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The Intesa Sanpaolo photographic archives

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Intesa Sanpaolo was established on 1 January 2007 from the merger of two Italian banks originally founded in the 16th century: Banca Intesa and Sanpaolo IMI. With 90,000 employees and 19 million customers, it is the leading banking group in Italy.

The institute's Historical Archive is one of the first banking archives created in Italy. Inaugurated in Milan in 1984 as the Historical Archive of the Banca Commerciale Italiana—an institution that merged with Banca Intesa in 2001—it serves to protect and promote its holdings of documentary heritage. However, the mergers that have affected the Italian banking system in the last twenty years have had significant repercussions on the work of the Historical Archive, which has shifted from supervising the Banca Commerciale Italiana's documents of historical interest to managing an entire 'system of archives'—namely those belonging to the credit institutions that have joined the new banking group.¹ This includes not only directly managed assets from Cassa di Risparmio delle Provincie Lombarde (founded in 1823), Banco Ambrosiano Veneto (1892), Banca Commerciale Italiana (1894) and Istituto Mobiliare Italiano-IMI (1931),² but also numerous archives scattered throughout Italy (to date there are 17 conservation bodies) which the Historical Archive oversees. A dedicated site registers and provides an overview of over 320 banks that have merged

with Intesa Sanpaolo over the course of a process of incorporations, mergers and acquisitions of bank shareholdings dating back to 1808.³

Featuring 12 kilometres of documentation, the photographic collection is notable for its size, historical time span, number of named photographers and range of subjects. It comprises over 300,000 images, dating from the mid-19th century to the present day, and provides examples of diverse photographic techniques (from ambrotype to digital photography) taken in almost every continent by more than 1,500 different photographers, both professionals and amateurs. Subjects include major events linked to the history of banking institutions, large offices in Italy and abroad, branches in remote locations, portraits of notable figures, personnel portrayed in the workplace or at ease, environmental disasters, artwork reproductions, and advertising images. Such an extensive photographic collection is bound to include images of varied quality. This is not only due to the photographer's professionalism and skill but hinges on the purpose of the shoot and the nature of the client's commission.

The collection is evolving because acquisitions made by the Historical Archive as a result of its surveys of offices, branches and archival repositories are ongoing. There are also the photographic collections from the various banking institutions incorporated into Intesa Sanpaolo.

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1. The Montecarlo Casino in an album from the late 19th century Banca Commerciale Italiana working men's club. Photo by Jean Giletta, Nice.
© Archivio Storico Intesa Sanpaolo



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2. Portrait of friends from the Bazzi Galli family archive, Corleone, 30 May 1864. Unknown photographer. © Archivio Storico Intesa Sanpaolo



3. David Rockefeller on a Lambretta during a visit to the Innocenti factory, Milan, 1957. Photo by Publifoto, Milan. © Archivio Storico Intesa Sanpaolo



4. The Buthier Electric Consortium building site for the construction of a dam in the Valle d'Aosta, Italy, 1962. Photo by Aldo Moisis, Turin.

5. Villaricca branch of the Banco Paraguayo de Comercio Sudameris S.A., Paraguay, post 1967. Unknown photographer. © Archivio Storico Intesa Sanpaolo



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6. Milan, Piazza della Scala on the evening of the inauguration of the Teatro alla Scala opera season, 7 December 1959. Photo by Publifoto, Milan.
© Archivio Storico Intesa Sanpaolo



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7. The director Federico Fellini with actors Anita Ekberg and Marcello Mastroianni at the premiere of the film *La dolce vita* in Milan, February 5, 1960.
Photo by Publifoto, Milan. © Archivio Publifoto Intesa Sanpaolo

The method that the Historical Archive applies to the heritage under its protection is rigorous: it aims to facilitate use and promote the reputation of the collection, and to prompt individuals linked to the history of the banks amalgamated with the group to donate their family archives. This initiative has been a success: yielding unexpected or exceptional photos, which at times have provided missing pieces to historical puzzles, as well as contributing to the history of photography in general.⁴

