

Stereoscopy History Series

Erotica

Jean Agélou

ANDRÉ RUITER

Jean Agélou

The photographer of intimate boudoir stereoviews from La Belle Époque.



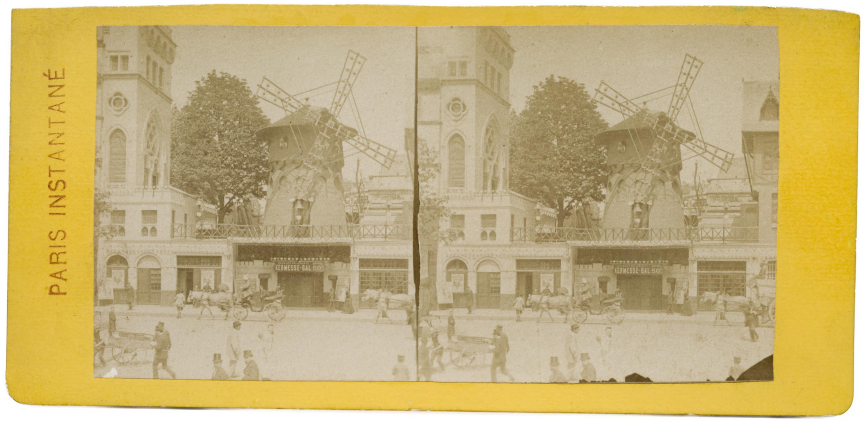
The *Stereoscopy History Series* explores the history of stereoscopy in Europe between 1850 and 1930, unveiling the stories of the people, companies and their remarkable instruments and images that captured the imagination of an era.

La Belle Époque

In the summer of 1871, France was licking its wounds after some traumatic events. It had declared war on Prussia on 19 July 1870, but the war was disastrous for France. The French army was crushed at Sedan by a coalition of Prussia and other German states and kingdoms. The French emperor Napoleon III was captured and deposed, and France became for the third time a republic. To make matters worse, a major revolt broke out in Paris. The uprising of the Paris Commune was brutally crushed by the French army in May 1871, and tens of thousands of Parisian civilians died during the uprising.

Better times came after the war. A period of growth, progress and optimism followed. After the First World War, the French would look back on this period with melancholy, and it was given the name La Belle Époque (The Beautiful Era). La Belle Époque was roughly the period between 1871 and 1914. Although tensions between France and Germany continued, it was a period of relative stability in Europe. Prosperity increased, technological innovations abounded, and art and culture prospered. Working conditions and wages also improved, which resulted in higher living standards for many citizens. A new middle class emerged that could afford to travel and buy luxury goods. New innovations, such as electricity, film and the telephone, quickly became more common and made life pleasant.

France was regularly in the spotlights. In 1889, the World Exhibition took place in Paris, with the Eiffel Tower as entrance gate. Life was celebrated during the cabarets of Le Moulin Rouge, and the Parisian nightlife was beautifully depicted by the painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901). Architecture and art were influenced by the new styles impressionism and art nouveau.



Le Moulin Rouge
8.5 x 18 cm paper stereoview, c. 1890

After France became a republic, the country became more tolerant. Nude photography was still not widely accepted, but it was tolerated by the authorities as long as the photographs were not obscene and did not cause public unrest. What was considered “obscene” was not very clear, and photographers and publishers had to proceed with caution to avoid crossing an invisible line and risking prosecution. Photographers rarely published under their own names. Instead they used different initials or pseudonyms, which prevented photos from being traced back to the same photographer in case of a violation. Because of the risks, nude photography was known as “photographie risquée”. Erotic photography exploded from 1905, and Paris was the centre.

Nude photography was not to everyone's taste, and defenders of public morals attempted to impose restrictions. As result of a new French law, full nude photographs disappeared in publications from 1908. Photos were retouched, and veils were added to hide genitals or pubic hair was erased. It seemed a satisfying compromise for both authorities and publishers. Nude photography could continue to flourish[1].



La Vie Joyeuse – Nos Mondaines
Box with six 8.5 x 17 cm erotic tissue stereoviews
Published by C. B. Marseille, c. 1905

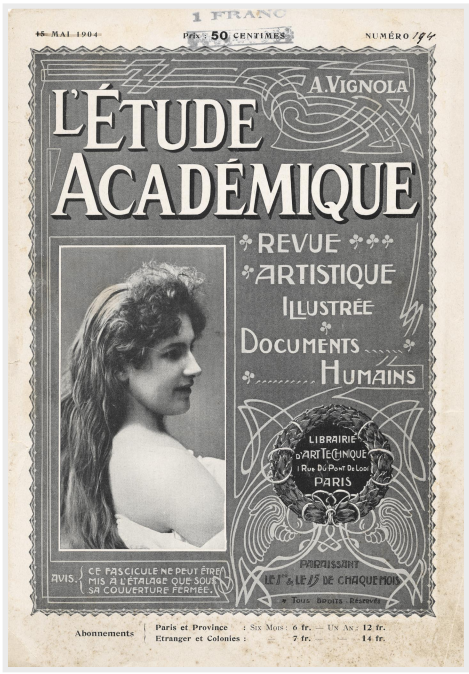
Nude publications

Erotic photography was accepted as study material for painters and sculptors, and this turned out to be a good cover for selling nude pictures. At the beginning of the 20th century, several publications with nude photographs emerged. Their ostensible goal was to inspire artists, but the publishers had another audience in mind.

