

Retocar la tercera dimensión. El archivo de negativos estereoscópicos de Aurélio da Paz dos Reis

Retouching the third dimension. The Aurélio da Paz dos Reis stereoscopic negatives archive

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RESUMEN

En la ponencia se explora el retoque de fotografía y su uso particular en los negativos estereoscópicos de gelatina y placa de vidrio. Se comentan las técnicas utilizadas, materiales y relación con el retoque practicado en la fotografía no estereoscópica. Enfocado en el fondo del fotógrafo portugués Aurélio da Paz dos Reis se estudia cómo él ha utilizado el retoque para la composición de los retratos estereoscópicos. Estos retratos están hechos en el estilo de fotografía de estudio y hoy recuerdan la sociedad artística, con quien el fotógrafo tenía estrecha relación, y otras celebridades. Más conocida su fotografía de exterior, se presenta una contribución a la caracterización de un tipo de fotografía menos estudiada de este autor. Pero también, estos retratos, son testigo de las técnicas fotográficas de su tiempo y de cómo el retrato fotográfico y el retoque siempre han tenido su posición especial en la historia de la fotografía.

Palabras clave: Estereoscopia, negativos de gelatina y vidrio, Aurélio da Paz dos Reis, retoque, retrato.

ABSTRACT

The paper explores photography retouching, particularly its use in dry plate stereoscopic negatives. The materials and techniques used and their relationship with the retouching practice in non-stereoscopic photography are discussed. This research focuses on the Portuguese photographer Aurélio da Paz dos Reis's collection of negatives, and how he used retouching for the composition of his stereoscopic portraits. These are studio-like portraits, and today they are a reminder of the artistic society, with whom the photographer had a close relationship and other celebrities. Better known for event and general outdoor photography, this paper presents a contribution to the characterization of a less studied type of photography by this author. Also, these portraits witness the photographic techniques of their time and how the photographic portrait and retouching always had a special place in the history of photography.

Keywords: Stereoscopy, retouching, dry plate negatives, Aurélio da Paz dos Reis, Portrait.

Introduction

This research focuses on the retouching of dry plate negatives from the stereoscopic negatives archive of Aurélio da Paz dos Reis (APR) at the Portuguese Centre for Photography (CPF – Centro Português de Fotografia), in Oporto. This is a part of a research project in conservation on the retouching of dry plates from Portuguese collections during the first half of the 20th century. Here, the emphasis is the APR's collection of stereoscopic negative portraits of celebrities. Retouching techniques and their uses are addressed and discussed.

To study a photographer's archive or collection is an opportunity to know better the photographer and their time. Although this is true, each researcher will look for their point of view or topic, and these seem to be endless as photography can document anything and be a document for everything. For a conservator, the study of a collection is also an opportunity for a more intimate approach to its materiality. Handling each object and hundreds, if not thousands, of them allows for a particular sense of the photographer's work.

Studying negative collections is like reading only half of a history book. We do not see the final product, not what the photographer intended. But, it is the photographer who creates these collections and preserves them, even after producing the print. Because of its reproducibility, negatives are kept, especially if the photographer had a commercial sense for his work. If the prints were sold and scattered, these negatives, kept together, now allow for an overview of the photographer's work. Not being the final version of the photograph, the negative holds a version of the image, often showing more as they are uncropped. In the negative, it is also possible to find handwritten annotations for different purposes. These notes sometimes register the time and place of the photograph; others are comments for the darkroom work and other identification elements.

Alterations to the image, such as retouching or masks, are also preserved in the negative. They are a part of the object as they are a testimony of the photographer's work and, although invisible in print, they make a definitive change in the image. Without them, any reproduction would be completely different and not what the photographer intended.

To better understand these retouchings, it is important to know about APR's retouching techniques, understand their effect, and how they reflect the photographer's intention and their impact on the final image. Finally, recognizing these alterations also gives us keys to better understanding of the perceived image and how they reflect the visual culture of its time and society.

