

The Edison Photographic Fond

By Maria Chiara Corazza

The Edison photographic archives consists of 230.000 original and copied photographic records, according to an estimate made in 2000 by the Centro per la Cultura d'Impresa. The fond is divided as follows: 150,000 prints, 50.000 negatives on glass panes and 30.000 negatives on film, slides and color slides,

Through an agreement signed in 1999, Edison deposited its archives at the Centro in order to be preserved and valorized, as well as to make it available to researchers. This initiative was publicized by the company in 2000 on the occasion of the exhibition *Il futuro della memoria industriale (The Future of Industrial Memory)* held at Assolombarda in Milan, where representatives of Edison, and other companies, and of the Department for Cultural Assets spoke about the political and cultural significance of this type of custodianship for the preservation of collective memory and the history of the company itself.¹ On that occasion, among the materials given to the public, the company also distributed a CD entitled *100 anni di memoria industriale (100 Years of Industrial Memory)* including a considerable number of the interesting photographs that portray Edison's company history. In 2000, the photographic volume *Montedison: immagini di un secolo (Montedison: Images of a Century)* was also published.

This photographic fond, which has been reorganized, is a spirited testament of a significant period of the Italian economy. It was declared by the Archival Superintendence Office of the Regione Lombardia in July 2004 to be of high historical interest. This official recognition, as well as the turning over of the custody of the archives, was communicated to Edison employees through the company's house organ "MondoEdison", where the images of the archives itself are also occasionally published.

The photographic fond, now entrusted to the Centro, is largely an account of the chemicals business in Montecatini – and to a lesser extent of Edison's² electric energy business – the images mainly show industrial plants, mines, laboratories, fruit and vegetable plantations, plastics applications³, as well as charitable institutions, and even the photographs

¹ The initiative was part of the project "Montedison per Milano", started in 1977 to promote and sustain activities to better the life and culture quality in Milan and of its citizens.

² Enel's setting up in 1962 and the subsequent transfer of Edison's companies that had previously dealt with the production, transport, distribution and selling of electric energy marked the end of a significant part of Edison's business activity. Another consequence of nationalization of electric power generation, was the transfer to Enel of the section of the Photographic Archives regarding Edison's electrical energy business.

³ One of the main discoveries was Moplen, the registered trademark of a plastic material produced by Polymer (a company controlled by Montecatini) many images of which are present in the archives, regarding its

of cinematographic sets⁴, as well as the headquarters in Foro Bonaparte. Other photographs portray the most significant personalities of the company's history, and there is a large and detailed section dedicated to the Italian and foreign trade fairs in which the company took part.⁵

Since the Centro's main institutional aims include the creation of a Territorial Economic Archives (Aet)⁶, the Edison archives agreement has provided the perfect opportunity to carry out its mission. Through a conceptual evolution in the management and in the valorization of the cultural assets which have increased over the years, the Centro asked Edison to modify the regulations of the agreement in two directions. First of all, that only the company owning the fond could commercialize the images, something that Edison never actually wanted to do; secondly, that the company and the Centro should find cultural institutions with the same aims as those of the project, and work together on the reorganization, cataloguing, digitalization and restoration of the asset.

The collaborative aspect was fundamental in the creation of a new agreement that the company, the Centro and the Parco nazionale tecnologico e archeologico delle colline metallifere grossetane (<http://www.parcocollinemetallifere.it/>) signed in 2006. This agreement was recently extended to the Chambers of Commerce of Grosseto and Milan in order to begin to systematically catalogue the fond with the application SIRBeC⁷, and to acquire around 4000 digitalized images regarding the situation in Tuscany (with particular attention to the mines) and the mining activity carried out over the entire national territory⁸. This intervention made it possible to define a working method on a small section of the archives which could be

employments, advertised by Gino Bramieri during "Carosello" and whose 50th anniversary was celebrated in 2006 in the course of several cultural initiatives. Molpen is one of the results of the research of Giulio Natta, the Nobel Prize for Chemicals winner of 1963.

⁴ The company produced many films and documentaries. For a description of these records, see the catalogue *FilmMontedison*, Milan, 1973, in which each film is presented through a descriptive schedule. Edison's film records are on deposit at the National Film Archives in Rome. See also the publication *Il mestiere dell'uomo. Ermanno Olmi regista per la Edison*, Milan, Federico Motta Editore 2005, in which there are many images of the archives including some images taken from the album with the sets of the various industrial films produced by the company. The volume was presented in June 2006 during a public meeting entitled *La fabbrica del cinema. Ermanno Olmi regista per la Edison*.

