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**Photographic Archives: sites of preservation, access and scholarship**

Photographic archives are specialized repositories wherein the history of a place and a people are stored and made available to scholars and the general public. This paper will look at the current state of research on non-profit photographic archives as locations of preservation, access and scholarly work. Given the move to digitization, what is the recent direction and best practices within photo archives? What does the future hold for photo archives? The role of archivists responsible for these archives has gone through tremendous changes and continues to evolve as we move further to a visual society, one wherein the need for greater visual literacy is ever-growing.

The challenge for archivists is how to best meet the needs of the photo collection as well as the ever-growing numbers of users. Within the field of analog photo archives, the primary issues being considered include the digitization of the photographs; the language, descriptive standards, terms, taxonomies, practices, and systems in use by the archivists; the diplomatics of the photographs in the archives; and finally, the level and types of access to the photographs and their digital surrogates.

*Digitization*

Photographic archives have been digitizing their collections for many years now, but this is still a work in progress. There remains many issues that individual collections still struggle with including how to prioritize what is to be digitized and how to afford to do this process. For most, the technical aspects have largely been resolved and the archivists responsible for many collections agree with the need to digitize the items in their care. The primary problem is that of funding; the capability to digitize millions of images around the world requires many hours of work on the part of trained individuals using specialized equipment. Once digitized, these digital surrogates then need to be finalized within a program such as Photoshop before they can be stored and ultimately shared. This leads to the next challenge of cost for the storage spaces, programs, as well as for servers to enable digital searching. Once all of this is in play, copyright laws must be adhered to and other protections need to be put in to place to protect the creators of the images as well as the subjects within the photographs themselves.

One very specialized archive, that of S-21, or Tuol Sleng, in Cambodia requires that very special care and respect be employed by those responsible for the images and their dissemination, as this archive contains 6,000 images of Cambodians who were tortured and killed by the Khmer Rouge. Respect needs to be employed for the victims as well as for the relatives of those killed under Pol Pot’s regime. This is an archive wherein the “importance of these records, and how they further the most fundamental and vital archival principles – evidence and accountability – and in so doing, further the search for truth and justice for the Cambodian people and the rest of the international community“ (Adam, 6) speaks to the import these images have to the history and development of humans as a race. The power of having these and other images available online enables them to speak to millions of people worldwide.

This ability to reach a wider audience is one aspect of the drive to digitize our photo collections; another factor is for the protection of the original photographs themselves. Damage, however small, is done every time a photograph is handled and this harm accumulates over time, eventually rendering the object damaged beyond repair. If it is not necessary for a scholar to view a photograph in person, this then becomes an ideal way for an image to be studied. I want to emphasize that the digital surrogate is by no means the same as the original photograph and it is not meant to fully replace the print. Archivists in this field understand that the object itself is of a nature that cannot be replicated by mere pixels. The texture of a photogravure, the weightlessness of a photo printed on Japanese tissue, these and more aspects cannot be replicated via a computer screen and it is for these reasons that the photographs must continue to be preserved, long after their digital copy has been created, perfected, and backed up. Without this, and other safeguards for their staying true to their original content, photographs are “re-expose(d to) tenuous claims to fixity that have also always been part of photography's history. (Volpe, 16)

Another concern that has come into play has been the need to re-examine how early digitization projects took place and the decisions that had to be made in the moment within the constraints of the time period. An example of this is that of the University of Washington’s Henry Art Gallery’s digital collection. When the forward-thinking Curator of Collections began the digitization project, there was very little electronic storage for the digital images as the cost for this storage was very high. Thus, when items were digitized either via scanning large-format negatives or by photographing the objects themselves (as the author did beginning in 1999, taking over 5,000 digital photographs), the resulting digital images were saved as very small documents. These images, while useful, do not allow for the study of the objects via the digital image due to their lack of detail. They cannot be zoomed in on and can only serve as references to the original object and not as a substitute. These are not digital surrogates in the sense of allowing for study of the item via the image instead of the object; there is simply not enough detail in the thumbnails to allow for scholarly work. The decision that had to be made at the time was the best decision given the circumstances: the images allow and continue to allow viewers of the website to get a facile understanding of the object and allows for better-informed requests of objects to be pulled and viewed in person. However, now that the cost of electronic memory has dropped significantly, the museum must consider the need to re-photograph and re-scan much of its collection in order to have larger version of its images available to scholars the world over. This is especially true for its 16,000 + costume collection. This makes for an interesting yet frustrating conundrum: the items are delicate and much work has been put into digitizing them over the years, yet the current images are insufficient for study themselves. The museum, while ahead of it time, now needs to re-think its approach to the digitization of its collections, one of which is a very significant collection of photography.