Le Nu Esthétique was the first publication, and its first issue was published in October 1903. It was initiated by the art historian Émile Bayard (1868–1937) and would appear until 1907. It was a great success and inspired others to publish similar publications.

The cartoonist Amédée Vignola (1862–1939) published many new titles between 1904 and 1906, such as *L'Étude Académique*, *Le Document Photographique* and *Mes Modèles*. The publications were cheap and every issue included an introduction to artistic nudity, to keep up appearances and emphasise the artful nature of the publication. Some publications, such as *Le Stéréo-Nu*, *Les Beautés du Nu* and, *Le Déshabillé au Stéréoscope*, contained a collection of paper stereoviews that could be cut out for viewing with a stereoscope.

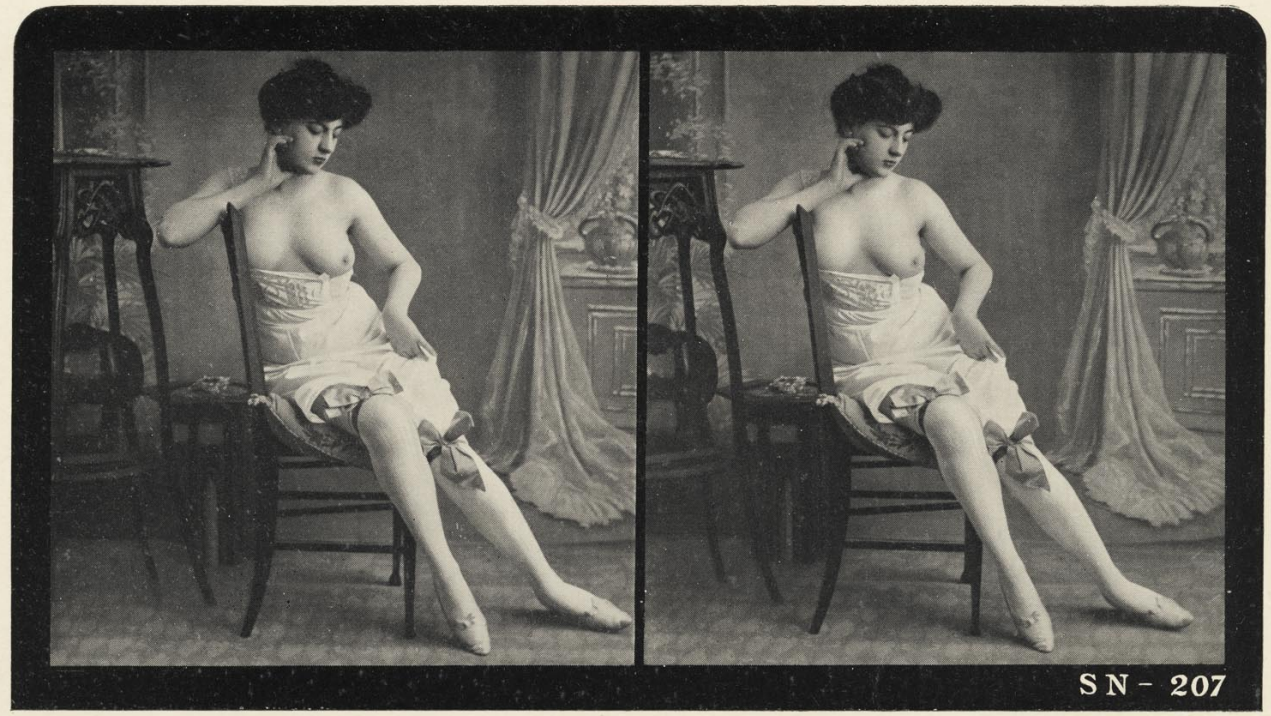
The publications were packed in sealed envelopes to make sure they could not accidentally fall into the wrong hands and cause public unrest. Before the First World War, 20 different titles and nearly 800 issues appeared. A detractor of the publications estimated that 1,268,000 copies circulated in 1908[2]. It seems clear that the buyers and subscribers were not all sculptors or painters. The First World War brought an end to the publications, and they were not revived after the war.

