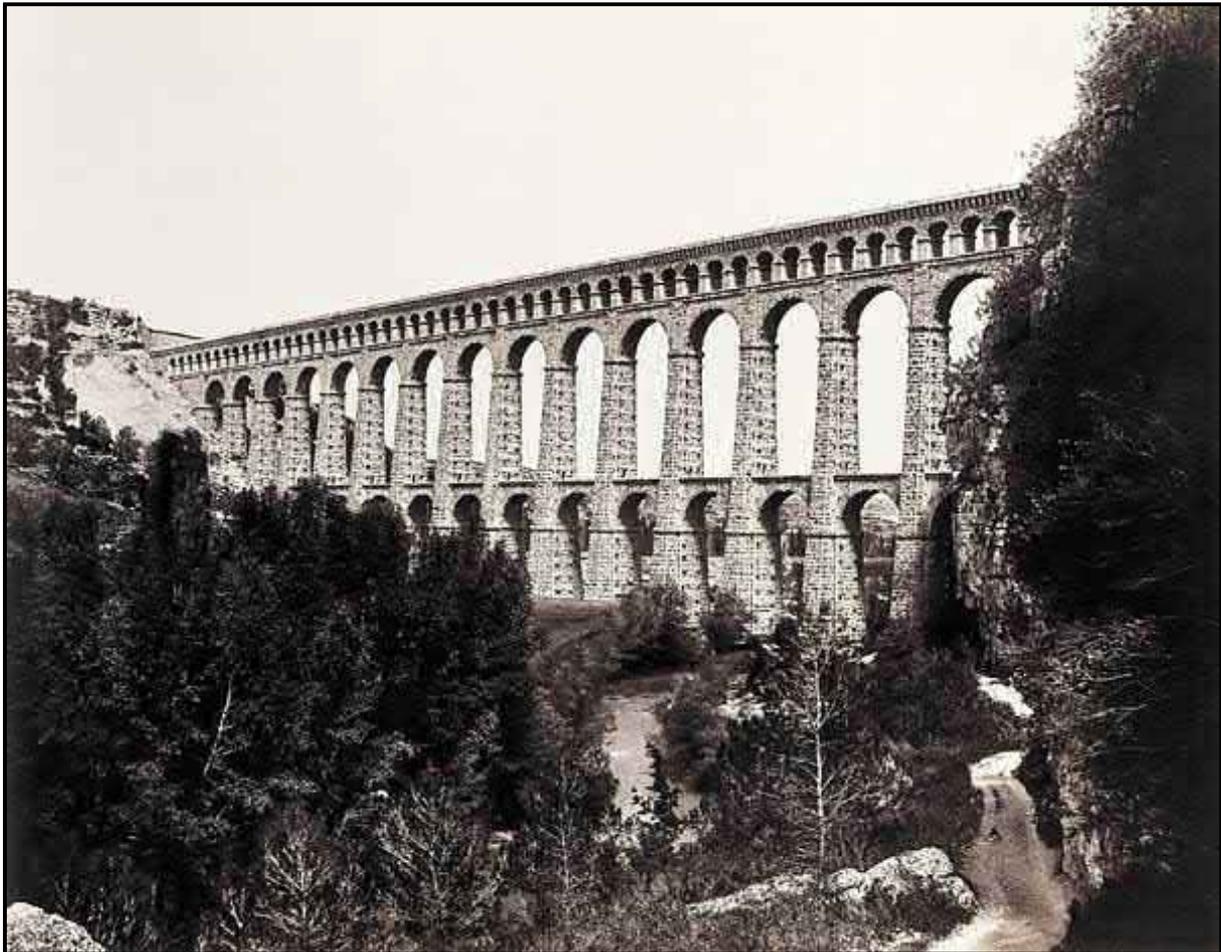


Theatre Romain a Orange (Interieur)

The pictures that he brings to Paris find general appreciation. In 1851, he is a founding member of the Société Héliographique, the first photographic society. Together with Hippolyte Bayard, Gustave Le Gray, Henri Le Secq, and Auguste Mestral he is assigned in the same year by the Commission for the Preservation of Monuments, with the 'Mission Héliographique' which has the task of photographing historic buildings of France. So he travelled to Fontainebleau, through Burgundy and Provence.

His photos impress by their clarity, beauty and the size of the prints, the latter because he probably was among the first to combine several negatives. Other major government contracts are the result and after only a few years, he is regarded as the leading architectural photographer of France.

