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Henri Le Secq is known to all students of photographic history as one of five photographers hired in 1851 by the Commission des Monuments Historiques to record various French buildings, presumably to encourage their maintenance as national treasures.¹ Although neither Newhall nor Gernsheim spends much space on it, Le Secq's surviving *œuvre* is one of the largest and qualitatively one of the finest of the earliest period of photography. Newhall states: "So sympathetic and informative were his photographs that one critic went so far as to say the sculptural portal of Rheims Cathedral could be studied better in them than on the spot. . ."² Henri de Lacretelle's comments in 1852 were similar:

We have long paged through the inexhaustible photographic album of M. Leseçq. The young artist, nobly devoted to the double mission that has been given him, leaves the pictures of his easel only to work on those of his darkroom. The Commission des Monuments Historiques has found in him enthusiasm and real intelligence. He has reconstructed, stone by stone, the cathedrals of Strasbourg and Reims in more than a hundred different prints. We've climbed, thanks to him, to all the towers; we've suspended ourselves from all the friezes, all the cornices. That which we would never have seen with our eyes, he has seen for us, in aiming his camera from all heights where the cathedral was visible. . . . Nothing is forgotten: even ignored inscriptions appear in his photographic prints. The cathedral is entirely reconstructed, course by course, with the effects of the sun, the shade and the rain. M. Leseçq has also made his monument.³

De Lacretelle's passage reminds us of a number of important points. First, that Le Secq was both enthusiastic and prolific. Second, that he was a painter. Along with several other major photographers such as Gustave Le Gray, Charles Negre and Roger Fenton, he studied with Paul Delaroche.⁴ The parallel of the easel and the darkroom is a sophisticated one; de Lacretelle improves upon a more simplistic approach toward the relationship between painting and photography proposed only the year before by the better known but more conservative critic, Francis Wey. Wey had advocated the artist's use of photography, but justified it only as a reminder of nature or, in other words, as a sketch in preparation for a final work in another medium, whereas de Lacretelle's parallel allows for the possibility that photography itself might be the final product, implicitly raising the medium to the level of painting. Third, that Le Secq has not only offered us the earliest photographic documentation of the famous cathedrals, but has made it an extensive record, in many ways still the most comprehensive ever produced. Finally, as de Lacretelle recognizes, that beyond documenting the cathedral as a monument, Le Secq himself has created another monument in his photographs.

It is clear from Le Secq's activities that he recognized his photographs as his own "monuments." His habit of presenting them in albums prefaced by photographic frontispieces in which he appears "at work" reinforces this impression. Indeed, he frequently pushed an iconographic association between himself and other creative forces within the fabric of his ostensibly straightforward photographs.⁵ So without taking Le Secq's architectural shots in the context of his approach, it will be difficult

for historians to assess them — not only as documents, but as work signalling a creative drive within early photographic production, and, more, signalling an entire era's approach to creativity.

The two large series on Rheims and Strasbourg to which de Lacretelle addresses himself are preserved, in good part and in excellent condition, at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.⁶ Both are breath-taking, and, when published and exhibited, will permanently change our present evaluation — so pathetically inadequate — of the state of photography in France in the 1850s. We can only wonder what the initial reaction really was to such images! Aside from giving us a documentary record of the cathedrals (in many instances prior to nineteenth century restoration) these images provide a coherent and controlled sequence of insights into these structures both on the part of an artist, and on the part of a student who saw the buildings in a way that none had seen them before or would see them after.

Although the series of photographs that Le Secq took of Chartres Cathedral isn't as extensive as those of Rheims and Strasbourg and is therefore in many respects not comparable, still it offers us several corresponding insights. It was equally admired. De Lacretelle, for instance, called the Chartres pictures "reproduction perfected" and continues:

The relief protrudes, the contour curves, the hole sinks, all on a photographic page as veraciously as on a huge wall. The hand has the temptation to touch, in order to rectify the visual illusion. . . . It is not paper, it is stone.⁷

Thus, it was with pleasure that the Eastman House recently acquired a rare published port-

folio of twenty-five photomechanically produced pictures of Chartres (in Thiel's *encre grasse* process) made from Le Secq's paper negatives of 1852, and undoubtedly printed under his direction.