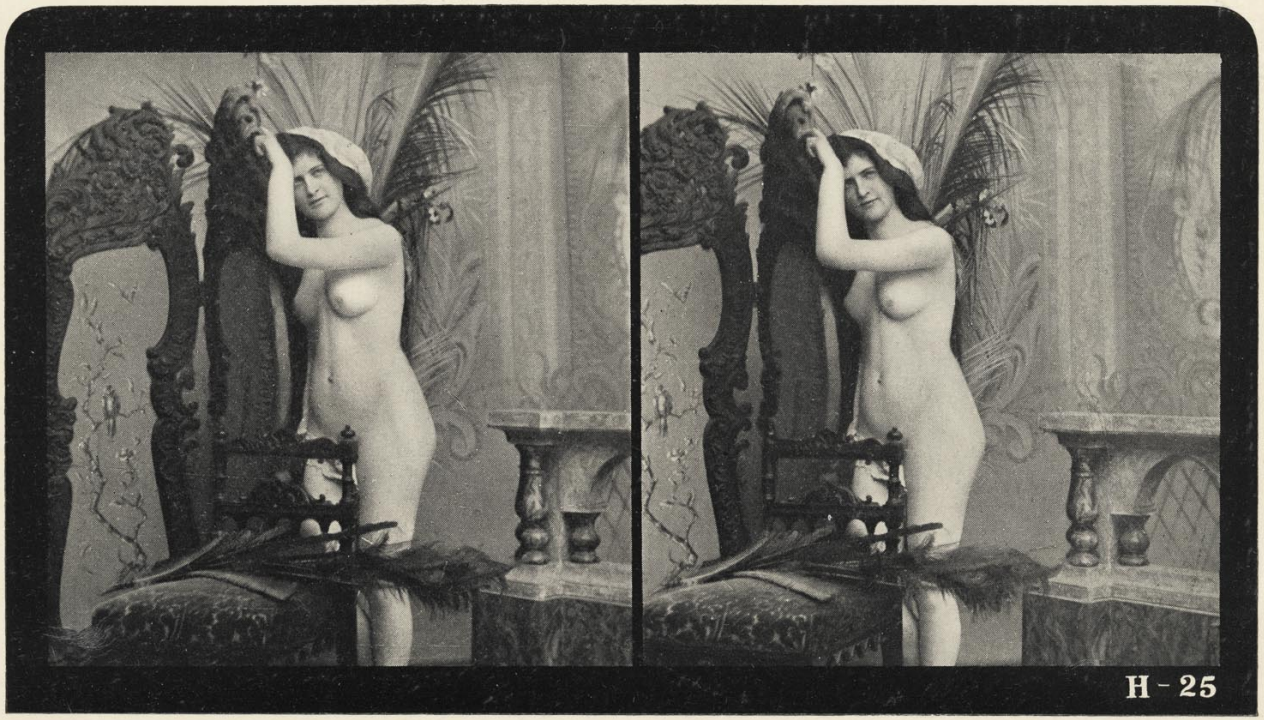


15 May 1904



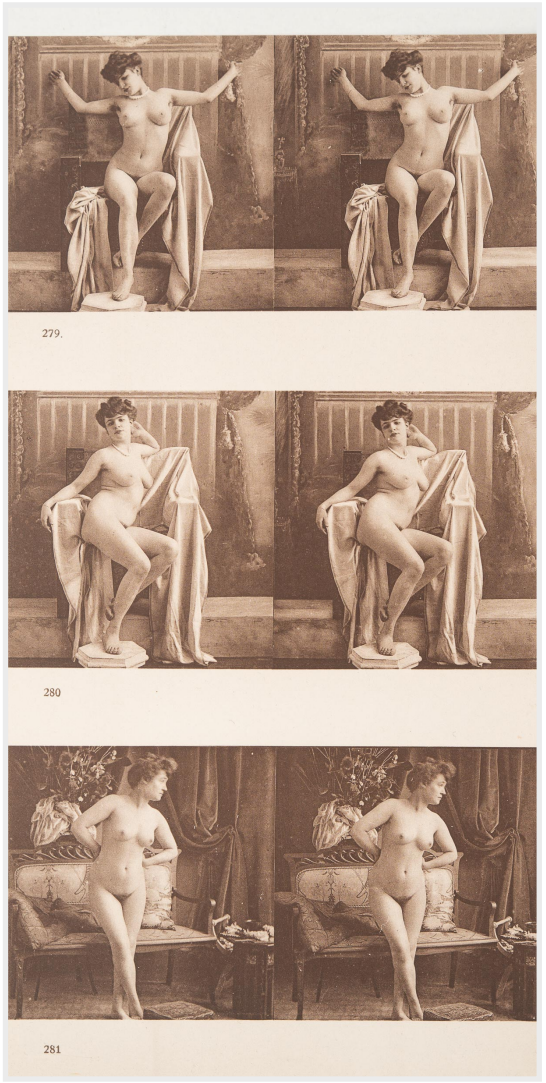
The cover of *Le Stéréo-Nu*, 15 June 1907.





Two 9 x 16 cm paper stereoviews from *Le Stéréo-Nu.*





Each issue of *Les Beautés du Nu* contained twelve 7 x 14 cm stereoviews that could be cut out for viewing with a stereoscope.



Le Déshabillé au Stéréoscope contained nine 7 x 14 cm coloured stereoviews.



Jean Agélou

Paul Isidore Agélou was employed by the French postal service in Alexandria, Egypt, where he married the Greek Maria Zaccaria. Their second child and first son, Jean Bernard Agélou, was born on 16 October 1878. A younger brother, Georges, was born on 28 April 1882[3].

The precise date when Jean moved to Paris to pursue a career in photography remains uncertain. His earliest works that can be attributed with certainty appeared in 1905 in the erotic publication *L'Étude Académique*[4], signed with the initials AJ. A demonstration by Agélou was described in *La Revue de Photographie* in 1905:

> …Here is the interior of Mr. Jean Agélou's studio, where he is still exhibiting a very pretty nude study and a portrait. Studio Interior—without having seen it, you could describe it: plaster masks, cushions, sumptuous fabrics full of shimmering reflections, trinkets, and so on. In this familiar setting, Mr. Jean Agélou has placed, at the center, a woman—doubtless a model—who, one knee on a sofa, leaning toward a mirror, arches her back and traces a most alluring line. Obviously, judging by the very place where he situates her, the young woman is the true subject of the studio interior, and the décor is merely accessory. Observe, moreover, that supple body closely sheathed in the dark gown: it fully deserves the honor bestowed upon it.

By June 1908, Jean had established himself at 1, Rue Armand Gauthier in Paris[5]. The street was situated near the Montmartre district, which during La Belle Époque had become home to artists and bohemians. The lively quarter was renowned for its tolerant atmosphere. Jean Agélou et Compagnie was founded in May 1911, in partnership with Émile Billotte and Baptiste Minard. The venture, however, was short-lived: it was dissolved in November that same year[6]. Only a month later, the company was re-established, this time with Raymond Besson as his associate[7].

