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**GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE PRESENTS ONLINE EXHIBITION  
*THE LEGACY OF ANCIENT PALMYRA***

*Exhibition draws from works by 18<sup>th</sup>-century architect Louis-François Cassas and largely unseen photographs by 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographer Louis Vignes*

[www.getty.edu/palmyra](http://www.getty.edu/palmyra)



**Left:** Temple of Bel, cella entrance, Louis Vignes, 1864. Albumen print. 8.8 x 11.4 in. (22.5 x 29 cm). The Getty Research Institute.

**Right:** Temple of Bel, cella entrance, Jean-Baptiste Réville and Pierre Gabriel Berthault after Louis-François Cassas. Etching. Platemark: 18 x 11.4 in. (46 x 29 cm). From *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phœnicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte* (Paris, ca. 1799), vol. 1, pl. 46. The Getty Research Institute

LOS ANGELES – Once a famed center of trade and meeting place of civilizations, Palmyra and its magnificent ruins have become targets in the ongoing Syrian conflict that victimizes its people and erases its cultural heritage. Launching February 8, 2017, the online exhibition *The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra* depicts the site as it was illustrated in the 18th century by the architect Louis-François Cassas and photographed for the first time by Louis Vignes in 1864.

"For centuries, traveling artists and explorers have documented the ruins of Palmyra in various states of preservation. And in modern times archeologists and art historians have devoted themselves to unraveling and preserving Palmyra's captivating, unique history and cultural significance, now under the shadow of unspeakable human suffering," said **Thomas**

**W. Gaehtgens**, director of the Getty Research Institute. "With *The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra*, the Getty Research Institute's first online exhibition, we are honored to present this visual record, much of it from the Getty Research Institute's collections."

Since its apogee in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, the Romans and Parthians knew Palmyra as a wealthy oasis metropolis, a multiethnic center of culture and trade on the edge of their empires. Stretching about three kilometers across the Tadmurean desert, the ruins of Palmyra are striking markers of the city's place in history. Starting in the late-17<sup>th</sup> century, Western explorers encountered these ruins and transmitted knowledge about the site through written descriptions, transcriptions of the numerous Palmyrene inscriptions scattered through the ruins, the collecting of ancient Palmyrene art and artifacts, and, later, the drawings of Cassas and the photographs of Vignes. Knowledge about Palmyra and its ruins permeated European society, becoming the subject of poetry and painting, in addition to influencing elegant Neoclassical design and architecture.

The online exhibition draws heavily from the Getty Research Institute's collections as well as art in museum and library collections all over the world. The exhibition explores the site's early history, the far-reaching influence of Palmyra in Western art and culture, and the loss, now tremendous and irrevocable, of the ruins that for centuries stood as a monument to a great city and her people.

"The devastation unleashed in Syria today forces a renewed interpretation of the early prints and photographs of this extraordinary world heritage site," said Getty Research Institute curator **Frances Terpak**. "They gain more significance as examples of cultural documents that can encourage a deeper appreciation of humanity's past achievements. Understanding Palmyra through these invaluable accounts preserves its memory and connects us with its grandeur and enduring legacy."

Among the monuments featured in the exhibition is the **Temple of Bel**, whose ruins were largely destroyed during the occupation of Palmyra in 2015 by the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS). Also referred to as the Temple of the Sun or the house of the Palmyrene gods, it was one of the grandest architectural projects of the 1st century CE. As the cultural heart of the ancient city, this massive complex integrates a courtyard stretching 200 meters on each side that could accommodate thousands of people during religious festivals.

In 2015 and again in 2017, ISIS destroyed some of the largest and best-preserved tower tombs, dating from 9 BCE to 128 CE and the most distinctive type of burial architecture in Palmyra, notably those of Elahbel, Iamlichus, and Ketot. Viewing Cassas's engravings, it is possible to imagine how the "Valley of the Tombs" once looked, enlivened with multistoried towers containing sculptural decoration on both the exterior and interior tombs. Such edifices clearly signaled to all the presence of the dead among the living. Though providing fewer details, Vignes's photographs capture the powerful desert light as it struck these great towers dominating the valley, effectively validating Cassas's impressive funerary landscape.