Le Secq experimented in the *encre grasse* process with some of his other photographs, too, although we do not know exactly when. A photograph of rocks in the Forest of Fontainebleau is known as a salted paper print (*Musée des Arts Décoratifs*) and in an *encre grasse* version (Paris market) as well. More research must be done on Le Secq's activity with permanent pigment processes to determine whether this was contemporary work (1850s) or much later (1870s), when he was reconsolidating some of his earlier negatives for publication.⁸ The date of his work in the cyanotype process, which he used for the Chartres, Rheims and Strasbourg views in addition, is also unknown as yet. A copy of the Chartres portfolio in Columbia University's Avery Library has been dated by the cataloguer as ca. 1880. Whatever the date, however, the Le Secq portfolio is doubly valuable for showing us the grouping that he chose to represent his much larger *œuvre* on Chartres.

For another example of Le Secq's groupings the student can turn to an earlier album of salted paper prints of Amiens Cathedral dated 1851, now preserved in the Cabinet des Estampes at the Bibliothèque Nationale. As in other albums that Le Secq compiled, this confluence with a frontispiece, in this case depicting Le Secq in the process of writing "Amiens cathedral . . ." on an old door.⁹ Here, the artist is clearly imposing himself on the beholder as the creator of the monument. The Chartres portfolio needs no such obvious clue, indicating both a later date and a more sophisticated approach. Here, Le Secq's distorted views speak for themselves. The most obvious example is the imperfect perspective in his shot of the North transept's central portal; a subtler instance is his angling in the picture of the North transept's Balaam, Sheba and Solomon. The results of Le Secq's 1851 Monuments Historiques mission to Chartres, exhibited in part at the Crystal Palace in the same year, were criticized by the jury for this type of distortion. In light of the fact that the Eastman House

Notes

¹ The other photographers were Baldus, Mestral, Le Gray and Bayard, who had already taken an extensive series of documentary photographic views of Paris in the 1840s, now housed in the collection of the Société Francaise de Photographie.

² The details of the 1851 commission appear in *La Lumière*, 1851, p. 87. Although there seems to be no exhaustive record of the directive's aims or of the resulting photographs, all of which are certainly not in the Archives of Monuments Historiques, the forthcoming exhibition and catalog on the commission by Philippe Neagu, Chef du Service des Archives, will certainly clarify the situation. I would like to thank M. Neagu for showing me the material in his care that pertains to the 1851 missions.

³ *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964) p. 44. See also, Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *The History of Photography* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1969).

⁴ Delarache, a *juste milieu* painter whose studio was one of the largest at the Ecole des Beaux Arts until its dissolution in the early 1840s, is commonly attributed with saying "From today, painting is dead," a remark he allegedly made after the public announcement of the daguerreotype process in 1839. It is less frequently noted that he married the daughter of the painter Horace Vernet, who according to his companion Goupil-Fesquet, "daguerrotyped away like a lion" on his trip to Egypt in 1839. This was one of the earliest examples of the use of photography. Whether Delarache advocated the use of photography to his pupils is not known, but is easy to surmise.

⁵ This subject is treated at more length in my "Henri Le Secq: French Calotypist and Modernist" in *Appraisals* (Danbury, New Hampshire: Addison House, in press). A fuller study of Le Secq's *œuvre* is in progress by Eugenia P. Janis.

⁶ I would like to thank Mme. Gaetion-Picon, Chief Curator of the library at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, and her staff, Mlle. Sartre and Mme. Bonne, for making the Le Secq material available to me.

⁷ "Albums photographiques: No. 2, M. Le Secq", *La Lumière*, 1853, p. 29.

⁸ James Borcoman, *Charles Negre*, Ottawa, 1976, p. 48 quotes Negre as referring to Le Secq's search for his negatives of reproductions of della Robbia's sculpture at this time.

⁹ See Eugenia P. Janis, "Man on the Tower of Notre Dame: New Light on Henri Le Secq", *Image*, December, 1976, pp. 13-25 and my "Henri Le Secq".

¹⁰ The negatives, for unclear reasons, are partly in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and partly in the Archives of Monuments Historiques. No negatives of the 1852 Châtres series, or any other 1852 negatives involving the 1851 commission sites, are on file at Monuments Historiques.

further about the fundamental nature of academic art and what it had engendered during this critical period in French art.

The history of Le Secq's involvement as an architectural photographer is still not clear yet.