Under this renewed partnership, the firm quickly gained prominence as a publisher of erotic postcards and stereoviews. Operations expanded to 6, Rue Armand Gauthier. In 1912, the company promoted twelve series of ten erotic postcards and six series of five[8]. By 1914, this range had grown considerably, comprising eighty-five series of ten postcards and thirty-six sets of five[9]. Each series was numbered and bore the initials JA.

Jean's younger brother Georges is thought to have contributed to the enterprise. In December 1913, an advertisement announced ten postcard series signed with the initials GA[10], a mark that can be confidently linked to Georges Agélou. Other series bearing the initials GP are also connected to Jean's or Georges' publishing house.

On 30 December 1913, Jean Agélou et Compagnie was dissolved[11]. Besson assumed ownership of the JA trademark and continued the publishing operations independently[12]. Jean himself carried on as a freelance photographer[13].

Around this time, Georges established his own publishing house, issuing erotic postcards under the GA trademark[14]. In 1921, Georges acquired Besson's business, thereby consolidating the brands JA, GA, as well as Léo and Lydia[15]. Jean continued making photographs for his brother's publishing house.

The careers of both brothers were cut short on 2 August 1921, when Jean and Georges died together in a car accident at Autry-le-Châtel[16]. Following their deaths, the assets of their enterprises were dispersed, and their negatives and trademarks passed into new hands[17].



JA postcard advertisement in *Almanach des Peintres & Sculpteurs*, 1915

Style

In Jean's photographs in *L'Étude Académique*, the models were usually depicted fully nude and arranged in classical poses. Some of these same women also appeared in Jean's own published series, where they were more often shown partially clothed in lingerie. These works were subtler and more sensual in character and can today be regarded as early examples of boudoir photography.

Jean's images were distinguished by their high technical and artistic quality. Decorative elements and romantic backdrops helped to create an intimate atmosphere, while the models appeared relaxed and at ease before the camera. Several models posed on multiple occasions, returning for different series. In all, several hundred women sat for him, many of whom were recruited from the theatres and nightclubs of Paris or through newspaper advertisements[18]. The names of most remain unknown.





Postcards were sold in sets of five or ten. For the sets of ten, portfolio cards were issued providing an overview of all the postcards in the series. There were also series issued that brought together a selection of different models. Postcards with erotic imagery became a French speciality, giving rise to the expression “French postcard”.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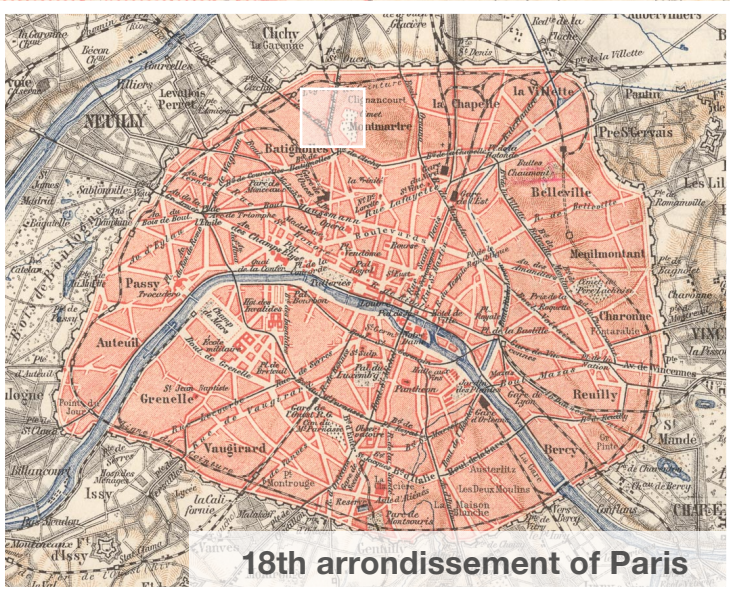
Companies and people

	Jean Agélou et Cie / Jean Agélou	**Raymond Bessan** (Successor Jean Agélou et Cie)	**Georges Agélou**
Duration	1908–1911 / 1914–1921 (Jean Agélou) 1911–1914 (Jean Agélou et Cie)	1914–c. 1921	c.1914–1921
Addresses in Paris	1, Rue Armand-Gauthier (1908–1913) 1 & 6, Rue Armand-Gauthier (1913–1914) 228, Rue Marcadet (1914–1921)	1 & 6, Rue Armand-Gauthier (1914–1919) 5 & 7, Galerie Vivienne (1919–c. 1921)	116, Rue Damrémont (c.1914–1921) 5 & 7, Galerie Vivienne (1921)
People	Jean Bernard Agélou * 16-10-1878, Alexandria (Egypt) † 02-08-1921, Autry-le-Châtel Business partners: Émile Billotte and Baptiste Minard (1911) Raymond Léon Bessan (1911–1914)	Raymond Léon Bessan * 14-12-1883, Paris † 29-12-1969, Paris	Georges Agélou * 28-04-1882, Alexandria (Egypt) † 02-08-1921, Autry-le-Châtel



116, Rue Damrémont

Georges Agélou from c.1914 to 1921.

228, Rue Marcadet

Jean Agélou from 1914 to 1921.

1 & 6, Rue Armand-Gauthier

The location of the successive businesses of Jean Agélou et Cie and successor Raymond Bessan.





The photographs for the shown stereoview and postcard were taken during the same session, indicating that Jean used both a stereo camera and a conventional camera when working with a model. The postcard bears the initials GP, suggesting that the GP trademark was also linked to the Agélou brothers.



