

**Dorothea Peters**

**The Photographic Archive of the Department of Art History in Göttingen. An examination of the stock**

**- Application for a short term grant -**

The Department of Art History at the University of Göttingen houses a rich collection of works of art. It was founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century explicitly for teaching purposes and as such is the oldest of its kind in Germany. Its curator was Johann Dominicus Fiorillo (1748-1821), whose appointment as a professor of art history in 1813 is generally considered to be the first step in the establishment of art history as an independent academic discipline (vgl. Dilly 1979, 174-183; Middeldorf Kosegarten 1997). The study collection of the 18<sup>th</sup> century consisted foremost of prints, drawings, and paintings, which has continually been enriched to works of sculpture, arts and crafts and video art up till now. Nevertheless, photography as the most important teaching tool of any art historian since the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has definitely not been paid the attention it deserves. My project is intended to fill this gap.

The function of photography as a teaching tool is underlined by the significant fact already pointed out 40 years ago by Heinrich Dilly that the perception of art was shaped by looking at *photographs* rather than (the) originals (Dilly 1975). Recent research provides manifold evidence of the role of photography as an indispensable instrument in the study of works of art (Hamber 1995; Tietenberg 1999; Peters 2000/2003; Ratzeburg 2002; Caraffa 2009; Bader/Gaier/Wolf 2010). Not only did it serve as a substitute of the original – unattainable because elsewhere – so that the art historian could study it on his own desk, it also established the comparative visual analysis as vital art historical method. This makes perfectly clear the form analytical attribution debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would have been impossible without this method. But photography was more than an individual working tool, it became a driving force of *private* and – as soon as the progress of printing processes allowed - a *public* discourse on art which manifested itself, above all, in art historical publications (Krause/Niehr/Hanebutt-Benz 2005; Krause/Niehr 2007).

There were two obstacles preventing photography from getting into focus as an autonomous field of research: As opposed to the demands of art history, photography did not rely on the specific and original idiosyncrasies but functioned as a mass medium. Moreover, art historians were used to regarding photographs of works of art as representations of the object (painting, sculpture, and architecture), i.e. a photograph always merely served the indexical function as image, a referral to the original in question. Thus the initial focus of art historical photo archives was, as shown above, on the picture content. The so called “material turn” following digitalization has effected a change of perspective in recent years (vgl. Schwartz 2000; Edwards/Hart 2004; Caraffa 2011b). When evaluating photographs scientifically alongside its allegedly merely instrumental function, more and more the representing medium itself is the object of consideration and scientific analysis. Hereby new visual sources are made accessible.

This exactly is the purpose of this project: The photographs, which were compiled on the basis of a specific as well as a universal epistemic interest, do not only allow an analysis of the complex contexts of their production, distribution and consumption in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. When taking into consideration their framing storage and application forms they can be considered as a condensate of the working methods of individual art historians as well as of public discourse. The physical characteristics, the surface texture, the stamps, the inscriptions on the cardboards, here can provide important indications for the technique and

dating. This allows a historical respectively art historical, recontextualization (Peters 2011b; 2011c).

Nevertheless, dealing with the photograph evokes specific difficulties. Photography, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was a permanently changing technical medium with a great variety of practical procedures, shapes and possibilities of presentation. The identification and dating of photographs as well as the evaluation of medial limitations therefore demand well founded technical-historical (photography, printing) and photo historical expertise and methods. Even if in recent years research in this field has increased, a lot more has to be done to implement art historical knowledge with the help of experts in history of photography (Peters 2005; Matyssek 2009; Caraffa 2009; Bann 2011; Caraffa 2011a; Tschirner 2011).

As a special case of an art historical photo archive there was the art historical “apparatus” which, sooner or later, were established in every academic institute for art history. Aside from engravings and other prints they usually contain an increasing number of photographs. Contrary to previous assumptions (Dilly 1975; Ratzeburg 2002) recent studies have conclusively shown that art historians were open to photography as a new medium understanding the importance for their own work (Peters 2000; 2005; 2007; 2009; 2010; Matyssek 2009).