Time and money continue to be the important hurdles that need to be overcome. Equipment and staffing remain the primary obstacles to the digitization question. For many, issues of copyright also come into play and that is a battle that is deep in the throes of being fought. As this topic is much larger than the scope of this paper, it will have to be left for another essay.

*Language, descriptive standards, terms, taxonomies, practices, and systems*

The very words used to describe and organize photographs (and other works) define what they are and who can locate them within an archive, be it digital or physical. The assigned taxonomies delineate the “nature of photographs as documents and the place of photographs in archives.” (Schwartz, *Records*, 2). Frequently, these entry points are simply re-worked systems held over from the text-based approaches already in use within the archive and the library. However, there is agreement that what is needed are descriptive standards that speak to the unique needs of the photograph. Organizations such as the Visual Resources Association are leaders in this area, yet the organizers and caretakers of visual documents have yet to come together on a set approach to cataloguing. It is important to note that subject matter as well as photographic process and substrate all become an important part of the content of an image, giving more information to a researcher about a time, a place, a people, or an event. The *InterPARES2 Terminology Database* is an excellent example wherein the relevant terms are brought together and organized in such a way that practitioners and preservationists can have access to a centrally located database of selected terms; this database then can be used as an authority file within cataloguing.

The issue of a necessary thoughtfulness remains at the core of the discussions being held around the organization and language surrounding images. “…sensitivity to the composite, dynamic, but somehow original integrity of a document, be it textual or visual, is at the heart of archival issues of our new information age. It is the basis for the discussion around metadata and it can also serve as the basis for a fresh approach to a time-honored discipline.” (Bartlett, 494) Alphonse Bertillon, whose system of creating mug shots is still in use, approached this in a manner that remains impressive to this day via his cataloguing and combining of both images and data onto a single fiche (card) for each criminal record and then organizing all of the cards in a system that allowed for retrieval within the early French justice system. (Seklua, 18) The fact that his system of mug shots is still in use speaks to the idea that technological progress is not the only answer to our problems; often we need to call upon our creativity to develop the best solution. In addition, according to Seklua, “(Bertillon) is one of the first users of photographic documents to comprehend fully the fundamental problem of the archive, the problem of volume.” (29). This problem is one that comes up time and again in all areas within archives, especially for photographic archives wherein the objects themselves are often printed in a series of multiples, thus magnifying the issue. A detailed system such as Bertillon’s, while the dream of many photo archivists, is beyond the reach of most cataloguers due to time and resources constraints. Alan Sekula mentions in his seminal work *The Body and the Archive* the frustration that all archivists encounter when organizing and cataloguing photographs: that of the “sheer quantity of images” (17). This is an issue that is only exasperated by the introduction of the digital camera and the Internet community’s demand that (eventually) all images be available online. Joan Schwartz discusses the idea that it would be ludicrous to expect to be able to access all texts and all mentions of any subject online. She gives the example of how it would be ridiculous to demand from, say, the archive in Victoria, British Columbia all references to a particular subject. Yet, many will have this very demand from online images. Seklua and Schwartz understand that there is an overwhelming number of photographs and digital images of photographs and to catalogue them in such a manner as to satisfy the needs of all the potential users would require more time and money than most organizations can provide. Added to this is the very nature of multiples that are possible via photographic negatives that has often lead to very basic cataloguing just in the interest of having something to append to a large body of work.

