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Liminal Materialities in Context

Non-Photographic Objects

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Editorial
The Places and Meanings of Non-Photographic Objects: Exploring the Boundaries of Photographic History

fig. 1
Alphonse-Louis Poitevin, [View of a House and Garden], about 1848, daguerreotype, copper electroplated, 5.9 × 8.4 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 84.XP.906.2.

fig. 2
Alphonse-Louis Poitevin, [View of a House and Garden], about 1848, photolithograph [Poitevin Process], paper print from an electroplated daguerreotype, 6.2 × 8.9 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 84.XP.906.1.

Non-photographic objects can be found in most institutional and vernacular contexts associated with photographic history. Yet, they are rarely studied in their own right and are frequently omitted from canonical historiography and archival description because they resist a neat classification of what may be strictly considered photographic and what may not. Examples include photomechanical prints and printing plates [figs. 1 & 2], chemicals and raw materials used in photographic chemistry (such as metals, rocks, and minerals) [figs. 3a & b], photographic supports without images, failed or damaged objects, furniture [fig. 4], photographic instruments, notebooks and written documentation, negative boxes, and various kinds of ephemera used to make or store photographs. These objects play a crucial role in photographic practices. They are instrumental in tracing how photographic materials were sourced and commercialised, how individuals acquired practical and technical skills, experimented with processes, and how photographs and photographic knowledge were made, organised, and circulated.

This issue of *PhotoResearcher* tackles these elusive objects, placing them at the centre of the discussion. We have provocatively named them non-photographic even though we strongly believe in their photographic qualities. In fact, determining if something is photographic or non-photographic is anything but straightforward. Are the criteria informing a photographic object linked to the presence of a photographic image, its function in photographic practices, or its connection to a photographer? The term non-photographic is here intended as a provocation rather than a denial of the objects' nature. We could argue that determining if something is photographic or non-photographic is actually arbitrary. Such an attempt reveals more about the institutional and disciplinary frameworks that sustain such distinctions than about the nature of the object in itself and its epistemological potential for photographic history and the many disciplines it intersects with. It is right in the negotiation of these objects' meanings and places within photographic history that the true matter lies. We propose understanding non-photographic objects as forms of photographic liminality, as many of the materials addressed in this issue challenge conventional definitions of the photographic. Our aim is to prompt a collective interrogation of the very notion of the photographic, pointing, on the one hand, to its limits, and, on the other, to the benefits of exploring a photographic history of non-photographic objects.

Besides occupying a marginal position in historiography, non-photographic objects have also often fallen outside the descriptive and organisational practices through which photographic materials are catalogued and made accessible. Consequently, they pose a peculiar challenge within photographic archives and collections. Archival practices have in fact largely developed around the photographic ob-







figs. 3a & b
Display views of the exhibition *A New Power: Photography in Britain 1800–1850* (1 February–7 May 2023, Weston Library, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford) curated by Geoffrey Batchen. Among the objects exhibited a native silver in limestone specimen and an oval tea tray by Josiah Wedgwood & Sons. Figure 3b (above) is by Ian Wallman, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford; Figure 3a (below) is by Francesca Strobino.

fig. 4
Part of the cabinet housing the lantern slide collection depicting works of art and architecture, established in the 1920s, and now preserved at the Department of Arts and Performing Arts, University of Florence. Photograph by Marta Binazzi.

ject itself, making it difficult to account for the many heterogeneous materials that may be essential to understanding their production, circulation, and use. As a result, such objects may remain insufficiently described, physically separated from photographic materials, or relegated to distinct categories within the archive. Their marginality is thus not merely theoretical and historiographical, but also produced and reinforced by how photographic collections are organised and described.

Yet these boundaries are neither fixed nor neutral. Within archives and institutional collections, objects are constantly reinterpreted through an ongoing process of negotiation and through changing hierarchies of value regarding their position and role within the archive, the art market, and historiography. An object, or a set of practices, may be considered photographic enough to belong to the main collection at one moment, only to be relegated to its margins at another, and vice versa. A notable example is William Henry Fox Talbot's photomechanical work, long considered non-photographic enough and physically separated from the rest of his photochemical oeuvre in archives and online databases, and, in more recent years, revalued as central to photographic history [figs. 5 & 6].[1] Yet, despite intersecting with photographic practices on multiple levels, photomechanical materials still occupy a marginal position in the archive and in history. Many non-photographic objects inhabit precisely this liminal space, remaining materially and historically connected to photographic practices while being separated from them by the categories through which archives make their collections intelligible.

The boundaries of the photographic archive – and more at large of photographic history – are therefore not merely classificatory limits, but transformative spaces in which the relationships between photographic objects, their material contexts, and the practices that render them visible or invisible are continuously negotiated.

