

# *Digitising, discovering and valuing European photographic heritage*

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EuropeanaPhotography is a pilot project supported by the European Commission in the frame of the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme in the Policy Support specific action.

Its main objective is to select, enrich and digitize over 430,000 of the finest examples of early photography, and to contribute the relative metadata and thumbnails to Europeana, the European digital library ([www.europeana.eu](http://www.europeana.eu)). These photographs provide a unique insight into the evolution of European society and of the art of photography between the 19th and 20th century, and they represent a very valuable source of data for the research in many fields such as history, economics, sociology and many more.

The consortium includes 19 partners from 13 European countries, representing both public and private bodies with very different backgrounds, thus providing a variety and richness of content. Moreover, several partners come for the first time ever in a Europeana-feeder project, also belonging to those European countries - such as Bulgaria, Slovakia, Lithuania and Denmark - that are still under-represented in Europeana.

The project coordinator of EuropeanaPhotography is the Institute for Cultural Studies of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven); Promoter S.r.l., a small Italian company, active on research and innovation projects, provides the technical coordination.

The project lasted 3 years, starting in February 2012 and is approaching the end of its activities. It has been a rather successful initiative and has been rewarded with the evaluation of “excellent” at the review carried out by the European Commission to assess the results of the project.

## EuropeanaPhotography in brief

EuropeanaPhotography partners sought their collections to select the best, often unseen, images in their archives, according to selection guidelines developed by the consortium under the guidance of the University of Leuven. These images – including prints, negatives, glass plates, silver gelatin and many other supports - are digitized with the highest standards of technology, with the support and coordination of the Centre de Recerca i Difusió de la Imatge (CRDI) of the Girona City Council.

In order to make the content available in Europeana according to the metadata models required, advanced software tools were developed within the project. They allow a multilingual enrichment of the native metadata, through the EuropeanaPhotography vocabulary, especially designed for the needs and requirements of the EuropeanaPhotography consortium under the coordination of the Royal Museum of History and Arts of Brussels. The aggregation and mapping of the metadata received by all the different content providers happens via the EuropeanaPhotography MINT system developed by the Image, Video and Intelligent Multimedia Systems Laboratory of the National Technical University of Athens. MINT is an advanced web-based platform targeted to facilitate aggregation initiatives of digital cultural heritage content coming from different repositories.

The 430,000 photographic images are available online as a preview on the Europeana portal and in high-resolution on the proprietary systems of the individual content providers.

A selection of 120 images has been curated by the partners to form the core of “All Our Yesterdays”, the EuropeanaPhotography travelling exhibition, which is intended to bring these photographic treasures nearer to the citizens, showcasing them in different location through out Europe.

To support the consortium and to develop a safe and valuable environment for both public and private bodies, the project has developed a range of supporting instruments related to IPR issues to orientate its partners and to be available for re-use by any other photographic archive interested in digitization and aggregation campaigns.

The project funded by the European Commission is ending in January 2015. However, the group of partners and associate partners is committed to continue to work together also after the end of the project, by constituting an association focused on the promotion of the heritage of photography, to build upon the legacy of Europeana Photography.

## The collection

EuropeanaPhotography selected photographic images of the first 100 years of the art of photography, tracing the evolution of European society and the art of photography, from 1839 (first images by Niepce in France) to 1939. The selection process was coordinated by KU Leuven and started in the early stage of the project: the actual selection piece-by- piece was carried out by each of the content providers curators and experts, who were guided in the choice by the following criteria: i) Masterpiece quality and impact; ii) General interest and appeal; iii) Complementarity with existing material in Europeana; iv) Synergy with content from other providers. As a result of this process, a deeper understanding of the richness and true value of the EuropeanaPhotography collections has come up. The partners explored their collections, to discover hidden treasures and make visible unseen images. Other partners researched for images into private collectors, family albums and smaller archives.

## The digitization activity

As EuropeanaPhotography is a digitization project, another main objective has been to establish and agree on standards for digitization and image quality, in order to exploit the most recent

technologies and to follow acknowledged procedures and workflow for the preparation of early photos and the application of digitization techniques.

Digitization strategies are crucial for every institution that owns, curate and preserve cultural heritage objects. The benefits of digitization are very appreciated in our society and cultural institutions are encouraged to disseminate their collections through the online networks. As for digitization of cultural heritage, also in the case of digitization of photographic heritage the main objectives are to facilitate access, to preserve originals, to increase dissemination possibilities and, in most cases, to develop business opportunities.

These objectives need to be pursued taking into account the specific characteristics of the photographic heritage, with particular regard to the characteristics of the old photographic objects, that are fragile, and that have a twofold nature, namely the positive prints and the negatives and other supports.