Words describe how we think about as well as locate items within archives. How items are co-located, what terms are used, and the hierarchy generated for the terms all speak to how items are viewed and, ultimately, if they are located by researchers. The Rules for Archival Description (RAD) groups art and photographs together while the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR2) has them separated into the N section (Art) and the TR (Photography) section while the Library of Congress’s Thesaurus for Graphic Materials combines them under the single term "graphic." (Schwartz, *Coming to Terms*, 152) They are catalogued as though art and photographs are the same physically; it is problematic to say that “they share common ground as “still pictures” and that they can be adequately grouped, according to section 4.0A1 of *RAD*, as “two dimensional pictorial representations.” (Schwartz, *Coming to Terms*, 154) Joan M. Schwartz, a leading expert in photographic archiving, goes on to say “grouped with art in the primary level of taxonomic ordering, photographs, *per se*, achieve visibility only at the second level of *RAD* granularity” (Schwartz, *Coming to Terms*, 154) once archivists (and ultimately researchers are able to) delve into deeper descriptions, then the “meaningful information which permits database users to distinguish clearly and immediately between forms of representation which function in very different ways, carry different burdens, and raise different expectations of reliability” become the norm that will enable greater searching, locating and greater accuracy within the located information. (Schwartz, *Coming to Terms*, 154) Specific terminology such as Daguerreotype or photogravure provide much more contextual meaning and “should not be lost in the hierarchical descriptive shuffle” (Schawrtz) under larger terms such as “photograph” or “graphic material.”

Schwartz is putting out the clarion call for precision from archivists working with photographs. They need to be catalogued in such a manner that is specific to them and takes into consideration their particular media while simultaneously preserving the context of the content provided both within the image and by it’s container, be it an album, a box, or some other accompanying container. She goes on to say:

It is our job as archivists – through fully informed acquisition and appraisal decisions; through our choice of descriptive standards, terms, taxonomies, practices, and systems; through contextualized reference services and outreach products; through conference papers and published articles – to ensure that photographs, indeed all visual and audio-visual materials, whether analogue or digital, continue to preserve and transmit their “burdens” with undiminished strength and clarity. (Schwartz, *Coming to Terms*, 171)

*Diplomatics in the Archive*

Building on the ideas brought forth via the issues surrounding taxonomies, the science of authenticating, dating, and interpretation by archivists and their scholarly users is the subject of much dialogue. Photographs are viewed as representing the real. They are admissible in court as evidence and even with the advent of image-manipulating programs such as Photoshop (though the manipulation of images was in place from the very beginning of photography in 1839), viewers often take a photograph at face value and believe that they provide an incontrovertible truth. Andrea Volpe, in her 2009 essay *Archival Meaning: Materiality, Digitization and the 19th century Photograph,* states, “photographs still operate in the museum under assumptions of authenticity and transparency...” (Volpe, 11)

Volpe writes a compelling essay wherein she delves into great detail on the import of the need for photo archivists to approach the items in their care from a multitude of directions. She acknowledges the sense that many view photographs as is, without questioning their authenticity in subject matter, much less the need for accuracy and flexibility when cataloguing their creator(s), their origins, authority, authenticity or their context. All these are permeable according to Volpe and an archivist needs to retain the information on all of the permutations of a photograph. However, she feels that “Rather than simply invalidate photographic media as now archivally suspect, we should instead attempt to assess all photographic media, past and present, with a greater sensitivity to their inherently transitory and multiple qualities.” (488) These transitory and multiple qualities include original media, secondary media (as in when a tintype is digitized), original cropping, later cropping, stamps or other markers added to the image and more. It becomes crucial that a photograph be documented as to all the transformations and modifications it has gone through so that the researcher viewing an image can, if they so choose, be able to learn the entire path the image has traversed in order to be able to make fully-informed decisions as to its applicability in their research. As Volpe puts it, images need to be “…self- referential in their authenticity by complying with a system of rules for creation agreed upon by the agency of origin.” (489) This is just the beginning; the system of rules as well as an evolving system of cataloguing needs to follow the image throughout its functioning life. This is an issue currently under research by several organizations including InterPARES, who is very interested in how to work with born-digital images. (Bushey, 148) Of critical interest is walking the fine line between balancing “interference with the creative process and support for it in order to ensure that the identity of the images generated will not be altered by their preservation needs.” (Bushey, 127)

