

Stereoscopy History Series

Early Stereoscopy

Ruins of Paris

ANDRÉ RUITER

Ruins of Paris

Stereoviews of a city transformed by power, conflict and collapse.



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.

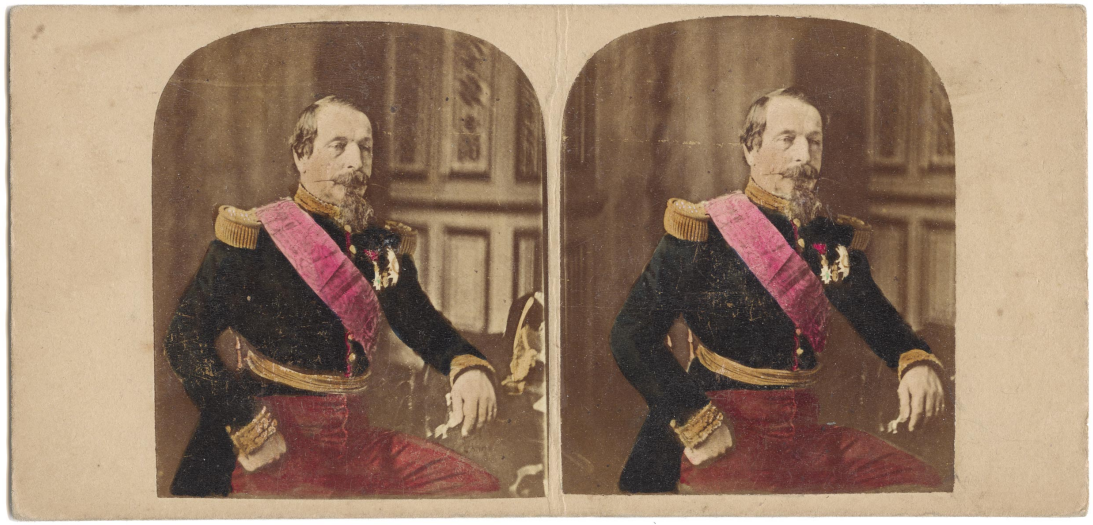
Napoleon III

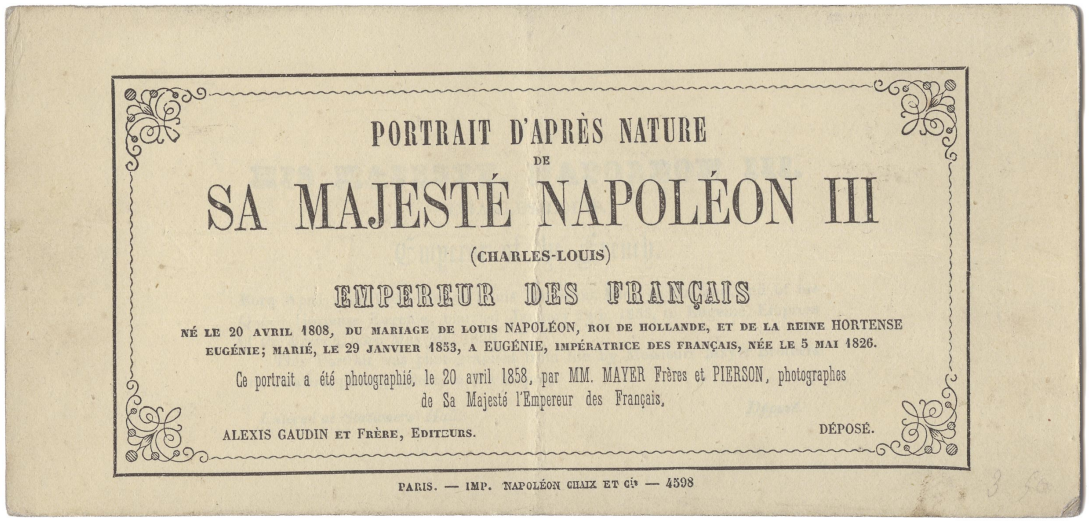
Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon I, rose to power amid the political instability of post-revolutionary France. Elected President of the Second Republic in 1848, he consolidated authority through a coup d'état on 2 December 1851 after constitutional limits prevented his re-election. Following a referendum, he proclaimed himself Emperor Napoleon III in 1852, establishing the Second French Empire. Napoleon III governed as an authoritarian ruler during the early years of his reign, later introducing limited liberal reforms. His rule combined centralized political control with economic modernization. He promoted industrial growth, expanded railways, and encouraged overseas trade. Under his reign, France experienced significant economic expansion and increased integration into global markets.