These are ambitious objectives that the partners of EuropeanaPhotography shared since the beginning of the project, and that needed to be properly positioned within the policies of each institution. The correct balance between accessibility and protection of rights has been a very important theme, discussed and investigated by the partners, taking into account the different points of view, both the business approaches of the private archives and the public vocation of museums and educational institutions.

Moreover, digitization must be considered a relevant strategic factor for an institution but also for a territory and for the whole country. In this light, in order to better deliver its expected impact, digitization projects should be developed in the framework of a strategic planning and, if possible, aligned with existing policies at a local, regional, national and European levels.

EuropeanaPhotography partners digitized a substantial part of their European photographic heritage, belonging to the early period of the art of photography and representing very different techniques and supports, which in some cases needed restoration before being digitized. Since the beginning of the project, EuropeanaPhotography has acted as a network of best practices, sharing knowledge and experience both inside and outside of the project consortium, aiming to improve the quality of reproductions and aiming to use professional and innovative methods to carry out the tasks of digitization and cataloguing. The partners always considered of great importance to disseminate the experience and know-how acquired in digitizing their photographs and for this reason the project carried out a rich and wide programme of seminars, workshops and presentation in professional conferences.

Guidelines are necessary to fix the main technical parameters that should guide the digitization process. They must be set in advance based on the characteristics of the original. For this project, a special attention was paid to FADGI guidelines (2010), even if there are other numerous references providing guidance to achieve the best quality results. Indeed every institution should have its own quality procedures, created according to their materials and to the objectives of their digitization projects. Before establishing guidelines, knowledge of the existent (and abundant) literature on the subject is indispensable. To this end, many papers were collected by the partners, published online and made available for everybody on the EuropeanaPhotography website. During the project, five training sessions have been organized with the aim of providing practical knowledge on the field of digitization of photography. The partners in fact work in different environments, have different missions, business models and economical possibilities with respect to digitization: therefore it was

important to offer information, training and awareness sessions in order for all to be aligned with the knowledge required by the project.

### Multilingual Vocabulary

A particularly important achievement of the project is the development of a multilingual vocabulary for early photography, which currently consists of over 500 concepts belonging to three areas, namely photographic technique, photographic practice and keywords, structured hierarchically. This vocabulary was originally completed by the project's partners in 12 languages. It has been used for annotation, translation and semantic enrichment of the metadata associated to each digitized photo. Further, the vocabulary has been enlarged, thanks to the activity of the associate partners who joined the project as external contributors, covering 16 languages including Russian, Ukrainian, Chinese and Hebrew. The technology at the base of the treatment is based on a set of tools that allow the partners to map their database to a common metadata standard and to ingest their data. The tools are accessible via the EuropeanaPhotography MINT platform, a web-based software for the aggregation of metadata based on the pre-existing MINT platform already developed in previous projects. The EuropeanaPhotography MINT system has been customized to the specific requirements of the project, including the photography-specific multilingual vocabulary.

### All Our Yesterdays Exhibition

*All Our Yesterdays - Life Through the lens of Europe's first photographers (1839-1939)* is the great exhibition of the EuropeanaPhotography project. It is the result of a collective effort from all the partners to make the results of the project accessible to the large public, highlighting the richness of the EuropeanaPhotography collections to the European citizens. During the project, the partners selected a group of images, including new discoveries chosen exactly for the scope of the exhibition. The initial selection was shared and discussed within the Content Committee established with experts appointed by each partner institution. The result has been a selection of 120 masterpieces of the photography, coming from 19 archives of 15 European countries and Ukraine.

The design of the exhibition has started from the development of an attractive narrative, based on a number of themes agreed among the Content Committee under the effective coordination of KU Leuven. The narrative of the exhibition is then at the core of the catalogue book. The general concept of the exhibition looks at vernacular photography, highlighting the city life in Europe, illustrating how photography was a premier witness to our common memory.

*All Our Yesterdays* is in fact the opportunity for the European modern citizens to discover the life that European past citizens lived throughout Europe's history in the period 1839-1939. The exhibition is organized in different "chapters" and sub-themes, featuring photos of everyday life of people in the streets, in the cities, in the countryside, in the villages, during festivities and as well as in daily occupations.

The photos are selected on the basis of both their testimonial power and photographic value. They are images that inspire empathy and appeal to historical consciousness, and most of all they are images that tell a story. The content providers were extremely responsive and enthusiastic to cope with this task, and came up with a very large number of proposed images. A poll was then organized

among the partners, to vote for the favorite images among the wider selection. These “best of the best” images have been eventually chosen for printing and framing.

