

Collecting Faces – Art History and the Epistemology of Portraiture. The Case of the Swedish Portrait Archive¹

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The notion of the archive has attracted attention in the aftermath of what is sometimes called “an archival turn” within the humanities – it has been discussed both as a metaphor for power and in terms of its materiality and dependency on media practices.² The archives structure our knowledge and determine what can be said at a certain time, as Michel Foucault famously pointed out in the late 1960s. But are there differences in kind between the use of archives by the various disciplines *within* the humanities, for example art historians and historians?

When Hayden White deconstructed the truth claims of historical writing, he did so by emphasizing linguistic rhetoric as the necessary glue that connected and transformed unprocessed

1 This text is a compilation of some of the outcomes from the authors PhD thesis on the historiography of portraiture and portrait archives, which will be published in Swedish in August 2016.

2 Wolfgang Ernst, *Sorlet från arkiven: ordning ur oordning*, Thomas Götselius & Otto Fischer (eds.) Glänta produktion, mediehistoriskt bibliotek 4, Göteborg 2008 (2002), pp. 8-10.

historical records into narrative form.³ Since then, whenever archives are analysed, papers containing text are often regarded as the main medium of knowledge⁴ – the document is seen as more or less equal to written text, while language is regarded as the privileged carrier of meaning. Images, on the other hand, are often described as “documentary”, or as “scientific” when valued as truthful.⁵ These choices of words indicate that images are often regarded as having an informational quality to them. Therefore, one could argue, a Foucault or White isn’t needed to deconstruct previously unquestioned truth claims ascribed to *visual* documents within the history of the humanities, because the image-as-document, unlike the text-as-document, has never been a given.

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In the following, I would like to direct my attention towards an art historical exception, the Swedish Portrait Archive. First, however, a short background of the early history of positivism and source criticism in the history of art historical research is needed. At the end of the 19th century, art history was defined as a *Wissenschaft* in a German-speaking context because the discipline had undergone what could be described as an Aristotelian or material turn, from a philosophy of art towards scholarship based on first hand impressions of art objects. Due to this understanding of art historical research as a kind of scientific enterprise, it was no longer regarded as sufficient to read books on aesthetics in order to familiarize oneself with art history.⁶ This turn was defended in 1874 by the well-known art connoisseur Giovanni Morelli (under the pseudonym “Ivan Lermolieff”) in

3 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1973.

4 Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*, Duke University Press, Durham 2014.

5 Renate Wöhrer (ed.), *Wie Bilder Dokumente wurden: Zur Genealogie dokumentarischer Darstellungspraktiken*, Kadmos, Berlin 2015, pp. 7-18.

6 Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna school of Art History: Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847-1918*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 2013, pp. 18-21.

his *Kunstkritische Studien*: "[a]ll sciences [Wissenschaften] (...) are based upon observation and experience".⁷ A connoisseur is often thought of as a kind of art critic with an aptitude for art appreciation and matters of taste. However, when connoisseurship was practiced by art historians at the end of the 19th century it also served a very direct purpose as an empirical method. Accumulated experience and close observations were necessary for attribution, identification, verification, classification and categorizing of old art objects because existing, written information was scarce, and often questionable. This material and scientific turn towards the object is described by Morelli:

As the botanist lives and works among his fresh as well as dried plants, and the mineralogist and geologist among his rocks and fossils, so should the art connoisseur live amongst his photographs. And if he is wealthy, among paintings and sculptures as well. [...] The one and only document [...] remains at the end for the art connoisseur only the work of art itself.⁸

In this quote, Morelli also displays his understanding of the art object as a kind of historical document with great importance. They were, as pointed out by Christopher Wood, approached as "material relics that promised unmediated access to the minds and experiences of historical subjects" in the emerging discipline of art history.⁹ That is, one should believe what one could see with one's own eyes, but remain sceptical towards attributions and writings from the past. The practice of scientific observation in the natural sciences could thus be compared to an art historian's trained eye and judgement, since they both presuppose the object of study to be treated as epistemological.¹⁰

7 Ivan Lermolieff (Giovanni Morelli), *Kunstkritische Studien über Italienische Malerei*, Band 1, F.A. Brockhaus, Leipzig 1890 (1874), p. 13.

8 Lermolieff 1890 (1874), p. 32.

9 Christopher S. Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, Zone Books, New York, 2000. p. 23. See also Daniela Bohde, *Kunstgeschichte als Physiognomische Wissenschaft: Kritik einer Denkfigur der 1920er bis 1940er Jahre*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2012.

10 Compare Lorraine Daston & Elizabeth Lunbeck, *Histories of Scientific Observation*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 2011; Mitchell B. Frank &

The Swedish Portrait Archive was founded in 1916, initiated by the Swedish art historian Sixten Strömbom. To raise enthusiasm and financial support, he described the aim of his project in a speech to members of the historical society *Personhistoriskt samfund* in 1915:

Over the centuries in which portraiture has been conducted in our country – the results of which have come to constitute the majority of art production – a highly significant number of depictions of Swedish people have of course been produced. A diverse crowd with cosmopolitan ideas has certainly infringed upon their objective truth value, but as indicated, they, together with the written records, constitute our chief source of knowledge about our deceased ancestors. In addition, they constitute irreplaceable material for research in the history of art and culture, as well as anthropology and eugenics.¹¹

This excerpt could be contextualized in several ways, but I would like to focus on one aspect in particular, namely the epistemological possibilities ascribed to portraits. In line with positivist art history, Strömbom expresses a strong belief in historical portraits as visual documents, equal to written records. As objects in the archive, they were regarded as vessels of truth content, as source of information regarding sitters long dead.