And, as Elizabeth Edwards reminds us, it is important to '[...] look at agitation at the boundaries – because boundaries are transformative spaces where both dangerous and productive things can happen.'[2] As the case studies discussed in this issue show, objects such as museum facsimiles, doodled daguerreotypes, rare earths and diamonds, astronomical lenses, banknote forgeries, portrait backdrops, press review scrapbooks, and archival preservation tools problematise what is conventionally considered photographic or non-photographic. Rather than offering definitive answers, this issue seeks to open up a field of inquiry that addresses the liminal status of many photography-adjacent objects and to raise a series of questions: What are the criteria informing the photographic, and how do these affect institutional settings? How do non-photographic objects permeate photographic history and change its narrative? Why should non-photographic objects matter to photo historians?

The articles collected initiate a discussion about how and why certain objects come to be valued as photographic while others remain outside that category, and what this may reveal about our own gaze and the opaque (yet very present) hierarchies within photographic history. Rather than reinforcing a binary opposition between the photographic and the non-photographic, we propose the notion of photographic liminality as a way of attending to objects, practices, and materials that inhabit the thresholds of photography. Doing so requires examining how photographic history

1 ___ Among the many online resources for the study of Talbot's work, *The Talbot Catalogue Raisonné* curated by Talbot scholar Larry Schaaf occupies a place of particular relevance. However, the Catalogue groups only Talbot's photochemical work and excludes the photomechanical one. To access the database: <https://talbot.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/> (22.09.2026). The distinction between Talbot's photochemical and photomechanical work is also reinforced in archives, such as the National Science and Media Museum Talbot's collection – the largest collection of Talbot's work, where the photomechanical material is separated from the rest of his work. See Francesca Strobino's article 'Experimental Metallic Surfaces and Absent Images: On the Materiality of William Henry Fox Talbot's Photomechanical Practice', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte,* vol. 88, no. 3, special issue Archival Absences: Towards an Incomplete History of Photography, guest editors Elizabeth Otto and Steffen Siegel, 2025, 310–327, and forthcoming monograph with Leuven University Press (2027).

2 ___ Elizabeth Edwards, 'Thoughts on the "Non-Collections" of the Archival Ecosystem', in: Julia Bärnighausen, Costanza Caraffa, Stefanie Klamm, Franka Schneider, and Petra Wodtke (eds.), *Photo-Objects: On the Materiality of Photographs and Photo Archives,* Berlin 2019, 70, <https://www.mprl-series.mpg.de/studies/12/toc.html> (22.09.2026).





figs. 5 & 6
Figure 5 and 6 show how a photogenic drawing negative and a photoglyphic engraving can be understood as part of the same research. William Henry Fox Talbot, *Buckler Fern,* 1839, photogenic drawing negative, 22.1 × 17.8 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 84.XZ.574.107.

has constructed its own objects of study, and how non-photographic materials have been positioned within – or excluded from – these frameworks.

Expanding Photographic History: Towards Non-Photographic and Liminal Objects

Photographic history has largely been populated by images, appreciated for their aesthetics and the skills, both technical and artistic, of their authors. Objects have entered this history in diverse ways and, in recent decades, they have reached a more prominent position within the field thanks to the material turn.[3] While this approach has successfully shifted the focus from the visual content of photographs to their materiality, much of this scholarship has remained centred on objects, such as photographic apparatus and materials, that are carriers of photographic images or directly used to make photographs. Two main factors account for the marginalisation of non-photographic objects. In the past, the materiality of photographs was often regarded as a mere consequence of the production process – a support required to render the image visible. Early scholarship, in particular, privileged a narrative of the steady and straightforward development of photographic processes and technologies, in which objects served a clearly defined role in the production of images.[4] Consequently, the focus has remained mostly oriented toward the description and classification of photographic processes and apparatuses. This has resulted in a substantial body of manuals on cameras, photographic processes, and equipment, which are highly useful for

3 ___ Among the many studies see: Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (eds.), *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images,* London 2004, and Bärnighausen et al. 2019 (reference 2).

4 ___ Early historians of photography such as Josef Maria Eder and Robert Hunt structured their manuals around technological development: Josef Maria Eder, *Die Lichtpausverfahren* from *Ausfuhrliches Handbuch der Photographie,* Halle 1899, and Robert Hunt, *A Manual of Photography,* London 1853. This approach has been influential in the twentieth century, leading to many publications focusing on the technological development of the medium. Among the many publications see for instance: Brian Coe and Mark Haworth-Booth, *A Guide to Early Photographic Processes,* London 1983, and Luis Nadeau, *Encyclopedia of Printing, Photographic and Photomechanical Processes,* New Brunswick 1989.

understanding technical aspects. However, these studies often remain relatively detached from the broader cultural and historical contexts of photography, and are not fully integrated into a broader cultural history of photographic practices.