He presents his photos at the Exposition Universelle in May 1855. Many of the total of 5 million visitors of this second World's Fair ever marvel at his photos. And so, still during the exhibition Edouard Baldus gets a lucrative contract: Baron James de Rothschild, Europe's leading banker and owner of the "Chemin de Fer du Nord", instructs him to make a photo album of this northern railway and the towns of the route, an important link in the transport connection France - England. Rothschild wants to hand over this album as a gift to Queen Victoria during her visit of the World Fair in August of the year. Incredible: He, Eduard Baldus, a boy from Grünebach, at the age of 42 as Edouard Baldus now an acclaimed photographer and artist working for Baron Rothschild and Queen Victoria.



Viaduc de Roquefavour

He does get to work, travelling on the train with King Napoleon III. and Queen Victoria, making photographs during the visit of the Queen and combines them with photos from his portfolio to an album containing fifty large prints. The luxurious red leather album with the title „*Visite de Sa Majeste la Reine Victoria et de Son Altesse Royale le Prince Albert 18-27 aout 1855; Itineraire et vues du Chemin de fer du Nord*“ is handed over to Queen Victoria. This gem is now in the collection of Queen Elizabeth II in the royal archives at Windsor Castle.

Working for government he documents the great floods of the Rhone with his pictures (1856), makes photographs of the construction of the new Louvre by order of Napoleon III (1855-58) and is considered one of the leading photographers of France. His work for the government and the documentation of the national culture are widely acclaimed: In August of 1860 Edoard Baldus is awarded the decoration as “Chevalier” of the “Legion d’honneur”, for his contributions to the progress of his art, as photographer and inventor.<sup>2</sup>

But this successful stage of his career is overshadowed by the death of his wife, who died in the spring of 1858 at the age of only 35 years. The secret of his past seems to rest on him like a curse. His mother-in-law is now taking care of the children, as Baldus is travelling again. In 1861 he is commissioned by the „Chemins de fer de Paris à Lyon et à la Méditerranée“ (PLM) to make photographs of the line and buildings, and the result is the second major photo work of Baldus on the railway.<sup>3</sup>



Paris - Place de la Concorde

<sup>2</sup> See: Centre Historique des Archives Nationales (Plouvier, Martine) – Dossiers de Proposition de Légion d’Honneur; Inventaire-index alphabétique des articles F70 115 à 119, Paris 2005. Here, 1820 is reported as his birth year.

<sup>3</sup> It is the year, when the area of his home village Grünebach is connected to the railway network by the construction of the line Köln- Gießen, which a few years later is presented in the luxury volume „Bau-Anlagen der Köln-Giessener Eisenbahn und der Zweigbahn von Betzdorf nach Siegen“, however not with photographs, but with 100 lithographs made by Jakob Scheiner.

### 3. Photographer, Printer, Publisher and Bankrupt

This railroad work was in some way setting the course, being completion and new beginning at the same time, because it seems that with the activity for the enterprise PLM Baldus' own interest in the commercial perspectives of photography grew even more. He also wants to be closer to his children after the death of his mother-in-law in 1862. For years Baldus had a small company in the Rue d'Assas, with a dozen of employees and assistants, had sold his works in half of Europe, but the rapid development of photography and reduction of production cost opens up new interesting opportunities. He makes series of photographs of Paris and produces stereoscopic images, the latter in large editions with rather ordinary print quality.

Already in 1855 he had developed his own method for photo-engraving. Baldus' method was precise and flexible, allowing both low pressure and high pressure.

He did not register for a patent for his invention and kept the details of his "heliogravure" process as trade secret. He continues to develop the process further, using chromium salt and a bath of ferric chloride.<sup>4</sup>



