

Picturing the Nation

On *Charles Bernhæft: photographe de la Belle Époque*,
Edmond Thill (ed.), MNHA, 2014

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A preference for fine art photography has for a long time penalised the study of the early commercial studios, overlooking their influence in the shaping of cultural tropes and visual narratives. In the context of Luxembourg, specifically, the conspicuous legacy of Edward Steichen has often overshadowed the work of the local photographers.

Following a 2006 retrospective, the volume edited by Edmond Thill, curator and head of the *Service éducatif* at the *Musée National d'Histoire et d'Art*, offers an extensive monograph on Charles Bernhæft, one of the most successful Luxembourgian photographers of the *Belle Époque*. Through the analysis of his life and works, the book aims at reconstructing the history of photography in Luxembourg in relation to the process of geographical redefinition and nation-building of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The starting point for the authors' investigation is the year 1839, marking both the birth of photography – with the presentation of the first daguerreotype at the Académie des Sciences in Paris – and the political independence of the Grand Duchy. While at this stage it is still premature to speak of a widespread sentiment of national belonging, towards the end of the century the local photographers progressively display an intention to contribute to the visual documentation of the native landscape, identifying the salient aspects of the country, its geography, architecture and traditional customs.

With little biographical information available, Charles Bernhæft has remained for a long time a shadowy figure. Born in Luxembourg City in 1859, flamboyant and temperamental (albeit rather conservative in his religious and political views), prolific artist and publisher of photographic albums and postcards, author of Luxembourg's first illustrated periodical (*Das Luxemburger Land in Wort und Bild*), official court photographer and proprietor of the largest photographic parlour in the city, as well as inventor and developer of photographic equipment, Bernhæft has been arguably the most popular local photographer of his time.

In the fourteen contributions of the book, the authors explore the different aspects of his numerous activities. Edmond Thill, Peter Fritzen and Fernand Gonderinger reconstruct Bernhæft's career as well as the history of photography in Luxembourg and the movements of the early photographers in the Greater Region. Individual chapters are dedicated to specific aspects of his photographic production: Susanne Lange on his landscape photography and

Réunion de famille au château de Berg à l'occasion du 80^e anniversaire du grand-duc Adolphe, 1897 (Collection de la Maison grand-ducale, Luxembourg)



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François Reinert with Cécile Arnould on the medals he received in the course of the universal expositions. Claude Lamesch writes about Franz Schmitt, who took over Bernhœft's establishment and published a series of ethnographic postcards of the Samoan Islands. Marie-Sophie Corcy and the 1903 text by Auguste Pierre Petit Fils discuss Bernhœft's technical innovations in the field of artificial lighting, while Jean-Paul Gandolfo, Sandra Maria Petrillo and Jean-Daniel Lemoine provide exhaustive details on his photographic and printing techniques. The authors have conducted a meticulous archival research that results in a rich and accurate reconstruction of the broader historical and cultural context.

Bernhœft's representation of the young Luxembourgish nation, through the landscape, the people and the representatives of power, constitutes the *fil rouge*. His mediation of the court image, in particular, is seen as instrumental in the consolidation of the grand ducal rule and in the familiarisation process aimed at making the state more intelligible and identifiable. The relation between national identity and photography is reiterated in the exhibition accompanying the book release, organised at the Museum Dräi Eechelen (May 2014-March 2015), *Images d'un pays souverain. Le photographe Charles Bernhœft et l'identité luxembourgeoise*, which explores specifically Bernhœft's landscape photography and his activity as court photographer.

The substantial section of the book dedicated to the analysis of the material qualities of the photographs and to the issues related to their conservation underlines the nature of photographs as cultural objects other than images, in line with the more recent theories in visual culture.

The large format and the extensive iconographic corpus, with over 1 000 images reproduced with a remarkable quality and true to the tones of the original prints, are visually appealing. This, together with the informal style, makes this collection of essays accessible to a wider audience and a valuable reference and starting point for everyone interested in the history of photography in Luxembourg. ♦

Conférences dans le cadre de l'exposition *Images d'un pays souverain*. Le photographe Charles Bernhœft et l'identité luxembourgeoise (au Musée Dräi Eechelen jusqu'au 18 mars inclus):

Anne Cartier-Bresson, *La photographie des origines au début de l'époque moderne : évolution matérielle et incidences historiques* (4 mars 2015 à 18.30 h)

Jean-Paul Gandolfo, *Les photographies familiales : sauvegarde d'un patrimoine sensible* (11 mars 2015 à 18.30 h)

Marie-Sophie Corcy, *L'évolution des techniques photographiques de prise de vue (1839-1920) : mise en évidence d'un système socio-technique* (18 mars 2015 à 18.30 h)



Exposition universelle d'Anvers 1894 : Types guerriers de la Troupe de Pawnee Bill (MNHA)



Luxembourg – Rochers du Bock, 1904 (MNHA)

Luxembourg – Vue de l'Alzette au Pfaffenthal, vers 1884 (Royal Photograph Collection, La Haye)

