

Memory recaptured in a small community – Preserving retouched photographic negatives, discussing visual culture

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ABSTRACT: This paper focus on a private portrait photographic negatives collection belonging to Foto-Carvalho, a photo-graphic studio of Estremoz (north of Alentejo, Portugal). It explores the techniques, materials, and reasons behind retouching on photographic negatives; also, the validity of retouching in the search for the photographic truth. Studying dry plate photographic negatives from lesser-known collections is a special opportunity to take a closer look to a time and a place. This case study on a Portuguese community will bring new and valued insights to portrait photography and contributions to visual culture of the first half of the 20th century.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the invention of photography people believed they would have a tool for truth, and any alteration of the photographic image could be controversial. However, retouching photographic images is a practice that exists since the beginnings of photography itself. The reasons for altering the images were varied. Some were necessary to strictly overcome technical difficulties; others had social, artistic or even economic reasons. Nowadays, with digital tools, it is easy to change an image. On the contrary, in the beginning of the 20th century, retouching a dry plate photographic negative was a practice that demanded artistic abilities.

Although dry plates collections are abundant, they are usually unknown and there are few studies that focus outside the well-known photographers. Also, there are few studies about the technical aspects of these collections, their conservation conditions or image alterations.

National archives keep the collections of National interest. Outside the main cities, in smaller towns, usually the information is scarce and scattered. Other collections, sometimes in the hands of private owners, can give precious information, as they contain the memories of a community. Their preservation and study bring to light information about their cultural context, customs and history.

This study is part of a PhD project on the use of retouching on dry plate negatives from different Portuguese photographic collections dating from the first half of the 20th century. The project includes an ongoing laboratorial study of the materials used for

retouching, a subject that has, so far, few studies dedicated to it. Also, new contributions are given to visual culture studies regarding the uses and intentionality of retouched negatives. This will allow a better understanding on the materials used for retouching, how they changed the final image, their present conservation condition and guidelines for its preservation.

The focus of this paper is a private photographic collection from the former *Foto-Carvalho* studio, a photographic studio of Estremoz (north of Alentejo, Portugal), active from 1936 to c.2000.

2. PHOTOGRAPHY AND TRUTH

“You hear so often from admirers of photography emphasizing that this young art represents the pure truth, understanding truth as the counterpart of reality. Indeed, photography can be truer, as truer producer of images as all other arts, but they are not absolutely true, and because they are not absolutely true, it becomes important to know the sources of the untruth in photography, and they are many.” (Vogel, 1867)

It was soon realized that a photograph would register more than the human retina. The veracity of the formed picture was unquestionable but not always in agreement with what the eyes could see, or with what the photographer wanted to capture or express.

In this same book, Vogel gives the example of lighting, how different ways of lighting the same subject influence the general aspect of a picture and can convey different states of mind. It is also known

that by changing lenses or the aperture of the diaphragm completely different images will be generated. Even changing the disposition of elements in the image can give, to the viewer, different interpretations on the same subject.

In order to overcome technical difficulties, such as lens aberrations, colour or contrast and to bring the image closer to what was observed by the naked eye, the photographers would also retouch their negatives. In that time pictures were retouched by hand.

In the search for a true photograph, often the purpose of retouching was not only to correct but to convey an image closer to the photographer's eye and the taste of the time.



Figure 1. Retouching desk (modern replica), private collection.

3. RETOUCHING PHOTOGRAPHY

In the first half of the 20th century, retouching negatives was done over a retouching desk (Fig. 1) with simple tools, such as a pencil or a brush. Some colorants were used to correct exposure or alter contrast, highlights or shadows. But this was not a simple task. Most important, with a well retouched negative, the resulting image should not be perceived as having been retouched.

The black and white emulsions available, although rapidly evolving, were in general less sensitive to some colours, especially to the reds, that would be registered as black.

In order to correct this technical issue, a red colorant was often used to retouch the darkened areas on the negatives. By adding red, those areas would turn lighter when converted to positives.

3.1. Portraiture

In the history of photography, portraits market developed very rapidly and since the end of the 19th century, there were photographic studios everywhere offering that specific service. Portraiture is a special kind of photography with less room for accepting the

natural differences between what the retina can apprehend and the image captured by the lens.

