

Photographs of Artworks: Electronic formatting of Knowledge and the Internet

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Abstract

In spite of the political discourse dominating heritage issues, despite academic constraints and a certain cross-disciplinary inflexibility, photographs have now come to be considered part of our cultural heritage.

Keywords--- Cultural Heritage, Photography, Digitising Photographs, Archiving.

1. Introduction

Photographs never present a neutral image of the real – they are a record of subjective perception and as such must be considered as a historically determined act of criticism. The photograph was first recognised as an item of cultural heritage in Italy in May 2004, and yet since the beginning of the twentieth century the photograph has played an important role in the development of the individual, in the growth of knowledge and learning, and in the construction of a civil society.

It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the polyvalence of the photograph came to be fully appreciated. In the 1950s, Bologna's classical art Biennale, organised by Cesare Gnudi and the heritage supervisory board that he directed, had on display Villani's photographic portrait. During the Seventies, Bologna's historical centre, the town's artistic works and sites, and the surrounding countryside were the subject of a census, which included detailed photographic evidence. The rest of the country sporadically followed suit. Photographic campaigns became the subject of heated debate involving representatives of national and international institutions. Such debate focussed on the technical methodology of photography and on the photo's cultural implications and stressed the need for photographs to respond to the exigencies of essentialism and objectivity. As a result, certain guidelines were set down limiting culturally based influences and interpretative distortions coming into play before, during and after the taking of the photo.

The language of photography can enrich and multiply the benefits of knowledge. Thanks to the internet, photographs can now reach a greater number of users and the cost of information acquisition has been greatly reduced. Technological innovation and the internet improve access to Cultural Heritage and while other methods of knowledge development must not be overlooked, these latter certainly do help us gain broader understanding of our own identity, they allow us to consult a wealth of cultural heritage and contribute towards the eradication of cross-disciplinary inflexibility which has for a long time compromised research activities. If we gain a thorough understanding of the heritage items which identify us as people and which embellish our cultural landscape, we will then be in a position to properly protect them, we will achieve a better interplay between conservation and restoration and finally we will be able to establish a systematic and profitable dialogue between the worlds of culture and tourism.

2. Digitalisation of the Photograph

Photography has long been used in conjunction with journalism. Right from its inception, photojournalism was concerned with witnessing historical events and the development of societies. Today, these photographic chronicles are considered to be a part of our artistic heritage and a great many artists use photos as a means of artistic expression, proof of which is the continual proliferation of galleries specialising in the exhibiting and selling of photographic art. The debate surrounding the value of photographic art in relation to these areas of expression is very much up-to-date, and yet it would nevertheless seem important to draw attention to the obvious fact that photography has always been multifaceted. As Benjamin notes, it was always destined to sidestep the aura of elitism surrounding works of art and their "creation", and question the notion of a work of art as being unique and non-replicable. The digitalisation of photography allows for ever more faithful reproductions. As such, we must not allow the market to block the circulation of photographs. Indeed, art can no longer be considered valuable on account of its non-replicability and must now depend on its own inherent

quality. The quality of an image can now be reproduced with absolute faithfulness and the photograph can be multiplied ad infinitum – whether it be an instance of photojournalism or the personal expression of an artist – and as such the photograph can never aspire to becoming the stuff of the elite. Where present, its own quality can never be compromised by reproductions or multiplications. Photographic reproductions can in no way damage our moral or cultural heritage and represent no violation of authors' rights or copyright. As such, reproduction in this case should not be confused with plagiarism.

Although these two uses of photography are very much in the limelight, I intend to discuss another facet of photography. I will not touch upon contemporary photography. Contemporary photography is an art form without a past, and any subsequent discussion of this should, I believe, be carried out in the context of the collections, galleries and private collections to which they belong. Contemporary photography should be left to mature in its own market.

What I intend to discuss here is photography depicting artworks – that is, those photographs that belong and testify to our cultural heritage, photographs that act as a resource for teaching and research in the fields of history and art criticism. In short, what I intend to examine are photographs representing works of art. The semantic content of these photographs is the work of art itself. In terms of representation, such photographs can be considered an alternative to drawings and engravings and as such cannot lay claim to any form of exclusivity. Documents such as these should never be considered out of context – we need to consider their spatial, or geographical, and temporal contexts in order to relate them to the present and identify their specific and relative value. It is only when we gain a clear insight into these contexts that we can fully establish the identity of a photograph; indeed, it is through the on-going dynamic process of cataloguing and information-gathering that we can continually reconstruct over time this identity. It is for this reason that we need to establish a set of common guidelines for the process of cataloguing, overcoming cross-disciplinary and institutional inflexibility and promoting interaction between collectors' archives, museums and local contexts. Information technology can of course facilitate cross-referencing and as such aids the development of a global, inclusive understanding of the work of art in question, of this cultural heritage item, which represents a point of intersection between artistic expression, identity, scientific research and teaching opportunities.

