



*Museum collection*  
Florence, MNAF -  
Alinari National Museum  
of Photography,  
© Alinari Archives-  
Alinari Archive,  
Florence



Claudio  
De Polo,  
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# The Oldest Photographic Firm

Interview with Claudio and Andrea De Polo  
by Maria Śliwińska

Wikipedia, the first and quickest source of information today, presents your company Fratelli Alinari as “the world’s oldest photographic firm, founded in Florence, Italy in 1852. Its archives contain 5.5 million photographs, ranging from daguerreotypes to modern digital photos from around the world”. This comes from your website, where we can read that “Today the name of Alinari guarantees a century of experience and state of the art professional technology”. Can you briefly describe the content you inherited?

Founded in **Florence** in **1852**, **Fratelli Alinari** is the oldest firm in the world working in the field of photography, the image and communication. The main site is <http://www.alinari.com>

The birth of photography and the story of the firm go hand in hand in their development and growth, as attested to by the immense Alinari-owned fund of **5,500,000** photographs, collected in the [Alinari Archives](#).

This fund is continuously growing and, thanks to a rational policy of new acquisitions and new photographic campaigns, it ranges from daguerreotypes to modern color photos.

Alinari is an irreplaceable point of reference for preserving, cataloguing, circulating and handing down, through the photograph, the history, society, art, and culture of Italy and Europe.



*Gina Lollobrigida*  
Studio Villani,  
1955 ca.  
© Fratelli Alinari  
Museum Collections-Villani Archive, Florence

**Who were the Alinari brothers, the founders of the photographic firm?**

Leopoldo Alinari (1832-1865) worked for several years for the chalcographer Luigi Bardi, where he learnt cooper engraving and photography. In 1852 **Leopoldo Alinari**, with his brothers **Giuseppe** (1836-1890) and **Romualdo** (1830-1890), founded the **photographic workshop**, the heart of the firm that still bears his name. It was the beginning of a unique endeavor specializing in photographic portraiture, views of works of art, and historical monuments, and it achieved immediate national and international renown. Leopoldo mostly traveled, photographing monuments in Italy (Rome, Florence, Naples, Pompeii and elsewhere) whilst his brothers ran the business.

**What photographic collections have you added to these excellent inherited resources?**

Through a series of new colour and black&white photographic campaigns the Archive nucleus has been continuously enriched. Recently, besides the extraordinary archive holdings such as



*The luminous portrait studio of the Alinari Brothers' photographic establishment.*

On the left the photograph Gaetano Puccini, Florence 1899

© Alinari Archives-Alinari Archive, Florence

 ALINARI

Alinari, Anderson, Brogi, Chauffourier, Fiorentini and Mannelli, some other glass-plate negatives and film from the Wulz, Michetti, Nunes Vais, Bombelli, Mollino, Betti-Borra, Zannier, Pozzar, Balocchi, Vannucci-Zauli, Unterverger, Tuminello, Muzzani, Miniati, Trombetta, Panatta collections and the Villani archive of Bologna composed of 600,000 images from a period ranging from 1914 to 1980 have been added. Pictures of works of art owned by the Italian state are available thanks to the kind permission of the **Ministry for Cultural Assets and Activities**.

In recent years, the Alinari Archive established a strong representation network with several international photo agencies in order to expand the Alinari Archive offer abroad (i.e. in Russia, US, UK, Germany, France, etc.) At the same time, the Archive also received the rights to represent, in a mutual agreement international content for the Italian territory. This includes the **45,000,000 managed or represented photos**, such as the **Istituto Luce**, with over 350,000 photos, and the Photographic Archive of the **Touring Club Italiano**, with 400,000 photos. Further agreements for representation exist today with the **Roger Viollet** archive (7,000,000 photos), the **Courtauld Institute** archive (2,500,000 photos), the **Marburg** archive (1,500,000 photos), the **Bridgeman/Giraudon** archive (200,000 photos), the **Interfoto** archive (8,000,000





photos), the **Rizzoli** archive (15,000 photos), the **Artothek** archive (22,000 photos), the **Finsiel** archive (5,000 photos), the **Imagno** Archive (1,000,000 photos), the **Topfoto** archive (12,000,000 photos), the **Bildarchiv Monheim** (25,000 photos), the **Ullstein-Bild** archive (12,000,000 photos), the **Rai Teche** archive with 32,700 photos, and the **Ansa** archive.

Would you be able to point out 10 top photographs you are especially proud of?

Alinari, Anderson, Brogi, Chauffourier, Fiorentini, Mannelli, Nunes Vais, Tuminello, Wulz, Trombetta.