Aurélio da Paz dos Reis

The photographs of Aurélio da Paz dos Reis (Porto, July 28th of 1862 – Porto, September 18th of 1931) show that he was a family man, active in the political society. He is known as the father of the motion picture in Portugal¹. But, mostly, he ran a floristry in the center of Porto, named Flora Portuense, selling flowers and seeds which he produced himself in gardens and greenhouses at his residence and nearby properties. In his spare time, the images show that he attended outdoor activities such as bullfights, various sports, popular and religious festivities, traveling,

1 A recognition for being the first Portuguese to produce a motion picture in Portugal, after knowing about the Lumière Brothers and Edwin Rousby's works, and not for his body of work or influences on others. Replicating Louis Lumière first motion picture, «Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory», APR would produce «Saída do Pessoal Operário da Fábrica Confiança» in 1896, showing workers of Confiança factory leaving at lunch time. He would do public viewings of this and other «quadros» (possible translation: frames) under the commercial name of «Kinetógrapho Português».

or just enjoying the company of his friends. His images show different pleasure trips to Spain, including Pontevedra and Salamanca, registering local traditions monuments and views. He also traveled on different occasions to France and Brazil on business and to further develop his interests in photography and the motion picture.

Aurélio da Paz dos Reis had photojournalist credentials but was more of an enthusiast than a professional photographer², in the sense that he did not have a studio open to the public nor sold his work systematically to newspapers or magazines. However, because he had a continuous presence in public events, some of his photographs were sought and published by magazines, namely, the *Ilustração Portuguesa*³.

He would sell his photography work under his trademark, the «Estereoscópio Portuguez» at his shop, Flora Portuense, in the center of Porto.

Aurélio da Paz dos Reis collection at the Portuguese Centre for Photography

The CPF's collection holds near 9000 objects, most of them in the format of stereoscopic negatives 9x18cm. It also holds a small number of negatives in other formats, but they look different technically, making it uncertain that they were by APR. In a small number, the collection holds original prints, some test prints, cameras, and other photographic material and equipment (Lacerda, 2007).

The overall collection is well preserved, but some negatives present signs of fading, probably due to poor processing; and others present highly deteriorated margins by wear and water damage.

Some printed cards, preserved at CPF, show an evolution in the presentation of the prints, most noticeably the cards published after 1904 that would include, on the left, an inscription and drawings referring to the silver medals won at the Universal Expositions of Paris, and St. Louis.⁴ After 1923, the cards also include mention of the gold medals earned at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition and the Rio de Janeiro Universal Exposition.

Paz dos Reis and Photography

As a photographer, his body of work is mostly composed of stereoscopic photography and, sometimes, using the same camera, some panoramas. The number of images in the collection that include APR himself shows that he would encourage other people to take hold of his camera, at least his children and wife.

2 APR considered himself an amateur photographer, and he is often referred to as such in the credits of his images.

3 When published in *Ilustração Portuguesa*, although they are stereoscopic images, only one half of the image was printed. In the credits both APR's name and his brand «Estereoscópio Portuguez» are mentioned.

4 There are different types of cards known: one with no markings; another with «Estereoscópio Portuguez» inscription on the left margin and «Aurélio da Paz dos Reis – Phot. Amador / Porto» on the right. These are probably dated before his participation and recognition with silver medals at the Universal Exhibitions of Paris in 1900 and St. Louis in 1904. After that, the designation of «Phot. Amador» - amateur photographer - would disappear and, on the left, drawings of medals and reference to the exhibitions were included. On the right, a drawing of the «Flora Portuense» logo is also included and the identification of Portugal is added. The latest type of cards known include the participation and recognition with gold medals at the International Exhibition of Pacific-Panama held in San Francisco in 1915, and later the Universal Exhibition of Rio de Janeiro in 1922-23. The cards exist in different colors. Also, in the CPF's collection, although in a smaller number, some images are printed as colored tissue views. These have no identification text or logos, except some with a small glued stamp in different colors with the text «Aurelio da Paz dos Reis / Porto».



FIG. 1. A) Digitally converted positive of stereoscopic dry plate negative; Aurélio da Paz dos Reis and his wife Palmira de Souza Guimarães having coffee in the garden of Nova Cintra House; 1900 (PT-CPF-APR-001-001-002326, CPF). B) The cover of Tom Tit *La Science Amusante*, the book held by Paz dos Reis in the photograph (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/>).

Aside from a necessary darkroom, the images show that he did not have a permanent photographic studio. Many of his portraits with painted scenarios look like studio photography but were set outside in his garden or other places. Noticeable, in many of them, are changes in the type of floor or other elements caught beyond the scenario, such as plants or architectonical features.

His work is best known for the record of social, political, and historical events and how the society of its time participated in them. He also produced numerous images from his travels abroad that were also published and sold with the «Estereocópio Portuguez» brand. Crowds on the street and social places are abundant themes in APR's photographs. Another characteristic of these images is the feel of a candid snapshot, frequently blurred as people move and get out of focus. He would also photograph his own family in relaxing settings, showing everyday life, however, with an intentional composition. For example, figure 1 shows more than a couple in their garden by the placing of specific objects in the scene. This composition conveys a message of what he considered to be an exemplary family, spending time together, reading current events, and sharing an interest in subjects outside the household themes, such as science⁵ (Serén, 1998).

