On the authenticity of photographs in Museum

Merilis Sähka
Estonian History Museum

Tartu - September 27th, 2008
“The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical reproducibility.”

Walter Benjamin
(Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1936)
Reproductions of the worlds’ first photograph


Gernsheim collection, Harry Ranson Centre, Texas University, USA.

http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent/wfp/


P. Getty Institute, Los Angeles, USA.
“The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical reproducibility.”

Walter Benjamin

(Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1936)
Analog photos in digital era

Museum of Pärnu

Example of reproductions (digital prints) of photographs and their descriptions in the permanent exhibition. 22.09.2008
Analog photos in digital era


Collection numbers of the photographs are listed in the references of the article.
Analog photos in digital era

Estonian History Museum.
Reproductions of photographs (digital print on plastic) in the permanent exhibition. 3.03.2008

Information next to the exhibited reproduction contains the name of the object and owner institutions’ name shortening.
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Analog photos in digital era

Library of Tartu University in the E-Catalog ESTER. Example of a digitized photograph and information about the original photo in the catalog.

http://ester.utlib.ee/
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Analog photos in digital era

Virtual photo-exhibition in the web-page of Estonian Theatre and Music Museum: “Beauty on the stage”

On the authenticity of photographs in Museum Materials Processes

Substance of the image Representation of the image

Design Addings Damages

Materials Processes

Physical context Conceptual context

Informational model of the photograph a historical artefact

**Documentation on display**

**Heinrich Tiidermann (1863-1904), Kaarli church in Tallinn – interior, exterior and portrait of the minister, ca 1900-1904.**

Composite photograph, collodion print on cardboard, format and design of cabinet portrait. 16,4 x 10,8 x 0,15 cm. Estonian History Museum, F 30680. Aquired from Sirje Annist in 2000.
Documentation on display

**IMAGE & content title + ....**

- **Photographer** or photo studio;
- **Date and place** of photographing the original image
- **Identity and size** of the original photograph – negative, positive or transparency, base material, photographic technique, size (with the original mounting), name of size-standard (postcard, cabinet card, etc.); - to express the original material identity of the source of the image
- Belonging to a **collection, album or series**; - gives (a physical) context to the photograph
- **Owner institution and ID-number** – makes it possible to retrace the original when necessary, and respect owners rights.
- **(Reproduction process** (scanning, (digital) photographing, etc.) – expresses the new identity of the image, minimises risk of misinterpretation of the copy image being the original photograph in an exhibition, for example.)
Ferrotype (collodion emulsion on iron plate), in original envelope, 8,3 x 6 cm. Estonian History Museum, F 3553. Aquired from Karl Rohtma in 1948.
C. Schmidt. Portrait of August Ferdinand Huhn (1807-1871) – minister of the church of St. Olaf. 1860’s, Tallinn. Two-layered, waxed and coloured salted paper print. 18,7x15,2x0,5cm. Estonian History Museum; F5547. Acquired in 1922. Conserved in 2006. (Digital images: front, inside and back of the photograph)
Conclusions

- Photographs are multy-layered cultural objects

- The photographic heritage is too easy to bring down on a single plane while making reproductions. Digitising envolves mostly just one part of the original object – its image.

- More documentation data can and should be shared about the photographs used and reproduced by museums (and archives) to preserve the integrity of historical visual heritage.
“Benjamin failed to recognise the ability of those who control the technology to control the image content and reproduction.”

Joanna Sassoon, Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction. 2004
Thank you!

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