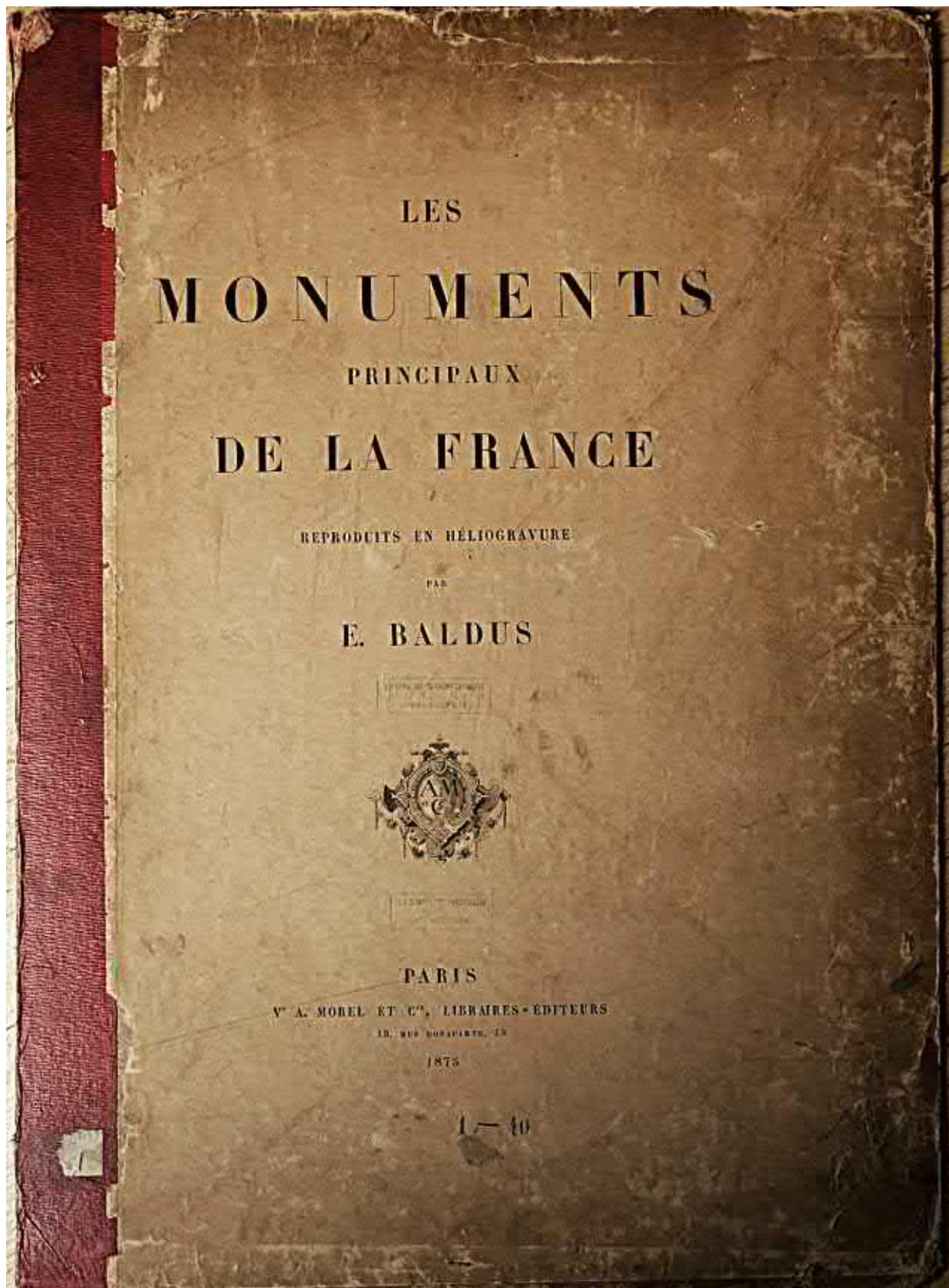
Paris - Pantheon

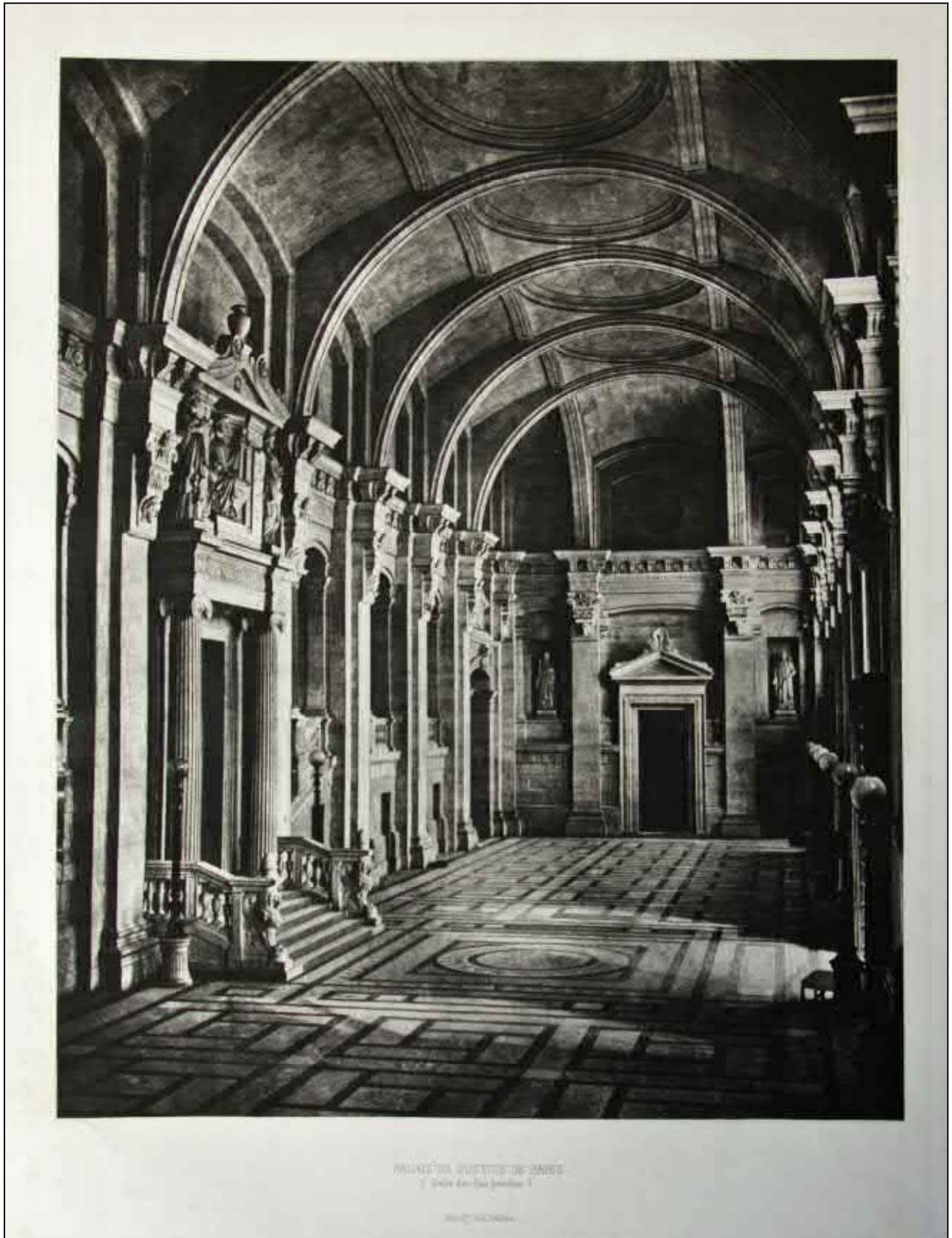
This is the foundation of his new activity as a printer and publisher. In the late 1860s he publishes large format albums and prints of his photographs of architecture and ornaments of the Louvre and the Palais des Tuileries, just before these buildings are damaged and destroyed

