I once asked myself why, when choosing between the academic portrait – the respective photographers considering themselves “academic painters” – and photography, the client would choose photography. I could see no advantage other than the lower price. In time, I realized that it was about the unfiltered pose of subjectivity of time, age, and soul that was rendered by a photograph and made it a unique and seemingly living witness of the past, especially of the personal past. That is why the client, perhaps not even knowing the reason, would choose himself, not the artist: the photographer was no longer the creator of the client’s image, like the painter, but the technician who handled the camera that captured it.

Some of the painter-photographers understood the mechanism of this choice and sought to separate the photo from its miraculous purpose (somewhat degrading for any artistic pride) which reduced it to the status of craft, and transformed it into art.

Carol Popp de Szathmari is an example. We do not refer to laboratory techniques, which were not possible at the time. Rather, he simply set the background of the scene, the position of the subject, his physiognomy and gestures; thus, the image retained his own vision, his creative contribution. Like him and simultaneously with him, there were creations of painter-photographers all around the world, so that, from the adolescence of photography there emerged what we call today “photography of art” – practically a new, extremely complex art. It is notable that when they approached veduta (panorama), unable to intervene on the background, these photogra-

The photographer Carol Popp de Szathmari

Cupidon with broken arms

Photographer: Carol Popp de Szathmari

1848

Calotype
The first calotype made by a Romanian photographer was dated November 1848 and represents the image of Cupid, an antique piece from the collection of Carol Popp de Szathmari, author of this calotype.

Photographers sought special angles dictated by their artistic vision, which immediately made the difference between a veduta-document and veduta-art. This helps us in distinguishing the vedutae made on request from those made of their own initiative.

Chronologically, the first shots were daguerreotypes, made first by itinerant photographers, as there were no certified workshops or studios in the press of the time. Unlike the daguerreotype (a positive image directly obtained on a rigid surface, on silver or on silvered glass, which meant a unique image), the calotype, the second chronological technique, produced a negative image from which could be produced a desired number of positive images. The first calotype made by a Romanian photographer was dated November 1848 and represents the image of Cupid, an antique piece from the collection of Carol Popp de Szathmari, author of this calotype. It became part of the collection of old photos belonging to Constantin Orășanu. Although its author gave it small consideration, it retains a certain artistic value.

The years after the Crimean War abounded in pictures: portraits, group images, and vedutae, most of them of Bucharest. The first photos on ethnographic themes appeared, made in the beginning by Szathmari, then by other photographers, more or less talented artists. An album compiled by Szathmari in 1862 and offered with dedication to Elena Cuza is a perfect example of the moment. There are photographs of outstanding quality, some of them betraying his artistic searches in this apparently hostile area.
The coming of Charles I from the Danube springs stimulated the young prince’s desire to

since then, the famous photographer Franz Duschek-father, his nephew by marriage and

his competitor, began his activity. An album presenting Otelelișanu’s estate in Magurele still amazes today through grace and poetry. The photographer – the first who was not also a painter – captured those parts of the park that seemed to resonate with his sensitivity.

The Otelelișanu Park
Photographer: Franz Duschek
1864

Colțea Tower
Photographer: Carol Popp de Szathmari
1869

The Saint George Church
Photographer: Carol Popp de Szathmari

Olt River Valey
Photographer: Carol Popp de Szathmari
With the entrance of the Army, led by Prince Charles, under the Triumphal Arch after winning the war on the plains of Rumelia in 1877, another photographer emerged, Franz Mandy. Strongly attracted by artistic photography and always attuned to the latest technical innovations, his vision would be special. Beside the multitude of conventional photographs made at the request of his clients, he left us the warmest and most sensitive images of the young Princess Mary, full of artistic values. He dominated Romanian photography until he died, in 1910.
Let me remind you that, from the beginning of the last decade of the 19th century, Mandy had two formidable competitors, Franz Duschekson and John Spirescu. The former flirted with modernist photography – sometimes of a Cubist strain, such as the photos of the Cernavodă Bridge obtained between 1890 and 1895. The latter focused on the poetic image, his vedute impressing by their freshness, shadows and reflections, appreciated by jury of the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1900. These artists (as they were not only photographers) were clearly his “fellows”, who increased their number every decade in geometric progression and remained “eternal”, only by their quality – absolutely by chance – as witnesses of the time.
Queen Mary of Romania
Photographer: Franz Mandy