A defining feature of Napoleon III's domestic policy was the transformation of Paris. Seeking to modernize the capital, improve public health, and reduce the likelihood of revolutionary uprisings, he entrusted Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann with an extensive renovation program beginning in 1853. The project involved the demolition of medieval neighbourhoods and the construction of wide boulevards, new squares, parks, and uniform building façades. Modern sewage systems, aqueducts, gas lighting, and improved transportation infrastructure were installed. Public spaces such as the Bois de Boulogne and Bois de Vincennes were developed to provide recreational areas.

The project faced significant setbacks, including financial strain on the state, growing public debt, and political opposition. Haussmann was dismissed in 1870 amid mounting criticism, but the essential structure of the renovation had already been established. The renovation reshaped Paris into a modern capital, facilitating circulation, commerce, and administrative control. It also displaced large segments of the working-class population to the outskirts of the city, altering its social geography.

Napoleon III's regime increasingly relied on foreign policy successes to sustain legitimacy. However, diplomatic setbacks in the 1860s weakened the Empire. These vulnerabilities became decisive in the confrontation with Prussia.





A coloured paper stereoview in the 8.5 × 17 cm format depicting Napoleon III. The photograph was taken on 20 April 1858 by the Parisian studio Mayer Frères et Pierson, operated by the brothers Ernest Léopold and Louis Frédéric Mayer in partnership with Louis Pierson[1]. The stereoview was published by Alexis Gaudin et Frère.

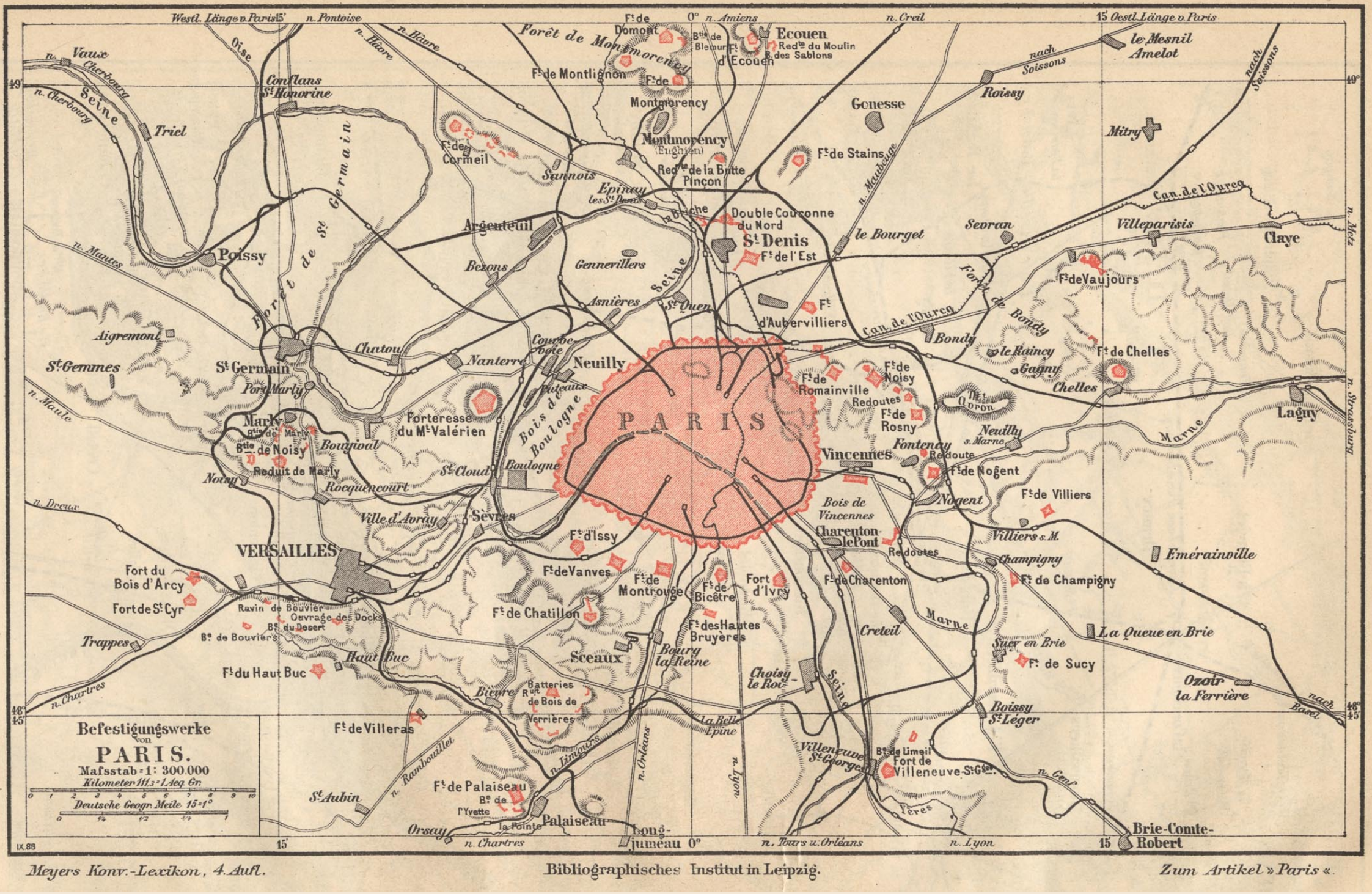
The reverse of the card bears a short biographical text about the Emperor, along with the names of both the photographic studio and the publisher. The stereoview proved to be highly successful: press reports dated 2 June 1858 state that 20,000 copies had already been sold[2].