Finally, education by the archivists including via the accompanying metadata will assist present and future researchers in their interpretation of a visual image and the development of social knowledge. Memory has been revolutionized through photography and has “changed the relationship between past and present, (produced) a massive reorganization of knowledge and social practices (and occasioned a) major readjustment of the alphabet/image ratio in ordinary communication." (Schwartz, *We Make Our Tools…*, 41)

*Access*

Due to the ability of a multitude of researchers to access a collection from almost any corner of the globe, archivists have to focus more on access via the Internet rather than on physical access to the photographs themselves. As discussed earlier, this can be problematic, as a digital surrogate may not suffice for the work at hand and it creates a host of other concerns for the archivist. On the other hand, digital access opens the archive up to a larger audience worldwide, one that would not be able to view it in any other way. This is especially true for smaller collections that are unable to host visiting scholars in their small spaces and that may have limited hours and staffing. Another barrier to access, be it in person or online, is the filing system and taxonomies discussed earlier. Oftentimes the digitization of large collections leads to only the most basic of cataloguing due to the daunting amount of images and that can in turn limit the use of the collection. Many feel that it is the responsibility of the archivists to facilitate entry to their collections in all of its forms. “…if historians and other users of archives have persistently failed to appreciate the value of visual materials in the making and the writing of history, then archivists – through their ideas and standards, practices and actions, whether consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, overtly or systemically – are, in large measure, responsible.” (Schwartz, *Coming…,* 143) It may seem that this places an unreasonably large onus upon the archivists, but if an image cannot be located or discovered, it may as well not exist at all. This need to be able to access a collection via multiple means becomes more important as users demand the ability to view a collection’s holdings at any time from anywhere. The difficulty, be it online or in person, is actually locating what a researcher needs while simultaneously facilitating those happy accidents onto that which the researcher did not know they needed until the item is discovered. This is where one needs to provide enough information to be useful, while not being too restrictive and causing the researcher to not dig deeper into a collection, thinking they have found all that they need. It is through the process of research itself that a subject evolves and the searcher often does not know what the final result will ultimately be. However, the scarce cataloguing that occurs at all repositories is a fact of overwhelming amounts of material with minimal staffing to do the cataloguing, a concern that limits any sort of access. A recent example is that of the University of Washington’s holdings of the older archives of the Cornish College of the Arts (formerly the Cornish School) (the more recent archives are held at the college itself). Recently 982 photographs in 6 boxes came to light on the UW Special Collections webpage. This archive is one that this author has spent a great deal of time working with, yet these photos have only recently been made known. The online records remain sparse, yet at least some level of cataloguing was done, enabling these additional materials to be studied. Greater levels of data and detailed approaches to the metadata will enable better use of these photographs.

*Conclusion*

Photographs are documents that hold great power. They are able to sway decisions and define eras. There is an assumption of the real inherent within the photographic image, a problematic but unquestioned component of writing with light. This power is further reinforced when the photograph is housed within an archive as the archive itself strengthens the credence given to the veracity of the image. The scholarly work that accompanies a digital image on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s website is crucial for scholars and the general public alike, as Flickr simply will not have the essential information and context, even if it is of the exact same image. While much progress has been made, the image community needs to further work on coming together on standards for the description and organization of the works within their care in order to better facilitate the use and interpretation of the photographs, digitized images, and digital-born images within the archives. These issues and others will be furthered studied by the author in her coursework in the iSchool graduate program.

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<http://www.interpares.org/ip2/ip2_terminology_db.cfm>

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