

LIBRAS Continuing Education Funding Award  
Post-Event Report

Society of American Archivists (SAA) Workshop  
**Visual Literacy for Photograph Collections (VLPC)**  
09 March, 2012

The focus of this workshop was on the effective identification, preservation, and retrieval of analogue photographic media. The early part of the day concerned the technological aspects of photography, wherein the instructor, Nicolette Bromberg, shared examples with us representative of nearly every technological method of photograph production. We were shown Daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, cyanotypes, carte de visites, cabinet cards, and other more modern photographic print examples. This was a particularly useful section of the day as she was able to provide a context for identifying undated photographic reproductions by circumstantial evidence. The presence of a particular tax stamp on a carte de visite, for example, means that the image was produced between 1864 and 1865.<sup>1</sup>

The bulk of our time was spent on identifying the underlying messages communicated by photographic prints. We were presented with images with and without context and given different exercises to help sharpen our own visual literacy. Oftentimes the content of the image will provide no contextual information. We were shown several methods for understanding the images, and for reading any accompanying materials, in a manner which would lead to positive and useful descriptive practices.

One example in the session was about Civil War era portraiture. We were shown several examples of carte de visite and cabinet card portraits shot by 1860s photographers and then given some modern examples from contemporary photographers replicating such Civil War era images for comparison. The contemporary photographers often will use equipment dating from that era, as well as paper and emulsion techniques, and will employ tricks to most accurately reproduce such an image. With a solid knowledge about the limitations and conventions of the earlier era however we are better equipped to recognize such fakery. Photographers today will not have similar studios or light sources and the shadows will have a different character. Nor will contemporary photographers be using the braces to hold subjects still for the length of the exposure and this will affect the presence of certain telltale signs of an 1860s work.

Overall the session was quite informative. Though it is true that I would have benefitted from more time spent with studying the historical technological underpinnings of photographic production and reproduction, there was still much of value in the session. Now, when I am working with images at Dominican, I can think back and remember our struggles and successes while working in small groups to apply a critical eye towards the unidentified and generally mysterious images provided to us.

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<sup>1</sup> The tax was repealed in 1865 as the tax was intended to fund supplies for the Civil War.