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**(Mexican Antiquities - Photography) [Western Facade of the Fourth Palace, Mitla, Oaxaca; Quatrieme Palais, à Mitla, façade occidentale] [Plate 15 from:] Cités et Ruines Américaines**

**Stock#:** 93940  
**Map Maker:** Charnay  
**Date:** 1857 - 1863 circa  
**Place:** Mexico  
**Color:** Uncolored  
**Condition:** VG  
**Size:** 16 x 10.5 inches  
**Price:** \$ 3,200.00



**Description:**

***By the Greatest Early Photographer of Mexican Ruins***

A large-scale albumen photograph of monumental ruins at Mitla, in Oaxaca, Mexico, by the pioneering French expeditionary photographer Claude-Joseph Désiré Charnay. This image, showing the facade of the so-called Nun's Palace, was issued as plate 15 in Charnay's famous photographic publication, *Cités et ruines américaines* (1862-1863).

Charnay, a native of Fleurieux-sur-l'Arbresle, France, immigrated to the United States in 1850, initially settling in New Orleans where he worked as a teacher. While in the United States he became acquainted with the work of John Lloyd Stephens, the famous American explorer. Stephens's books about Mexico's Yucatan greatly impressed the Frenchman. During a subsequent stay in France Charnay won a commission from the French Ministry of Public Education to travel to Mexico. It is believed that he learned the wet-plate collodion process in France before he embarked for Mexico. This cumbersome process involved the use of glass-plate negatives that were coated with a sticky collodion before being exposed while still wet. From 1857 to 1861 he worked under inhospitable and humid conditions, using the tedious wet-plate photographic process, to achieve perhaps the most remarkable series of 19th-century photographs of Mexican antiquities.

The present image shows one of the main pre-Columbian structures at Mitla, outside the city of Oaxaca in south-central Mexico. According to Keith Davis:



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*Charnay's Mitla series of sixteen photographs (plus one of the nearby Tule tree) constitutes the largest segment of his Cités et ruines album. Mitla is composed of five major groups of buildings, and dates from the period A.D. 800-1200....*

While Stephens and Catherwood had made daguerreotypes in Yucatan during their second expedition in 1841-1842, which were the basis for engravings in their publication, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, it was Charnay who took expeditionary photography to a higher level.

*The use of photography in Mexican archaeology produced little success before Charnay's arrival in 1857...Charnay was unquestionably the first important photographer in the Yucatan, and his work in 1858-59 represented the earliest systematic use of photography as a tool in Mexican archaeology. Later researchers took more photographs than Charnay, and perhaps made more accurate use of their photographs' visual information, but Charnay remains the greatest of the Central American archaeological photographers for the timing, quality, and impact of his work. Operating with only the visual precedent of Catherwood, Charnay overcame awesome difficulties to produce a body of photographs that, in turn, set the scientific standard for all later researchers. - Davis, pages 101 and 104.*

Charnay's photographs of Mexican ruins reflect his successful intuitive response to the beauty and magnificence of the Mesoamerican monuments. Indeed, Charnay's intuitive sense is displayed in his own description of his photographic work: "I contented myself with simply photographing some of the monuments as I visited them, without any comment thereto... When I was in the presence of the ruins I felt myself crushed by the grandeur of the work."

The complete album of *Cites et ruines américaines* was included in the Grolier Club's pioneering exhibition of photographically-illustrated books, *Truthful Lens*, whose catalogue aptly summarizes Charnay's Mexican work and its importance in the history of photography:

*Sent on a mission by the French government, Charnay arrived in Mexico in November 1857. He returned to France in December 1859, but visited Mexico regularly until 1880. This work heightened French interest in Mexico and its pre-Columbian architecture. Napoleon III, to whom the volume is dedicated, convinced Archduke Maximilian to accept the crown as Emperor of Mexico in 1864. [Charnay's] mammoth pictures suggest a significant talent worthy of further investigation. They rank with the most ambitious expeditionary photography that had just begun to be successfully practiced in Europe, India, South America, and the Far West of the United States - Truthful Lens.*



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**Rarity**

Complete sets of Charnay's *Cités et ruines américaines album* are nearly impossible to obtain. When the series was reproduced in 1994 for a Banco de Mexico publication edited by Victor Jimenez, the only accessible set in Mexico lacked two of the photographs. The Musée de L'Homme in Paris holds the largest collection of Charnay's photographs, including some glass plate negatives. According to Palmquist & Kailbourn, other important collections are held at Princeton University, George Eastman House, and the University of Pennsylvania.

**Detailed Condition:**

Albumen photograph print on paper. Tiny (1 cm) tear to upper edge (no paper loss). The image exhibits a nice reddish-brown tone, similar to the early albumen prints of Blanquart-Evrard's process. Unmounted. Overall condition is very good.