L'Étude Académique, 15 July 1914



The image in *L'Étude Académique* has the initials GA, while the postcard is marked GP. Both photographs were taken during the same photoshoot.



Some of Jean's negatives have survived. Glass plate negatives in the 9 × 14 cm format are known, which were used for producing postcards of the same size. No negatives of his stereoviews have yet been identified.





This 13 × 18 cm negative was originally used for a print in *L'Étude Académique*. After publication in the magazine, frame lines, a serial number, and initials were scratched into the negative so that it could be reused to produce a smaller 9 × 14 cm postcard.



After Jean’s death, his negatives were sold. The shown example was originally used for printing a JA Série 068 postcard, but the number and JA initials were removed and replaced with a new number (24). The negative was probably reused by another publisher who had acquired Jean's negatives after his death and issued it in new series.

Maud d’Orby

Maud d’Orby (1851–1929) is one of the few models known by name who posed for Jean. D’Orby was a soprano singer born in Valladolid, Spain. She gained popularity for her performances in comic operas and operettas, and achieved her greatest success in France during La Belle Époque, particularly between 1897 and 1908.

D’Orby appeared on stage in several renowned Parisian theatres, including Olympia, La Scala, and La Cigale. In addition to her stage career, she posed for a number of photographers. Her portraits were widely circulated, both in magazines and as collectible postcards.

She featured in at least six postcard series published by Jean. In these images, she is shown clothed or semi-nude, often dressed in elaborate theatrical costumes. As far as is known, Jean did not publish any stereoviews of her.





Stereoview classification

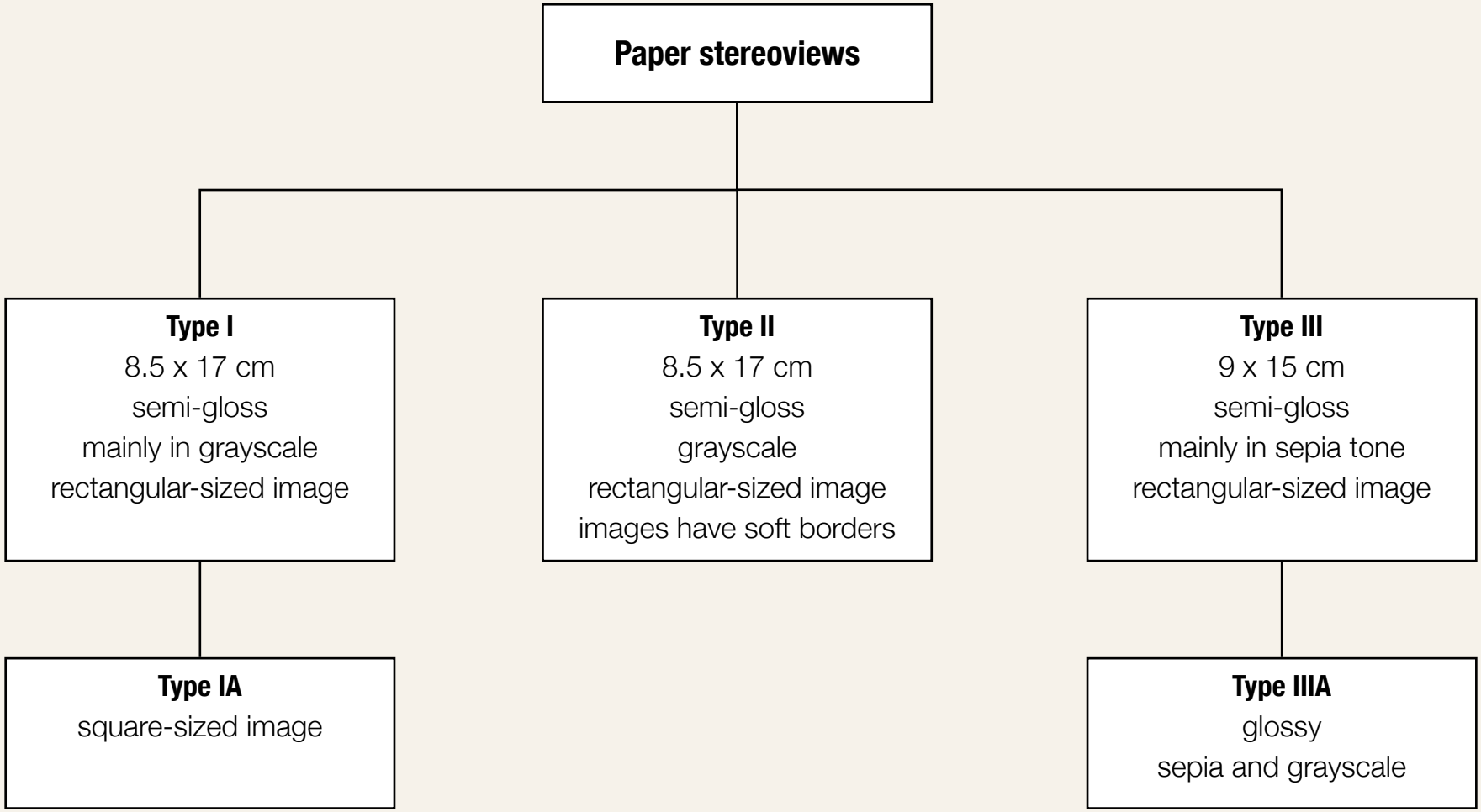
Judging by the range of photos offered on online auction sites today, it can be concluded that Jean's erotic stereoviews are rarer than the postcards. The stereoviews were apparently printed in smaller editions. Like the postcards, the stereoviews were probably sold in series of five or ten.