It appears that while he made photographs of

Amiens and Chartres in 1851 for Monuments

Historiques, he returned to both cathedrals the

following year.¹⁰ There is no indication as to

whether this was his own idea or whether it

related to his official mission. Some of his

Rheims and Strasbourg photographs are dated

1851. Others are not dated at all, although

they might have been made at the same time.

Judging from Le Secq's other work, this could

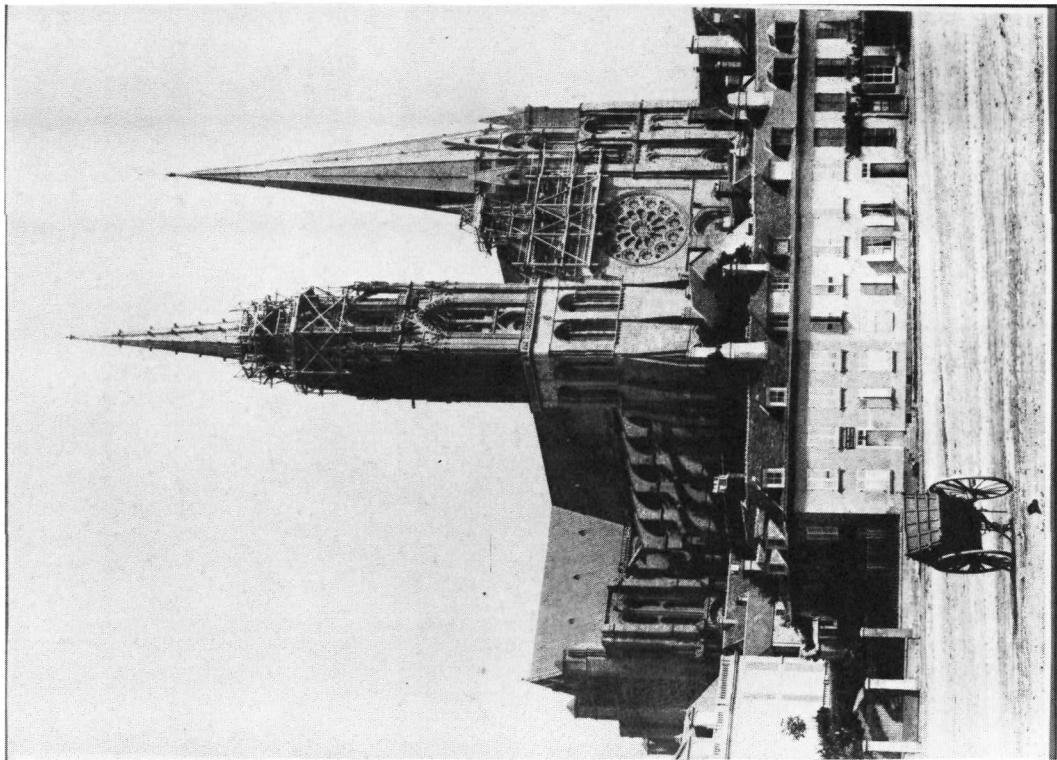
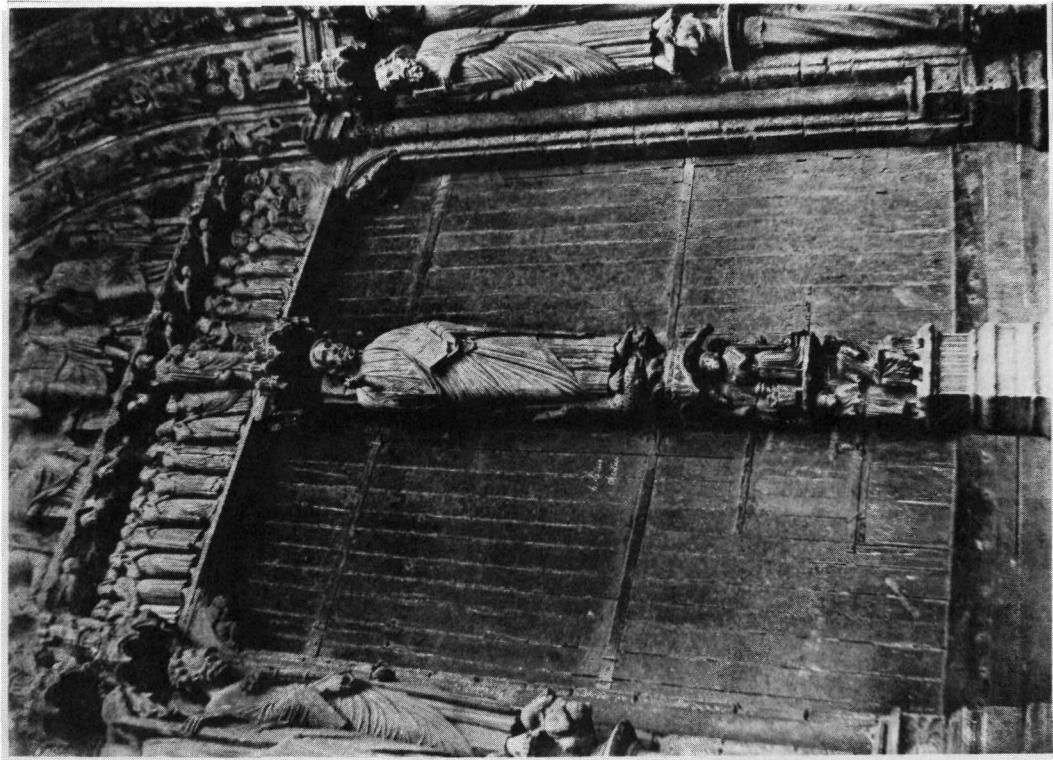
simply be a case of incomplete or inconsistent