Also, until the late 1990s and early 2000s, a dominant tendency in the history of photography was to privilege the artistic and visual qualities of the photographic image, reflecting a connection between artistic outcomes, authorship, and the biographical narratives surrounding photographers. This approach had a deep impact not only on the art world and market, but also on scholarship. Consequently, much attention was paid to the authorship of the photographer, the visual content of photographs, and the notions of 'final' and 'original' objects – typically understood as 'successful' photochemical objects, both positives and negatives.[5] This approach established a hierarchical framework privileging uniqueness and originality rooted in traditional art history, thus centring attention on unique prints and prominent figures (often men).[6] These perspectives informed not only historical narratives but also the ways in which archives and collections have been shaped and organised, with considerable consequences on the visibility of non-photographic objects.

Within this framework, photo-historical discourse has undergone a significant shift over the last two decades. Several studies, exhibitions, conferences, and publications have encouraged us to look beyond the image itself and to unpack the broader constellation of objects and practices that constitute photographic history. A number of studies have redirected attention beyond the analysis of visual content, examining the production of photographs,[7] the economic conditions of production and circulation,[8] the infrastructures that sustain photographic activity, the materials, tools, and workflows involved in image-making,[9] and objects and processes marginalised by previous histories, such as photomechanical processes[10] and photographic failures.[11]

Taken together, this growing body of research constitutes an important scholarly trajectory within photographic studies that ramifies towards other disciplines such as the history of science, technology, business, industry, etc. This issue positions itself within the material and culture tradition and continues a line of inquiry that has been present in this journal.[12] Our contribution seeks to extend the material approach further by bringing into sharper focus the material, cultural, and historiographical implications of attending to non-photographic objects and by pushing this methodological and conceptual shift a step further. It is, however, important to note a limit of the present issue, which does not engage with AI photography. While we recognise the material dimension of these practices and their very visible impact on the environment, in this issue we have decided to focus on more 'traditional' objects,

5 ___ This approach was pioneered by Helmut Gernsheim and Alison Gernsheim, *The History of Photography,* London 1969; Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day,* New York 1964.

6 ___ See: Elizabeth Edwards, Costanza Caraffa and Ruth Quinn, 'In Conversation: Photographic Curatorship and Photographic Cultures in Museums and Research Institutions', *Science Museum Group Journal*, no. 24, 2024, <https://dx.doi.org/10.15180/242208> (22.09.2026); Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photography's Default History Is Told as Art – It Shouldn't Be', *The Conversation,* 2015, <http://theconversation.com/photographys-default-history-is-told-as-art-it-shouldnt-be-37734> (22.09.2026).

7 ___ Marie-Ève Bouillon and Laureline Meizel, 'Introduction. Derrière l'image: pour une histoire sociale et culturelle des productrices et producteurs de photographies', *Photographica,* no. 4, 2022, 11–20; Marta Binazzi, 'The Legal History of an Alinari Postcard: Photomechanical Reproduction and the Illustrated Postcard Industry at the turn of the Twentieth Century,' *Photography and Culture,* vol. 18, no. 2, 2025, 235–239, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17514517.2025.2465004> (22.09.2026); Marta Binazzi, 'Unauthorized Reproductions. The Production Networks of Photographic and Photomechanical Art Reproductions around 1900,' in Balbi, Buddeus, Mašterová, Parkmann (eds.), Photomechanical Reproduction: The Unseen Medium of Art History, Amsterdam University Press, 2027 [forthcoming]

8 ___ Estelle Blaschke, *Banking on Images: The Bettmann Archive and Corbis,* Leipzig 2016; Steve Edwards, 'Why Pictures? From Art History to Business History and Back Again', *History of Photography,* vol. 44, no. 1, 2020, 3–15 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2020.1827832> (22.09.2026).

9 ___ Petra Trnková, 'Electrifying Daguerreotypes: On Correlations between Electricity and Photography Around 1840', *History of Photography,* vol. 45, no. 2, 2021, 111–127, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2022.2062907> (22.09.2026); Kelley Wilder, 'Photographs as Bureaucracy in the Business of Photography', in: Costanza Caraffa (ed.), *On Alinari: Archive in Transition,* Milan 2021, 116–127; Omar Nasim, *Observing by Hand: Sketching the Nebulae in the Nineteenth Century,* Chicago 2014.

10 ___ Strobino 2025 (reference 1); Geoffrey Belknap, *From a Photograph: Authenticity, Science and the Periodical Press, 1870–1890,* London 2016.

11 ___ Kris Belden-Adams, *Photography and Failure: One Medium's Entanglement with Flops, Underdogs and Disappointments,* London 2017, and Franziska Kunze, *Opake Fotografien: das Sichtbarmachen fotografischer Materialität als künstlerische Strategie,* Reimer 2019.