Jean is known to have published at least 42 numbered series of paper stereoviews bearing the initials JA, though the actual total was higher, since not every series carried a number. No stereoviews that were published by Jean have been identified with other initials than JA. The absence of stereoviews marked with the initials GA or GP suggests that the production of stereoscopic images ceased earlier, perhaps around 1914, after which attention shifted exclusively towards the postcards.

The stereoviews were issued in formats of 8.5 × 17 cm and 9 × 15 cm, and exhibit several variations in presentation style. Those that can be firmly ascribed to Jean carry the initials JA together with a serial number, usually preceded by the word “Série”. These markings are generally arranged one beneath the other and appear at the bottom of either the left or right image of the stereo pair. In some cases the initials and number are separated. Captions were either inscribed in white on a dark ground or in black on a light one. Certain stereoviews bear no initials or numbering at all, yet can be attributed to Jean on the basis of their presentation style or through recognisable interior details of his studio.

A single photographic session with a model could give rise to publications in both 8.5 × 17 cm and 9 × 15 cm formats, in which case the two sets shared the same serial number. This correspondence can help to reconstruct missing numbers when they survive in one format but not the other. One example is also known in which the same serial number was assigned to two different series featuring two distinct models. Whether this duplication resulted from error or from deliberate choice remains unknown.

Classification of Jean Agélou's stereoviews





JA Série 25

8.5 x 17 cm paper stereoview, Type I



JA Série 14
8.5 x 17 cm paper stereoview, Type IA

Most Type I and IA stereoviews are grayscale images,
however this example has a sepia tone.



JA Série 28
8.5 x 17 cm paper stereoview, Type II

Type II stereoviews can be recognised by
the soft edges surrounding the images.



