

Photos – reality in boxes?

“Photos show what’s there.” This statement is only partially true, even if surely every one of us would spontaneously agree with it: Isn’t that why we take photos, for example on vacations or class trips, in order to preserve the memory of experiences, events?

A photo can in fact show what was in front of the viewfinder when the shutter was opened. But how, when and under which conditions it was taken, what was happening around the shown scene, and why the photographer took the photo – these are often very difficult to find out, because they are just not present on the image.

Add to that the fact that photos can be altered – and not just since the dawn of the “digital age.” Portraits have often been touched up; group portraits of politicians have been manipulated so that individuals who have fallen into disfavour with those in power simply “disappeared from the scene” afterwards. But more common than intentional falsifications are smaller changes, such as when photos are cut to a certain size or cropped to include only those parts that seem interesting to the editor.

So you have to evaluate an image thoroughly before you can estimate its value as a source for your work. Here are some questions that can help you:

1. Description of an image

- When and where was the photo taken? Can you recognize what prompted the photographer to take the picture?
- Who took the photo, and for whom was he working?
- What is present in the image? What elements can you see?
- How is the image structured (cropping, figures, object, background, centre of field)?
- What photographic technique was used (focal length, cropping, figures, objects, composition, centre of field, camera perspective, size of subject)?
- Was the image altered (retouched, montaged, cropped)?

**Description of
an image**



2. Placing the image in its historical context

- Does a particular “motif” or main theme emerge?
- Is the photo representative (of the time in which it was created, of its contemporaries)?
- Is it a snapshot or a set-up scene, an amateur or professional photo?
- Should this be a document or an artistic interpretation of the situation at hand?
- What is your view of the photo caption and the information attached to the image? Do they contain value judgments, are they meant to influence the viewer, do they contain false information?
- What further information is important to the interpretation of the image and to its placement in its historical context?

**Historical
context**

3. Final evaluation of a photo

- What is the “whole picture” after you have put together all the “puzzle pieces”? What information about the past can be drawn from the photo, and what interpretations of the past should be transmitted using which transmission techniques? What would you say is the message of the photo?
- What questions remain open?

Final evaluation