How did we come to have curatorial control of this collection, and what has it yielded? The first step towards initiating the internal management of the collection took place in 2008 with a survey of the entire photographic patrimony. Adopting the model introduced by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, in collaboration with the Weissman Preservation Center of Harvard University Library,⁵ an assessment was made of the size, content and conservation status of each collection, as well as its potential uses. In this way, it was possible to establish priorities and plan work for the coming years that would respond to conservation and promotional urgencies, as well as the bank's initiatives to communicate the documentary heritage of the group and develop other innovations, such as websites, new online archival files,⁶ educational materials, publications and exhibitions.⁷

This systematic approach enables us to respond to requests from the bank, and demonstrate that archival photography can make an active contribution to developing an awareness of business culture, whether it be within the banking institution, or beyond. To date, the Historical Archive has been asked to assist in a number of initiatives, ranging from internal communication to commercial agreements or even sponsorships.

The archive's fundamental activities of heritage conservation are supported by the use of new technologies and periodic online publications. These currently feature 50,000 registered photographs. They have broadened awareness of the photographic collection, particularly in the academic community, but also among the interested

public, not to mention other archives and public or private entities operating in the field of photography and culture. In 2016, the Historical Archive was asked to join the Network for the Promotion of Photography,⁸ an association of organisations, linked to the world of photography. These initiatives have made the bank recognize the value of historical photography, and have prompted it to think about purchasing photographic archives as one of its economic investments. Although investments in the art market have been well-established for over a century in Italy, investment in photographic archives is comparatively new: in a

country where state resources are scarce, banking institutions can play an important role in safeguarding a valuable cultural asset for the whole community.⁹ Such was the case with Intesa Sanpaolo's 2015 purchase of the Publifoto photojournalist agency archive (1937–1997), a patrimony of approximately seven million

analogue photographs covering news, politics, customs, society, culture, sport, landscape and architecture, taken in Italy and abroad by the agency's own photographers, or by other professionals or Italian and foreign agencies for whom Publifoto acted as distributor. Since the end of 2017 the archive has been managed by the Intesa Sanpaolo Historical Archive.

The dual role of managing the photographic collections of the banks that merged with the group, together with the broader photographic archive disconnected from the bank, has necessitated profound internal reflection. Our work has involved striking a balance between heritage

management of an archive of this size, and meeting the bank's needs for an immediate return on investment through large-scale promotional initiatives. An example are the public and private partnerships. In 2019 Camera-Centro Italiano per la Fotografia in Turin¹⁰ partnered the first photographic exhibition dedicated to the Publifoto Archive.

Teaching workshops were launched, sponsorship of the international visual narrative festival Cortona on The Move¹¹ involved the creation of an exhibition of photos taken from the Publifoto as well

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8 & 9. Inside the Intesa Sanpaolo Publifoto Archive, Milan, 2019. Photo by Pino Musi. © Pino Musi and the Archivio Storico Intesa Sanpaolo

as the bank archives and an exhibition on Italian music,¹² *NOI. Non erano solo canzonette*, drew from both archives. Furthermore, the Historical Archive reached an agreement with La Venaria Reale Conservation and Restoration Centre in Turin¹³ for the restoration and digitization of photographic plates from the Publifoto Archive and photographic prints from the IMI patrimony. The bank's own photo collections were included and benefitted from their diffusion and visibility among the general public.

Inventorying and archival study, identifying conservation priorities and conducting restoration work, cataloguing and digitization, should remain the primary activities for sustaining the continuous long-term promotion of the Publifoto Archive.¹⁴ However, the bank receives numerous internal and external requests for the use of its photographs and short response times have led us to question the 'traditional' approach to our work. We need to seek innovative solutions that will produce satisfactory, high quality results that optimize time, budget and professionalism in the field.

To this end, we are developing a new, in-house process that will encompass conservation, restoration, digitization and long-term preservation, thereby streamlining management procedures and the risks and cost associated with the transfer of photographs. This project aims to the most advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence, to relieve archivists of activities that can be automated and currently under-exploit their professionalism.¹⁵ Specialized staff will therefore become a fully-employed resource due to their training, professionalism, and the scientific contribution they can offer.

