

Visual Archives

Valérie Gorin

Since the 1860s–1870s, drawings, paintings, posters, daguerreotypes, postcards, stamps, pictures, films but also leaflets and periodicals are preserved by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)¹ or the International Federation of the Red Crescent (IFRC),² and also by the United Nations where each agency has its own visual archives (such as the United Nations Refugee Agency or the World Health Organization). Exploration of visual archives can enrich or fill gaps, as well as open new lines of enquiry over the imperialist and colonialist ideologies of the late nineteenth century, or the settings of multilateral diplomacy in the interwar period of North-South relations after 1945. For example, a historical investigation over the poster archives of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum—the largest humanitarian collection in the world—has questioned the visual politics and the reappropriation of humanitarian principles throughout the Red Cross movement since the First World War (Gorin 2019).

Most of the time, visual artifacts are preserved in separate archival units, collections, or buildings, even in the same organization, depending on the visual or textual nature of the source.³ The constellation of archival sites thus represents multiple challenges for the researcher. It is greatly advised to contact the archivist in charge of the visual archives in the organization (see chapter 8—*Archives*). Some archives are digitized online for free, but they

1. The ICRC audiovisual archives. <https://avarchives.icrc.org/> (accessed October 2, 2020).

2. The IFRC historic film collection is on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCd2bE77hqagP0uP2JxfSTdA> (accessed October 2, 2020).

3. For example, see the distinction made in the WHO archives: https://www.who.int/archives/fonds_collections/partners/en/ (accessed October 2, 2020).

do not include all visual artifacts (e.g., memorabilia). An on-site visit to the archives is necessary for researchers interested in two aspects: first, a focus on the materiality of visual objects, such as the technique or the constraints related to viewing devices, will allow researchers to understand the immersive experience of spectators from previous decades; second, the consultation of written material accompanying images is mandatory (e.g., reports, personal correspondence, field notes) to have contextual information about the production/dissemination process (see chapter 9—*Visual Methods*). Visual archives preserved in the same location offer homogeneous corpuses that give meaningful inputs about the use and reuse of an image, sometimes for multiple purposes and through different visual formats. It is therefore useful to explore the political and cultural specificities of images and their variations through space and time. However, it is not always possible to trace the history of their creation. Many images before 1945 are preserved without any captions, nor location, date, or name of the image-maker. Finally, accessibility is also an issue: images of the early twentieth century are accessible because they fall into public domain. However, there might be a limitation period of approximately twenty to forty years on contemporary images for confidentiality reasons.

References

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