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<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Daniel - The Beginnings of Photogravure in Nineteenth-Century France

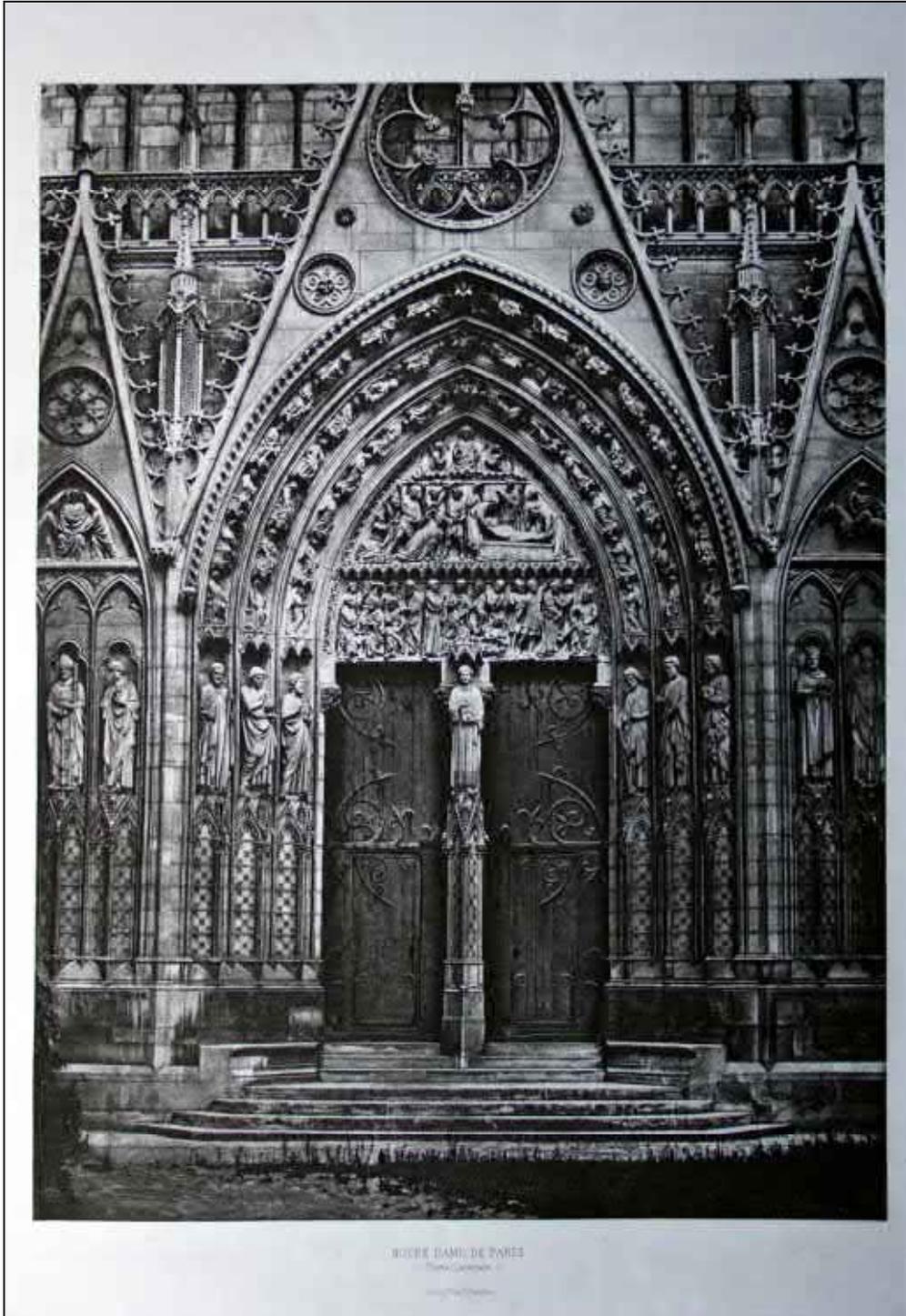
during the revolt of the Paris Commune. He also publishes collections of engravings of the work of Cerceau and in the 1870s the „Monuments Principaux de la France“.