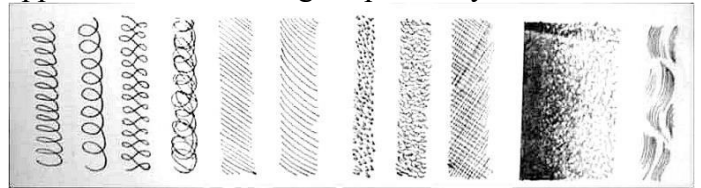


Figure 2. Examples for the practice of pencil retouching (Marin, 1966).



Figure 3. The construction of the railways (1940's - now deactivated) retouched in the sky area with red make up, Foto-Carvalho, Estremoz.

Black and white portraiture is still in use today and some photographers, such as it happened in the Foto-Carvalho Studio, resisted doing colour portraits.

Portraiture was a market-oriented business. Esthetical retouching was recurrently done and now attested by the archive's collections.

A common alteration found in glass plate negative portraits is retouching with pencil. Especially in the first half of the 20th century, pencil retouching would be done to attenuate the texture of the skin, so it would have a porcelain or velvet like appearance, something that is very characteristic of portraits of that time. After applying a varnish layer over the emulsion, the pencil would be used in random patterns (Fig. 2) so to give visual interference and attenuate or virtually erase major artefacts, such as skin wrinkles.

3.2. Other subjects

Portraits were not the only images being retouched. In landscape or documentary photography a common practice was to retouch the sky areas (Fig. 3). A red or black opaque layer would normally be applied to completely whiten those areas. Larger areas could even be covered by masks made of opaque paper. The photograph would then be printed with a white sky or through double exposure, adding a different negative for the sky area.

This technique was also used to isolate elements in a photograph, as it happens in Figure 4. A sculpture photographed inside a church was completely isolated from its background. For this purpose, red paint was applied surrounding the fine details and black opaque paper covered the remaining area.

4. STUDYING PHOTOGRAPHIC NEGATIVE COLLECTIONS

In photographic studios it was a common commercial practice to save the original negative. This way a client could return to buy more copies of the same image. Nowadays, some of the most representative collections, of awarded or well known photographers and photographic studios, are kept as negative archives in the most important National institutions, located in the major cities.

However, other collections exist, away from the major city centres, some still in private hands, that hold complementary information to the National history. Also, they hold a broader view of the visual culture of their period and especially they present greater relevance to their communities.

5. FOTO-CARVALHO

One of such collections is the negative archive of the Foto-Carvalho studio in Estremoz. Its renamed photographer was Rogério Carvalho (1915-1988).

Foto-Carvalho was the most important photographic studio of the region for several decades. It is known that it had several apprentices who would go on using their learning in other towns of Alentejo, such as Portalegre or Redondo. One of the apprentices, Olímpio Ferreira, is still alive. He started working at Foto-Carvalho at the age of 13 and would grow to be the owner with his wife after Rogério Carvalho's death. At the age of 65 he finally sold the studio and its negative archive in c.2001 to the owner of *Estudios Correia*, a studio opened in the 80' and still active to this day.

The current owners of the *Estudios Correia* regard this archive from a commercial point of view, as an added value to their business. Still today it is possible to buy prints of the Foto-Carvalho studio negatives. At the same time *Estudios Correia* owners are aware not only of the historic value of this collection but also of its symbolic importance as a way of strengthening the identity bonds within the community. They are open to research studies such as the present one and also promote viewings of selected examples by organizing themed exhibitions of its archive; with the next exhibition, happening in September 30th 2018. At this exhibition it is intended to show the portrait work of Foto-Carvalho studio from 1936 to 2001, a trade almost forgotten by the general public as, in this

digital age, anyone can capture their own portraits with a simple mobile phone.



Figure 4. "Queen Saint Isabel sculpture" Image showing paper mask and retouching for total isolation of the sculpture from its background (194?), Foto-Carvalho, Estremoz.



Figure 5. Paper sleeves with writings, numbering, print size, number of copies and retouching instructions, Foto-Carvalho, Estremoz.

5.1. Exploring the Foto-Carvalho collection

The Foto-Carvalho collection mainly includes glass plate and film negatives of studio work; the great majority consists of photographic portraits. The portraits are organized by size and number, which correspond to the order in which they were taken. Originally, each negative was enclosed in a paper pouch (sleeve).