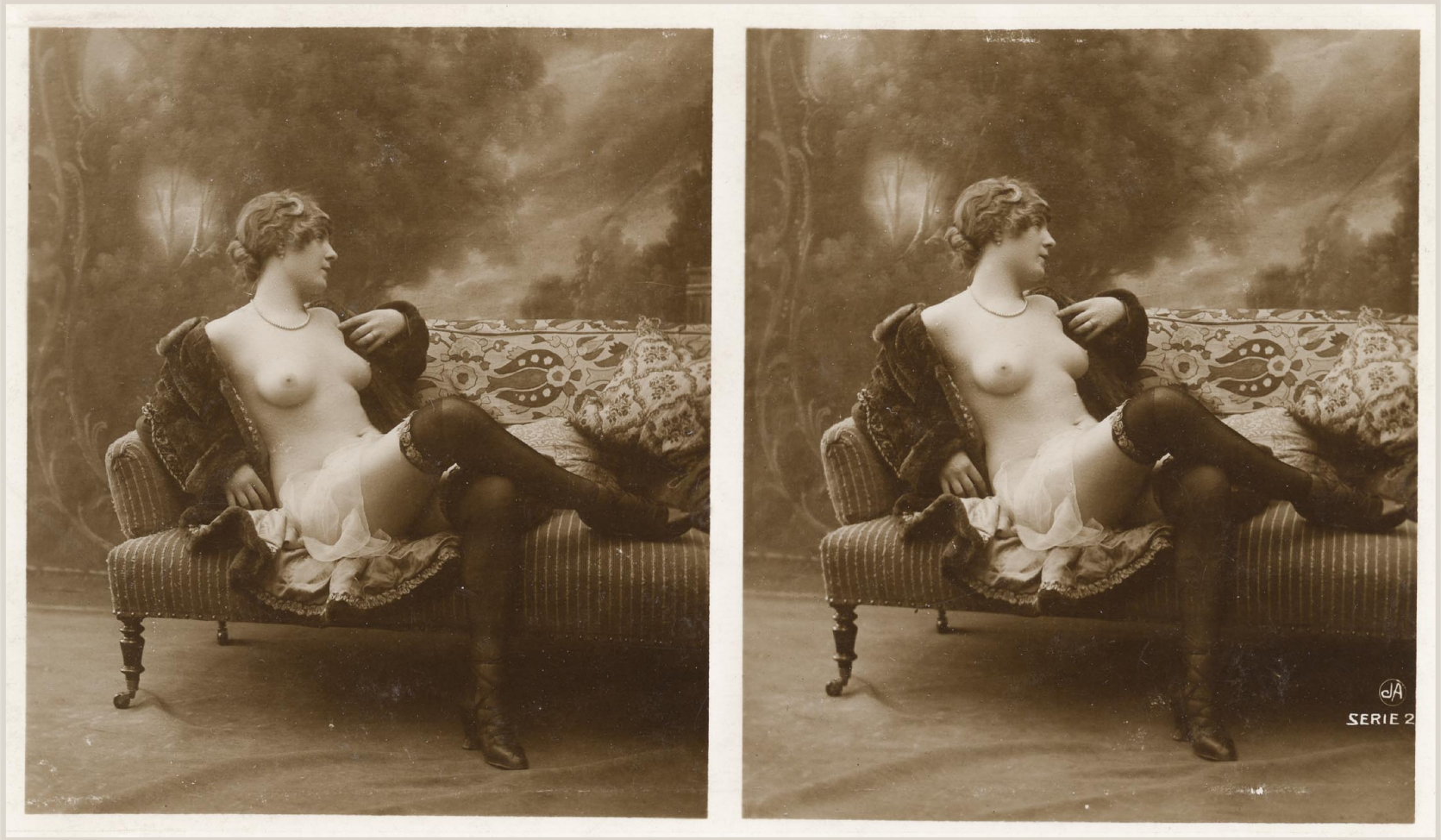
JA Série 13

8.5 x 17 cm paper stereoview, Type II



JA Série 26

9 x 15 cm paper stereoview, Type III



JA Série 26

9 x 15 cm paper stereoview, Type III



JA Série 3

9 x 15 cm paper stereoview, Type IIIA



JA Série 5

9 x 15 cm paper stereoview, Type IIIA



JA Série 33

9 x 15 cm paper stereoview, Type III



JA Série 30

9 x 15 cm paper stereoview, Type III



JA Série 22

9 x 15 cm paper stereoview, Type III



8.5 x 17 cm paper stereoview, Type II

A stereoview without number or initials. The Type II style, combined with the presence of the couch that appears in many JA photographs, indicates that this image was made by Jean Agélou.



JA Série 8

9 x 15 cm paper stereoview, Type III



JA Série 8

9 x 15 cm paper stereoview, Type III

Mon cher Martin

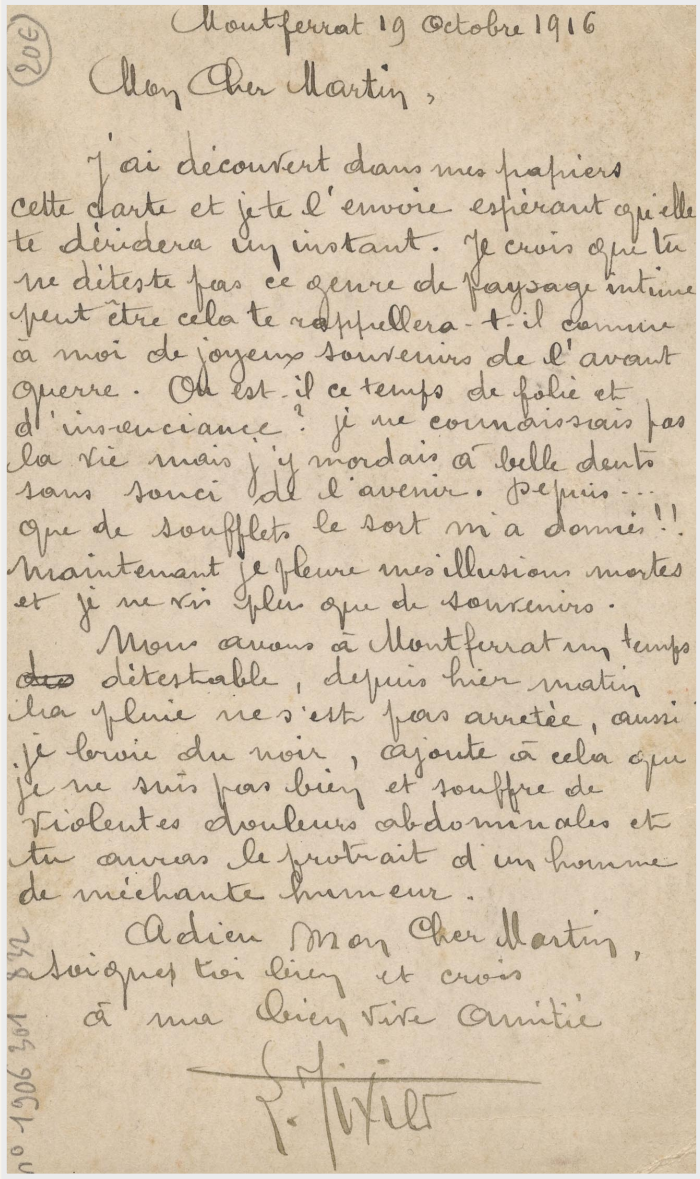
This JA Série 27 stereoview bears a handwritten message on the reverse. It appears to have been written by a French soldier during the First World War, conveying a melancholic note to a friend. Jean's erotic images were popular among French soldiers, and it is likely that the army tolerated them as a means of sustaining morale. The translation reads:

Montferrat, 19 October 1916

My dear Martin,

I found this card among my papers and I'm sending it, hoping it will entertain you for a moment. I believe you don't dislike this kind of intimate pictures—maybe it will remind you, as it does me, of joyful memories from before the war. Where is that time of folly and carefreeness? I didn't know life, but I bit into it wholeheartedly without worrying about the future. And since then… what blows fate has dealt me!! Now I weep for my dead illusions and I only live on memories. Here in Montferrat, the weather is dreadful. Since yesterday morning the rain hasn't stopped falling. So I'm feeling quite gloomy; add to this the fact that I'm not well and suffering from violent stomach pains, and you'll have the portrait of a man in a bad mood. Farewell, my dear Martin, take very good care of yourself and believe in my sincere friendship.




Montferrat 19 Octobre 1916

Mon Cher Martin,

J'ai découvert dans mes papiers cette carte et je te l'envoie espérant qu'elle te déridera un instant. Je crois que tu ne déteste pas ce genre de paysage intime peut être cela te rappellera-t-il comme à moi de joyeux souvenirs de l'avant guerre. Où est-il ce temps de folie et d'insouciance? je ne connaissais pas la vie mais j'y mordais à belle dents sans souci de l'avenir. Depuis... que de soufflets le sort m'a donnés!! Maintenant je pleure mes illusions mortes et je ne vis plus que de souvenirs.