Author's profile

Serena Berno earned a Masters in Archival Studies from the University of Milan while working as a photographer's assistant. She subsequently specialized in the preservation and management of photographic archives at CFP Bauer, a professional training institute in Milan. She is currently the curator of the photographic collections of the Intesa Sanpaolo Group Historical Archives and Publifoto Archive, and she is the Editor of the Photographic Notebooks series and the online catalogues of the photo collections.

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- 1 The organisational structure of the Art, Culture and Historical Heritage Department, which includes the Historical Archive, specifies that the responsibilities of the Historical Archive include the management and protection of all the documentation (including digital) under permanent conservation, whether it originates from the central sections of Banca Intesa Sanpaolo or from the group's other banks.
- 2 Mignone, A. and Pino, F. (2016), *Memorie di Valore. Guida ai patrimoni dell'Archivio storico di Intesa Sanpaolo*. Milan: Hoepli. See The Historical Heritage of the Istituto Mobiliare Italiano (Milan: Intesa Sanpaolo, Monografie, n. 14, 2019) downloadable at <https://progettocultura.intesasnpaolo.com/archivio-storico/pubblicazioni/monografie/the-historical-heritage-of-the-istituto-mobiliare-italiano/>
- 3 Intesa Sanpaolo is the product of the amalgamation of over 300 institutions—savings banks, pawnbrokers, rural banks, co-operative banks, ordinary credit companies, Catholic banks, public law entities and banks of national interest—which have joined the group over the centuries. To provide information on the history and heritage of pre-existing banking documentation, the Intesa Sanpaolo Historical Archive has created the 'Historical Map' project, a 'genealogical' guide to the group, available at <https://mappastorica.intesasnpaolo.com>
- 4 One such example are the photos from the Bazzi and Galli Archives, explored in two monographs by Laura Casone and downloadable at <https://progettocultura.intesasnpaolo.com/archivio-storico/pubblicazioni/monografie/L'album-fotografico-di-Luigi-Canzi-Ritratti-tra-famiglia-e-storica-1855-1918>, published in 2016, and *Fotografie della Prima guerra mondiale dall'Archivio di Giulio Bazzi* (2019). It has also just been released the third volume of the series of photographic notebooks (available in English): Berno S. and Cassanelli R. (2020), *Photographs from the Ottoman Empire. Bernardino Nogara and mines in the "Near East" (1900-1915)*, Milan: Edizioni Gallerie d'Italia - Skira. <https://progettocultura.intesasnpaolo.com/archivio-storico/pubblicazioni/quaderni-fotografici/>
- 5 Regarding the project promoted by Harvard University Library, see the 2012 Preservation White Paper entitled *A Methodology for Surveying Photograph Collections*, written by Melissa Banta with Paul Messier, Andrew Robb, Brenda Bernier and Robert Burton, available at <https://preservation.library.harvard.edu/white-paper-methodology-surveying-photograph-collections>
- 6 <https://asisp.intesasnpaolo.com>
- 7 <https://progettocultura.intesasnpaolo.com/archivio-storico/pubblicazioni/>
- 8 <http://www.retetografia.it/>. Founded in 2011 by a group of organisations and institutions engaged in the common goal of promoting and disseminating photographic culture, the network organizes conferences, internal training and opportunities for disseminating the photographic heritage of its members' archives on an annual basis. This includes the Week of Open Archives, an annual event held at the end of October that offers special openings and guided visits of its members' important photographic collections, held by their respective curators.
- 9 The bank has in fact recently designed a photographic museum in Turin, in which the Publifoto Archive will play a leading role.
- 10 <http://camera.to/>
- 11 <https://www.cortonaonthemove.com/>
- 12 <http://www.mostranoi.it/>
- 13 <https://www.centrorestaurovenaria.it/>
- 14 In addition to the activities listed, others include: teaching at the Historical Archive; producing publications, such as articles and exhibition catalogues; and communicating via social media and the Historical Archive website: <https://asisp.intesasnpaolo.com/publifoto/>. An exhibition on the bombing of Milan during the Second World War was hosted by the Gallerie d'Italia in Milan in October and November 2020.
- 15 For example, the elimination of activities such as the manual transcription of information from the original agency registers or from the backs of prints (a fundamental source for locating and interpreting the photographs).