I can see it's not possible to list just 10 photographs so you used a trick pointing out the photographers. I am not surprised as your collection is really extremely rich.

The Alinari brothers worked at a time when photography was the most advanced way for presenting and illustrating contemporary life, so photographers were highly valued professionals. Today almost everyone has a digital camera, and can easily make any picture. How can you make a business in such a world? Do people still need photographic repositories?

Today there is indeed a huge proliferation of affordable but good technology. Therefore, competition is indeed much higher than before. In order to be competitive, Alinari has decided to invest in state-of-the-art technology, providing a leading example of a successful combination of the latest technology and knowledge mixed with the "oldies," Alinari's old photographic traditions and skills. New technologies include digitization solutions by Mamiya/Leaf and PhaseOne, long term preservation by Preservica, story-telling and audio-guide by IZI.Travel, tagging and metadata enrichment by Imagga, HP web servers, quality printing by Epson, compression image optimization by XDepth, and so on.

Repositories are of course very important in order to maintain and preserve for future generations our precious heritage and back-history. In order to be able to transmit and transfer content and technology to future generations, it is of course important that those repositories are created using an open-source and backward compatible system.

In 2006 you opened a new photographic museum building in a prestigious location at Piazza Santa Maria Novella in Florence. I was lucky to be present at the opening ceremony, which attracted the cream of the society from Florence and elsewhere. Can you briefly say how it happened that the museum of history of photography was established?

In September 1998 Fratelli Alinari constituted the "**Fratelli Alinari. Foundation for the History of Photography**" (**Fratelli Alinari. Fondazione per la storia della Fotografia**),

## Interview with Claudio and Andrea De Polo by Maria Śliwińska

whose objectives included the safe-guarding, promotion and valorization of everything in the domain of photography and its history, as well as the figurative arts in general.

The MNAF, Alinari National Museum of Photography, is located in the fifteenth-century building known as ‘delle Leopoldine’, renovated thanks to the fundamental contribution of the Ente Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze. The building has been allocated by the City of Florence, the owner of the complex, as exhibition space for its twentieth-century collections, and space has also been granted to the *Fratelli Alinari. Fondazione per la Storia della Fotografia*. Duly restored and equipped in line with the most up-to-date exhibition requirements, this is where the Alinari National Museum of Photography now has its premises.

Among the responsibilities of the Foundation are those of promoting and creating exhibition activities as well as managing the museum and the technical and didactic activities of the MNAF, Alinari National Museum of Photography in its premises in the Leopoldine in Piazza S. Maria Novella in Florence, and the AIM, Alinari Image Museum, in the former National Railways building in Campo Marzio in Trieste.

**Can you afford to run such museums? It must be quite expensive, and income from the tickets most probably doesn't cover the costs. What motivates you to keep it open at a time when anything can be made available as a digital exhibition?**

Backed up by the experience Fratelli Alinari has in this sector, with over 200 exhibitions in the fifteen years the Fratelli Alinari Museum of the History of Photography has been active, the Foundation will take its cue from this know-how and from the consolidated connections and relations with all the leading personalities and institutions around the world to continue in its commitment for the valorization and diffusion of outstanding exhibition projects. It will also promote studies and research in the field of the history of nineteenth- and twentieth- century Italian and non-Italian photography, as well as the experimental activities of young contemporary photographers.

**Can you say something about the digitization program established at your company? How many items have you digitized, what collections there are, who can search them and where?**

In the last 3 years Alinari has improved its digitization arsenal by acquiring, along with 2 Scitex flatbed scanners, also a top-notch 80-megapixel digital back by Mamiya/Leaf-PhaseOne. Thanks to its Schneider lenses and a single shoot, the system is very fast and it delivers the best possible quality available in the cultural heritage sector today. Every day 400 new images are captured, indexed and placed on the Alinari web server, searchable through a bilingual database supported by IPTC-photo metadata information. Search can be freely made at the following website <http://www.alinariarchives.it>.





What are the biggest problems for photographic archives and museums to stay alive?

Technology requires continuous investments and content licensing revenues are rapidly decreasing due to the market saturation on 2D content. New technologies are rapidly arriving, such as 3D, augmented reality, 360 degree panoramic images, visual search, immersive navigation, digital theatre, and so on. As a consequence, partnerships and new commercial products/services are probably essential in order to remain in business today.

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And finally, what are your daydreams as the owner of this prestigious institution?

My dream is to leave for many future generations the same love and passion for photography and art, something that I always try to share with my friends, relatives and colleagues.



Thank you very much for sharing with the Uncommon Culture journal readers your thoughts. I believe your dreams will come true. It was a pleasure to work with you.