*All Our Yesterdays* was launched with an exceptional event in Pisa: a 5 weeks exhibition that encountered a great success and an impressive number of visitors amounting to over 5,400. The Pisa edition of *All Our Yesterdays* was organized by Promoter srl (the Technical Coordinator of EuropeanaPhotography) and hosted by the Museums of Graphics, under the patronage of the University of Pisa, the City Council of Pisa and the Regional Council of Tuscany. It opened on the 11th of April 2014. The vernissage event was widely publicized and a lot of people were present, so that during the opening ceremony, which was held in the hall of the museum, many people were forced to wait outside the entrance, on the sidewalk. Guests of the opening ceremony were the Major of Pisa and the Chancellor for Culture, representatives from the University of Pisa and the Museum of Graphics, together with a representative of the Europeana Foundation. Of course all the project’s partners arrived from all over Europe to attend the event and to visit the exhibition.

As an ancillary activity, the exhibition offered “collecting days” when citizens were invited to share their photographic heritage held in private albums and collections. A digitization station operated by professionals allowed the visitors to digitize their own family photos, contributing to the digital preservation and the promotion of the memory of local cultural heritage. The digitized items were approximately 900, mostly related to family portraits and everyday life of Italian people in between the two World Wars. A valuable piece of collection is the group of photos of the airport of Pontedera, which was a rather important node for civil and military aviation in Italy until the 1950s, and today it doesn’t exist anymore. Other themes include war, soldiers, schoolmates, the fascism and the Italian colonies, and day-trips. The best selection of these images will converge in a local exhibition, planned to be held Pisa by the end of 2015.

Designed as a flexible concept comprising both physical and virtual elements, as well as multiple content modules, *All Our Yesterdays* is intended to be reproduced at other instances and locations. The date for the Belgian reprise has already been fixed, in connection and junction with the final conference marking the conclusion of EuropeanaPhotography’s project. Also, several other partner institutions and external organizations have expressed their concrete intent to host the exhibition in the next years.

The closing conference will take place on the 29<sup>th</sup> - 30th of January 2015, in collaboration with the Lieven Gevaert Centre for Photography. On the 30th in the evening the exhibition will open. The Belgian version of the exhibition will stay until the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, and will be presented at two locations: the main exhibition at Campus Library Arenberg plus a teaser-exhibition in Leuven’s city center, intended to attract culture-minded tourists and thereby generate visitor traffic towards the main site at the Library. While, for the greater part, the exhibition will re-use the content and material of the exhibition held in Pisa, the exhibition of Leuven will be adapted to the new location and setting. An extra accent will be added to enhance its Belgian and Leuven “flavor”: in collaboration with the Leuven City Archive, a unique collection of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century glass plates documenting the great fire of Leuven (1914) will be exhibited, to discover in more detail this particular and very sad ‘Yesterday’.

## Conclusions

The experience of EuropeanaPhotography is particularly interesting because it integrates into a single project several lines of research and development that are very urgent to be addressed.

It aggregated knowledge and expertise on the digitization of early photographic heritage, which is a domain of the cultural heritage still to be further investigated. In this way, it added to the Europeana portal masterpieces of the photography and inedited images of our recent past. The techniques

adopted by the partners represent a set of best practices that are available for future reuse, contributing in this way to enhance the quality of the digital representation of photographic heritage.

The forum represented by the 19 partners offered an exceptional opportunity to share experiences and lessons learnt among the participating archives. Quality control mechanisms, improved workflow to enhance the efficiency of the work, processing to enriching metadata, thesaurus and controlled vocabularies associated with the cataloguing activities, creative advertising of image data banks, promotion and communication of photographic heritage, are just some examples of the richness of themes addressed by the project.

The 430,000 digital pictures are a tangible outcome of the project. These masterpieces, previously taken into private repositories and are now accessible via the Europeana portal for future exploitation and reuse by teachers, students, researchers and creative and cultural enterprises.

And last but not least, the experience of *All Our Yesterday* will continue to excite the European visitors of the exhibition, showing how the integration of the physical and digital world can enhance our experiences. The pictures in fact existed at the beginning as physical glass-plates, daguerrotypes, negatives, and many other different physical supports. They were then “printed” as photos to be shared, with friends and relatives. Now, after more than a century, those images have been digitized, and everybody in the world can look at them on the Internet. And through *All Our Yesterdays* they are in the physical world again, in large formats, using modern and advanced reproduction techniques, to dazzle our imagination, to move our emotions and to create new communities.

The power of photography continues, and the digital technologies contribute to extend in the time and in the space the enchantment coming from the profound relationship between those who are photographed, those who make the photos and those who look at the pictures.