Frequently with only his daughter but also the entire family, APR would produce photography based greeting cards for the New Year, mostly using the stereoscopic camera in panorama mode or set vertically. These are composed with props and often include a card with a greeting message.

Similarly, APR's studio-like portraits are made with time and care, often holding meaning beyond what could seem a casual pose. These are made with a scenario and other props, such as chairs or handheld objects. Most of these portraits show celebrities, usually actors with whom APR had a close relationship, but also political and other personalities from society.

The intention behind the portrait photography of celebrities, carried out in studio photography style, is not clear, APR always showed a commercial intention in all his endeavors, and these were probably sold as collectibles, a practice that existed with other studio photographers.

5 There are other versions of this composition, one where APR and his wife Palmira change roles and another including their daughter at a young age with a doll, standing between the two.

Aurélio da Paz dos Reis was not a brilliant photographer, and most of his images have questionable technical quality⁶. This is balanced, however, by his persistence and ubiquitousness, leaving us a legacy of many great images and, overall, a collection with important historical and documental value.

Retouching Photography

The retouching of photographs exists since the beginning of the history of photography. Even before the negative, photographs were often manipulated to show an image that would be closer to public expectations. As a tool for capturing the truth, photography had many shortcomings, starting with the lack of color. So, firstly, photographs were painted, unwanted parts removed, and small production defects corrected or covered.

With the negative-positive process, the photography industry became possible. Photography was made easier for amateurs, and photographic studios emerged everywhere. Photography was no longer a curiosity of science or activity of a few, but a commercial product that needed to meet expectations imposed by patrons and the society in general. Professional photographers would be distinguished by the quality of their work which included professionally retouching. In the negative, and long before digital tools, retouching was done to the same extent as today, but using pencils, brushes and knives, artistic talent, and patience.

Retouching portraits

Photographic portraiture did not show the idealized image of a painting, and the harsh lens captured an unforgiven version of a person. The disappointing image showed every mark and defect of the skin; angular lighting would exponentiate curvatures in the face and cast dark shadows in unwanted areas. The photographic emulsion did not correctly register every color and tone, the pink baby skin would end up looking dark, and freckles would become black spots on the skin. Blue eyes with direct light would register white except the dark pupil. Beyond these technical difficulties, the society would impose other corrections. The skin should be light, as dark skins were traits of low-class workers. Therefore, not only pink babies but everyone would get their flesh tone corrected. The skin should be perfect and wrinkles and other skin defects, marked as dark shadows, would be attenuated, sometimes exaggerated, so that an old man would present the skin of a young person.

Looking at the portrait photography of the first half of the 20th century has made us accustomed to a perfect skin with a smooth feel, some looking almost like, that was the demand of that time. The curvature of the lip, an ear that stands out, stray hairs, or a crooked mustache were often corrected, all to meet each person's view of oneself and the standards of the society of its time.

Retouching techniques

Retouching techniques are seemingly simple. The essential tools and materials used for retouching dry plate negatives were a retouching desk that served as a lightbox, knives, and other abrasion tools, ink, lead pencils, and varnish. Retouching is considered additive or subtractive. The subtractive techniques consisted of removing part of the photographic emulsion surface, using abrasive powders or a retouching knife, and these cannot be undone. Additive techniques consisted of applying different mediums, such as inks, varnish, and pencil, on one or both surfaces of the negative. Some additive retouchings are fragile and sometimes poorly preserved.

6 This assertion is made from the observation of the images and negatives at CPF, and not of the final published prints.



FIG. 2. A) Detail of half of a stereoscopic negative showing: retouching work over face and hands with red ink and pencil; actor's portrait (PT-CPF-APR-001-001-007334, CPF); b) Stereoscopic negative surface showing silver mirroring deterioration except on central areas treated with varnish; actor's portrait (PT-CPF-APR-001-001-007257, CPF)

Because their purpose is not well understood by many, in some cases in the conservation treatments they are removed, irreparably changing the preserved image to a condition different from what the photographer intended.

