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Jean Pascal Sébah
Ascending the Pyramid

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Jean Pascal Sébah (1872 – 1947)

Ascending the Pyramid

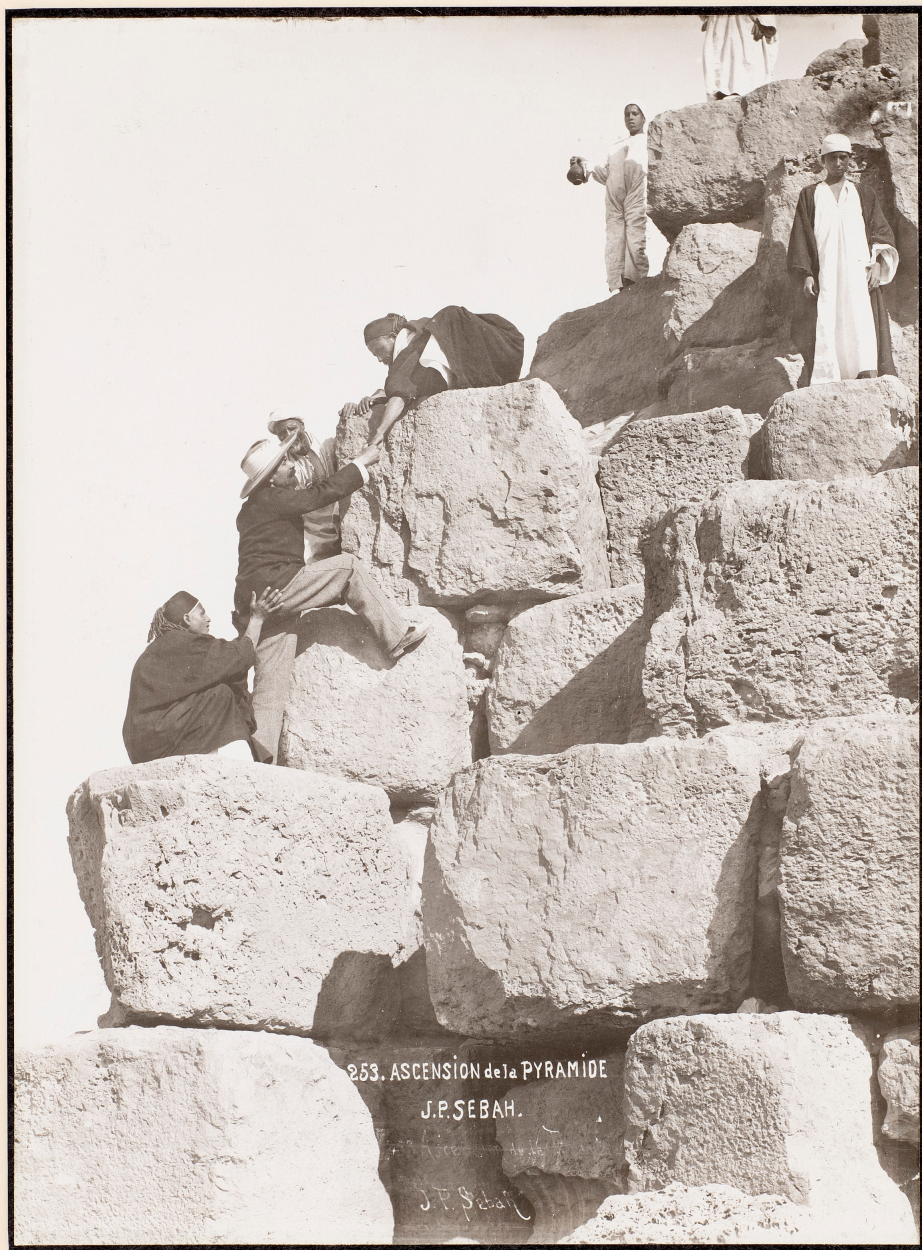
Albumen print

Signed and titled in the negative

Provenance

Private collection, France.

