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Presentation: **Egypt in the Victorian Parlor: EL Wilson's virtual tour.**

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Egypt in the Victorian Parlor: EL Wilson's virtual tour.

ASTENE members were launched upon an immersive 19th century visual journey to Egypt and the Middle East by Prof. George L. Mutter. Donning special colored glasses to see the images in 3D, we were treated to a premiere showing of rarely seen, newly digitized, stereophotographs by the Philadelphia photographer Edward Livingston Wilson who traveled to the Holy Land in the winter of 1881-1882. Going up the Nile by khedival steamer and dahabiyeh then overland by camel through Sinai to Petra and Palestine it was a grand tour indeed! Accompanied by William Rau, who did most of the actual photography, Mr. Wilson documented the trip specifically for an audience of armchair travelers who would purchase and view his "Scenes in the Orient" stereocards. These are original photographic prints mounted as stereo pairs on salmon mounts embellished with Wilson's name written in Arabic. Wilson and Rau separately published

serialized accounts of their journey, which when combined with the sequentially numbered stereoviews create a first person annotation of the stunning scenes as encountered en route ¹. It was the first known use of dry plate photography in Egypt, an advance which liberated the photographer from the necessity of a portable darkroom in the field, thereby permitting greater freedom of movement and spontaneity than previously possible.

Arriving in Cairo in January 1882 by way of Alexandria, Islamic and pharonic monuments are balanced by everyday life. Street scenes populated by Egyptians going about their business are punctuated by poignant vignettes. When accosted by a dozen donkey boys at the Kasr el Nil bridge, Wilson re-established order by lining them up in to take their smiling picture. Women were more elusive. Because the unveiled female visage was traditionally absent from public life, he had to offer a cash reward for the woman willing to bare her face to the camera. Success ensued, immortalized by paired shots of a young woman astride her donkey in the street: one with, one without, the veil. Largely due to these unflagging efforts we are treated to snapshots of local people and ways of life throughout. Beggars, guards, messengers, fantasia dancers, religious and political figures, and even real lepers are all there.

A highlight was that Emile Brugsch who was an old friend of Wilson's, allowed him to photograph the royal mummies discovered a few months earlier in the royal cache of DB320. Sprawled openly on the floor of the central salon of the Boulak Museum, the wrapped encased mummies had yet to be installed in display cabinets. Brugsch and Gaston Maspero then accompanied Wilson's party as far as Luxor, where together they entered the original tomb still containing scattered debris of the rapid clearance that had taken place six months before. Rau caught Maspero, Brugsch at the mouth of the shaft, flanked by the robber Mohammed Abd er Rassul himself holding the actual rope used to first enter the tomb. For the past 117 years, this now famous scene had only been known from derivative steel engravings². There is mention of a shot of Brugsch sitting in the burial chamber, which appears now to be lost.

Images presented were compiled by Prof. Mutter and his collaborator Bernard P. Fishman of Rhode Island, as part of their ongoing digitization of a collection of 24,000 stereoviews, some of which will be posted online at their website www.Photoarchive3D.org. ASTENE members have much to look forward to!

¹ Published in serial form as "Echos of the Orient" (Wilson) and "Photographic Experiences in the East" (Rau) in the magazine Philadelphia Photographer, 1882-1883.

² Mutter GL, Fishman BP. "Lost" photographs of Edward L. Wilson: The American who documented the discovery of the Royal Mummies cache. KMT A Modern Journal of Ancient Egypt 2009; 20:60-68.