The Franco-Prussian War

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 arose from tensions between France and the Kingdom of Prussia, which sought to unify Germany under its leadership. A central cause was French opposition to growing Prussian influence in Europe. The immediate trigger was the Hohenzollern candidacy for the Spanish throne and the diplomatic dispute surrounding the Ems Dispatch, edited by Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to provoke French reaction.

France declared war on Prussia in July 1870. The French army, inadequately organized and poorly coordinated, faced a coalition of Prussian and German states with superior mobilization, command structure, and artillery. A series of rapid defeats followed. On 1 September 1870, Napoleon III was captured at the Battle of Sedan, leading to the fall of the Second Empire. A republic was proclaimed in Paris on 4 September 1870.

Paris endured a prolonged siege from September 1870 to January 1871. Cut off from supplies, the city faced food shortages, economic disruption, and civilian hardship. Despite attempts at resistance, including the use of balloon mail and limited military sorties, Paris capitulated in January 1871. The war formally ended with the Treaty of Frankfurt in May 1871. France was required to cede Alsace and part of Lorraine to the newly proclaimed German Empire and to pay a substantial indemnity. The defeat altered the balance of power in Europe and fostered long-term hostility between France and Germany. The siege and surrender of Paris intensified political divisions within the city. Tensions between the Parisian population, the National Guard, and the new conservative national government created conditions for an internal uprising, directly leading to the events of the Paris Commune.



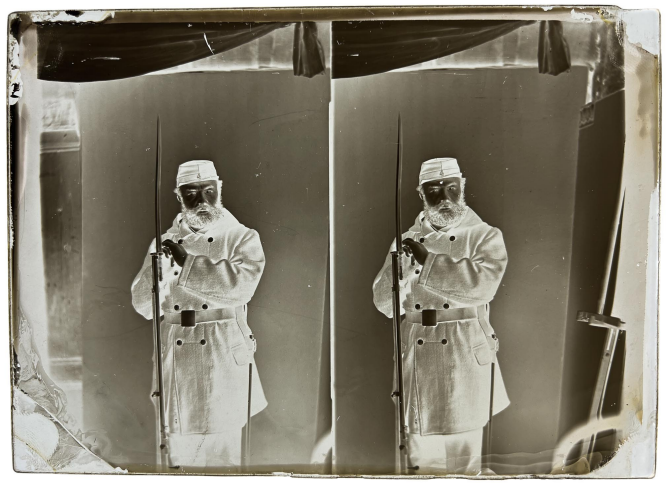
Paris and its surrounding defensive works, a German map from 1888.



Siège de Paris

8.5 x 17.5 cm paper stereoview published by Jules Raudnitz.