⁵ The photos of the Edison trade fair stands are of great interest because they portray the evolution of the image communicated by the company (see for example the dissertation by Stefano [Moltrasio, Marco Vantusso, Il progetto espositivo per la grande industria: allestimenti Montecatini 1935-1967](#), Politecnico di Milano, academic year 1994/95).

⁶ See article 3 of the statute of the association. Up to now the Centro has received many assets as gifts or deposits from several important enterprises, both active and defunct: Assolombarda, Carlo Erba, A.L. Colombo, Caproni, Dioguardi spa, Ordine professionale degli agenti di cambio, Samur srl, Cooperativa edificatrice La postelegrafonica, Unione esercizi elettrici spa, and Edison. The reasons for the creation of an Aet can be found in the contribution by Giuseppe Paletta in *Conferenza nazionale degli archivi*. Roma, Archivio centrale dello Stato, 1-3 July 1998, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, Rome 1999, pages 83-86 and in the editorial by Giuseppe Paletta in «La memoria dell'impresa», n. 3, February 1999, Milan.

⁷ SIRBeC is the IT system of the Regione Lombardia for cultural assets. More information can be found on the website <http://www.lombardiacultura.it/scheda.cfm?ID=363>

⁸ Montecatini – set up in 1888 – merged with Edison in 1966 creating the Montecatini Edison Spa that, in 1990 took the name Montedison and in 1991, Edison Spa (see also the work by Duccio Bigazzi for the Istituto lombardo per la storia del movimento di liberazione in Italia (Lombardia Institute for the History of the Liberation Movement in Italy), *Gli Archivi d'impresa nell'area milanese. Censimento descrittivo*, Milan, Editrice Bibliografica 1990, pages 31-37 and the later adjournment of the census realized by the Centro in 2000).

extended to other sections⁹ since it was impossible to catalogue and reorganize the entire fond.

To select and quantify the images of interest for this project, the Centro used the only instrument currently available¹⁰, which is a checklist created by Francesca Magliulo for her dissertation¹¹. This list, although incomplete, gives some of the key indicators to identify the containers that held records of interest for this project. The list identifies the complex units formed by photographic albums and cardboard boxes.

In the 1950s, the Edison created a photographic office within the company, and in the 1970s, its records were reorganized. This office was in charge of taking photographs that not only documented the company's own existence, but also created a parallel view of the Italian economy, society and territory and its evolution over one century. At the same time, many leading Italian photographers, such as Bruno Stefani, Vincenzo Aragozzini for Studio Crimella, Achille Bologna, the Studio Ancillotti e Martinotti, Riccardo Moncalvo, Ernesto Fazioli, the Agenzia Publifoto, Tullio Farabola, Federico Patellani and Ugo Mulas, worked for the company and were put in charge of specific photographic campaigns.

Somebody – perhaps the company photographer's studio itself – systemically reorganized the entire collection of photographic records. We can be sure of this fact because of the conditioning of thematic albums which allowed the selection and the preservation of the photographic heritage of the companies.¹² The theme is almost always the only thread that links the various media, often with multiple copies and from different periods of time. In order to respond to precise needs, Edison's photographic services were divided, selected and reorganized according to different aims¹³.

⁹ A large group of professionals participated in the project - Diego Ronzio, Peter Sapio, Maria Stella Tonti, Sonia Tunez and Laura Casone – under the trusteeship of Laura Casone. To coordinate this project, I am grateful for Gianluca Perondi's cooperation.

¹⁰ Speaking about the greater likelihood of preservation of photographic sources in comparison to "paper" ones, Bigazzi, referring to an essay by Luca Borzani, said: "It is clear that the most significant photographic records about industry are preserved by the customers of the photographer's studios: the companies themselves. If we consider the systematic destruction of paper records, [usually] stopped too late, we have to admit that the photographic records generally had a better destiny. While some dispersion has occurred, the image of the industry had the ambiguous advantage that photography [seems to be an independent testament, exhaustive and concise at the same time, of something that happened in the past]. Also in the context of the company, which seeks to eliminate or reduce the space required [for records] and the management costs of anything unrelated to production, the [informative, effective and esthetic importance] attached to the photographs assured their preservation." D. BIGAZZI, *Gli archivi fotografici e la storia dell'industria*, «Archivi e imprese», n. 8, July-December 1993, p. 6.