Other kinds of photographs, taken outside the studio are numbered but not organized. Exterior images registered celebrations, such as weddings or other religious events; costume photography, for the publication of postcards; and other social events such as sports, theatre, music concerts or bull fights.

5.2. Retouching at Foto-Carvalho

Information about retouching can be found, not only by observing the negatives themselves but also by reading the notations scratched into the emulsion and written on the enclosing paper sleeves (Fig. 5).

The great majority of the portraits is typically retouched on the face and hands areas, using a pencil (Fig. 6) on the emulsion side and a red colorant on the glass side (Fig. 7).

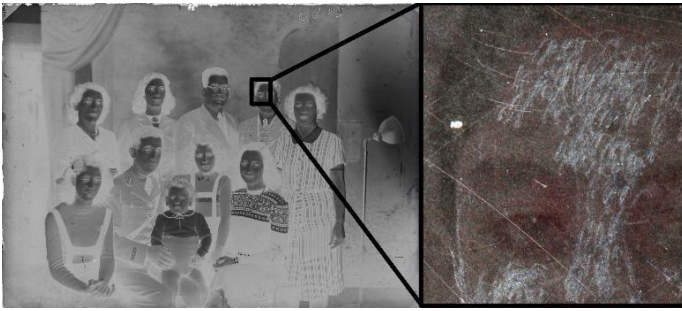


Figure 6. Retouching with pencil on the emulsion side, detail, macro-photography, Foto-Carvalho, Estremoz.

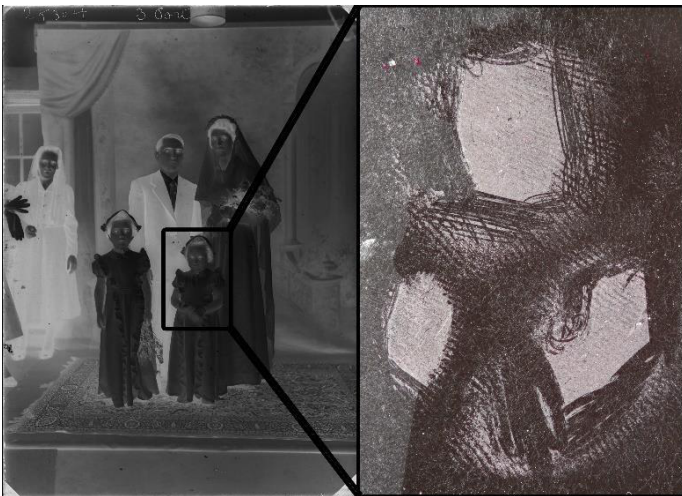


Figure 7. Retouching with red make up on the glass side, detail, macro-photography, Foto-Carvalho, Estremoz.

Varnish was applied on the emulsion side, strictly over the areas to be retouched and never on the entire surface.

5.3. Identifying retouching intentions

When realizing that, at Foto-Carvalho, retouching was a standard practice in portrait photography, this cannot be faced simply as a way to overcome technical issues. The photographer chose to retouch the negatives with the same care as he chose the lighting or pose of the pictured person. This means that retouching is part of the photographic process and should be preserved when considering the preservation of a negative and the interpretation of the final image.

Young or old, men or women, the portraits show whitened faces and softened skins that became characteristic of the Foto-Carvalho work. Also, they mirror the glamour of the star movies' portraits and other National collections of the same period.

6. CONCLUSIONS - MEMORY RECAPTURED IN A SMALL COMMUNITY

Photography should not be considered as an unbiased recording device. When searching for the truth, the

photographer makes his choices. At Foto-Carvalho this also meant retouching as a complementary technique in photography. The photographer instils his vision and his taste to the final image and his choices along the entire photographic process, including retouching, are what builds a unique image.

The information obtained from observing retouched negatives is the key to better understand the heritage significance of the Foto-Carvalho collection, as a whole.

Portrait collections such as this have few studies dedicated to them. The possibility of studying such collections is an opportunity to revisit and recapture the memories of the respective community. This is a collective memory of the visual culture of its time and contributes to the National view of an important Photographic Heritage.

This justifies the preservation of such collections and special care in the effort to preserve the retouching techniques. As they are an integrant part of the creation process, of the object, of the image and memory.

7. REFERENCES

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