An inverted 13 x 18 cm collodion negative. The image shows an unidentified French soldier photographed in a studio. The number four on his kepi indicates that he belonged to the 4th Infantry Regiment. He is armed with a Chassepot rifle, in use by the French army between 1866 and 1874, and wears a Model 1845 belt. The overcoat is more difficult to date. It is possible that the soldier served in the Garde Mobile, a unit composed largely of civilian soldiers, whose members often wore mixed or non-standard uniform elements[3]. The photograph was most likely taken around the time of the Franco-Prussian War.

The Paris Commune

The Paris Commune emerged in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, shaped by military defeat, social hardship, and political mistrust. After the armistice with Prussia, the French national government, led by Adolphe Thiers, relocated to Versailles. Many Parisians viewed the government as illegitimate and opposed its attempts to disarm the National Guard, which was largely composed of working-class citizens. On 18 March 1871, government forces attempted to seize artillery held by the National Guard in Paris. The operation failed, leading to an uprising and the withdrawal of government authority from the capital. On 26 March, Paris elected a communal council, which proclaimed the Paris Commune, asserting autonomy from the central government.

The Commune governed Paris for approximately two months. It implemented measures including the separation of church and state, remission of rents accumulated during the siege, and the transfer of abandoned workshops to worker cooperatives. Administrative power was exercised through elected delegates subject to recall. Despite internal divisions and limited territorial control, the Commune functioned as a revolutionary municipal government.

The Versailles government organized a military response. In late May 1871, government troops entered Paris during what became known as the “Semaine Sanglante” (Bloody Week). Intense street fighting followed. The Commune was defeated, and its leaders and supporters were executed, imprisoned, or deported. Thousands were killed during and after the suppression.

The Paris Commune ended on 28 May 1871. Its defeat reaffirmed the authority of the French Third Republic. The Commune left a lasting legacy as a symbol of revolutionary governance and urban insurrection, deeply influencing political thought and reflecting the unresolved social and political tensions revealed by France’s imperial collapse and wartime defeat.



Brewster-type stereoscope for 8.5 x 17 cm paper and glass stereoviews. The viewer was manufactured by Jules Duboscq around 1855. It has a rare pull-out drawer in which the stereoviews are placed.

Duboscq, Ferrier and Léon & Lévy

In 1850, David Brewster travelled to Paris with a prototype of his lenticular stereoscope. In Great Britain he had been unable to find a manufacturer willing to produce his device. In Paris he met the scientific instrument maker Jules Duboscq, who immediately recognised the potential of Brewster's invention.

Duboscq began manufacturing the viewer that would become known as the Brewster-type stereoscope. At the same time, he started selling stereoscopic daguerreotypes for use with the new viewer. These daguerreotypes were produced by his photographer Claude-Marie Ferrier.

In 1851, Duboscq visited the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, London. There he encountered the glass slides, known as Hyalotypes, produced for the magic lantern by the Langenheim brothers from the United States. The slides inspired Duboscq to explore the production of stereoscopic images on glass. He invited Ferrier to London to study the slides, after which Ferrier began producing glass stereoviews. Duboscq fitted a ground glass at the rear of the stereoscope in order to illuminate the glass images using transmitted light.

The collaboration between Duboscq and Ferrier came to an end in 1854. Ferrier continued independently as a photographer and publisher of stereoviews. His portfolio included views of France, Switzerland, Italy, and other countries. The stereoviews were produced using albumen-on-glass negatives. The finished glass stereoviews consisted of three layers of glass, with the printed image sandwiched between two protective plates, held together with binding tape. The glass stereoviews were presented in a refined manner, with a variety of carefully designed presentation styles.

In 1859, Ferrier entered into partnership with his son Jacques Alexander and Charles Soulier under the name Ferrier père, fils & Soulier. Soulier had collaborated with Athanase Clouzard earlier. Together, they had simplified the production of glass stereoviews through a patented method that reduced the construction to two layers of glass.

Soulier contributed a substantial collection of glass negatives, significantly expanding the catalogue of Ferrier père, fils & Soulier. The firm developed into a renowned publisher of high-quality glass stereoviews. Its existence, however, was relatively brief: in 1864, the business was sold to Moïse Léon and Isaac-Georges Lévy, who continued operations under the name Léon & Lévy.



8.5 x 17 cm glass stereoview made by Claude-Marie Ferrier in Italy.