12 ___ See, for instance, *PhotoResearcher* issues: *Photography in the Marketplace*, no. 25, 2016, edited by Kelley Wilder; *The Darkroom: Chemical, Cultural, Industrial,* no. 41, 2024, edited by Sara Dominici; *Photography, Electricity, Infrastructure,* no. 45, 2026, edited by Kelley Wilder.

analogue and digital photographic practices. We believe including AI photography in the debate surrounding non-photographic objects is the next step forward, opening up new questions and challenges for the material culture approach.

Liminal and Non-Photographic Objects in This Issue

We invited researchers and museum professionals to engage with objects that challenge traditional definitions of the photographic and highlight the ubiquity of non-photographic and liminal material. The articles cover a broad temporal and geographical range, with case studies drawn from three continents (Africa, Europe, and North America) and spanning two centuries, from 1835 to the present day. Consequently, the objects addressed in this issue engage with a variety of photographic processes, from the daguerreotype to digital photography, as well as different kinds of practitioners including chemists, artists, forgers, astronomers, and conservators. The essays foreground a deliberate methodological and interpretative diversity, each proposing a distinct way of articulating the relationship between the photographic and the non-photographic, extending into different fields and practices: from unexpected photographic objects labelled as 'curiosities' (Petra Trnková and Francesca Strobino) to scientific (Katharina Bick and Kelley Wilder) and art-related practices (Valentine Nyamndon and Cristina Sorrentino), to institutional contexts and conservation practices (Katerina Korola, Francesca Issatt, and Vanessa Torres).

Petra Trnková explores the trespassing of photography into illegality through the case study of photographic forgeries of banknotes that circulated between the 1840s and 1870s in the former territories of the Habsburg Monarchy. Trnková shows how these objects, situated at the intersections of multiple processes and techniques, between photographic and mechanical, were not mere collectors' curiosities but significant social phenomena, prompting reactions from banking institutions, state authorities, the general public, and the photographic community.

Francesca Strobino's essay looks into the uncommon practices of doodling, piercing, and scratching daguerreotypes through the analysis of objects from the Jacob Byerly Collection at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, US. As Strobino shows, the loss or mechanical and chemical alteration of photographic images in many daguerreotype plates challenges nineteenth-century photographic standards, revealing the photographic liminality of these objects, which interrogate the boundaries of the photographic.

Kelley Wilder explores the entwined history of rocks and crystals, the allied mining industries, and the development of photography in the second half of the nineteenth century in the UK. Through the experiments of William Crookes (English, 1832–1919), Wilder points out how photography was integrated into the study of mineral specimens, and how the quality of 'being photographic' briefly entered the field of mineral analysis.

Katharina Bick's article on astronomical photography demonstrates how objects traditionally considered external to the final photographic image can be central to photographic practices and the production of knowledge. By examining the telescope used from 1905 by the Hamburg Observatory during its solar eclipse expeditions, Bick shows how these devices were not merely supports or tools, but active participants in shaping photographic outcomes as well as their production, interpretation, and circulation.

Cristiana Sorrentino's article examines the scrapbook compiled by the Italian photographer Lori Sammartino (Italy, 1924–1971) throughout her career as a personal record of press reviews of her work. Sorrentino argues that, despite its seemingly marginal status compared with traditionally defined photographic materials such as prints, the scrapbook constitutes a valuable source for reconstructing Sammartino's photographic practice and the critical reception of her work.

Valentine Nyamndon analyses the role of backdrops in Cameroonian studio portraiture from 1981 to the present. Rather than focusing solely on the portraits themselves, he examines how backdrops actively mediate the relationships between the sitter, the painter, the photographic studio, and the final image.

Katerina Korola's article examines the test strip developed in Germany by the Agfa photochemist Edith Weyde (Czechia, 1901–1989) to detect gases harmful to photographs in archival collections. Although not a photograph itself, the strip operates according to the same chemical principles as silver gelatin photographs, revealing the porous boundary between photographic and non-photographic objects and practices.

Francesca Issatt and Vanessa Torres offer an insight into the often invisible museum practices behind one of the many beginnings of photography, perhaps one of the most celebrated: William Henry Fox Talbot's (UK, 1800–1877) *Latticed Window* (1835). Issatt and Torres discuss the critical role played by digital photography in museum curatorial practices, such as the first condition report of the *Latticed Window* performed in 2025.

Taken together, these essays challenge established notions of the photographic, and start a critical conversation on the place that non-photographic objects have occupied in the wider history of photography. Facsimile, scratched daguerreotypes, photographic forgeries, rocks and crystals, a scrapbook, a test strip, portrait backdrops, all demonstrate the potential of such objects to prompt a re-examination of the history of photography and the hierarchies embedded within the field, encouraging scholars to pay more attention to the broader social, economic, political, and cultural implications that may spring from the analysis of these liminal objects.

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