Palais de Justice de Paris (Salle des Pas perdus)

But the commercial success of the photographer, chemist, printer and publisher is not keeping pace with the extent of the activities. After the production of his photographs of the new 'Hôtel de Ville' of Paris (1882-84) he gets into financial trouble. In 1887 the old man has to file for bankruptcy<sup>5</sup>. A little later, on 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1889, Edouard Baldus dies at the age of 76 in Arcueil-Cachan in the south of Paris. The secret of his success as a photographer can be explored by the viewing and consideration of his works. But the secret of his origin and personal background Baldus takes to his grave – for more than a century.



Notre Dame de Paris (Porte Latérale)

<sup>5</sup> Clotures de faillites: Baldus - Av. De Breteuil, 16, 21 juin 1887, In Archive Commerciale de la France 1887, (20.7.)

#### 4. Posthumous Reputation: His photos more sought-after than ever

In his home area the family name Baldus is still common, but hardly anyone associates that with a great photographer. As well in France, Baldus, the first professional architectural photographer, the photographer of the railways and the progress, had disappeared from focus for a long time. But since the early 1980s Baldus and his photographs receive new attention - probably also a reflection of the "New Topography" in the photography of the 1960s and 70s.

Néagu and Heilbrun consider him to be the first modern photographer at all,<sup>6</sup> his photographs being the birth of modern perception.<sup>7</sup> His albums and series of preferred motives, such as the railway bridges, anticipate the serial concepts of Sander and the Bechers by a half or a full century. Masterpieces such as the "Minotaure" today remind of Atget or Friedlander, but actually were made many decades before their works. But it is the meticulous work of Malcolm Daniel, who – first with his doctoral thesis – later as Curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York investigates systematically the life and work of Baldus, which starts a rediscovery of this pioneer and his truly great photographs. The results of Malcolm Daniel's studies and Baldus' oeuvre are presented to the public in great exhibitions in the MET (1994), in Montreal and Paris (1995) and with a monograph of 300 pages.<sup>8</sup>



