

Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History. COSTANZA CARAFFA, ed. Berlin, München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2011. 456 p. ISBN 978-3-422-07029-5.

This collection of papers challenges archivists and art historians to re-examine the use of photographic sources for the study of art history, and brings to the foreground the role of photography as a mediator in art history. While the title of the book will interpellate photo archivists, art historians, and visual resource librarians, the extensive analyses, case studies, and theoretical discussions could provoke parallel examinations in other fields of study that rely heavily on photographs – or even other types of records. The approach taken might also contribute to examinations of the interrelationship between media and discipline in ethnography, musicology, architectural history, and film studies. Be they field notes, audio recordings, photographs, or DVDs, what are the impacts of recordings or study surrogates on the disciplines that use them? For archivists, the readings in this book should lead to new considerations for archival appraisal, scholarly access, and digitization initiatives.

The editor, Costanza Caraffa, is the head of the Photothek at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut. In 2009, her institution and the Courtauld Institute of Art in London organized two conferences titled *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History*; this volume is a compilation of the papers from these events. Twenty-nine authors, including art historians, photographic historians, museologists, and curators, have contributed. They are based at universities and collecting institutions in Europe and North America. Caraffa has grouped the papers into four sections: “On Photo Archives”; “Collecting Photographs, Shaping Art History”; “We Make Our Photo Archives and Our Photo Archives Make Us”; and “In a Photo Archive.” In her introductory essay, Caraffa makes numerous references to the influence of Canadians Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz. Acknowledging Schwartz’s contributions to critical thinking in photographic archives, Caraffa’s title for the third section, “We Make Our Photo Archives and Our Photo Archives Make Us,” is a deliberate play on the title Schwartz chose for her seminal article “‘We make our tools and our tools make us’: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats.”¹

A succinct quote from Donald Preziosi launches the introductory essay: “Art history as we know it today is the child of photography”² (p. 11). As the papers and the sections roll out, we follow the development of photographic processes in the mid nineteenth century and their impact on the emerging discipline of

1 Joan M. Schwartz, “‘We make our tools and our tools make us’: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats,” *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995): 40–74.

2 Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven & London, 1989), 72.

art history. The discipline itself is shown to be fully reliant on the existence of photographic “reproductions” that make possible comparisons and analysis by bringing together surrogates of original artworks that are physically dispersed throughout the world.

Caraffa’s introductory essay demonstrates that, as photographs of artistic, archeological, or architectural works were acquired by institutions and connoisseur collectors, the resulting library or collection took on the attributes of an archive (or what one might call an institutional fonds). Caraffa discusses the institutionalization of these bodies of photographic reference sources in the wake of collecting, classifying, and cataloguing practices, and argues that these holdings embody the evolution of art history as a discipline. Furthermore, because institutions made incremental additions by commissioning or acquiring new photographs over time, these archives also serve as traces of the history of photography itself and its changing processes and conventions. In another paper titled “Photographs: Material Form and the Dynamic Archive,” Elizabeth Edwards reinvests the so-called passive photographic archive with a vigorous and dynamic agency: visual resource collections are not neutral transmitters of information but rather the result of “material practices,” both in the production of the photographic records and in the custodial structures where they reside (p. 48). Framed as agents, in her words they are “actively resourceful” (p. 47).

A retrospective analysis of the archive can demonstrate the impact of an artwork’s photographic surrogate on attributions of artistic authorship, misattributions, and reattributions. In her discussion of art scholar Aby Warburg, Griselda Pollock reminds us that photography was at the very heart of the construction of the coherent “body of work” with its privileged, authorial view of the artist as master (p. 77). As reflected in art museum labels, the art historian strives to identify the name of the artist who created each work, and to structure connoisseurship of Western art around authorship as the key attribute. (Archivists privilege the organizing principle of the fonds and the identification of the creator of the records.) Machtelt Israëls writes about art critics Bernard and Mary Berenson and their use of photographs in reappraising the work of the Italian Renaissance artist Sassetta. As Israëls explains it, the Berensons, thanks to knowledge drawn from their research and site visits, made an astute purchase of three panels by then little-known Sassetta. Over the years, as the Berensons studied Sassetta, travelled, and accumulated photographs of his work, they concluded that the three Sassetta sections in their collection were part of a disassembled altarpiece that had originally been comprised of at least seven other panels. More recently, the Berensons’ photographs have served as documentation for reconstruction studies on the altarpiece, including research by Machtelt Israëls.

Several authors focus on the materiality of photographic records, including the processes, finishes, mounts, versos, stamps, labels, and enclosures. They discuss how this materiality contributes to a reading of layers, influences, and

scholarly applications. Others remind us that the iconic views of masterworks are the result of the deliberate angle, framing, and lighting selected by the photographer, and the logistics and practical capabilities of the equipment and the operator. After all, highlights and shadows serve to reveal certain features and suppress others.

The appreciation of materiality raised in this book is particularly relevant and poignant as institutions rush to digitize their holdings for online access and efficiency seekers propose the disposition of digitized analog records. The Florence Declaration, and its “Recommendations for the Preservation of Analogue Photo Archives,” is among several significant outcomes of the Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History conferences and exchanges.³ The declaration states:

The conviction that it is useful and necessary to preserve the analogue photo archives is based on two simple considerations: the technologies not only condition the methods of transmission, conservation and enjoyment of the documents, but they also shape its content; the photographs are not simply images independent from their mount, but rather objects endowed with materiality that exist in time and space.⁴

I have touched on only a few of the compelling themes addressed in the thirty-one papers in this book. As an archivist working in a university repository, henceforth I will be seeing certain photographs in my custody in a much broader light. Thanks to the arguments in this volume, my archival appraisal decisions will be informed by a more nuanced reading of “copy” and “original.” From early-twentieth-century lantern slides to mid-century mounted exhibit resource prints to more recent 35mm colour slides – and, yes, even PowerPoint slides – the intermediary tools in teaching and learning will merit reconsideration in a wider and layered context. In acknowledging and preserving the materiality of photographic study surrogates, archivists and art historians can expose the relationship between the “original” and its “reproduction” and provide the evidential platform for the historiography of art history.

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3 The Florence Declaration resides on the Kunsthistorisches Institut website, where it is available in several languages: <http://www.khi.fi.it/en/photothek/florencedeclaration/index.html> (accessed 4 November 2012).

4 Florence Declaration: Recommendations for the Preservation of Analogue Photo Archives, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, http://www.khi.fi.it/pdf/florence_declaration_en.pdf, 1 (accessed 4 November 2012).