Nous avons à Montferrat un temps ~~des~~ détestable, depuis hier matin il a pluie ne s'est pas arrêtée, aussi je broie du noir, ajoute à cela que je ne suis pas bien et souffre de violentes douleurs abdominales et tu auras le portrait d'un homme de mauvaise humeur.

Adieu Mon Cher Martin, soigne toi bien et crois à ma bien vive Amitié

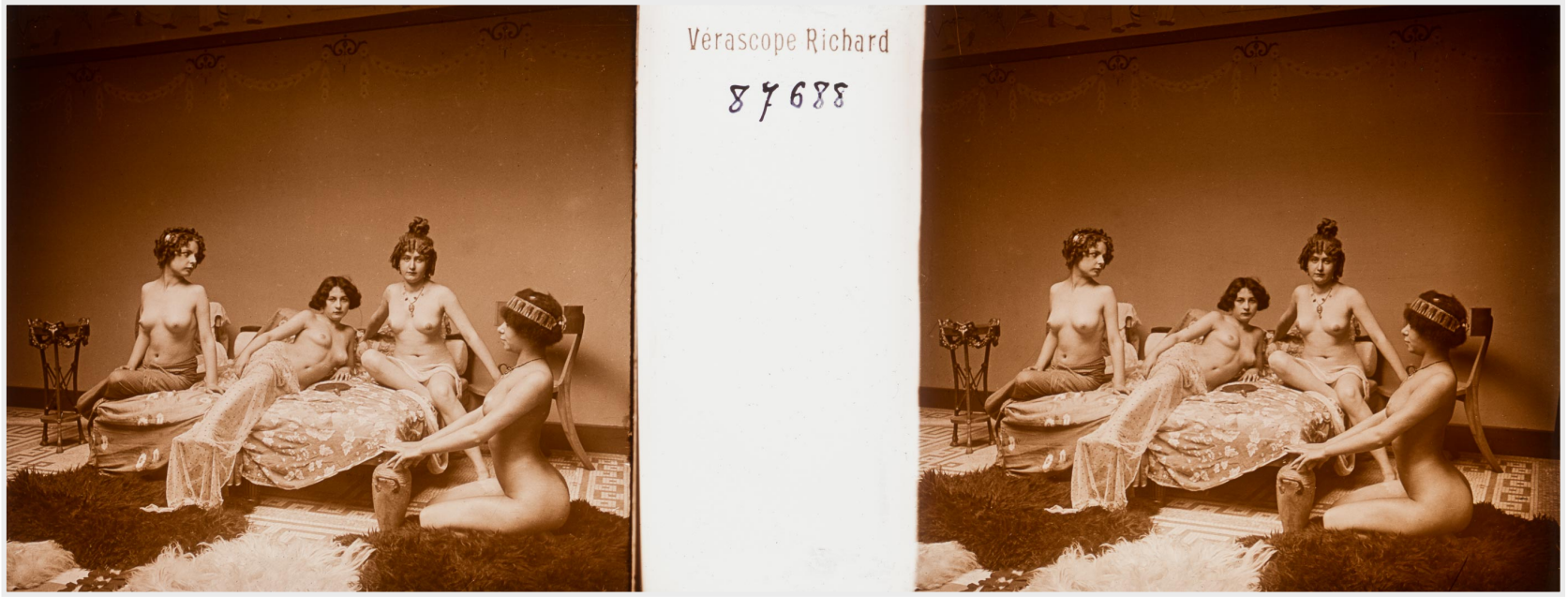
J. Mille



Miss Fernande

Fernande is Jean's most famous model. He photographed her for several years, but she also posed for other photographers. The first photos of her appeared in *L'Étude Académique* in July 1910, and the last known photos by Jean were made in 1913. Little is known about her life. *L'Étude Académique* of 15 February 1911 mentioned her age of 18, which means that she was born in 1893. As the publication often records different ages for the same models, this information cannot be regarded as reliable.

Fernande probably worked as a prostitute. A found postcard with her image contains the handwritten text *My photo in 1912, Fernande*, and a stamp with the text *Miss Fernande, 7 Passage de Flandre, Paris*[19]. She might have used the postcards as business cards. Fernande was arguably one of the first pin-up models in history, and her photos are still cherished today by collectors.



No. 87688 - Atrium Nus

Paris, 1910

45 x 107 mm glass stereoview

Vérascope Richard

This photograph from 1910 was taken in Jules Richard's Atrium. The woman on the left is a young Fernande.



Fernande, 6 x 13 cm glass stereoview



Fernande, 8.5 x 17 cm glass stereoview



Fernande, 8.5 x 17 cm paper stereoview
Éditions S.T.L.

Éditions S.T.L. was the trademark of Lavelle et Cie, a publisher of postcards and stereoviews. The company was established around 1904 and located in Issy-les-Moulineaux, Paris.



Fernande, 8.5 x 17 cm paper stereoview
Éditions S.T.L.

Notes and references

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2. Lecaplain, M. (2019), *Les premières revues de modèles photographiques de nu à destination des artistes (1902–1914).*
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6. *La Gazette Des Sociétés* (04-01-1912), p. 21.
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16. Bourdon, C. (2006), *Jean Agélou: de l'académisme à la photographie de charme*, p. 46.
17. *Le Courier* (09-12-1921), p. 5.
18. *Le Journal* (11-11-1908).
19. Farina, F. (1989), *Venus unveiled*, pp. 22, 23.

Revisions

1.0	03-10-2025	First edition
1.0.1	04-10-2025	Minor adjustment
1.1	22-10-2025	Rare Type IIIA view added

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Website: stereoscopyhistory.net