August Schmarsow (1853-1936) is a suitable example for this: He was habilitated by Herman Grimm in Berlin who had used photography for teaching purposes since the beginning 1870s. In 1881 Schmarsow came to the institute of art history in Göttingen, where he got a professorship in 1882 (until 1886). On 1. June 1883 Schmarsow gave a little report on his work at the Göttingen university to Wilhelm Bode: „Die Kunstgeschichte ist hier so ganz hübsch in Gang gebracht, und zwar auf eine Weise, der Sie sicherlich gern zustimmen. Ich muß ja im Interesse der allgemeinen Bildung allgemein verständliche Publica lesen, und benutze sie dazu wenigstens Anregung u., soweit es thunlich, auch Anschauung zu verbreiten, indem ich grundsätzlich über Nichts rede, das ich nicht ad oculos demonstriren kann, und vielfach kleine Ausstellungen historisch geordneter Photographieen etc. arrangire. Das Hauptgewicht aber lege ich auf die Uebungen und halte kein historisches Colleg ohne angehängtes Practicum, wo den Leuten wirklich etwas gegeben wird, wo sie wirklich sehn (sic) und arbeiten lernen, wenn sie nur wollen“ (Zentralarchiv Berlin, Nachlass Bode, 1. Juni 1883, S. 2). In 1897 Schmarsow was co-founder of the art historical Institute in Florence, where the systematic organization of the photographic apparatus was deemed just as crucial as that of any library. In 1909 he wrote an extensive account on the Institute of art history in Leipzig, which today is considered one of the earliest sources for the organization of an art historical apparatus as well as the ways photography was used by art historians in their teachings. Schmarsow's successor Konrad Lange (1855-1921), who from 1885 to 1893 was associate professor in Göttingen, was a similar case. In 1891 he wrote a chronicle of the institute, which manuscript is at the moment stored at the Seminar of art history in Göttingen, and later on he set up another teaching collection in Tübingen.

From the achievements of the two professors one can deduce indicators for the early organization of the photographic apparatus in Göttingen that – beyond the early teaching collection of works of art from the 18<sup>th</sup> century - included photographs as well. The importance of this presumed collection in respect to the history of art history is underlined by the fact, that the Geheimes Staatsarchiv in Berlin holds among others two volumes of documents on the „Vermehrung, Aufstellung und Ordnung der Gemälde- und Kupferstichsammlung der Universität Göttingen“ 1874-1927, which should include photographs.

What seems to be even more important is that the Department of Art History in Göttingen provides a vast collection of photographs of unknown provenience. This material is so far completely untapped, and because of its volume and by now low value for teaching purposes it is increasingly problematic. The collection is presently in a state of dissolution which has to be prevented, even more because members of the staff also have expressed their dissatisfaction with the present condition. It can be rightly expected that essential elements of the old “apparatus” from the last third of the 19th century can be found within this collection as well as additional later material until the domination of digitalized pictures today. In this project in a first survey of the material the photographs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century should be captured and eventually isolated in order to restore the roots of the modern art historical ‘apparatus’ in the times of Schmarsow. For the reconstruction of its history the documents of the Kultusministerium mentioned above, possibly found inventories, the chronicle of the university and other sources should be considered.

As I have been told by members of the staff of the Institute for Art History in Göttingen the estimated range of inventories in the Göttingen photo archive is approximately about 30.000. These consist partly of unmounted photographs, but mostly photographs in different techniques mounted on cardboards with inscriptions and stamps of the institute. As far as I could see on the scans that have been sent to me a range of about 20 % are photographs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (albumen, salt paper prints etc. from different photographers); in total that should be about 6.000. The conditions of storage are quite difficult as well and it is absolutely necessary to rearrange and to secure the old collection to prevent further damage. This has to be done immediately to prevent precious scientific study material from neglect or – even worse – being destroyed.

At present part of the collection is kept in ten steel cupboards in a corridor, in slipcases and boxes of different sizes in an unknown (topographical, not chronological?) order. The boxes partly date from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, partly from the 1920s or later. This type of storage principally could be maintained after the examination of their content. More problematic is the storage of the photographs of bigger formats, which have been used for teaching purposes in front of the students. They are lying chaotically in the size of 60 x 60 cm in many stacks piled on shelves, in drawers, in cupboards, in 20 chests, in old portfolios etc. all over the archive, the photothek and other rooms of the institute.