signing on his part.

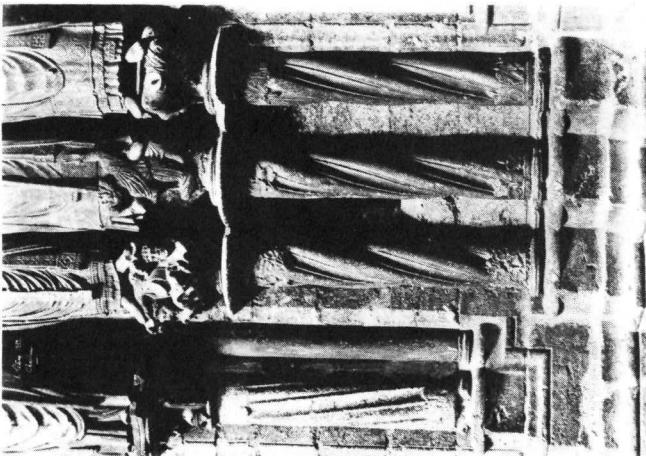
The Eastman House has one of the largest collections of Le Secq material in the world.

Among numerous calotypes, it has several prints made from the same negatives that are represented in the Chartres portfolio; thus, students can compare different techniques from identical images. Le Secq's Chartres portfolio can now be added to the Le Secq puzzle — architectural studies, photographic academies, landscapes, still lifes, portraits, experimentation in non-silver processes, documentation and reproduction. In examining this portfolio we are another step closer to deciphering Le Secq's language and translating it into a tongue we can understand.

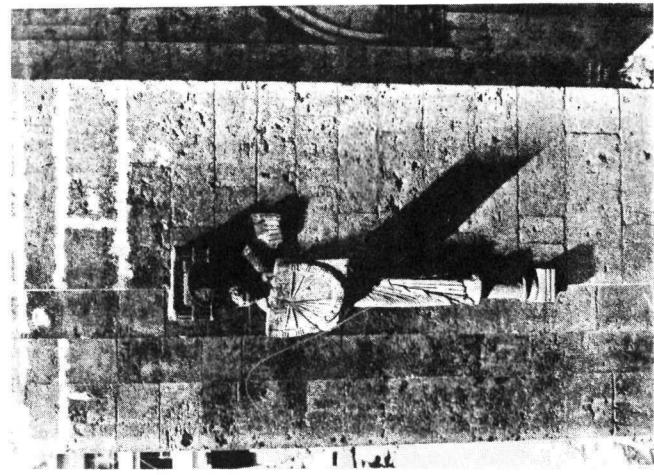
These and the following photographs are all by Henri Le Secq. Left: Chartres Cathedral, general view. Right: Chartres Cathedral, South Transept Porch, Central Portal.

