

Utopia in Autochrome: Reconsidering Archives of the Planet

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Who was Albert Kahn and what is his *Archives of the Planet*?

Albert Kahn (1860-1940) was a French banker who amassed a fortune by investing in diamond and gold mines in South Africa. With his imperial spoils, Kahn funded philanthropic projects informed by the ideals of cosmopolitanism and pacifism. These initiatives included 18-month international travel grants for teachers and lush, world-themed gardens around his villa in Boulogne. But his most ambitious undertaking was *Archives de la Planète*, a photographic survey that aimed to document “the surface of the globe inhabited and developed by man.”

Though he did not like to have his picture taken, Kahn bankrolled the collection of 72,000 autochromes, 183,000 meters of film, and 6,500 stereographs across four continents. The project began as a dream in 1908, when Kahn and his chauffeur-mechanic Albert Dutertre took a world tour, experimenting with photography and sound recording as they went. It ended in the early 1930s, when the “bizarre man of money” was ruined following the stock market crash of 1929. What Kahn and his many collaborators created in between is of interest to scholars as it constitutes one of the largest collections of early color photography and documentary film. Contradictorily, Kahn’s peace-making effort recorded the destruction of the Second Balkan War, World War I, and the Turkish War of Independence.

Perhaps Kahn’s utopian venture does not constitute a true archive, lacking any direct connection to authority (Bjorli and Jakobsen 2020, 155). But close analysis of the digital transfers and metadata provided by the Musée Albert-Kahn offers historians and archivists a critical lesson in the hazards of overabundant collecting.

Did the project meet its stated goals?

While Kahn’s use of the term archive is questionable, so too is his conception of the planet. Since his venture intended to represent the globe, it is perplexing to discover that 77% of the collection documents European locales. Of the images from Europe, 78% were taken in France, Kahn’s country of nationality. Yet even within French borders, the *Archives* overrepresent Paris and two places where Kahn himself owned property: Boulogne-Billancourt and Roquebrune-Cap-Martin (Smits 2025, 132).



Also notable is the relative lack of human figures in the images. An overwhelming majority do not feature people in them but rather focus on architecture and landscapes. This is a startling revelation for a collection bent on recording human activity. My statistical analysis sought to discover whether a photograph’s subject was dependent upon its country.

Statistical findings

By isolating photographs with *humains* as a subject term and applying a chi square test, I was able to determine that there is a statistically significant relationship between what country a picture was taken in and whether people appear in it. The countries that overperformed the most in their proportion of human subjects included Benin and the Netherlands, while Belgium and Canada underperformed. Plainly, photographers were more or less interested in people depending upon where they were. Further investigation needs to account for this relationship.

Additional questions:

- Kahn said he wanted to capture a world readily vanishing. How much of the globe documented by Kahn’s collection is gone?
- If we separate out *enfants* from *humains*, is the ratio of human

subjects to non-human subjects similar between countries?

The analog revolution and our own

Kahn, like ourselves, lived through a period of great technological transformation. His project was born out of an ambition to apply the innovations of color photography and moving images. As my research demonstrates, his collection failed to fully achieve its cosmopolitan and pacifist aims.

As archivists, we should always be conscious of how our efforts to diversify records may in fact replicate preexisting biases about the other. Digital tools can easily give us the illusion that universal representation is possible. Kahn’s *Archives* provide a cautionary tale of how an idealist scheme – even on an unlimited budget – is seriously constrained by the incognizance of its creators.

References

Bjorli, Trond Erik, and Kjetil Ansgar Jakobsen, eds. 2020. *Cosmopolitics of the Camera: Albert Kahn’s Archives of the Planet*. University of Chicago Press.

Smits, Thomas. 2025. “Revisiting the Kahn collection: multimodal artificial intelligence and visual patterns of presence and absence in the *Archives de la Planète*, 1909-1931.” *Visual Studies* 40 (1): 126-142.

Archives by region