Nobody knows what is inside of all these containers, as they have not been opened at all over the last years. However, scans of some examples of the photographs have given the impression, that the valuable material should be examined immediately. In cooperation between the Department of Art History, the central custody and me as an expert in photo history it should be possible to develop a concept for the future handling of the collection. Another special problem of conservation is the storage of delicate photographs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century together with post cards and acidic calendar sheets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that are now worthless. It seems to be important to separate photographs and graphics and to dispose of the calendar sheets. This process has already been started, but one should be careful not to destroy or throw out the old photographs as well.

Within a short term grant of 6 weeks the following should be accomplished:

- Survey and first sorting of the photographic collection into categories like photographs, post cards, calendar sheets, graphics, portfolios, books etc.;
- First hypotheses on the provenance and chronological development of the stock (purchases, bequests), reading the stamps and inscriptions of the cardboards;

- Focus on the objects of the 19th century: photographers / photographic publishers, subjects;
- Survey of the written and printed sources like inventories, chronicles of the university, documents in the Geheimes Staatsarchiv in Berlin and in the Hauptstaatsarchiv in Hannover, etc.;
- General assessment of the importance of the photographic collection: Can the old art historical “apparatus” of the university of Göttingen be identified? What are the highlights in a photo historical perspective?
- Developing a strategy to handle the photographic collection in the future.

With this project the Department of Art History in Göttingen would be one of the first ones to support research – from different perspectives – on their photographic collections to make it accessible for further scientific studies. The Photothek of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence (vgl. Bähr 1999) has started a series of lectures in 2008 which was turned into a series of international conferences on “Photo Archives” (Costanza Caraffa). Some grants have been given for scientific research with the photographs as objects, among others to the applicant. The Bildarchiv Foto Marburg has succeeded in identifying and opening up the old art historical apparatus, again with a work contract of the applicant (Peters 2011c). In a PraxisSeminar students worked with selected parts of the collection which resulted in an online exhibition (Hubert Locher; <http://www.fotomarburg.de/histfoto>). The Humboldt-University in Berlin, too, has started research on the history of her art historical apparatus in connection with the 200<sup>th</sup> jubilee of the foundation of the university (with the impetus of Horst Bredekamp). The analysis was based less on the photos as objects, than on the voluminous documentation of its history (Haffner 2007; Peters 2014). Very recently the Städel in Frankfurt has shown early photographs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century of her own collection (<http://blog.staedelmuseum.de/kunst-der-moderne/vom-lehrbild-zum-kunstwerk-%E2%80%93-fruhe-fotografie-im-stadel> ).

I would like to contribute my skills and knowledge to analyze and develop the old photographic collection which is kept by the Department of Art History at the Göttingen university. This is a research-desideratum both from photo historical perspective as well as from an epistemological perspective.

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## **Dorothea Peters: Curriculum Vitae**

Born in Göttingen, Abitur at the Max-Planck-Gymnasium in Göttingen.

Studies in psychology, anthropology, philosophy, pedagogy, education of arts, sociology, art history in Göttingen, Kiel and Berlin (diplomas as psychologist; graduate teacher; art historian).

6 years scientific staff member at the University of Arts (Hochschule der Künste) in Berlin (Faculty of Visual Communication).

Self-employed art historian and photo historian since about 20 years.

2000 work contract: Survey of the photographic collections of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin (for the projected Deutsches Centrum für Photographie in Berlin).

2005 Doctoral thesis on photographic reproduction of works of art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the University of Kassel (Berthold Hinz / Horst Bredekamp; scl).

Fellowships at the Deutsches Museum in Munich (2006: Georg Meisenbach and the invention of halftone-engraving), at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence (MPI, 2009, 2010/2011: Photography and the scientific debates on Raphael in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Work contracts and lectureships in Marburg, Berlin etc. Chairwoman (acting) of the History and Archives division (Sektion Geschichte und Archive) of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Photographie (DGPh).

Main research on the history of photography, printing, book publishing as well as history of science. Lives as independent scholar near Berlin.

Dr. des. Dorothea Peters

OT Wanzka

Dorfstraße 1

17237 Blankensee

Tel. 039826/76651

E-Mail: dorothea\_peters@yahoo.com