¹¹ F. MAGLIULO, *L'immagine fotografica della Montecatini. Documentazione tecnica e propaganda durante il fascismo*, academic year 1997/1998. The author summarized and also expanded on some of the themes broached in the article *L'archivio fotografico della Montecatini. L'immagine di una grande impresa durante il fascismo*, in "Impresa e storia", n. 20, 1999, pages 357-366.

¹² "No matter how much damage the albums caused to the photographs from the point of view of both material and the alteration of their meaning, the albums actually safeguarded a large part of the records we have today." D. BIGAZZI, *Gli archivi fotografici e la storia dell'industria*, in «Archivi e imprese», n. 8, July-December 1993, p. 16.

¹³ On the system of selection and reassembling of the photographic records in relation to the aims of a company Bigazzi said: "[Photographs] are far from being independent and objective testimonies of companies' vicissitudes. In fact, they seem to be more reluctant than written records to give us the information we seek. First of all, we must not underestimate the selection process of industrial photography. The first stage immediately follows the production and consists of deciding which images are most effective for advertising a product, illustrating commemorative volumes, showing the stages of manufacturing on technical prints, and so on. These images have a different future: some of them are used only once, while others are used in more than one occasion. Sometimes they become symbols, and remain so even after the product or the stage of production they depict becomes obsolete; there are other cases in which images created with a specific aim, after a few years become symbols. The symbols of the company express the values that the company wishes to embed in time,

Once the relevant containers were identified, our project team began to study and quantify their contents. First, we were able to confirm the arrangement of the records according to subject (rather than author or chronological order). As it can happen in these cases, in each container we found images on different media with similar themes.

This analysis was essential to identify the photographs of some interest for the project as opposed to the mere copies. Having examined 5.700 media (1.600 of which were copies of the same image), we chose those to be catalogued. If the selected images were on other media, we conditioned them separately.

Our priority was to catalogue each record and to reassemble the albums as a single record. Consequently, the photographs were not considered as separate assets, but as parts of a wider history. For this reason, one of the most relevant factors during the cataloguing was the position of the each photograph in the container, so that it was possible to reconstruct it in every moment even after its dismantling during the conditioning. The indexes of the images (in which we found the number of inventory of the negative, the subject, the author and, occasionally, the confidentiality of the photographs) created in the past by the company were extremely important even if they sometimes did not match the real situation due to later rearrangements. These lists also contained captions regarding the photographed object, allowing a better retracing if there were no other indications. Frequently, these captions had been crossed out and other captions stuck on the *back* of the photographs—they were used to identify the subjects.

We found many copies of a single photograph printed in different periods and sometimes preserved on the same page of the album; in other cases, in several containers with the same or a similar subject. In order to choose the photograph to catalogue we created a “handbook-guide” with the criteria of selection (physical preservation of the media, synchronicity of the media with the photograph, authors’ stamps, and so on).

To accomplish this, we had to reorganize the containers – in particular the albums – according to the order begun in the 1970s, which could be traced on their spine or on their top cover. In this way, we recreated the succession of records series, which allowed us to compare the records more systemically and precisely. The results of this work will be soon available on the website of the Regione Lombardia <http://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/>.

This reconstruction of a small part of the fond is being extended to the entire photographic fond, thanks to the launching of a new project with the financial support of the Regione Lombardia. Thus it will be possible to have a more complete overview which will make it possible to link each unit (the container) to a precise series¹⁴. Finally, along with the Parco, Edison and the Regione Lombardia, we are working to find consultation and valorization systems of the cataloguing carried out up to now, so that the fond becomes accessible to the scientific community. This is an important step, as it is the realization of the agreement signed by the parties; that is, the sharing of cultural assets in a non-commercial field.

even when there are changes in the technical procedures or the organization.” D. BIGAZZI, *Gli archivi fotografici e la storia dell’industria*, in «Archivi e imprese», n. 8, July-December 1993, pages 11-12.

¹⁴ A general indication of this archival division was given by the colors of the containers (for example green: industrial plants; blue: foreign plants; red: plants for the manufacturing of plastic products; grey: leading personalities; and so on) but with this new stage of our work, we are verifying the usefulness of this division.