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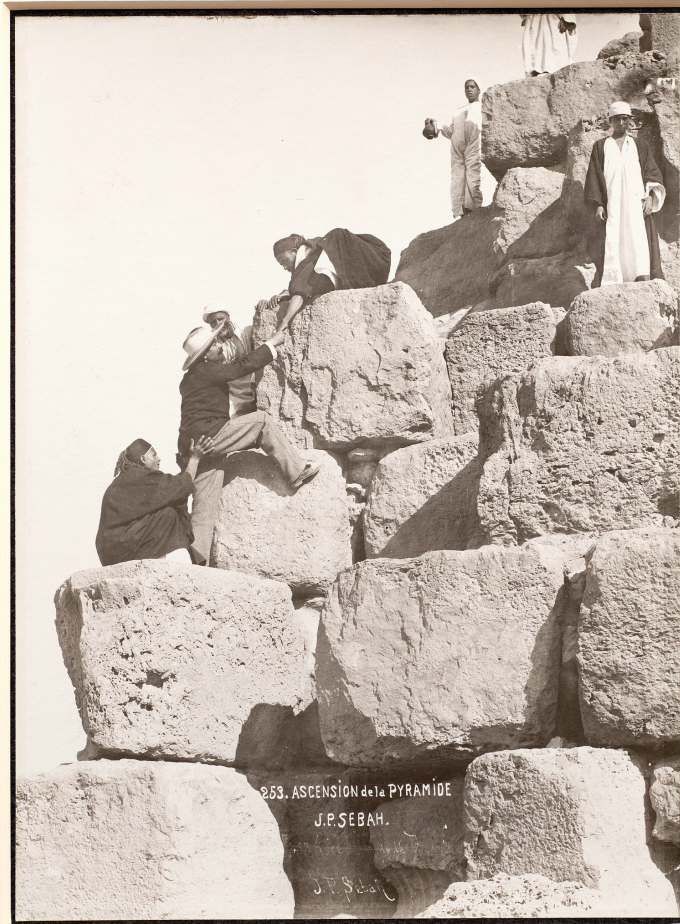
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This photograph records one of the most celebrated rituals of nineteenth-century travel in Egypt: the ascent of the Great Pyramid of Khufu at Giza. At the centre of the composition a European traveller, in a dark jacket, pale straw hat and light trousers, is hauled up the monument's massive limestone courses by a team of local guides. One grips his hand and pulls from above while another braces and lifts him from below. Higher up, further guides in pale robes and a water-carrier pause among the great blocks, while at the summit additional figures are silhouetted against the bright sky. The print is numbered 253 and inscribed *Ascension de la Pyramide* with the signature *J.P. Sébah* in the negative.

By the late nineteenth-century, the climb to the top of the Great Pyramid had become an almost obligatory course of the Grand Tour of Egypt. Tourist travel to Egypt had created a strong demand for photographs as souvenirs, and the ascent itself was a managed spectacle. Travellers were lifted course by course up the metre-high blocks by teams of Egyptian guides from the neighbouring villages. This image captures both the physical drama of the climb and the carefully choreographed commercial encounter between Western visitors and their local guides that lay at the heart of the early tourist economy at Giza.

Jean Pascal Sébah was the son of Pascal Sébah (1823 – 1886), founder of one of the foremost photography studios of the Ottoman world. Pascal Sébah opened his own studio in Constantinople in 1857 in the Pera district, and by 1873 was successful enough to open a second studio in Cairo. Following his father's death the business continued, and from 1888 traded as Sébah & Joaillier in partnership with Polycarpe Joaillier, the firm developing a reputation as the leading representative of Orientalist photography and serving as official photographers to the Sultan Abdülhamid II. Jean took particular charge of the Cairo branch and lived in Egypt for a period, where he signed his photographs "J.P. Sébah," commemorating his father and their celebrated family name.

Subjects such as this belonged to the standard repertoire of Egyptian views produced for the tourist trade by the leading studios of the period, which included Félix Bonfils, the Zangaki brothers and the Bécharde firm alongside Sébah, whose albumen prints were sold individually or sometimes compiled into souvenir albums. Another impression of the composition is held in the Library of Congress, Washington (fig. 1). As a record of both the monument and Orientalist photography that surrounded the

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culture of travel, the image remains among the most evocative of late nineteenth-century Egyptian tourist views.

