49th Levantine Heritage Foundation Zoom lecture with guest speaker Carine Lemyre
14 December 2026, 6.00 pm (UK time)

Formats of Empire and the Maison Bonfils (1867-1914)

In 1867, the French photographer Félix Bonfils and his wife, Marie-Lydie Cabanis Bonfils, established a photographic studio in Beirut, then a growing port city in the Ottoman Empire. For nearly fifty years, the Maison Bonfils photographed the landscapes, monuments, and inhabitants of the Eastern Mediterranean and Egypt, selling its photographic material to tourists, pilgrims, and armchair travellers in Europe and North America. The studio's photographs did not circulate as single prints alone; they were assembled into souvenir albums, printed as cartes de visite, mounted as stereographs, and projected as magic lantern slides. They are preserved today in collections across Beirut, Paris, and North America.

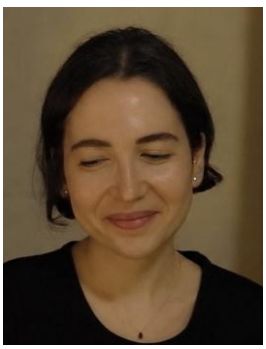
Scholars have often read the studio's output as a homogeneous body of Orientalist imagery. This talk instead considers how specific photographic formats and visual technologies shaped the production, circulation, and reception of colonial knowledge about the region. I will discuss how each format offered its European viewers a distinct mode of visual instruction. Albums such as *Souvenirs d'Orient* guided readers through Baalbek with text and image. Stereographs offered three-dimensional journeys along the Nile, and lantern slides projected the Holy Land as a spectacle of scale, colour, and depth. Each taught audiences to see, feel, and imaginatively inhabit the "Orient" in its own way. I will also examine the collective and gendered labour behind the studio, particularly that of Marie-Lydie Bonfils, whose contributions have long been overshadowed by the figure of a single male photographer. In doing so, the talk also repositions Beirut as a critical node in the global history of nineteenth-century photography.

Booking essential: https://carine-lemyre-presentation.eventbrite.co.uk (donation appreciated)

Contact: contact@levantineheritage.com



Maison Bonfils, Beyrouth. Vu du collège américain, ca.1870, albumen silver print, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Carine Chelhot Lemyre is an Assistant Professor of Art History at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA), University of Balamand. Her research examines photography and painting in relation to travel, commerce, and colonialism in the late Ottoman Empire. She is currently completing her book manuscript, *Formats of Empire: Photography, Visual Technologies, and the Maison Bonfils, 1867–1914*. Carine received a PhD in Art History from the University of St Andrews in 2023, with support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Canadian Centennial Scholarship Fund (CCSF), the Society for the Study of French History (SSFH), and the Society for French Studies (SFS), among others. She also holds a BA from the American University of Beirut (2016) and an MA from the University of Toronto (2017).

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