Retouching in Aurélio da Paz dos Reis' collection of celebrities' portraits

Almost all retouching found in APR's collection is limited to studio-like portrait photography and some close-up portraits without a scenario. Because APR did not have a complete photography studio, and there is no known record of employees hired to do photographic work, it is unclear who did the retouching of his negatives. The collection at CPF shows that he knew other photographers and had access to their studios. So, he could possibly, have had the negatives retouched by a studio retoucher or learned with someone how to retouch them. He is known to be a reader of different types of books and magazines, including science and technical books on photography, that might have also been a source for knowledge in retouching (Serén, 1998).

In comparison to a typical studio portrait of the same period, the overall retouching observed in APR's collection has minimal effect. The few existing original prints show that the effect of this retouching leaves a natural, seemingly untouched feel. Nonetheless, the retouching found was not done only to correct technical flaws and extend to an aesthetic purpose.

Because these are stereoscopic photographs, the same retouching needs to be applied, in the same manner, to both halves of the image. In general, the retouching done to all portraits includes the treatment of the skin with a lead pencil to attenuate wrinkles and expression lines and to give an overall smooth look (figure 2a). This was done on the emulsion side over transparent varnish that was applied over the areas to be retouched. The varnish acts as a protective layer in negatives preventing the deterioration called silver mirroring. Today, the varnished areas can be easily recognized, and even how the varnish was applied, for lack of silver mirroring. In figure 2b, it is possible to identify varnished areas in correspondence with head and hands in the image, and the stain suggests that it was applied with a cloth or cotton ball («muñequilla»).

On the glass side, a red stain was commonly applied over the face. The distance conferred by the glass thickness makes it less defined when printing, and the borders of the stain become imperceptible. The ink was applied like make-up and touched-up with the tip of the finger, often



FIG. 3. A) Stereoscopic dry plate negative with red make-up applied on the glass surface over the face; B) Detail of the same negative showing retouching scraped off over eyes and mouth; actress' portrait (PT-CPF-APR-001-001-007215, CPF).



FIG. 4. A) stereoscopic dry plate negative with red ink covering waist area; B) Detail of half of the same negative showing the result in a digitally converted positive. Actress Maria Pia de Almeida (PT-CPF-APR-001-001-007215, CPF).

recognizable by the pattern of the fingerprint. The effect of this technique, in the print, is lighter skin. Any excess or areas that needed to be kept dark, such as eyes or mouth, are scraped off with a needle or the tip of a knife (figure 3). Because this was usually done with a colorant with little or no binder, these retouchings are very fragile. In APR collection, we find many portraits with only a residue of this material.

Because fashion of that time dictated that an elegant woman would have an hourglass silhouette, the example in Figure 4 shows how APR gave a little help by covering part of the body with a more concentrated red ink to block the area completely. This becomes white in the print and could be further reintegrated with ink or pencil to match the background. These examples of more interventionist retouching are scarce in the collection.

Photography manuals from this period often discussed what should be the limits of retouching (Pereira, 2018), but as Hubert put it in his «The art of retouching» manual (1895: 48-49):

(...) Let me give you an important piece of advice. Do not on any account forget to touch ladies' waists in a specially hearty manner, if you want to keep on good terms with them. You are always safe in cutting off an inch on each side, and in some cases, where corpulence is rather conspicuous, two or more inches will never be missed.

Conclusions

Aurélio da Paz dos Reis was a dedicated photographer. Although he considered himself an amateur, because of his enterprising personality, he made his photographic work and the «Estereocópio Portuguez» brand a reference. Today, he is an important figure in Portuguese history, not just as the father of cinema but also in the history of stereoscopic photography.

The APR's archive at CPF shows that he was ahead of his time, registering every moment of his life and the events happening around him, leaving us a valuable historical and cultural legacy. The opportunity to study this collection is an essential addition to the research project on retouching techniques, and its particular use in stereoscopic photography.

Although it is unclear who did the retouching of the portraits, it was not expertly done. The negatives show the same basic retouching techniques found in other portrait collections and described in manuals but to a lesser extent. The retouching was done mostly to compensate for exaggerated features and other defects or aberrations introduced by the camera or caused by the limitations of the photographic emulsion. Some of them, however, show a more pronounced effect, and all portraits were retouched to correct skin tone.

The fact that he takes the time to retouch his portraits, but not other types of photography, can be related to an ideal of what he thought a photographic portrait should look like, which in turn was influenced by the generally accepted aesthetics of his own time.

Summing up, the retouching observer in APR's portrait negatives was not done intensively, as in other typical studio portraits. However, it is clear that the retouching goes beyond overcoming technical difficulties. They correspond with social expectations, the photographer's intention, and the image he wanted to convey, giving insight into his time and social conventions as a visual cultural testimony and heritage.

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