Église de la Madeleine

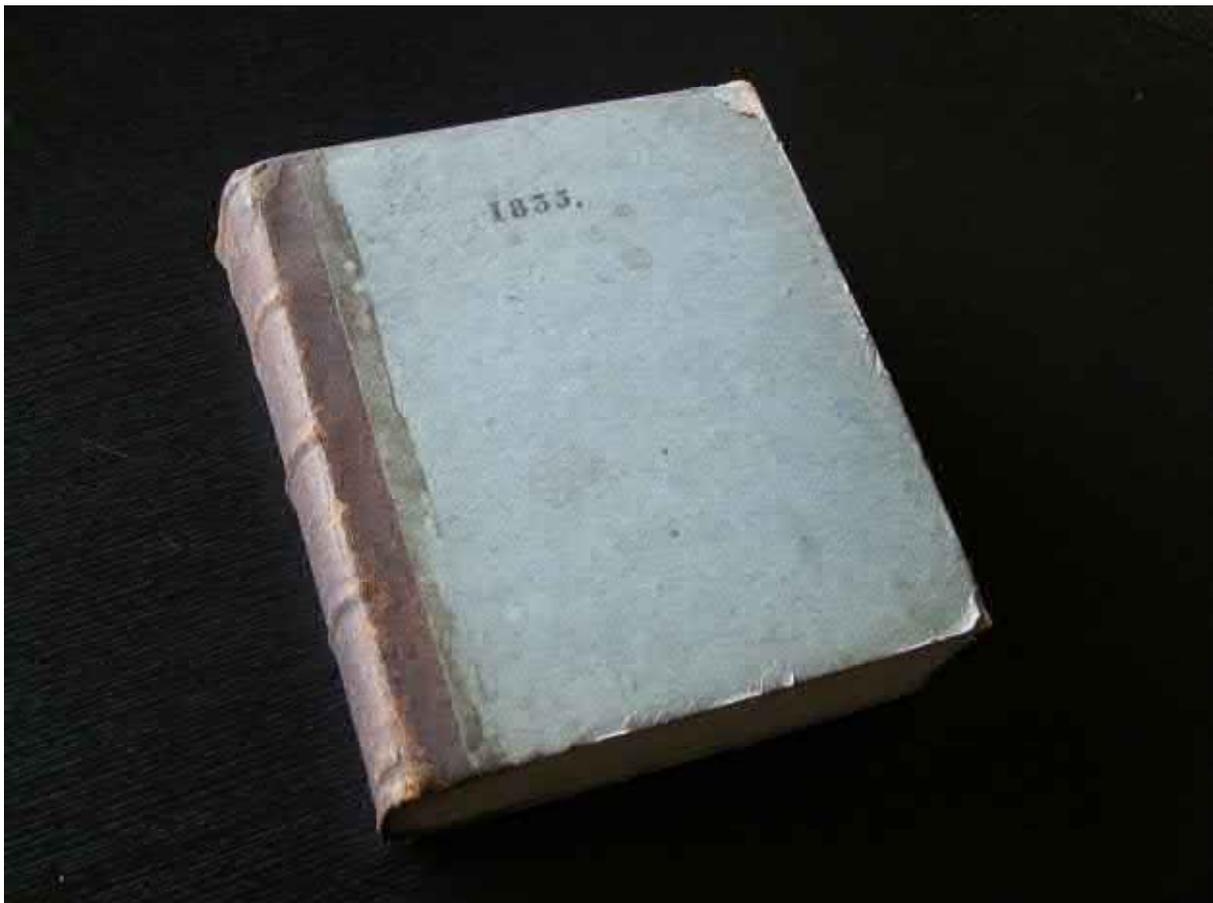
<sup>6</sup> Néagu, Philippe und Françoise Heilbrun – Baldus, paysages, architecture; in: Photographies, Spring 1983, S. 55-77

<sup>7</sup> Perego, Elvire – Die Stadt-maschine. Architektur und Industrie; in Frizot, Michel (Hrsg.) – Neue Geschichte der Fotografie, Köln 1998, S. 215

<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Daniel (Author); & Barry Bergdoll (Essay) - The Photographs of Edouard Baldus 1994

In 2006 Martin Parr and Gerry Badger include Baldus' Album „Chemin de fer de Paris à Lyon et à la Méditerranée“ of the year 1863 into their collection of the most important photobooks.<sup>9</sup> In this very special selection we find so with Edouard Baldus (Grünebach 1812-1889), August Sander (Herdorf, 1876-1964) and Bernd Becher (Siegen, 1931-2007) three world-class photographers from the 'Siegerland' region. Such esteem echoes in the prices: Small prints of early photographs of Baldus start at € 500, larger formats are sold in international photo auction at prices up to € 50.000.

Dspite all this attention in recent years, despite all the research on his work and life, his past remained a secret – but no longer anymore. For the solution let us have a look on the time before his arrival in Paris. Let us make a step back into the year 1835:



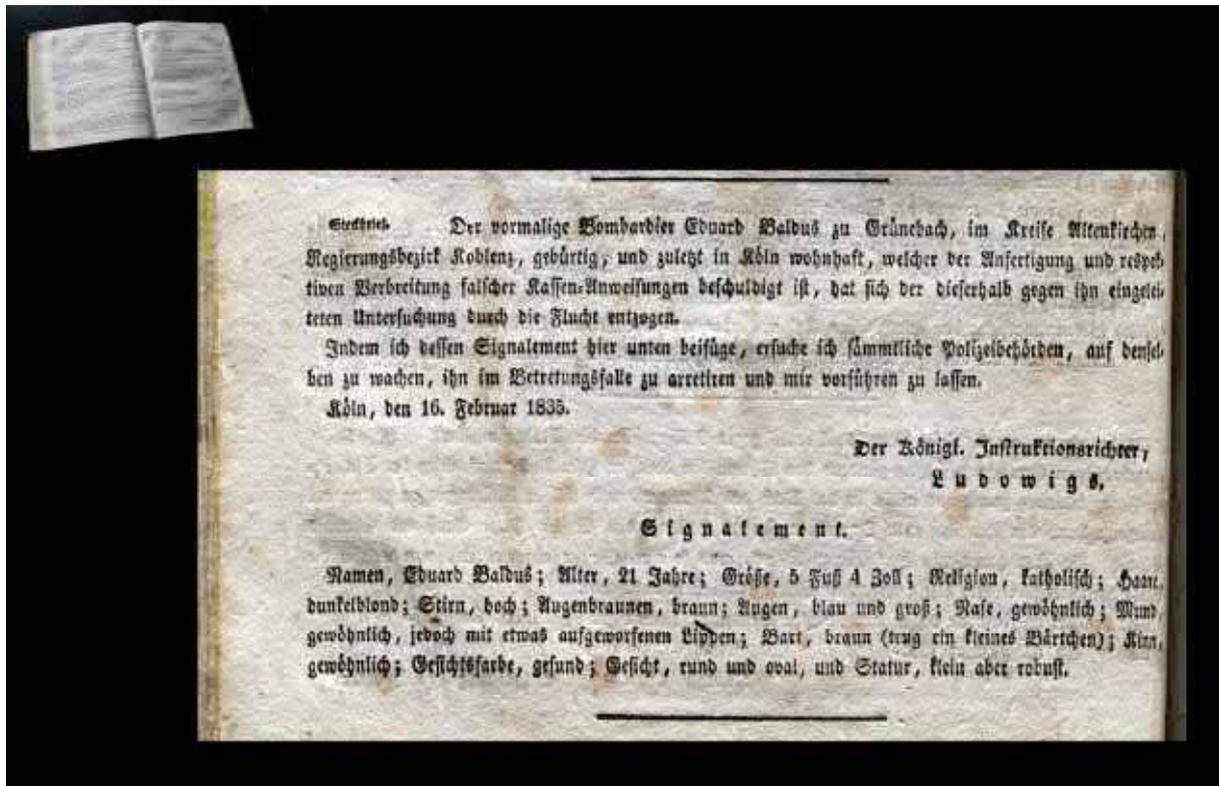
## 5. The Secret of Ed(o)uard Baldus

After his time as soldier Eduard Baldus lives in Cologne. The life as a soldier was too modest, the pay too meagre. Cologne, a city with already 70.000 inhabitants, offered too many temptations, especially for a country boy standing at the edge of adult life: Eduard Baldus is 21 years, measures 5 foot 4 inch, is small but robust, catholic, has dark blond hair, a receding hairline, and a small moustache, big blue eyes and a healthy complexion.

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<sup>9</sup> Parr, Martin and Gerry Badger – The Photobook: A History, Vol. II, London 2006, S. 180.

This sounds like a police bulletin – and it is one. Eduard Baldus is wanted in the whole Rhine Province. With the date 16<sup>th</sup> of February 1835 we find in all official gazettes of the Government, in Cologne, Düsseldorf, in Aachen and Koblenz the following arrest warrant<sup>10</sup>:



Warrant of Apprehension. The former bombardier Eduard Baldus, born in Grünebach, in the county Altenkirchen, governorate Koblenz, and most recently residing in Cologne, who is accused of making and distributing forged Cash Notes, evaded the corresponding investigation by escape.

By adding the following description, I ask all police authorities to watch for him, arrest him and bring him before me.

Cologne, 16th of Februar 1835. Royal Investigative Judge : Ludowigs.

#### Description

Name, Eduard Baldus; Age 21 years; Size 5-foot 4 inch; Religion catholic; Hair dark blond; Forehead high; Eyebrows brown; Eyes blue and big; Nose ordinary; Mouth ordinary, but with slightly pouting lips; Moustache brown, (had a small moustache); Chin ordinary; Complexion healthy; Face round and oval, and statue small but robust.

If we believe the accusations to be true, already in his time in Cologne Baldus had discovered his talent to make money by creating images, but in the very verbal sense. Here he gained his first practical experience in printing technique forging 'Kassenanweisungen', the paper money introduced in Prussia in 1821.

<sup>10</sup> Hier ein Auszug aus dem Amtsblatt der Regierung zu Aachen, vom Donnerstag, den 26. Februar 1835 (Stück 11).



The young man is having a good time with that money. The maximum penalty by Prussian law, which is printed on the notes, namely life-long penal servitude, does not deter him. However, the laws applicable for the Rhine Province are different, because the Prussian Land Law is not introduced there yet.<sup>11</sup> According to the applicable criminal code at that time, money forgery will be punished by the carrying out article 139 of the code, i.e. the death penalty.

Eduard Baldus escapes with his life in the nick of time: The search for him by warrant remains without result.<sup>12</sup> Eduard Baldus finally absconds to France and arrives in Paris in 1838. Thus the threatening guillotine does not cut off his head, but cuts him off from his past and roots – once and for all. With this escape from the scaffold begins his new life, his rise and success.

