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# Photo collection of NN Group

About managing and the gems...

Ingrid Elferink

This article consists of two parts, the first part is about the photo collection itself, its origin, management and use, and the second part is about the photography of people present in the collection, the gems.

## The photo collection of NN Group

Financial services company NN Group N.V.'s history department, formed in 1992, is responsible for NN's historical collection. Over the years, employees have contributed documents, objects and photos intended for a company museum. First the records department looked after this collection. The employees were not professional archivists, but thanks to them we now have a great collection. The photographic collection was used for anniversaries, publications and exhibitions, but its management was not a priority. Everything was kept in the same way: in boxes. Consequently the photographs were not properly conserved. When a professional photo registrar was hired, the photographs received the attention they deserved and the beauty of the collection was realized.

The photo collection consists of thousands of photos, negatives, photographic slides and photo albums. Taken by amateur and professional photographers, the

photographs feature people of note, events, buildings and company rituals. They reflect the company's culture and give us an insight into a changing office life across the centuries. From the 1890s, prominent Dutch photographers such as Jaap d'Oliveira, Philip Mechanicus and Pieter Molkenboer were commissioned to document the offices (Photograph 1). We hold the collections of predecessors of NN, such as De Nederlanden van 1845, Rotterdamse Verzekerings

Sociëteit (RVS), Nationale Levensverzekering-Bank, Delta Lloyd and others. Many of these companies had activities abroad, and therefore we also have pictures of life outside the Netherlands.

The photo collection in numbers: 10,000 photos, 40,000 negatives, 1,000 slides and 225 photo albums. The whole historical collection is catalogued in The Museum System (TMS), a database used by many international museums. More than 7,500 photographs are accessible in TMS. Every photographic object is digitized by the registrar, or by a digitization company. In 2019 more than 60 photo albums were digitized and then packed in custom-made, acid-free boxes.

The more accessible the collection becomes, the more it is used. In 2019, for example, the restaurant in the Amsterdam office was decorated with photos of staff

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1. Lunchbreak at head office in The Hague, 1971. Color slide. Photo: Philip Mechanicus (Amsterdam). TMS 8393/HA NN Group



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2. Entrance at NN Group Office Amsterdam, 2019. Digital photo. Photo: Peter Tjihuis (Amsterdam). HA NN Group  
3. Agent in France, 1890. Albumen print. Photo: J. Fabre (Marseille). TMS 11795/HA NN Group  
4. F.A.J. Ross, carrier of RVS in photo album, 1867. Albumen print. TMS 5394-11/HA NN Group

members from the 1970s. For the entrance of the same building, we created a mosaic using 450 passport photographs of employees in the 1940s (Photograph 2).

To strengthen internal ties within the company and develop their interest in the organisation and its identity, we tell our colleagues stories illustrated with images from the photo collection. Presentations are given where many photos are shown.

You can read about NN's history and collection on the NN Group website. On the Nationale-Nederlanden Instagram account ([nn\\_nederland](#)) it is Throwback Thursday (#TBT) every Thursday, with a post of a historical photo in line with a current event. And even though the collection cannot be consulted online, people know where to find us. For example, a large number of photos from the collection has been on display at the exhibition 'Rotterdam works' in the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam from 18 September 2020 until 17 January 2021.

In 2020, the depot moved from Ede to Arnhem, where the historical collection was re-housed in a well-conditioned place, with a special area for the photo collection. In 2020, Nationale-Nederlanden celebrated the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of our predecessors, De Nederlanden van 1845, which was established as a fire insurance company. Unfortunately, many activities were cancelled due to the coronavirus, but a special online magazine was made for all the staff members, in which many photos were used.

This shows that the photo collection not only matters but is in full swing.

### The employees in the picture

In NN's 175 years, the people who worked in the company have been frequently captured on camera creating a photographic heritage that is very valuable. 175 years of working, company outings, farewell parties and being together! Something that seems quite distant in the midst of the coronavirus. This makes the photos of the former NN employees in the office twice as important.

### Portraits

Portraits of board members feature prominently in the collections; in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century these were painted on canvas but from 1850 photographic portraits came into play. Employees were less frequently captured, although they are present in the collection. In addition to the many official portraits of board members and supervisory

directors, photos were used as an administrative tool. For example, the insurance agents working outside of the Netherlands were often appointed by correspondence. To introduce themselves they sent their *carte de visite* to the head office in the Netherlands. We have portraits of French, German, Swedish and other gentlemen who ran agencies for the company (Photograph 3).

In a special photo album from 1867, a wedding gift from staff to the director of the RVS, we find 28 portrait photos of all staff members. This is unusual, because in 1867 making a *carte de visite* could cost almost a week's wages! The portraits give a good impression of the office clerk and insurance carrier in 1867 (Photograph 4).

A later photo album of the Hollandsche Societeit provides an insight into its employees in the 1960s. This so-called *smoelenboek's* (yearbook) administrative goal was to document all employees, and the alphabetical name register is full of deletions and additions. In total, the album has nearly 700 photos that were taken in-house. Based on this album, we can estimate that women made up about 20% of employees in the Hollandsche Societeit in those days (Photographs 5 and 6).

