

# Special Section on Archives and Photography



## Note from the Guest Editor

As guest editor for a special section in this issue of *Archivaria*, I am pleased to present new voices and perspectives on photographs in archives. *Archivaria* has a strong tradition of publishing articles exploring photography, but the last issue to devote extended space to photography (*Archivaria* 5) was published over thirty years ago. In his introduction to that 1977 issue, Richard Huyda discussed the many challenges facing archivists working with photographic records. Many of these challenges continue to be relevant today: concern about rising prices for photographs, grappling with the instability of the medium and related preservation issues, and the need for improvements to intellectual control tools to address the growing interest from researchers for access to these records.<sup>1</sup>

The transformative changes brought about by digital technology is likely something nobody could have predicted thirty years ago. It is interesting to note that film photography, once derided as a “middlebrow art”<sup>2</sup> that allowed the masses to capture the mundane aspects of their lives, is now so infrequently used it could be called a hobbyist or artisan’s medium. I am tempted sometimes to consider film photography a finite œuvre. Of course, digital photography is now the most democratic method of taking pictures; it is also the industry standard for professionals. But consider the material culture “paraphernalia” of film photography and its predecessors, from slide screens and projectors to the frilly edges of a 1950s snapshot. Zoë Tousignant brings to light a collection of photos specifically made to be hand-held (cartes-de-visite), and discusses how the growing literature of vernacular photography may inform us about the care and custody of these works. Sharon Murray’s article demonstrates that photo albums act as more than mere mementos to those that assemble them; they can also be read by others and reveal much about their creators and their ideologies.

1 Richard J. Huyda, “Photographs and Archives in Canada,” *Archivaria* 5 (Winter 1977-78), p. 3.

2 Pierre Bourdieu used the phrase for the title of his book examining photography as a sociological practice. *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (Stanford, 1990).

Digital photography leaves its own physical trails, but perhaps what is most striking is how it has changed how images are used: taken in massive quantities, and able to be circulated and viewed without ever necessarily becoming something held in the hand, as photographs have often been. Archivists certainly face new challenges when considering the acquisition, preservation, and access of digital photographs, but as James Opp writes, our community should also consider the implications that digital technology has upon our descriptive practices. In our haste to open our collections to the broadest of audiences, we may generate unintended messages or even obscure original layers of meaning.

How surprised I was to read that in 1977 no Canadian archive was then equipped with the facilities to preserve colour -film photography. As Jessica Bushey's exhibition review article shows, colour products posed challenges that "black and white" (silver gelatin) products did not. Coupled with a late appreciation for colour within the art world and marketplace, the work of photographers such as Herzog, about whom Bushey writes, has suffered physically in the interim.

Those who work with photographs front and centre may sometimes have an unorthodox take on theory and practice. I have never considered this a failing of those who are passionate about photography in archives, and believe that a good debate can only bring new ideas to light and strengthen the field. Jill Delaney's article questions the manner in which scientific records are acquired from the Canadian federal government. Her thinking is motivated by the particular history of photographs as scientific data and scientific products.

John Tagg wrote that the history of photography "... has no unity . It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces." <sup>3</sup> This may explain why the enthusiasm of individuals immersed in different literatures and pursuits, such as historian Jennifer Anderson, have come forward with contributions for this issue. The Novosti Press Agency Photograph Collection will be a great resource for those seeking to understand more about Soviet-Canadian relations.

I would like to thank General Editor Catherine Bailey for her assistance in this project, which was motivated by my great enthusiasm and shortage of experience. I would also like to thank the contributors, some of whom have never been published in *Archivaria* before and come from outside the archival community. While I cannot claim to have taken the national pulse for photography in archives in any way , as Richard Huyda perhaps did in 1977, I am happy to have at least contributed to the same conversation.

**Sarah Stacy**

<sup>3</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis, 1988) p. 63.