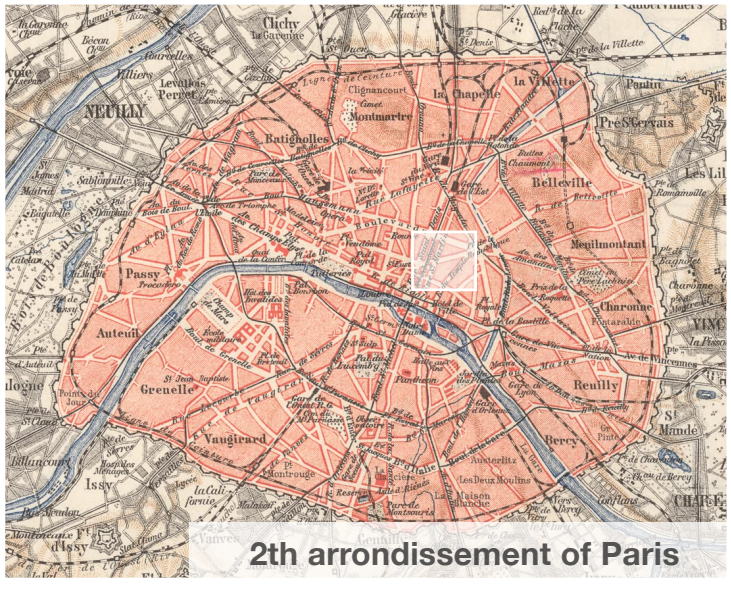
The images are decorated with a black passe-partout and gold fillets.



A jumelle, or binocular type, stereoscope for 9 x 18 cm paper and glass stereoviews. The viewer is attributed to Mattey or one of its predecessors.

Companies and people

	Claude-Marie Ferrier	Ferrier pére, fils & Soulier	Léon & Lévy
Duration	1854–1859	1859–1864	1864–1871
Addresses in Paris	8, Rue Coquillière	113, Boulevard de Sébastopol	113, Boulevard de Sébastopol
People	Claude-Marie Ferrier * 21-02-1811, Lyon † 13-06-1889, Paris	Claude-Marie Ferrier Jacques Alexandre Ferrier * 09-09-1831, Lyon † 22-05-1911, Paris Charles Soulier * c. 1840 † c. 1876	Moïse Léon *(no birth or decease information)* Isaac-Georges Lévy *(no birth or decease information)*



113, Boulevard de Sébastopol

Ferrier père, fils & Soulier and Léon & Lévy

The Ruins of Paris by Léon & Lévy

After the Paris uprising, a number of photographers documented the city. Their work focused on the damage inflicted by the Prussian siege and on the official French buildings that had been set on fire by the Communards during the uprising. The images were subsequently issued by various publishers, including in the form of paper stereoviews.

Léon & Lévy published a series of 116 glass stereoviews under the title *Ruines de Paris*. The series first appeared in 1875 in the American catalogue *Classified Catalogue of Magic Lantern Slides and Transparencies for the Stereoscope, Manufactured by Messrs. J. Levy & Co., Paris (late Ferrier & Soulier)*[4]. Léon's name was absent, as he had left the firm at the end of 1871. Lévy continued the business under the name J. Lévy & Cie[5].

The stereoviews in the *Ruines de Paris* series are numbered between 8500 and 8700. Each slide consists of two layers of glass, bound together with dark tape. The images of the stereo pair form a single window, are printed on a transparent background and feature small rounded corners. The serial number and title are printed beneath the left image.



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8541 - *Caserne au Pont du Jour*