In addition to ideological underpinnings that are hard not to notice for a later reader with Sweden's history of eugenics in mind, Strömbom in his speech also presented a practical reason why Sweden needed a portrait archive. The bulk of the art objects commissioned and produced in Sweden up until then consisted of portraits. Great volumes were kept in collections dispersed nationwide, stored by the state, institutions, civilians, private societies and corporations, as well as in churches and at universities. Some of them had in the passing of time turned

Daniel Adler (eds.), *German Art History and Scientific Thought: Beyond Formalism*, Ashgate, Farnham & Burlington 2012.

11 According to an unpublished manuscript at the archive of the museum, [untitled], F2GA:2 "S.P.A. 1920-30-tal", Topografica: Gripsholm, Nationalmuseum.

into neglected, forgotten and uncared for pictures, hanging in dusty, dark corners, whereas other where on display as monuments and memorials in impressive interiors. The continued, material existence of quantities and volumes of visual objects demanded repositories in the institutional form of image archives and art collections. It is well known how photographic reproduction enabled art history to develop a disciplinary infrastructure of image archives with easy access to images of site specific and (more or less) immobile objects.¹² Art historians could, to rephrase Morelli, live and work among photographs, as a complement or *ersatz* to expensive, time consuming and sometimes even impossible travels to the location of the original object.¹³

SPA therefore started out as a project to map, list, describe and photograph all existing portraits of Swedes, collecting information in order to build an image-centred archive in Stockholm. Systematic fieldwork was practiced in the provinces of the country, in line with an idea of the art historian as cartographer. This aim, however, should not be confused with a claim to map and document all existing portraits in Sweden. As a matter of fact, it was reported in the first annual report of 1916 how the initial premises of the project proved hard to follow. Surprisingly, no one seemed to have predicted that to distinguish portraits depicting Swedes (and not, for example, Danes) in a larger collection of pictures, just by looking at them, would not be an easy task. The problem was solved, however, by imposing a new rule stating that every portrait should be listed and photographed, saving the process of sorting out unwanted portraits of foreigners for a later stage.¹⁴ Contrary to an archive documenting the

12 Costanza Caraffa (ed.), *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History*, Italienische Forschungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz, Max Planck-Institut, Deutscher Kunstverlag, Berlin & München 2011.

13 Analysed from this point of view, as empirical material for experts to map, list, identify, authenticate and document, the founding of SPA falls within the realms of media archaeology, as initiated by Wolfgang Ernst, see Wolfgang Ernst, *Im Namen von Geschichte: Sammeln – Speichern – Er/Zählen. Infrastrukturelle Konfigurationen des deutschen Gedächtnisses*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 2003; Ernst 2008 (2002).

14 Sixten Strömbom, "Svenska porträttarkivets verksamhet 1916", *Personhistorisk tidskrift*, 1917.

history of art, the emphasis was put on the identity of the sitter, and not on the artist, period style or a general belief in art-for-art's-sake. It was, as articulated by founder Strömbom when interviewed in the press about the aims of the portrait archive, a documentation of "the Swedish face".¹⁵

SPA was in 1932 officially incorporated as part of the larger organisation of *Nationalmuseum*, the National Museum of Fine Arts in Stockholm. Even though the director was an art historian by profession, and the archive was placed in an art museum, it continued to be structured as a national inventory of portraits of Swedes, rather than as an archive documenting portraiture as an art form. A supplementary catalogue listing the names of the artists did exist, but it was only meant as a tool offering additional cross references to the main register, which was arranged according to the identity of the sitter.¹⁶ The images as such were neither primarily joined together to form an archive documenting works of art regarded as part of an art historical narrative, nor categorized and connected according to underlying principles of period, style or national school.

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A portrait is an image of an individual, and as such, the genre of portraiture has often been met with suspicion regarding its status as "fine art". One reason for this could be that portraiture has traditionally been expected to represent and record both outward appearance and inner qualities of an individual, rather than to represent universal ideals. Furthermore, the historiography of portraiture includes a long history of popular notions

15 "Världsunikt porträttarkiv fyller 25 år", *Dagens nyheter*, 1939/01/31; "Det svenska ansiktet", *Dagens Nyheter*, 1939/02/19; Sixten Strömbom. *Index över svenska porträtt 1500-1850 i Svenska porträttarkivets samlingar*, Band 1, Nordisk Rotogravyr, Stockholm 1935, pp. VII-VIII.

16 Also, the archive was limited to include photographic documentation of portraits executed in various artistic techniques between 1500 and 1850, which meant that the archive covered all mediums except photography. The choice of this specific historical period could be motivated by an animosity against portrait photography, a popular part of modernity's visual culture, and could also be considered a confirmation of photography's unquestioned status as non-art.

specific to the iconicity of portraits as visual memories, for example “making an absent sitter present”, or standing “face to face” with someone long gone. The fact that such expressions are well worn indicates a specific agency generated from portraiture, providing a certain effect of presence on the beholder. Notions such as these reflect the embodied experience of the beholder and expresses a certain sense of sentimentality towards the image as a vivid and tangible, time-transcending subject of history.¹⁷

The approach to historical portraits, when included in the Swedish Portrait Archive, was as sources or documents, containing information best read and interpreted through connoisseurship applied as a method of visual hermeneutics or close reading, and supported by a mental set of physiognomic thought. They were treated as visual recordings of the character of individuals from the past. SPA was meant to serve as an image archive documenting faces, built by art historians, and guided by scientific ideals.

¹⁷ This relation between image and temporality is in line with the theoretical framework proposed by Keith Moxey in his *Visual Time: The Image in History*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2013.