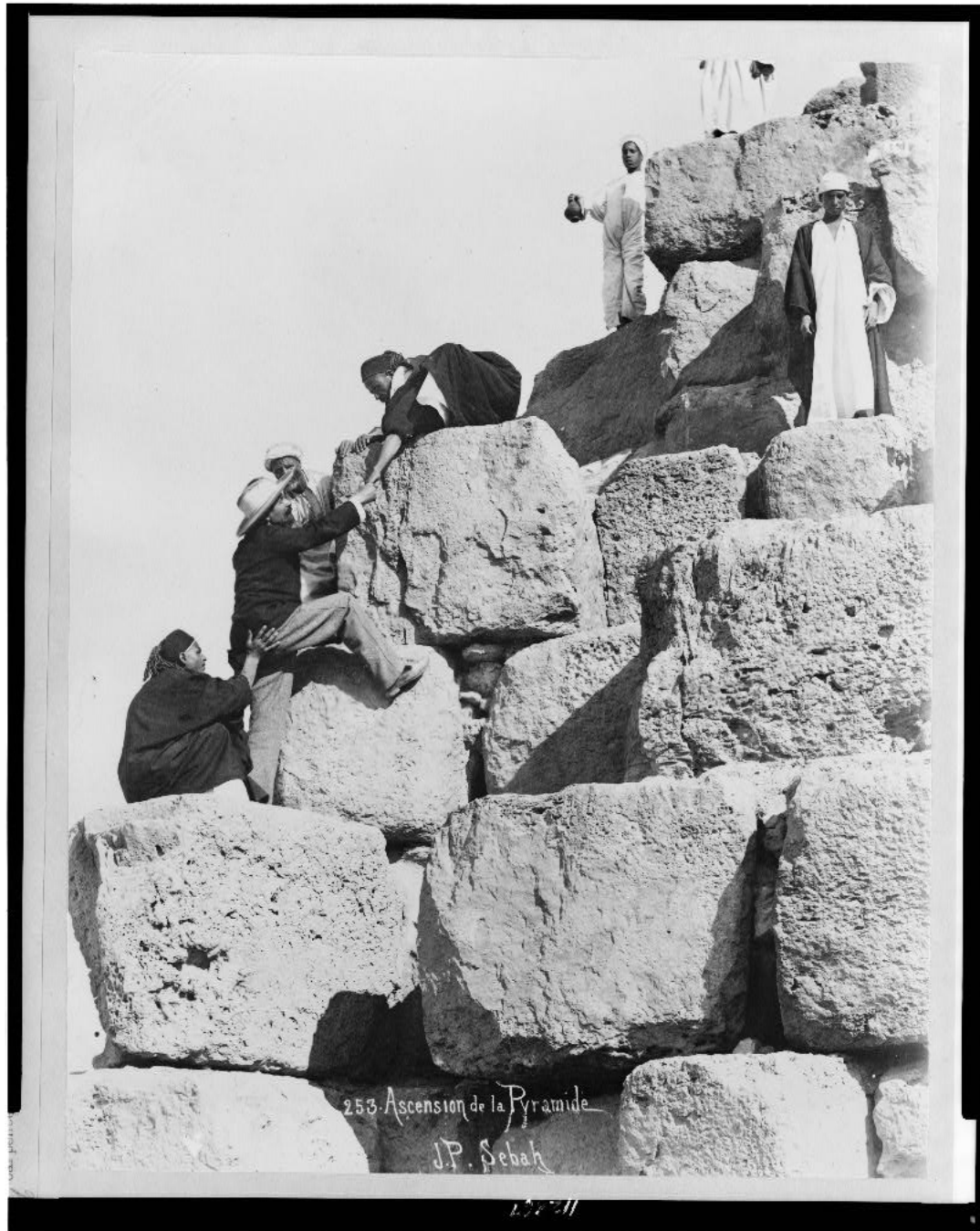


Fig. 1: Jean Pascal Sébah, *Ascension de la Pyramide*, c. 1860-1880, Library of Congress, Washington, inv. 95505828