The photograph as image of a work of art has for some time been used in inventories describing Italy's artistic heritage, though recently, editors and public institutions have begun cataloguing and archiving this form of photograph in its own right. Technical advances and a broader understanding of photographability make

document photos an integral instrument in the process of identifying and describing Cultural Heritage – they depict the work in question, describe its current state, reveal transformations over time and shed light on its context. Indeed, photos such as these can be considered an archive of objects subtracted from their meaningful context. They act as a form of normative premise for those involved in identifying, conserving and preserving Cultural Heritage. They bear witness to those characteristics which identify the work of art as a process and present an insight into the historical background of any given work – its different sites of display and its various moments of restoration; this of course is vital for the purposes of research and cataloguing. Paradoxically, as the process of recognition becomes swifter and the information gained more pertinent, photographs will be increasingly relied upon in the documenting of any particular item of cultural heritage. The photograph, therefore, does not merely identify, it provides all the details necessary for the correct compilation of official records (Normativa ICCD 1999), some of which may not come to light in the descriptive phase. The photograph must respond to the exigencies of essentiality and objectivity and must provide all the information needed to identify the characteristic features of an item for the purposes of cataloguing.

When it first appeared, the photograph was considered the most faithful reproduction of artworks – more faithful, that is, than engravings, watercolours or sketches. These days, we cannot overlook just how much the subjectivity implicit in photographs is alterable and influential.

What we must now do is decide what prerequisites should inform photographic documentation. Towards the end of the 19th century, Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) set about constructing a systematic and organic framework linking cultural history and art history, where the act of seeing was privileged, and underlined his desire that photography should offer reliable information concerning artworks. This desire was not immediately satisfied. Around this time the first photographic archives were being established in Italy – the Brera archive opened under the direction of Corrado Ricci in 1899 – but the photograph was destined to flirt with the same framing, colour and lighting factors as those accompanying painting and sculpture. The contextualised shot of a work of art with its frame, which in itself is a historically determined act of criticism, is less common. In Italy it was for a long time considered as an import; indeed when photography first arrived in Italy, the country was fragmented, indebted to and mourning an illustrious past tradition. The photograph was for a long time accompanied by a sense of ambiguity, which impeded an understanding of its specific nature, thus obscuring the fact that the photograph might have implications that went above and beyond its mimetic and imitative qualities. Photos were seen as an alternative to sketches. The photo album came

to replace the travel-log sketchbook and its drawings, which were to be elaborated upon in the studio¹. Tourism and the emerging market for art publishing provided a demand for souvenirs where artworks and photography were amalgamated. The photograph was seen as a substitute for drawings partly because it was able to transcribe reality, but it also came to substitute the observation of reality itself – including artworks, nature, costumes, the exoticism of the East and the eros of European literature, music and painting.

Here in Bologna the pioneers of photography were headed by Emile Anriot (1868), working at the end of the nineteenth century, and included a set of increasingly aware players involved in the visual mapping of Italy, such as Anderson and Brogi, but above all Pietro Poppi (1833-1914), Felice Croci (active between 1886 and 1907), Giovanni Castelli (1864-1921), the firm belonging to Luigi (1845-1914) and Giovanni Lanzoni (1875-1926), Angelo (1873-1947) and Alfredo Bolognesi (1863-1940). And yet as late as 1903, Anacleto Guadagnino, director of Bologna's painting gallery, was still hoping to become the proud owner of a decent camera. Francesco Malaguzzi Valeri, director of Bologna's painting gallery and head of the galleries' supervisory board until 1923, made some important initial contributions to the activity of archiving. In the context of Bologna University, Igino Benvenuto Supino (1858-1940), appointed in 1907 as the first professor of art history in the faculty of Literature and Philosophy, raised awareness regarding the use of the photograph and, when financing permitted, entered the market in order to purchase photographs for use in teaching and

research. Convinced of the value of the photograph as a scientific instrument, he used photographs to embellish the descriptive narrative of his journalistic articles and teaching notes and by 1930 he had put together a substantial photographic archive. This archive was donated to the University by his descendents, and subsequently grew into what is now the photographic collection of the department of Visual Arts.

In this collection the semantic content of the photos is a work of art, a content therefore that has implications spanning research, publishing, markets and the teaching activities of many of the protagonists of art criticism and art history at the university of Bologna, the Igino Benvenuto Supino Institute and the Department of Visual Arts.

We must investigate the aesthetic and historical value of this medium, read between the lines of their catalogue records to establish exactly what the photographic image offers and depicts. Photos show us what someone else has limited them to seeing. Photography is therefore more than just a technical method of illustrating and describing – it is in itself a cultural sign. In the recent climate of growing appreciation for Cultural Heritage and the attendant obligations of understanding, conservation and preservation, we need to begin to make inroads into studying the numerous photographic documents contained within these latter.