8518 - *Pont de bateau prussien à Sèvres, pris de Brimborion*

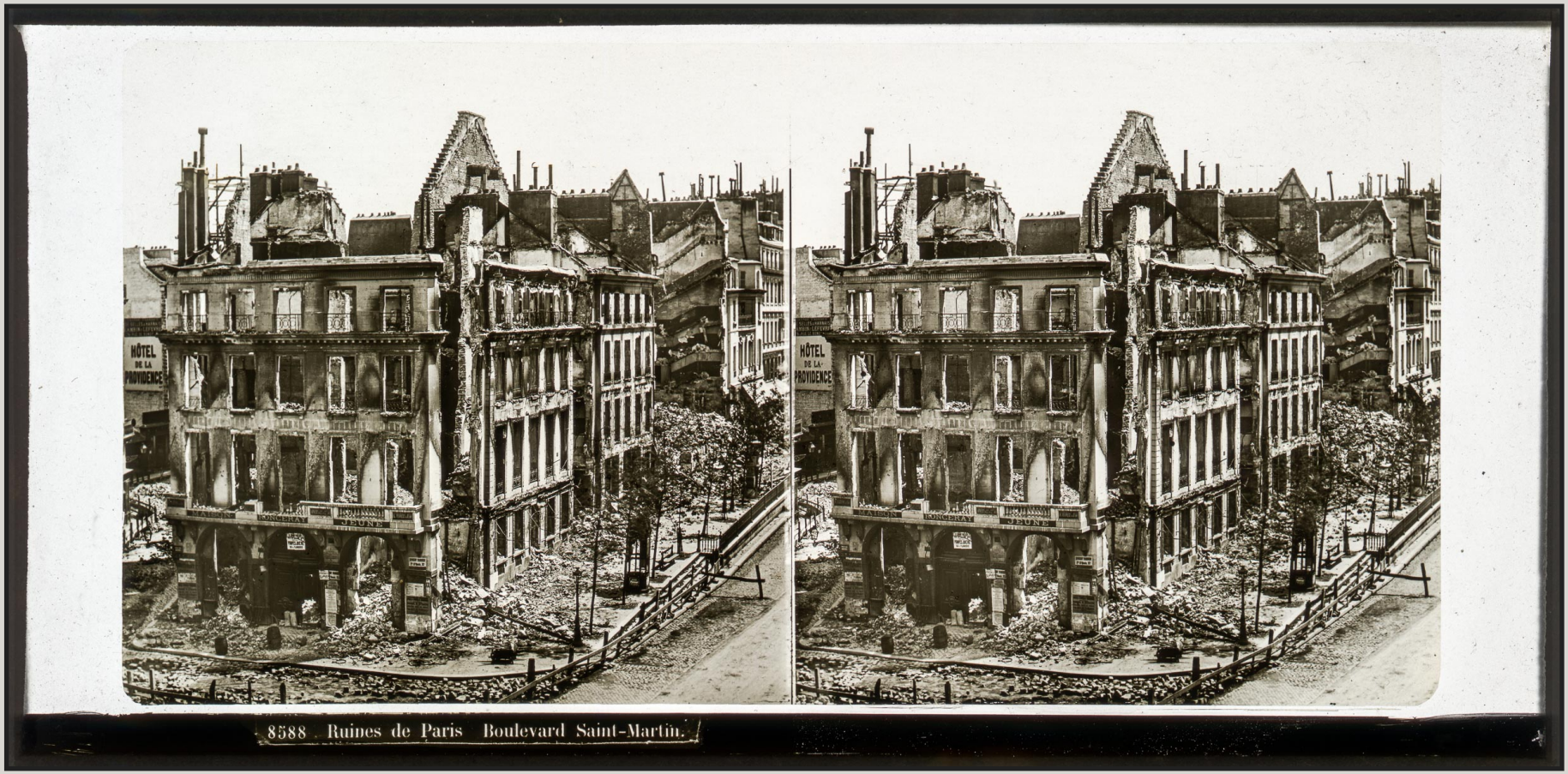
The Prussian pontoon bridge at Sèvres, seen from the Brimborion Battery. During the siege of Paris, Prussian troops built pontoon bridges to cross the Seine and position their artillery.



8571 - *Hôtel-de-Ville, côté rue de Rivoli*



8602 - *Pavillon de l'Horloge, côté du Jardin des Tuileries*



8588 - *Boulevard Saint-Martin*



8575 - *Perspective du Ministère des Finances*



8623 - *Intérieur des Greniers d'Abondance*

The Greniers d'Abondance were state grain warehouses in Paris to secure the city's food supply and prevent famine. The warehouses were burned down during the Paris Commune.



8594 - *Salon de la Paix, Palais des Tuileries*



8582 - *Rues de Lille et du Bac*



8532 - *Ruines de la rue Royale, à Saint-Cloud*



8584 - *Auteuil, vu de la Gare*

Notes and references

1. Denis Pellerin. *L'Emp'reur, sa femme et le p'tit prince* (2023), p. 161
2. Ibid, p. 162
3. Uniform analyse by Maarten Otte, author of *The Franco-Prussian War 1870–1871 Touring the Sedan Campaign* (2020)
4. John B. Cameron; Janice G. Schimmelman. *The Glass Stereoviews of Ferrier & Soulier* (2016), p. 85
5. Ibid

Revisions

1.0	26-01-2026	Fist edition

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Website: stereoscopyhistory.net