Photographer of international class, Member of the Legion of Honour – and wanted counterfeiter of bank notes, escaped from imminent death penalty: He had to invent a past, to avoid losing his present and to have a future.<sup>13</sup> This explains the contradicting statements on his past, his constructed curriculum vitae as successful painter – but as well his experience in printing, which taught him the importance of perfection and precision. Did he resort to his old art, to improve the modest income of his family? Did he come under pressure when former accomplices came to Paris in the early 1840s? We'll likely never know, but in any case, he did not betray his secret. He was probably reformed forever by his dramatic escape from the

<sup>11</sup> This only happens in July 1835 (Amtsblatt Düsseldorf, Nr.44). In 1834 the silk weaver Johann Peter Kuhn in Düsseldorf was sentenced to death, his revision because of changing law rejected. See: Archiv für das Civil- und Criminalrecht der Königl. Preuß. Rheinprovinzen. 1834, NF 14. Bd. S.27.

<sup>12</sup> At least there is no report in the official gazettes on his apprehension contrary to the case of others.

<sup>13</sup> Still in 1842 accomplices are wanted in the Rhine Province, such as Theodor Herweg, who arrested in 1834 in Cologne, but was able to escape. At the early 1840s in Paris he named himself Theodor Romanzow and receives a passport on the name of Danello de Winiarski from the police prefect.

scaffold, as he did not make use of his printing techniques to avoid bankruptcy. However, would there have been the photographer Edouard Baldus without the counterfeiter Eduard Baldus? Hardly ever!

Although the winding road from Grünebach to Paris ended in poverty – what a life! More exactly: How many lives! Soldier, counterfeiter, emigrant, painter, husband and father, photographer, printer, publisher – and again and again inventor, especially of himself. That his photographs are traded at high prices today is a triple ironic note for Eduard, the ‘Guardian of treasure’, the escaping money counterfeiter and photographer dying bankrupt, whose work and real treasures his home region still has to discover.

*Peter Lindlein*

*2010, revised 2021*

*P.S. It is also some kind of irony, that just that photo - which called my attention for Baldus and his birthplace, and which later let me discover the warrant for apprehension for the counterfeiter Baldus - although was published in an album of Baldus, today is attributed to another photographer. This was just the start of a long list of wrong references leading to the truth – or to that what we consider as such. And as Baldus was not a purist in his photographic work, retouching, adding and combining, I took the liberty to present a collage earlier, to complete finally his self-portrait of 1853 in the year 2010 on the cover of this article.*

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Thésée et le Minotaure – Jardin de Tuileries

## A small afterword in 2021: Crime sells, even a century later

More than a decade has gone since this small article revealed the secret of Edouard Baldus. The first, and still the best to comment on this was Malcom Daniel in October 2010, at that time curator in charge of the Department of Photographs of The MET, in his blog "The Secret of Édouard Baldus Revealed" on the website of the *Metropolitan Museum* in New York.<sup>14</sup> This revelation changed completely how we see the biography of Baldus today. Malcolm Daniel had "always thought of him as a great photographer but a bit of a bore", but confessed "that it makes me like my man Baldus a bit more to think of him as a young counterfeiter on the lam." No wonder, when you look at such a life: from a small hamlet to the capital of the world, from rogue to artist, leaving us photos which are still sought after more than a century after his death.

And crime still sells. The first, to make use of the story was the auction house *Ader Nordman*, when they presented Edouard Baldus in a few lines to sell about 20 photos in 2013<sup>15</sup>. When it came to a major auction with photos and plates of Baldus in June 2017, the auction house *Copages* used extensively and successfully the complete crime story and a lot of the illustrations for the catalogue and their public relations, loudly enough, to find an echo in "Le Figaro" in *Paris*, but as well in newspapers in *Spain*.

Kate Addleman-Frankel included it in her book "After photography? The photogravures of Édouard Baldus reconsidered" published by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, linking the Baldus' photogravures to the story of the counterfeiter Baldus.

Numerous articles in the internet followed. And today, this part of the story of Edouard Baldus is known, and it has renewed and increased the interest and attraction of one of the most important early photographers. And this makes it a double joy for one of his greatest admirers to have written this article ten years ago.

Peter Lindlein, 2021

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<sup>14</sup> [www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/features/2010/the-secret-of-edouard-baldus-revealed](http://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/features/2010/the-secret-of-edouard-baldus-revealed)

<sup>15</sup> FONDS PHOTOGRAPHIQUE DE L'INSTITUT CATHOLIQUE DE PARIS, DIMANCHE 17 NOVEMBRE 2013

1835.