

Please Touch!

The New Alinari National Museum of Photography in Florence, Italy

By Ken Lassiter

Want to hear something cool? The world's newest photography museum was organized by the world's oldest continuously operating photography firm. This photography museum features something no other museum offers: photography exhibits expressly for the blind and sight impaired. Readers of *Photographer's Forum* Magazine may recall the interview with Dr. Andrea de Polo, published in the May 2003 issue. Dr. de Polo explained that Fratelli Alinari Photo Archive was founded in 1852, just 13 years after photography was announced in 1839, and has been operating ever since. Fratelli Alinari has one of the world's largest collections of photographs in their archives, preserving today over 5.5 million historical and modern images from around the world. He described Alinari's plans to build the first national photographic museum in Florence, Italy. The museum opened in late 2006 and has become a new attraction for visitors to Florence.

The Museo Nazionale Alinari della Fotografia (MNAF) was constructed in a historic building, known locally as "delle Leopoldine," and it is located in Piazza Santa Maria Novella in Florence—just a short distance from the central train station. The building was the site of the Ospedale di San Paolo dei Convalescenti in the thirteenth century before becoming a Capuchin convent. In 1780, it was converted into a girls' school, teaching the domestic trades. The City of Florence owns the building now and decided it was the perfect site for the national photography museum of Italy.

The Touch Museum

Twenty important historic photographs from the Alinari collections are featured in the Touch Museum as special exhibits for blind and sight-impaired viewers. Each exhibit includes the well-known mounted photograph. Adjacent is an enlarged three-dimensional representation of the photograph using paper, glass, wood, sand and other materials to represent the image. Accompanying each photo exhibit are captions in normal typeface and in Braille. The Braille captions were produced in collaboration with the Tuscany Region and the Braille printing factory of Florence.

One example of the special exhibits is the famous portrait by Julia Margaret Cameron of *Henry Taylor, in the style of Rembrandt*, made in 1866. The photograph is represented with a face sculpture wearing the same type of fabric Taylor wears in the image with his beard presented by cotton threads. A Daguerreotype is disassembled so the visitor can feel the parts including the glass plate, the decorated frame and the image engraved on a silver plate. To explain the concept of a negative to a blind person, the silhouette of the same pine tree was cut twice in wood, with one cut of the exterior outline and the other cut of the interior outline. A viewer touching Laure Albib-Guillot's *Hand with a Rose* (1935) will feel not only the hand and the rose petals made of perfumed India

paper, but will find the fragrance of a rose lingering on their hand. The senses of sound and smell are used to supplement the sense of touch. To enhance viewing for the visually impaired, these special exhibits are brightly colored to maximize their enjoyment.

The Touch Museum project was initiated by Claudio de Polo, President of Fratelli Alinari Foundation. “It is a noble and courageous experience which we proudly host in our museum.” said de Polo. “The idea came to me during a trip to Antwerp where, on a barge, an itinerary equipped for sighted visitors made it possible for them to enter in some way into the world of those who could not see.” All visitors to the museum are invited to experience the special exhibits fully.

To make the whole museum more accessible to handicapped persons, sign-language tour guides for the deaf are supplied for groups and motorized mini-carts are available for the disabled. Audio tapes are supplied to guide and explain the exhibits to visitors.

Seven More Sections in the Museum

The first gallery covers **The Origins of Photography** from 1839 until 1860: the first Daguerreotypes, and calotypes—the first paper negatives. Landscapes, portraits, artistic compositions and documentary works by the early pioneers. Included are many portraits and documentary photographs of early Florence by the Alinari brothers.

The next gallery is **The Golden Age of Photography** from 1860 until 1920. Exhibits explain the evolution of photography technique and technology over the decades. Photography becomes established and studios spring up everywhere. Photography became an autonomous art form. People enjoy landscapes and reproduction of artworks as souvenirs of their travels. Experimentation continues with new technologies and personal expressions become a hobby of the masses.

The Advent of the Avant-garde covers the period 1920-2000. Now that photography became emancipated and is no longer considered a poor cousin of painting, it has become one of the major forms of contemporary art. There is a selection of works from the great protagonists of the 20th century that enriched our visual culture with many images that have become icons of our time.

Transparent Images From paper negatives to glass plates using many methods of sensitizing such as Autochromes and hand-colored glass lanternslides to Kodachrome and modern color films widely used in the latter part of the century. This presents a rich variety of original transparent media for full understanding of these valuable materials of photography.

Alinari presents a rare collection of **Photo Albums** of every size, shape, material and method of workmanship. There are albums created to assemble and conserve images to increase their importance and value over time. The album pages contain

a wide universe of photography, style and decoration. Each album tells a unique personal story of the person behind it.

A Journey Through the History of Photographic Equipment presents cameras and other photo equipment from 1839 to 2000 displayed in a dedicated exhibition sector. From the earliest rudimentary cameras to the Kodak and to the evolution of digital cameras widely popular today, this gallery shows the extraordinary creativity, ingenuity and vision of the people who created the photographic technology that is such an important part of our lives today.

Beyond Photography is a gallery demonstrating just how far the use of images has permeated almost every aspect of modern life. We use images in stationery, documents, postcards, advertising, ceramics, glassware, fabrics, jewelry and frames to tell the story of how photographers sold and marketed the fruits of their skills as photographers.

Visiting the Museum

The National Museum of Photography opens from 10 AM until 7:00 PM. Closed Wednesdays. For more information on ticket prices and hours call +39-055-216310 (in Florence) or check online:

http://www.museumsinflorence.com/landscapes/musei_firenze.html. The web site shown offers information and advance booking for groups and individuals for all museums in Florence. MNAF is located at Piazza Santa Maria Novella 14a rosso in central Florence, Italy.

The Museum Shop

Please supply information on the museum shop: what is offered for sale, the location, any special features.

Fratelli Alinari

Museum visitors may also wish to visit nearby Alinari Fratelli at Largo Alinari, 15 – right off the Central Train station piazza. Alinari has over 3,100,000 black and white and color images from glass plates to color negatives archived. Alinari has 900,000 vintage prints including salted paper, albumin and bromide prints, calotype negatives and Daguerreotypes. Alinari publishes a large number of books especially on the works of nineteenth and twentieth century European and Italian photographers. There are 6,000 original albums in their collection.

After 36 years with Kodak, Ken Lassiter retired to Florida in 1993 where he is a freelance writer and consultant on photo education. 2009 is Ken's 52nd year in the photography business.

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