

Castles, Salons, and Darkrooms (Prague, 20 Oct 26)

Prague, Oct 20, 2026

Deadline: Jul 15, 2026

Petra Trnkova

Castles, Salons, and Darkrooms: Mapping the nobility's impact on early photographic history in Central Europe (1840s–1860s).

A significant portion of the earliest photographic heritage in Central Europe originates from aristocratic collections. Within photographic historiography, however, the role of the nobility has long been overlooked. Scholars have predominantly focused on photographic practitioners, treating the aristocracy as merely passive consumers of photographic technologies, services, and publications. Yet, as specialized studies suggest, the interest of the nobility and its extensive networks of contacts exerted a decisive influence on the expansion of the photographic field, both on institutional and personal levels, particularly within the Habsburg Monarchy.

This conference aims to invert the traditional perspective by focusing on members of the nobility as key agents who co-constituted the conditions for the development of photographic culture and the dissemination of photographic knowledge in Central Europe. The nobility's active role took several shapes: acting as photographic collectors, patrons, and promoters of the earliest commercial photo studios; initiating specific photographic projects and publications; and participating as aristocratic amateur photographers.

Concurrently, particular attention is paid to the role of 'go-betweens' who enabled and enhanced the nobility's access to this novel technology and its products. These intermediaries played a decisive role in transferring specialized knowledge between the photographic sphere and the aristocratic world in both directions. Furthermore, they instrumentally facilitated the transmission of photographic technology and expertise across national borders. This group included not only members of the aristocracy receptive to external technological innovations, but also the photographers and photographic enthusiasts granted access to the lower nobility and the strictly closed world of the high Austrian aristocracy. Alongside diplomats, these intermediaries often comprised personal physicians, estate administrators, ministerial officials, scientists and university professors, military officers, private tutors, and keepers of aristocratic collections. Leveraging personal contacts, intellectual and cultural capital, as well as robust institutional backgrounds, these individuals disrupted the rigid social boundaries of the aristocracy, thereby contributing to the reconfiguration of early photographic knowledge.

The conference seeks to explore both individual actors and the diverse contexts in which photography was deployed or distributed across Central Europe and beyond during its first decades, courtesy of the nobility. These contexts include, for example:

- Personal and familial representation
- Diplomacy, military, and maritime affairs
- Education and travel
- Estate management and economic development
- Collecting, fine art, and print culture
- The private sphere of aristocratic life

We welcome both case studies focusing on specific patrons, commissioners, or intermediaries of photographic knowledge, as well as papers tracking the trajectories, mechanisms, and communication channels fostered by the nobility that contributed to the development of early photography. Proposals may address, but are not limited to, the following questions:

- What were the primary motivations behind the nobility's engagement with photography during the 1840s–1860s?
- Were economic capital and leisure time truly the primary determinants of aristocratic interest in photography during this period, as is frequently asserted in scholarly literature?
- Did photography reinforce the insularity and exclusivity of the aristocracy, or did it conversely help dismantle strict social boundaries and gradually 'bourgeoisify' the lifestyle of high society?
- What were the structural characteristics and formation processes of the earliest photographic collections assembled by the nobility?
- In what ways and to what extent was the prolific photographic culture of the British and French royal courts reflected in the practices of the Central European nobility?
- In what ways can the study of aristocratic networks map the transnational and cross-border circulation of photographic knowledge, despite the scarcity of preserved photographic collections?
- To what extent, and in what manner, might the nobility's interest in photography have aligned with their political aspirations?

Submission Guidelines:

We invite scholars from various fields engaging with nineteenth-century photography and aristocratic history to submit proposals for 20-minute presentations. Please submit an abstract of up to 300 words accompanied by a brief biographical note to Dr Petra Trnková at trnkova@udu.cas.cz by 15 July 2026.

Important Dates:

Submission Deadline: 15 July 2026

Notification of Acceptance: 31 July 2026

Conference Date: 20 October 2026

Organizers:

Dr Libor Jůn, Dr Francesca Strobino, Mgr. Denisa Tichá, Dr Petra Trnková

Venue:

Academic Conference Centre, Husova 4a, Prague

For any enquiries, please contact Dr Petra Trnková at trnkova@udu.cas.cz.

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Reference:

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