Women in Photography 1839-1939 (Milan, 20-21 Nov 25)

Brera Academy of Fine Arts, Milan, Nov 20–21, 2025
Deadline: Jun 15, 2025

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Practitioners, Labourers, Entrepreneurs in a Global Perspective.

Final conference of PRIN 2022 PNRR NextGenerationEU funded project Fotografiste:
Women in Photography from Italian Archives, 1839-1939,
conduced by IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca (PI) and Brera Academy of Fine Arts Milan.

Why are there so few women in the history of photography? Scholarly contributions have highlighted the obstacles that hindered women's success in photography, as well as the ideological foundations of photographic history that have kept them invisible within dominant narratives. Despite this, the role of women in photography remains under-researched, particularly on those practitioners active between the invention of the medium around 1839 and the outbreak of World War II in 1939. This international conference aims to give visibility to women in photography during the first century of its history by uncovering their identities and stories through the lens of women's history and gender studies, revitalising forgotten or overlooked female figures, and revising dominant historical accounts which centre prominent male photographers and photographic businesses.

The conference draws on the methodological approach of decolonial feminist studies, which acknowledges that individuals and social groups who have been (and continue to be) marginalised face the greatest difficulties and obstacles in bearing witness to their own exclusion. Recent contributions that merge gender history, labor history, and feminist critical theory provide an additional methodological framework. This dialogue has led to the rediscovery of previously overlooked forms of women's labor, both within and beyond the domestic sphere. Following feminist economic perspectives, we understand domestic labor as a central component of productive labor. As a result, the very concept of work has been broadened, shifting the focus to the diverse forms, modalities, and qualities of women's labor.

The conference will include three sections, each based upon Fotografiste's main objectives:
- Reframing photographic history by building a more inclusive, trans-disciplinary and transnational narrative, capable of doing justice to the often hidden roles of women as labourers, practitioners, and entrepreneurs across different photography sectors;
- Enhancing accessibility to archives by creating new archival records and updating existing ones to include information on women's roles in photography;
- Engaging with local communities by fostering involvement in participatory events aimed at the

valorisation of photo historical heritage and at tackling issues of gender inequality.

We invite papers and visual presentations from emerging and established scholars, archivists, and artists. Participatory practice-led research is welcome.

We are looking for contributions that:
- Move beyond medium specificity, offering an alternative to dominant narratives shaped by traditional art history;
- Look at photographs not solely as authorial images, but also as parts of integrated networks of different media, businesses, practices, technologies, materialities, and fields of knowledge;
- Examine previously overlooked women's roles in photography by using diverse sources and underexplored archival materials that have rarely been considered by historians of photography;
- Identify the roles and functions women played within photographic culture, industry, and businesses, and explore how these roles have transformed over time;
- Produce a trans-disciplinary, transnational, and materially oriented historical narrative on photography, linked to the history of women’s emancipation, and deeply informed by cultural, social, and economic history;
- Make under-analysed collections accessible and valorize them by highlighting archival relationships that can uncover new data and narratives about women in photography;
- Question archival standards and advocate for descriptions of photographic materials that are informed by women's history and gender studies;
- Address the impact of dominant historical narratives within the ecosystems of archives;
- Engage with digital humanities to analyse historical sources and propose innovative methodologies of data processing to reveal possible connections and cross paths of women's careers;
- Present case studies that use photography to promote a more inclusive engagement with heritage by enhancing collective awareness about the role of women in society;
- Analyse case studies involving local communities in the co-creation of cultural production in photography;
- Present projects that emphasize citizens' rights to access photographic heritage and their active participation in its preservation and valorization.

Please submit an abstract of 300 to 400 words and a short bio of 200 to 300 words via email to fotografiste.conference@gmail.com by 15 June 2025. Accepted applicants will be notified by 30 June 2025. Each speaker will have 20 minutes to present their paper. Travel and accommodation expenses will be covered. Following the conference, selected papers will be considered for publication. The event will be held in English. For any queries, please contact fotografiste.conference@gmail.com.

Advisory Board:
Linda Bertelli, IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca,
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Reference:
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