The cultural and market-driven census carried out by the Florentines Alinari and Carlo Brogi, by Rome's Domenico Anderson, by Pellegrino and Umberto Orlandini from Modena, and by Ravenna's Luigi Ricci differ greatly from the informative map provided by Villani, from the historical conscience provided by Paolo Monti, and from the attention attributed to the human factor of Antonio Masotti. These differences become obvious when we examine the Supino collection: Luigi Ricci's gelatine prints with their interior shots of Sant'Apollinaire, of the Ursiana Basilica, of San Vitale, Sant'Apollinaire in Classe, Alinari and Brogi's shots of Subiaco, the albums by Philpot & Jackson, Huguet, Van Lint, Paolo Lombardi or those of the award-winning Gabriele Carloforti. It's not just a question of method or point of view – what we find is a completely different sensibility and cultural education.

If we are to create an interactive network offering users online access to cultural resources and shared heritage we must establish organisational guidelines for the digitalisation of collections belonging to archives, libraries and museums. Construct, deconstruct, reconstruct – this is the process undertaken in the identification of Cultural Heritage, in its insertion into the heritage system and our collective memory. The cataloguing of photographs demands an approach based on coherent descriptive strategies, which as far as possible should also be interactive. We should not

¹ L. Vitali, *La fotografia e i pittori*, in *Scritti dedicati a Marino Parenti*, Firenze 1960, pp. 251-257; *Combattimento per un'immagine. Fotografi e pittori*, catalogo della mostra a cura di D. Palazzoli e L. Carluccio, Torino 1973; M. Miraglia, *L'immagine tradotta dall'incisione alla fotografia*, Napoli 1977; Eadem, *Note per una storia della fotografia italiana (1839-1911)*, in *Storia dell'arte italiana*, 9, Torino 1981, pp. 436-451; Eadem, *Dalla tradizione incisoria alla documentazione fotografica*, in *La Sistina riprodotta*, a cura di A. Malteado, Roma 1991, pp. 221-231; E. Spalletti, *La documentazione figurativa dell'opera d'arte, la critica e l'editoria nell'epoca moderna (1750-1930)*, in *Storia dell'arte italiana*, 2, Torino 1979; M. Mozzo, *Nota per una documentazione fotografica in Italia nella seconda metà dell'800 tra tutela, restauro e catalogazione*, in *Arti e storia nel Medioevo*, edited by E. Castelnovo, V, Torino 2004, pp. 847-859; M. Ferretti, *Immagini di cose presenti, immagini di cose assenti: aspetti storici delle riproduzioni d'arte*, in *Fratelli Alinari*, Firenze 2003. For Italian sources see: C. Bertelli, *La fedeltà incostante*, e *Appendice di testi e documenti*, in *Storia d'Italia, Annali*, Torino 1979, I, pp. 59-192; II, pp. 201-302; I. Zannier, P. Costantini, *Cultura fotografica in Italia. Antologia di testi sulla fotografia 1849-1949*, Milano 1985.

overlook the fact that what stands behind photographs such as these is a commissioning subject and a photographer who have chosen particular shots, focus points and frames. We must also take into consideration the actual work of the photographer and factors such as lighting, the field and depth of focus and developing processes. What is seen before and after the image can either be included or excluded. For example, where cities and architecture are the object of photography, we can either examine or refute items such as street signs, advertising, graffiti, cars and other forms of transport, as well as pedestrians. Each presence or absence triggers a question mark. Moreover, images can be touched up and altered with computer programmes or changed during the printing process. The relative caption chosen is also relevant. Once it has been taken, the photograph can be handed over to the commissioning subject, it can enter the market or can be inserted into a particular context. The photograph can appear in the photographer's own archive as well as in those of Foundations or private and public collections. Once on the printed page, the photograph immediately belongs to a new context and gains new arbitrary relationships. The photograph is thus most definitely an act of criticism insofar as it registers a particular interpretation and subjective perception; we would do well therefore to determine its origin, character, authorship and interconnecting relationships.

The photograph also bears witness to the subjective reception and interpretation of a sign and it therefore follows that the identity of the image can only be determined once its origins have been determined. Perception differs according to era and culture. Historiographical subjectivity is variable. Every image uses other images, whether real or mental, to reflect reality². In order to understand an image, we must reconstruct its past function, which in turn will enable us to gain an insight into its qualitative value. As Gisèle Freund stated in 1976:

*The importance of a photograph lies not only in the fact that it is an instance of creative expression, but more importantly that it represents one of the most effective ways of shaping ideas and influencing behaviour*³.

3. Conclusion

To conclude we might pause for reflection on the words of Corinna Giudici who points out that the photograph is "an ever different and innovative form of synthesis, real to that moment and to that historically-determined context."

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³ G. Freund, *Fotografia e società*, Torino 1976, p. 17.