

Geneva City, Department of cultural affairs

<http://phototheque.mahg.ch/>

The digital photographic library of Geneva's Museums of art and History



The existing photo library

Mission

The primary mission of the photographic library is the management and exploitation of an extensive collection of photographic images relating to the holdings of the Geneva city's Museums of art and history (MAH). The photographic library forms part of the Inventory and Scientific Documentation sector (IDS), which has global responsibility for the museums' information systems.

The museum's collections are extremely varied, ranging from archaeology to applied and fine arts. Current holdings are estimated at over one million items. The photographic library holds around 300'000 photographic images, which represent nearly a third of the total collections. Work is underway to increase the proportion of the collections for which images are available, both by identifying and integrating "hidden" sources of photographs and through new photographic campaigns. However, a considerable amount of work still remains to be done before that the collections are completely documented.

Departments covered by the photographic library

Images in the photographic library cover the following departments:

- Museum of art and history, Charles Galland
 - o Fine arts (paintings, drawings sculptures)
 - o Archaeology (prehistory, Egyptology, Middle-East, Greco-roman, Gallo-roman regional, numismatics)
 - o Applied arts (furniture, silverware, musical instruments, Middle-ages, Byzantium, textiles, arms and armour)
- Ariana museum : (ceramics and glassware)
- Museum of clocks and enamels : (watches, clocks, enamels, miniatures)
- History of science museum : (scientific instruments)
- Art and archaeology library : (art history and scientific publications)

Organisation of the photographic library

The photographic library works in close collaboration with the photographic workshop. Two professional photographers are responsible for photographing the museums collections. Black and white negatives and originals of large-format colour transparencies are stored under controlled conditions in a special repository. Black and white prints and copies of transparencies are sent to the photographic library, which deals with their classification, description and consultation.

Images in the photographic library are sorted by category and are accessible both to employees of the museum and, on request, to students and researchers, journalists and others from outside the institution.

The photographic library sells black and white prints and rents large-format transparencies on request, either for study or for publication. Any published images have to be accompanied by the name of the museum, the copyright notice, the name of the photographer, a brief legend and the inventory number of the object.



Uses of photographic documentation

Photographic images are commonly be used:

- for the purpose of study by curators and scientific staff within the museum, or by researchers and students external to the institution,
- as part of the process of restoration and preservation of objects,
- as evidence of a state of deterioration as a result of fire, flood, vandalism or other events,
- for identification following loss or theft,
- as evidence of depredation due to environmental factors,
- as documentation for the preparation of exhibitions,
- for publication in exhibition catalogues, scientific inventory, reviews, periodicals and various other publications edited both within and outside the institution.



The digital photographic library

The museum is currently engaged in a project to create a digital photographic library. The goal is the digitisation of the existing photographic collections and their publication via internet. The project uses advanced indexation and search techniques to provide a user interface which is intuitive and simple to use.

Images in the digital photographic library will be available online both to members of staff and to researchers, students and members of public outside the institution. Images will be presented at a resolution suitable for internet, accompanied by descriptive text and analysis of the iconographic content. It will also be possible to order high definition images, suitable for publication, via internet. It is hoped that the digital photographic library will help to open up the collections to a much wider public than is currently possible.

Content

A prototype application is currently being evaluated. It gives access to over 20'000 images, composed of digitised originals present in the photographic library and of new images created using digital photography. The long term objective is that the entire collections of the museums should be available for consultation online.

The Centre of Geneva iconographie (CIG) possesses an extensive collection of historic images of Geneva, many dating from the very beginnings of photography. These images will also be integrated progressively into the photographic library and, whenever possible, placed in relation with maps of the city.

Research

A system of interrogation using natural language has been specially developed for the project. Used for semantic analysis of each query it is capable of retrieving images by any combinations of author, title, subject, inventory number, date, object type, or by image format and name of photographer. The system is intentionally flexible and tolerates, for example, minor variations of spelling and syntax. It is capable of interpreting and to a certain degree "understanding" queries – notably chronological expressions such as *before*, *after* and *circa* – so as to optimise search results.

Results

Search results are presented in the form of slides on a "light table", sorted by order of relevance, which allows them to be consulted rapidly. Images can be zoomed to full-screen size and printed, along with their accompanying descriptive record. Images are optimised for consultation via internet (600 × 800 pixels). High resolution images can be ordered directly from the photographic library

Project objectives:

- Offer access to the photographic library to a large public.
 - Highlight the value of the museum's collections and Geneva's cultural heritage.
 - Overcome the space restrictions and organisational difficulties which limit access to the existing photographic library.
 - Avoid unnecessary handling and consequent degradation of photographic originals.
 - Develop a system which is easy to use.
 - Take advantage of recent research in the field of cultural documentation.
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Illustrations:

- p.1 © Musée d'histoire des sciences, Ville de Genève, inv. n° 38
John ROWLEY
Cadran solaire équinoxial mécanique
Londres
Limite des XVII^e – XVIII^e siècles, 1^{er} quart du XVIII^e siècle
Laiton doré
Dim. : haut. 36 × long. 26 × larg. 20 cm
Photo : Yves Siza
- p.2 © Musée de l'horlogerie et de l'émaillerie, Ville de Genève, inv. n° H 2001-26
VEIGNEUR Frères (actifs entre 1770 et 1796)
Montre de poche dite « bras-en-l'air »
Vers 1790
Or, émail, automate en ors de différentes couleurs
Dim. : haut. 8 × diam. 5.6 × ép. 2.15 cm
Photo : Maurice Aeschmann
- p.3 © Musée Ariana, Ville de Genève, inv. n° 13027
Verre à jambe
Venise (?), 1^{ère} moitié du XVII^e siècle
Style : Venise ou Façon de Venise
Verre incolore, verre bleu clair, doublé (noeud), soufflé en moule
Dim. : haut. 23.2 × diam. 10.3 cm ; pied: diam. 10 cm, ép. 1.1 mm ; lèvres: ép. 1.2 mm ;
marque du pontil: diam 1.1 cm
Photo : Jacques Pugin