### Department photos

Another special photo album was made in 1894 as a gift from staff to founder and director Christiaan Henny on his retirement from De Nederlanden van 1845 after almost 50 years of service. This richly decorated leather album with gilt edging contains portraits of all employees, with their name and the year in which they started, and seven photos of the office in Zutphen. These office photos were taken by the local photographer and show the boardroom of son and successor Carel Henny and the employees in the Reinsurance, Accounting, Foreign affairs and Policies departments. Thanks to one of the employees, Dijkerman, who annotated the album 50 years later in 1945, we know a lot about the men in the pictures. Dijkerman started at the insurance company in 1891, aged only 15 he was then the youngest employee. He annotated each photo, describing not only the name and position of his former colleagues, but also interesting and sometimes quite personal background information! Some of his former colleagues were not always nice, others drank (and not only at home), still others chewed tobacco wads—a practice which was not universally appreciated. In short,

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- 5. Page from photo album staff members, ca. 1960. Gelatin silver print. TMS 13818-0014/HA NN Group
- 6. Cutout from photo album staff members, ca. 1960. Gelatin silver print. TMS 13818-0014/HA NN Group
- 7. J.C. Dijkerman in photo album, 1894. Daylight collodion silver print. TMS 5319-28/HA NN Group
- 8. Policy Department in photo album, 1894. Daylight collodion silver print. Photo: J.C. Reesinck (Zutphen). TMS 5319-35/HA NN Group



9. Office of RVS in Rotterdam, 1931. Daylight gelatin silver print. TMS 6105-13/HA NN Group

10. Telephone operators of RVS in Rotterdam, 1931. Daylight gelatin silver print. TMS 6105-25/HA NN Group

11. Punch room with Hollerith machines, 1966. Negative. Photo: Gerrit Schilp (Den Haag). TMS 8004/HA NN Group

12. Employees leaving the office in Rotterdam, 1966. Negative. Photo: Gerrit Schilp (Den Haag). TMS 8016/HA NN Group



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- 13. Staff of Nationale Levensverzekering-Bank, 1903. Gelatin silver print. TMS 7727/HA NN Group
- 14. Directors and staff of Hollandsche Societeit, 1907. Gelatin silver print. TMS 13723/HA NN Group
- 15. Onboarding in 1958. Gelatin silver print. Photo: A.S. van den Hoek (Voorburg). TMS 7253/HA NN Group
- 16. Onboarding in 1976. Gelatin silver print. Photo: Fotobureau Thuring (Den Haag). TMS 8846/ HA NN Group
- 17. Onboarding in 1987. Gelatin silver print. Photo: Fotobureau Thuring (Den Haag). TMS 10109/ HA NN Group



his notes provide a source of information about office life at the turn of the century that we could never learn from the photos alone (Photographs 7 and 8).

Sometimes we have no information about a photo or even an entire photo album. Nevertheless, due to the curators' expertise, something can often be tracked down. In one untitled album of office photos, we can identify that the photos are of the head office of the RVS in Rotterdam, and we also know the name of the director. On the calendars on the walls we can see the dates 14 and 15 May 1931. Therefore we know that the photographer visited over two days to capture the company's interior on camera. In 28 pictures, the album shows the doorman, the director, the conference room, the canteen, the warehouse, the telephone operators, and other offices.

But who the photographer was, and why this beautiful album was created, is still unknown (Photographs 9 and 10).

Spanning more than 150 years, the photo collection captures moments in time, creating a record of changes to the furnishing of the offices and the clothing of the people. Over the years, photographers have taken different approaches to looking through the lens. Photographer Gerrit Schilp took an innovative approach to corporate photography. In 1966 he was commissioned to make a photo series for the staff magazine of the Nationale Levensverzekering-Bank. The occasion was the opening of the refurbished head office in Rotterdam. In 38 negatives we see dream-like images of the modern office taken from an unusual angle. Employees are depicted at work, in motion and blurred, and sometimes we see only a fragment of a leg (Photographs 11 and 12).

### Group portraits

The collection contains many group portraits, many of which feature the entire staff. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the companies were still small enough to record all staff on a single photographic plate. It is interesting to see how the photographers chose the location and composition. For example, at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nationale in 1903, the entire staff was portrayed in a very traditional way, with people sitting and standing in line. What is special about this portrait is that there are no directors in it, and we can see one woman, a Miss Huizer. In another group portrait, from 1907, we see a completely different group of people. Here, the Hollandsche Societeit

celebrates their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary and we see the entire staff, with directors, agents and employees in the meeting room of the head office. The photo is staged, with the employees arranged around a table that they probably never sat at (Photographs 13 and 14).

New employees were captured in the so-called introduction photos. Beginning in 1958, onboarding days were organized for new employees at De Nederlanden van 1845. A day in which the newcomers were introduced to

the company and the office building was also common at other NN predecessors. At the end of the day, a photo was taken and published in the staff magazine with the title 'Welcome to us' or 'Newbies'. The photo showed the newcomers, along with their names and the department they were to work for. Photographers were hired, and later the in-house photo service was used. What makes these photos so interesting is the changing fashion styles; from the standard attire of a suit and tie to T-shirt and jeans, the skirts get shorter, men's hair goes from short to long, and women's hair from long to short, and in the 1980s everyone has a perm. The insurance employees followed the latest fashions. In the photo collection more than 700 original prints have been preserved, from 1958–1997. Current employees still regularly use these photos. The staff magazine is online and for a farewell or anniversary there are still colleagues to be found in the introduction photos (Photographs 15–17).

In this way, the historical photo collection captures the people of our history.

All photographs: @ NN Group

### Author's profile

Ingrid Elferink is responsible for the history and the historical collection of NN Group. She started as head of the History Department at ING in 1993. She is an archivist and has recently completed a number of masterclasses in photographic processes.

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<https://www.nn-group.com/our-company/our-history/historical-collection.htm>

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