

History of collections: Exotic photography

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The preceding seminars heard exposés on the efforts to locate the American and Oceanic collections in France. Unfortunately we are not at present equipped to carry out a national survey of the exotic photographic collections in France. No such study yet exists for several reasons. We will discuss three different ones.

The *first*, and not the least interesting, reason concerns the definition of the body of material to be dealt with. How can such a study be circumscribed? Which photos are or are not exotic. There is a need for criteria (geographical, historical, concerning authors, etc.) that would allow us to confirm that the category “ethnological photo” is not something in itself but the outcome of processes. The definition of those sets of photographs concerned would then be carried out with full knowledge of the facts.

The *second* reason not to be overlooked is a difficulty of a technical order. There are many photographic collections in France and they are widely dispersed. Even if the work already done on the American and Oceanic collections would be valuable in helping to locate the other collections, our knowledge of all the potential sites remains very fragmentary, and their location would take a considerable amount of time.

With reflection and the necessary means, the first two obstacles are not insurmountable, and it is fitting to dissociate them from the *third*, more complex problem, which is the failure to recognize photography as an object worthy of study, and investment (in terms both of research and of funding).

We propose to look at the work that has been done on one specific collection, the photographic archives of the Musée de l’Homme, detailing our approach.

The first work on an inventory of the collection took place at the start of 1992, following the arrival of a new director. The direction of the work was quickly determined by a subsidy from the Ministère de la Culture (the National Commission for Photography), which wished to fund the restoration of four of the oldest collections. This overview and the initial research on specific collections enabled us to pinpoint several deficiencies in the system in place, which had not changed since the 1930s.

The classification of the photos set in place between 1929 and 1938 (date of the museum's opening) privileged a geographical approach. The public had access to one or several drawers per country. The photos in the drawers had been pasted onto cards bearing place names and filed by theme. Information on when the photo had been taken, its context and the author's name were usually missing. Even if in some cases it was possible to find the photographer using a number, this notion was not considered to be an element of research.

The absence of such information negated the very notion of condition of realization, as though the photo were simply an object picked up on site, as though this were a transparent operation, as though the photo existed without the photographer.

This situation had several non-negligible consequences, and in particular:

– In terms of general knowledge, for instance the fact of filing together photos of people taken in the 19th century or in the 1950s without a distinction being made cannot be regarded as simply an unfortunate omission, since it is a perfect illustration of the notion of peoples without a history. Likewise, the suppression of the notions of author or context presupposes an equivalence of modes of production. (What does it matter whether the photographer was a soldier, an anthropologist, a missionary or a tourist? What does it matter whether he was traveling for pleasure, on an official assignment, or on an operation in a colonized area, etc.)

– In terms of the conservation of these pieces of heritage (protection against alteration and loss is almost impossible).

It quickly became apparent that, although there were important gaps in our knowledge, the conservation problems threatened to be particularly irreversible. From that moment, the goal became clear: we needed to obtain the recognition of these photographs as objects worthy of attention, funding and study. Simply put: they needed to exist as heritage collection objects.

This simple idea is not original. In fact, it is so commonplace that anyone could take it for granted. Yet it proved to be very difficult to implement in such a way that it was no longer simply a principle but became a real policy to be pursued.

We were encouraged in this by several contacts with similar collections, and notably by Elisabeth Edwards (Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford). As far as conservation is concerned, relations with the photography department of the IFROA (Institut National du Patrimoine, department of restoration), enabled us to carry out very thorough studies of certain collections, in the framework of a diploma program.

Whereas the Culture Ministry was equipped to respond to requests in the area of restoration (applications for subsidies based on research by students in their final year at the IFROA), the problem of the inventory and documentation of the collection were more difficult.

It must be borne in mind that the overall context of the Musée de l'Homme did not particularly favor this kind of reflection or proposals. The plans for the museum on the Quai Branly have since sparked territorial stratagems and revived a long tradition of defining domains. Whereas the notion of objects of knowledge was opposed to the category of art objects, another hierarchy prevailed among the objects of knowledge between "real objects" and photographs.

It quickly became impossible to carry out specific inventories (aimed at restoring certain collections) without rethinking the whole inventory system. To be brief: the principle for referencing photographs used in the photo archives since their creation was fit for the management of an agency designed for the diffusion of images rather than for

their conservation. In substance, while it was easy to start from an image and find or produce a copy, it was hard to start from the so-called inventory lists and find a photo, and impossible to remark its disappearance.

Confronted with the size of the task and the lack of means available within the institution, we began to look for funding so as to put the inventory on a solid footing. At the same time we looked for software that could be used for inventories. For the reasons cited above, the choice went to a software program designed for the inventory of museum objects.

Two sponsored projects led to the creation of a database, which now contains 100,000 notices describing each photo (using the classic model of the museum inventory notice, and including the information that had been lacking, such as dates, context, conditions of acquisition, technique, size, etc.): 100,000 notices, among which 23,000 digitized photos.

The first project defined a corpus in relation with the history of social anthropology/ethnology and the history of photography; the second aimed to piece together the collections that had come from various colonial sources.

Today the database of 100,000 notices includes nearly all of the images from the 19th century and the early 20th century up to the 1930s.

The work was done in view of a preventive conservation, which we wanted to be compatible with public access. This access has been extended to historical uses and research. It is still possible to consult the actual collection, but under conditions of controlled security (by appointment and under supervision). In the same perspective, so as to propose an alternative to the former direct consultation of prints, a computer station showing a selection of 10,000 documented notices was installed and made directly available to the public in 2000. This station presents a selection from the general database accessible by simplified research keys.

The two programs have enabled us to inventory a portion of the 350,000 photographs in the collection. The future of this work of course depends on the choices made by the Quai Branly museum.

The general evolution of the place occupied by photography in museums shows a shift away from the area of documentation to the status of collection. It would seem logical for the future Quai Branly museum to continue in this direction.

To come back to photography in the framework of the ECHO Project, with respect to the experiment conducted on the collections in the photographic archives of the Musée de l'Homme, it seems essential

–to not mistake the status of photography and the possibilities it offers, so as to avoid the frequent case in which photography is present simply as a complement or an illustration. It would be best also to beware of the temptation of digital duplication, which often leads us to forget just how much remains to be done in the area of identification and contextualization.

–to deal from the outset with the thoroughly hybrid status of this object: both the product and the image of non-western societies and our own, the photograph is a complex object. Our familiarity with the medium quickly makes us forget its inherent complexity.

–this familiarity also explains why we so quickly forget that it is first of all a material object that is fragile and exposed to deterioration and loss.

In conclusion, here too we need to convince the public and the authorities of the validity of research on the history of these collections.