



Photographic Collections in the National Archive of Catalonia



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Front view of the headquarters of the National Archive of Catalonia in Sant Cugat del Vallès (Barcelona).
Photograph: J. Play
CAT ANC
Management Archive

Introduction

For Twentieth-Century man, the image, or picture, was the paradigm of information, and also a basic system of communication. We all know that a picture is worth a thousand words, and that the language of images is clear and understandable for a great many people who were born and educated in a culture that uses these elements to convey messages, sometimes evidently, and other times more subliminally.

Photographic images, like other audiovisual materials, share a common feature: their content, information or message is expressed through an unwritten, coded language, which the recipient has to decode. The photograph as a piece or an object has an intrinsic characteristic and, without forgetting its information content, it also contains other values (artistic, technical, historical). Hence, besides its docu-

mentary nature, which in turn makes it part of our documentary heritage, it may also have historical or artistic qualities and become part of a country's historic and artistic legacy.

As documentary heritage, and like other types of documents in different formats, it has to be treated and preserved if it is to be used in the future, which is why, in recent years, archives have embarked upon a major task of recovering, preserving, cataloguing and disseminating photo collections.

An avalanche of photographs

The transformation in the world of images is a recent reality which may be placed halfway through the nineteenth century, with the invention of photography and subsequently films, television, and video. Before that date, iconography was linked to artistic output, and



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an iconographic object was an expensive resource that could only be purchased and used by privileged classes. Once reproductive technologies became available to everyone, the amount of materials generated began to increase: with every passing day, a large number of images of varying quality are generated and accumulate while they wait to be processed properly or else are used immediately and are subsequently rendered devoid of all interest.

In Catalonia, ever since the beginnings of photography (the first attempt at photography took place in Barcelona on 10 November 1839), there has been a great interest in the various techniques and procedures used to fix images on duly sensitised surfaces.

After scientific experimentation and a process of evolution, mastery of the technique led to professionalism and a large number of com-

mercial photographic studios sprang up. Moreover, many amateurs, especially in the well-to-do classes, combined their penchant for photography with other interests, such as love of their country or hiking and family life, and plastic artists discovered the technique's possibilities, leading, in turn, to new uses and applications in photographic technology.

The outcome is a wealth of materials in private hands that have to be found first. Their degree of interest, condition, value or values that justify processing them will affect the work of the professionals and institutions concerned. But which materials should be preserved? Who should process them? Should all materials be included in archives? To answer these questions, we must first establish our sphere of competences and the image acquisition policy of the National Archive of Catalonia.

Reference room
of the
National Archive
of Catalonia.
Photograph:
O. Martínez
CAT ANC
Management Archive.





Treatment and installation of glass negatives in the National Archive of Catalonia. Photograph: I. Navarro CAT ANC Management Archive

The National Archive of Catalonia and the Images Area

The National Archive of Catalonia¹ was created by decree in 1980 as the country's core archival institution, with a twofold aim of being a general archive for the administration and a historic archive. As a general archive for the administration, the ANC recovers, includes, and manages the political and administrative documents of the departments, organisations, and companies of the Government of Catalonia, and as a historic archive, the ANC recovers all other documents of particular relevance for enhancing knowledge of our national reality.

The National Archive of Catalonia is divided into three areas for the management of its documentation: the administration collection Area, the historic collection Area and the images, graphics and audiovisuals Area.

The images, graphics and audiovisuals Area has the following responsibilities:

- Ensuring the recovery, processing and safe-keeping of visual and sound documents in different formats;
- Collaborating in establishing criteria and laying down technical standards for the archival processing of collections;
- Generating descriptive tools;
- Proposing the actions necessary to preserve collections properly;
- Cooperating in dissemination.

Collection acquisition policy

Acquiring a collection for the archive involves being responsible for it and also accepting the costs that come with such responsibilities: all the work involved in management, cleaning, restoration, installation in properly air-conditioned installations, organisation, description and dissemination, can be estimated economically, and we are obliged to stick to budgets and remain within our working possibilities.

This is the reason why a short- and long-term collection acquisition policy is called for, seeking compatibility between the principles of the source and territoriality of collections and the powers of the ANC, establishing clear criteria and objectives which also make it possible to capitalise on the cost of exemplary facilities. However, this does not mean that a one-off or unplanned intervention cannot be considered to acquire collections which appear sporadically on the market or whose special preservation conditions require rapid and costly action.

The first consideration to be taken into account in the acquisition of documentation is the difference in procedures between public funds and private funds. In the first case, and in its capacity as the Administration Archive of the Government of Catalonia, the ANC will transfer all the photos and photographic collections from the departments, organisations, and companies of the Government of Catalonia, once the legal requirements have been



Preservation device
with climate control
for black
and white negatives.
Photograph:
F. Sánchez
CAT ANC
Management Archive



met, as well as all material resulting from the activities and the life of our institution.

In the second case, and as a historic archive, the collection will be complemented by acquisitions agreed to with private parties or other institutions, provided that such acquisitions, as provided for by the current law on archives and documents "concern Catalonia and are of particular relevance". Acceptance of a private collection will be conditioned to a favourable report issued by the technicians of the images Area, who will consider the age, author, content, suitability, quality, and quantity of the material, as well as its economic and cultural value. In the case of acquisitions by purchase or by donation, the report must also be submitted to the Board of Classification, Valuation and Exportation of Cultural Heritage Goods of Catalonia for approval. Only then will action be taken to acquire the material. If the report is unfavourable, or if the cost of restoration-preservation surpasses the material's economic and cultural value, the acquisition will be ruled out.

The second consideration is the distinction between photographic collections and collections containing photographs. We only apply the criteria and policy for the acquisition of photographic collections to the first group, as the second group consists of collections covered by other acquisition policies (collections from companies, equity funds, personal funds) and in which photographs are regarded as just

another one of the types comprised within documentation, and once acquired, the non-text part will be processed and described in the images Area.

Basic Rules

The following types may be acquired:

- Collections produced by natural and legal persons within the territorial framework that are regarded as being of interest to the country's history.
- Collections that refer to Catalonia or to aspects of its history, preserved inside or outside the territory.
- Collections in danger of disappearing or which cannot be properly processed by other institutions.
- Collections which thematically or chronologically complement other collections in the archive.
- The Catalan photographic heritage.
- All collections donated or deposited in the archive at the express wish of their owners.

The following circumstances at least must be avoided:

- Competitiveness with other institutions, and duplicate collections.
- Including material that does not provide any kind of information or whose quality and historical interest are unremarkable.
- Including copies whose originals are already on deposit in other archives.

Notes:

1. The National Archive of Catalonia is an institution of the Government of Catalonia.