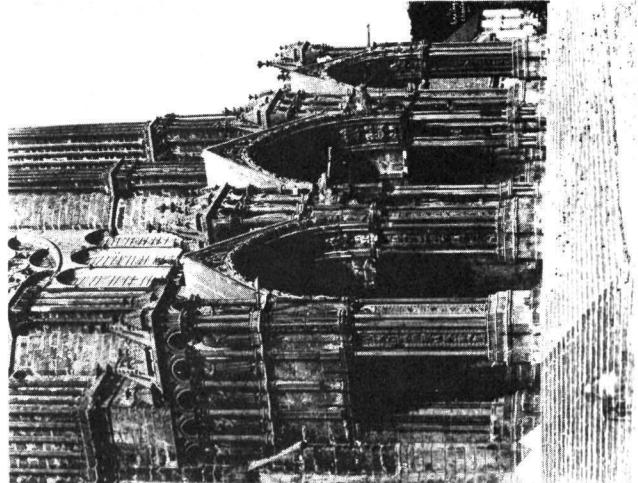
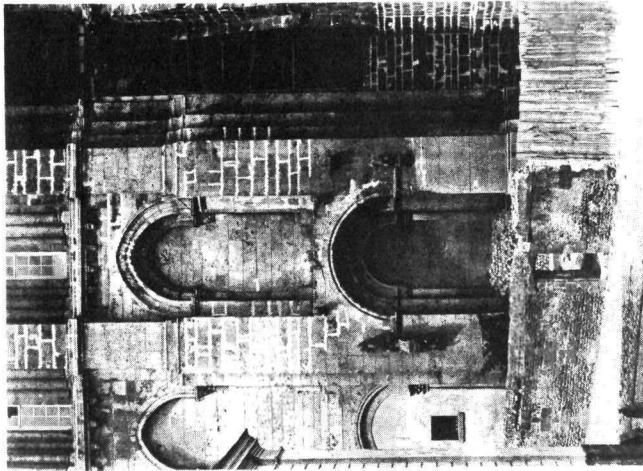
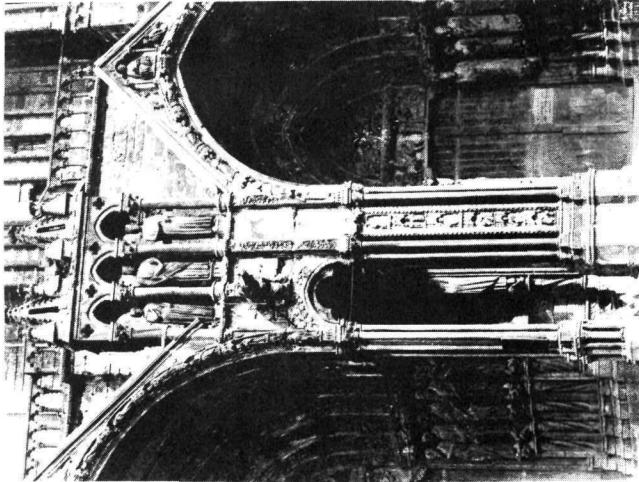
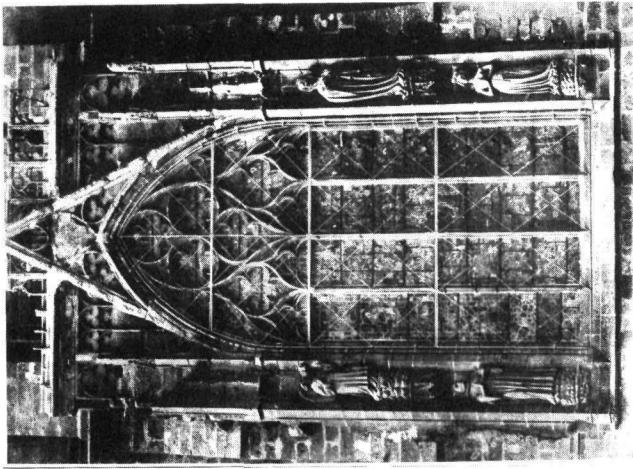


Far Left: Chartres Cathedral, South Transept Porch, supports to lamb figures of Saints Laumer, Leo, Ambrose and Nicholas. Left: Chartres Cathedral, North Transept Porch, Right Portal, Balaam, Queen of Sheba, Solomon.



Far Left: Chartres Cathedral, detail. Left: Chartres Cathedral, North Transept Porch, Central Portal, detail.





Right: Chartres Cathedral, detail. Far Right: Chartres Cathedral, detail.

Right: Chartres Cathedral, South Transept, detail. Far Right: Chartres Cathedral, South Transept Porch.