

IN THE CLOUDS

A Selection of Aerial Views from The Fouad Debbas Collection

The idea of producing aerial photography and of applying it to cartography began in 1855 with Andraud's publication on the Exposition Universelle of the same year.

In the 1860s, from the moment of his first attempts at aerial shots from a hot air balloon, the French photographer Nadar would revolutionize both photography and the discipline of topography.

It was only during the First World War that the use of aerial photography in the military became routine. Combined with ground level observations, aerial photography made reconnaissance work over large territories possible.

Under French mandate in the Levantine countries, it was the 39th Aviation Regiment of the Army of the Levant, based in Rayak (Lebanon), which established air support to control certain regions, draw up maps and establish a road network.

Several albums from the Fouad Debbas Collection gather together the flight journeys made by the different squadrons of the 39th regiment in the 1920s and 1930s. The views are often identical, the purpose being to identify ports, towns and villages, bridges and other infrastructures, castles and fortresses situated on inaccessible tells, archaeological sites, or else to track the movement of Bedouins in the Syrian desert.





Aerial photography: A bold undertaking

The aims of these aviator-photographers were audacious given the many technical difficulties of the photographic processes themselves, aside from meteorological phenomena, flight conditions, and camera shake.

The photographers continually sought to improve their photographic equipment. They adjusted the camera's suspension system and invented shock absorbers made of foam rubber to avoid blurry plates, a direct result of vibrations from the aeroplane's engine. An aerial camera needed to be solid, with a fixed focus lens with a fairly wide aperture. It needed to remain unaffected by vibrations and have sufficiently large and robust glass plate holders. The photographer needed to be able to make horizontal, vertical, and oblique rotations. Typically, the crew would be made up of three people: the pilot, the navigator, and the photographer. Once the reconnaissance flight had been carried out, the flight plan would be decided, depending on the angle of views, high altitude (between 1500-1000m from the ground) or low altitude (300m), weather conditions, or even the sun's position in the sky.

From the photographs exhibited here, we can note that aerial shots need to be taken on clear days, that a sun low in the sky reveals more detail on the ground, and that flying at low altitude enables closer observation of infrastructures. Aerial photography is thus the result of the careful assembly of multiple factors.

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**Unknown photographer,
attributed to the Photographic Unit
of the 39th Aviation Observation Regiment**
Planes in flight, Circa 1926-30

Silver gelatin print on paper, in album, 10.5 x 16 cm



Colonel Dumarcet (pilot)
and Colonel David (observer)
Beirut, the Grand Serail, and the port, Circa 1926-30
Silver gelatin print on paper, in album, 18 x 24 cm

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Unknown photographer,
attributed to the **Photographic Unit**
of the **39th Aviation Observation Regiment**
Palmyra, Valley of the Tombs, Circa 1926-30
Silver gelatin print on paper, in album, 18 x 24 cm





The Photographic Unit of the 39th Aviation Observation Regiment, Rayak

In April 1920 and following the end of the First World War, the League of Nations assigned to France the administration of Lebanon along with its neighbouring territories (Bekaa, Hasbaya, Rachaya) and the Mediterranean coast from Acre (not included) to Alexandretta (today known as İskenderun). In line with the Sykes-Picot Agreement, French troops were stationed in the Levant from 1917 onwards.

The French airforce based themselves at the town of Rayak in the Bekaa Valley. The on-site regiment's missions were to gather intelligence and produce reports on the different columns, clusters and troops operating in the region. The Photographic Unit of the 39th Aviation Observation Regiment was made up of numerous squadrons responsible for photographing the region's ports, towns, major roads, in addition to its castles and ancient sites. Several photographers from the regiment are known, including David, Piat, and Drouard, who signed certain aerial photos that now form part of the Fouad Debbas Collection.

The many postcards sent by French officers and soldiers based in Rayak offer us a unique insight into their life at camp and in the field:

My dear Jean,

Please excuse my delay in responding to you. I was very glad to receive your letter, especially as I was in an armoured train 80km from camp when I received it.

So, old Gaston is trying to give me some competition in the trade of Bordeaux whites and dry Turins! I think it'll take a bit of sweat to reach our heights. Don't tell him. Anyway, I'll give him some tips on my return. The Bedouins here say that in a month from now there will be peace. The Druze and bandits roam everywhere, or hole up in Palestine for shelter. That doesn't surprise me, as there are several columns of parties and wherever they go, so do we. But a fortnight later they revolt again. I hope nonetheless that this time it'll work out and that in three months I'll be back in France. Well, one can't be sure of anything and I still might become bored out of my mind.

Until such a time, I'll leave you with a firm handshake.

Send my regards to Louis and the others.