The funerary sculpture that decorated these multistoried tower tombs is among the best-known art to come out of Palmyra. Richly decorated with sculptures of the deceased, the



**Funerary bust with inscription, "Maqī son of M'ani,"** Palmyrene, anonymous maker, ca. 200 CE. Limestone. 20.5 x 14.6 x 7.1 in. (52.1 x 36.7 x 17.9 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa,

massive tombs are the source for some 3,000 bust portraits held today by museums worldwide. Modeling Greco-Roman naturalistic traditions of portraiture, but often draped in native Parthian garments with eyebrows more stylized and incised, as in the Assyrian tradition, these ancient sculptures stare proudly back at us as witnesses of their illustrious history. These busts bear testimony to the wealth of a vibrant multicultural society, the ravages of time and politics, and the enduring resonance of art.

"Positioned at a crossroads, Palmyra was a nexus of ideas and innovations streaming from east and west that made it one of the most cosmopolitan centers in antiquity. The unique style of Palmyra's architecture and sculpture reveals a blend of artistic influences that reflects its diverse population," said exhibition curator **Peter Louis Bonfitto**. "Cassas and Vignes employed different techniques to capture the magnitude of this vast ruined landscape; they complemented panoramic views with architectural studies to record the singularity of the monuments."

### **Louis-François Cassas (French, 1756-1827)**

In 1784 French artist and architect Louis-François Cassas traveled to the Eastern Mediterranean as part of a diplomatic mission to the Ottoman court. Arriving in Palmyra in May, 1785, Cassas assiduously worked to record the immense quantity of ruins scattered across the landscape until departing a month later with a caravan of 500 camels heading on to Baalbek in modern-day Lebanon. Aspiring to surpass earlier publications on Palmyra, Cassas wanted to awe and inspire his European audience by lavishly documenting this great Greco-Roman city lost in the desert. His panoramic etchings conform to the *voyage pittoresque* tradition, inviting the viewer to simultaneously marvel at the grandeur of antiquity and lament its inevitable decay. An amalgamation of orientalism and antiquarianism, the prints made from his drawings show local Bedouins inhabiting a dramatic landscape strewn with antique blocks, Corinthian columns and monumental doorways. His primary objective to systematically record the artistry and ingenuity of a vanished civilization is evident from Cassas's numerous technical renderings of the imposing civic and religious architecture. Floor plans and reconstructed architectural elevations are complemented by details of ornamental features.

### **Louis Vignes, (French, 1831-96)**

Photographing the ancient ruins of Palmyra was the vision of French nobleman Honoré Théodore Paul Joseph d'Albert, duc de Luynes (1802-1867), an exceptional savant, who in 1864 led a scientific expedition to the Dead Sea that included surveying the Transjordan region and exploring the famous rock-hewn city of Petra. For these investigations, he recruited several scientists including naval lieutenant Louis Vignes, because of Vignes' navigational skills and knowledge of eastern Mediterranean ports. To visually record the sites reached on his self-funded expedition, Luynes had Vignes trained in photography by artist and photographer Charles Nègre. After the completion of much of the mission, Luynes returned to Paris, leaving Vignes to continue to Palmyra, where he took over thirty photographs including three-part panoramas of the ruins.

Until their acquisition in 2015 by the Getty Research Institute, the Palmyra photographs featured in this exhibition were largely unknown because they had remained in the possession of the Luynes family. Printed by Nègre, probably soon after Vignes's return, these three dozen photographs of Palmyra are extremely rare and, in some cases, unique prints. They are the earliest known photographic images of the ruins, making Vignes the first to aim the camera's lens on the monuments. Produced some 75 years after Cassas's engravings, these pioneering photographs of Palmyra complement the prints to create an unparalleled visual record of this extraordinary ancient site.

*The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra* is curated by Frances Terpak, Getty Research Institute, curator and Peter Louis Bonfitto, Getty Research Institute, research associate.

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On the occasion of the exhibition launch on Wednesday, February 8, 2017, the Getty Research Institute will present *Palmyra and Aleppo: Syria's Cultural Heritage in Conflict* a panel discussion on the unfolding consequences of war on historic sites and monuments throughout the region.

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**View of the Ruins of Palmyra**, G. Hofstede van Essen, 1693. Oil on canvas. 33.8 x 169 in. (86 x 430 cm). Allard Pierson Museum, University of Amsterdam, 000.049. Courtesy of the University of Amsterdam