



Shadowed Heritage: Photography as an Infrastructure for Artistic Education and Research in Italy (1840-1930)

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Project Overview

The project *Between Teaching Collections and Artistic Research: The Photographic Heritage of Italy's Fine Arts Academies* is a large-scale national and international initiative designed to achieve two main objectives.

The first is to conduct a **historical and critical study on the role of photography both in the teaching practices and in the artistic research developed within Italy's Fine Arts Academies** and Schools of Decorative and Industrial Arts between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

The second is to carry out a **cataloguing campaign of 50,000 objects** belonging to these photographic holdings, following the **expedited MIDF protocol**. The records are entered into the **SIGeC web platform**, while a smaller selection—around **1,000 photographs**—are published in an **enriched, research-oriented version** on the **IartNET database**, conceived as a digital infrastructure for **artistic research and cultural heritage**.

Both actions aim at the **protection, enhancement, and accessibility** of state-owned cultural assets of outstanding significance, which remain largely **inaccessible to the public** today.

Scientific Content of the Project

During the **Risorgimento** and in the decades following Italian unification, the **Fine Arts Academies** played a leading role in **artistic education, art-historical research, heritage conservation**, and, more broadly, in the **formation of a**

national artistic culture and taste. The rich historical heritage preserved within these institutions offers invaluable testimony to this context—born from the dialogue among **regional, national, and international practices and traditions.** From its very invention, **photography**—with its dual function as **model and document**—occupied a central place in the worlds of the **fine, decorative, and industrial arts.** It established itself as a tool capable of **training both the eye and the hand** of painters, sculptors, architects, and decorators. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the **Fine Arts Academies and Schools of Decorative Arts** began to **acquire photographs,** creating extensive collections of great **iconographic and historical value.**

Photography was used as a **model** in a cultural environment that valued the **accurate, almost philological depiction** of places, environments, and customs—a goal greatly aided by the photographic repertoire of **architecture, furnishings, weapons and armour, furniture, and vessels,** developed alongside photographic reproductions of **paintings and sculptures** by regional schools and great masters. Photographic images functioned as **casts or proofs taken directly from reality,** providing the kind of **scientific accuracy** that, from a **positivist perspective,** the “unfaithful” translations of engraving could not offer.

Alongside this innovative pedagogical use of photography as an analogue of the real, the collections that took shape within certain Academies were directly linked to the **earliest documentary photographic campaigns,** initiated under **state sponsorship** through the activities of the **Monuments Conservation Commissions,** which were themselves based within the Academies. **Educational activities and heritage conservation were thus deeply intertwined.** The **surveying of artistic and architectural heritage**—encompassing castles, churches, monasteries, abbeys, furnishings, sculptural decorations, lintels, balustrades, and objects of material and Renaissance culture—was instrumental in **reconstructing the historical roots of medieval and Renaissance civilizations,** thereby contributing to the **formation of national identity.**

The **revival and promotion of Italy’s ancient artisanal traditions** were likewise crucial to the **autonomous recognition of the applied arts,** at a time when Italy sought to assert itself within the **European market for decorative and industrial arts**—a recurring ambition at major **international exhibitions.** The Academies and Schools of Applied Arts were the institutions where artisans in diverse specialisations were trained, nurturing the productive sector that would eventually give rise to **Italy’s renowned design tradition.**

The project operates on **two complementary levels of online engagement:**

- On one hand, it offers the general public access to **rare and precious images** created by some of the **masters of early photography**.
- On the other hand, it narrates the **origins and histories of photographic collections** that emerged at the intersection of **artistic education, heritage preservation, and industrial development**.

Beyond the historical dimension, the project also opens up new perspectives for **contemporary artistic research**. By reactivating these images and collections through digital infrastructures, curatorial practices, and creative reinterpretations, it invites artists and scholars to explore photography not only as a historical medium but also as a living field of experimentation. Rooted in a long Italian tradition that views art as both practice and inquiry, **artistic research today extends this legacy into new epistemic and creative forms**. In this sense, *Between Teaching Collections and Artistic Research* positions the Fine Arts Academies once again as dynamic sites of knowledge production, where past pedagogies and present research practices converge to generate new forms of understanding, visibility, and creation.