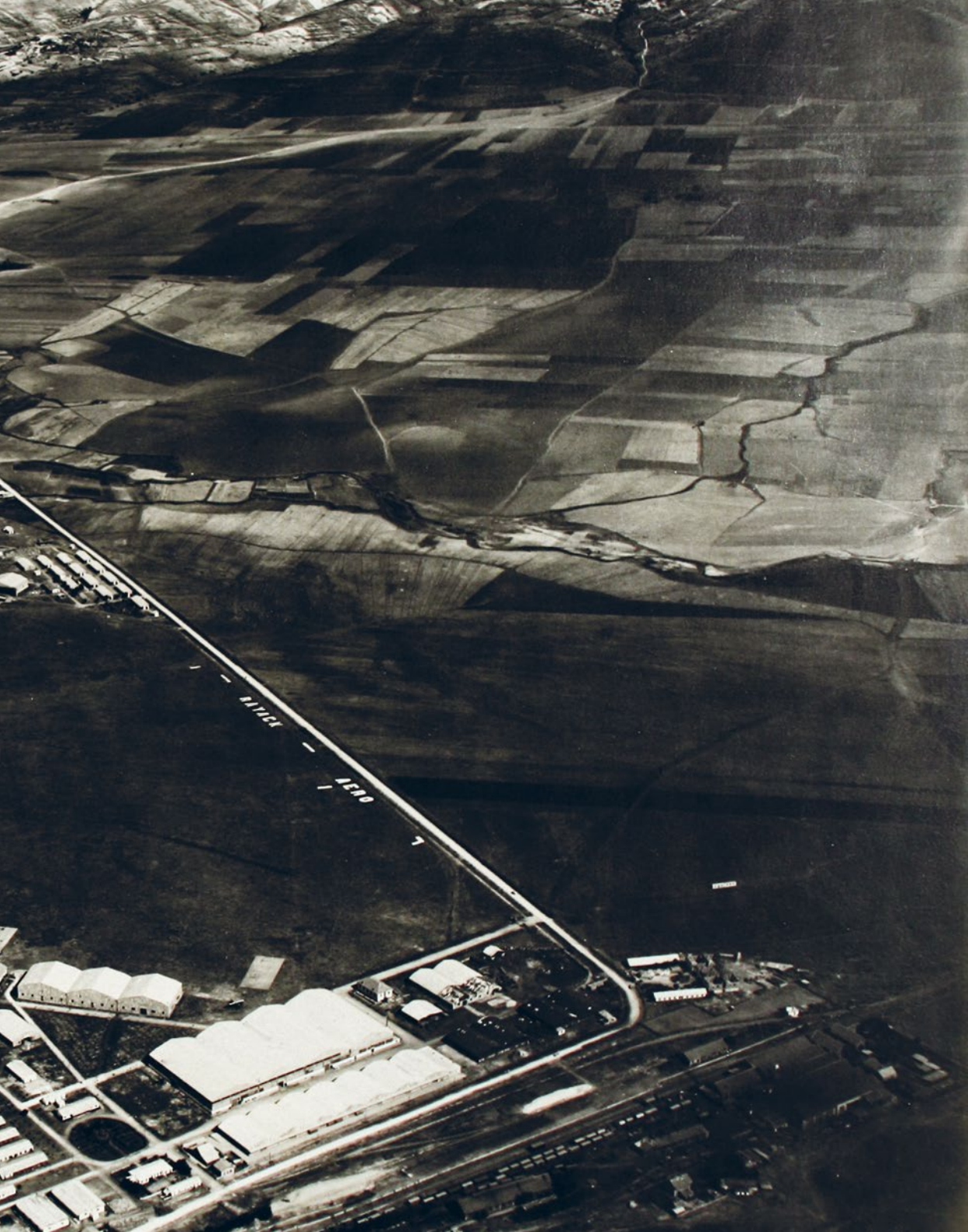
Maurice.

The French presence in the Levant came under threat from nationalists who, seeking to create a unified and independent Syria, would carry out the Jabal Druze revolt from July 1925 to March 1927.

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Unknown photographer,
attributed to the Photographic Unit
of the 39th Aviation Observation Regiment
Rayak, aerial military base, Circa 1926-30
Silver gelatin print on paper, in album, 18 x 24 cm





A “shift of the gaze”¹

With aerial photography, our gaze on the world shifts: “The earth unfolds into an immense carpet without borders, without beginning or end.”²

Aerial imagery, whether vertical or oblique, offers a new spatial experience and a glimpse of a completely new iconography, opening the door to such movements as cubism and geometric abstraction. Artists like Georges Braque and Robert Delaunay challenged the perspective inherited from the Renaissance, pushing it to the edge by placing on the same plane all the different views of the subject represented. This carpet without borders, beginning or end, is also that of Jackson Pollock’s *all-over* paintings.

Seen from above, landscapes become unrecognizable; we lose our bearings and our gaze misleads us. We can no longer distinguish the infinitely large from the infinitely small. *Dust Breeding* by Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp (1920) is an eloquent example of this experience.³

1 Thierry Gervais, “Un basculement du regard” (A Shift of the Gaze: The Beginnings of Aerial Photography 1855-1914), *Études photographiques*, 9 May 2001, [Online], published 10 September 2008.

2 Nadar (Gaspard Felix Tournachon), *When I Was a Photographer*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015. Originally published in French as *Quand j’étais photographe* by Ernest Flammarion, Paris, 1900.

3 Campany David, *Dust: Histoires de poussière d’après Man Ray et Marcel Duchamp*. Editor: Mack, 2015.



Unknown photographer,
attributed to the Photographic Unit
of the 39th Aviation Observation Regiment
Busr al Harir (Syria), Circa 1926-30
Silver gelatin print on paper, in album, 12 x 18 cm

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Unknown photographer,
attributed to the Photographic Unit
of the 39th Aviation Observation Regiment
City of Aleppo and the citadel, Circa 1926-30
Silver gelatin print on paper, in album, 10.5 x 16 cm





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The Fouad Debbas Collection

The Fouad Debbas Collection is a photographic collection comprising over 30,000 images from the Middle East – namely Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Turkey – from 1830 till the 1960s. It was built over the course of two decades by Fouad César Debbas (1930-2001), who was an ardent believer in the importance of collecting and preserving images as a means of safeguarding cultural heritage.

Housed in the Sursock Museum, the Collection consists of photographs, postcards, and stereoscopic views, in addition to loose albumen prints, etchings, and books, all of which relate to the region. The Collection, Orientalist in character and replete with commercial clichés, forms an important part of the Sursock Museum's collection, highlighting photography's key role in the development of modern art in Lebanon.