

**¹SEPIADES: one but not the same:
Unifying the diversity of Europe's visual memory**
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Abstract:

The advent of digitisation has placed new demands on keepers of photographic collections. In today's information society easy search-and-retrieval of information is considered a basic requirement, and cultural institutions are expected to play their parts as information providers. With the increasing amount of unauthorized and unreliable information presented on the Internet, memory institutions, more than ever before, have a responsibility as trusted guardians of authentic materials.

As a growing number of institutions use their imagebases to present their photographic collections on the Internet, in some cases including services for providing duplicates to customers, it is primarily the quality of the descriptions that determines the success or failure of the digitisation project. Web presentations rely primarily on existing catalogue entries for their search-and-retrieval, and in the process of creating a web site the weaknesses and gaps in the catalogue come to light. It appears all too often that new catalogue entries have to be made from scratch, or existing entries have to be thoroughly corrected and standardized. In many digitisation projects the work required for providing proper captions turns out to have been underestimated in the original planning. In the end, work on descriptions consumes a substantial part of project time.

A catalogue is the backbone of a collection in more ways than one. The importance of investing in high-quality catalogue records can hardly be overestimated. Creating and maintaining such a catalogue requires a considerable investment of both staff and resources. How to improve the quality of catalogues for photographic collections while keeping the work involved within bounds was the central issue for the Safeguarding European Photographic Images for Access (SEPIA)¹, Working Group on Descriptive Models.¹

When SEPIA started in 1999, the general picture was that institutions used a great many different descriptive models to catalogue their photographic collections, that they were facing huge backlogs in describing photographs, that standardisation was largely absent, and knowledge about identification of photographic processes limited.¹ The working group, consisting of photo cataloguing experts from museums, archives and libraries in Sweden, Norway, Spain, and Finland, developed a model to describe photo collections called SEPIADES, which was published at the end of 2003.¹ It allows multilevel description of both digital and analogue photos. SEPIADES offers a wide variety of elements to describe photographic collections and exchange records with others. The software tool that has been developed on the basis of the recommendations is a Java/xml tool that allows import from and export to Dublin Core. Another way to share records is configuring the tool as a OAI-PMH¹ data provider.

SEPIADES is not meant to be a strict, rigid model. Although it includes a large number of elements, only a few of them are regarded as absolutely essential and could be called 'mandatory'. The others have been listed and defined so as to provide users with suggestions for coping with a specific area of description or documentation that they may want to focus on. There are, for instance, large sets of elements available for technical identification, physical characteristics and damage

assessment, but these are by no means 'mandatory'. Their purpose is to offer guidance for those interested in detailing these aspects of their collections.

SEPIADES aims to unify the diversity of photo catalogues, not by forcing it into one format, but by using the richness of this diversity. It has been programmed in non-proprietary software to enable institutions to connect it to their existing standard descriptive models.
