

Désiré Charnay

Desire Charnay (1828~1915) was the first photographer & explorer to document the ancient monuments of Mexico, thus setting ground for many important discoveries.



A relentless explorer, Désiré Charnay ventured with his camera into little known places in the central and south Mexico, to examine and photograph the ancient monuments and ruins, at that time known mainly to the local people or, through the sketchy writings of the Spanish missionaries. His three expeditions took him through the historically richest territories of central Mexico, Oaxaca, part of Guatemala, up the Yucatan peninsula, north through Veracruz, and back to the ancient Tolan in Hidalgo. Certainly, a remarkable journey, considering the travel conditions, and the photographic equipment and supplies of those days.

Désiré Charnay grew up to be an avid photographer, an amateur archeologist, and a romantic adventurer. He was born on May 2nd, 1828 near Lyons, in France. He studied in Paris, in Lycée Charlemagne, a traditional science school, established in 1804 by Napoleón Bonaparte. Already as a teen, Désiré Charnay was fascinated by adventures and travel, and explored England and Germany. After his graduation from the Lycée, young Charnay took a boat to the Americas, and at the age of 17 became a French teacher in New Orleans.

At that time, he read the books of John Lloyd Stephens, published 1841 and 1843, about Stephen's explorations in Yucatan. Charnay became very enthused with the possibility of

personally exploring these mystical regions, and after some negotiations with the French ministry of education, he received a commission to undertake such studies. He left on his first expedition in 1857, taking along a glass-plate camera. Thus, he became the first photographer to record many of the ancient ruins in Mexico.

During his research, Charnay became interested in the ancient Toltec culture, and went on to make many discoveries in the ancient Tolan, now an archeological site in Hidalgo, on the outskirts of the city of Tula.



The Ancient Cities of the New World

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Voyages and Explorations in Mexico and Central America from 1857 ~ 1882

This is the title of Désiré Charnay's book, as translated "*for the benefit of the American readers*" by J. Gonino and Hellen Conant, and published by Harper Brothers in New York, in 1887.

In this book, Charnay records his observations of his expeditions to Mexico. When he wrote the book (in 1882), he was already a seasoned traveller, having explored Mexico in 1857 to 1861, and later Madagascar (1863), Chile and Argentina (1875), and Java and Australia (1878).

He opens his book with a modest introduction:

"When I started for Mexico in 1880, I already knew something of the country, having, in year 1857, been sent out as delegate from my Government [French ministry of education] to explore parts of it. At that time I was rich in hopes and full of grand intentions, but poor in knowledge and light of purse, and I soon learned that the work I had undertaken was of so difficult and complicated a character, that the whole thing was beyond my power; and, finding that from want both of money and of technical knowledge I was unable to carry out the great schemes I had imagined, I contented myself with simply photographing some of the monuments as I visited them, without even venturing to add any comments thereto."

Today, however, his "*simple photographing of the monuments*" became a treasured record of the "*affairs as they were*", a stunning imagery of the original archeological sites. For us, modern photographers with light-weight digital cameras, it might be difficult to imagine Charnay carrying a large-format, glass-plate camera, mixing his silver colloid emulsions in the tropical heat of the jungles, and then trying to preserve the fragile images all the way throughout his expedition. And yet, he had succeeded, and many images from his work had inspired further archeological work, leading to some stunning discoveries.

Désiré Charnay himself became fascinated with the mysterious Toltec culture, and has contributed to the discoveries of the site in Tula, and to the understanding of the myth of Quetzalcoatl, one of the most intriguing and powerful myths of the Americas.

In further article, we will go deeper into the adventures of Charnay, and also the two men whom not only touched Charney's life, but also contributed greatly to the visual records of the ancient archeological sites in Mexico.

