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## The Johannes Felbermeyer Collection at the Getty Research Institute

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# The Johannes Felbermeyer Collection at the Getty Research Institute

## **Abstract**

A version of a presentation at the annual College Art Association conference in Los Angeles (February 2012) given as part of the VRA affiliate session.

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

I'd like to thank my colleague Tracey Schuster who co-presented on the VRA panel with me for her support, guidance, and unmatched Photo Archive expertise.

In 1985, the Getty Research Institute dialogued with the Fototeca Unione, at the American Academy in Rome, regarding possible acquisitions of photographic material. Of particular interest, was the archive of Johannes Felbermeyer, photographer for the Academy. At the time, Felbermeyer who was rather elderly, lived humbly in a small Rome apartment while retaining an office and darkroom at the school where he was known as a gentle man with a deep love for Italy and India and a soft spot for stray cats. A Roman at heart, Felbermeyer died in the eternal city in 1988.



*Archive photograph of Johannes Felbermeyer (Photographer unknown)*

Four years later, the Getty Research Institute acquired Felbermeyer's archive totaling approximately 10,500 photographic prints and 20,000 negatives. According to those who worked with him, the scope and organization of the archive was totally "in [Felbermeyer's] head". After unpacking the archive, the Photo Study Collection staff, in addition to leveraging their own knowledge of the materials, contacted scholars who knew him in order to catalog and arrange it.<sup>1</sup>

Letters exchanged between the photo archivists and scholars piece together a "snapshot" of Felbermeyer's life story. For example, an archivist received the following warm reply from Emeline Richardson, an archaeologist and scholar who worked and traveled extensively with Felbermyer:

"Thank you very much for the handlist [sic]; I don't wonder you were daunted when you first unpacked the collection. Johannes [Felbermeyer] had his systems, but he never explained them... He knew his way around

his stuff, but it must have taken a deep core of archaeological research for you and the Getty to make sense of it...”<sup>2</sup>

Born in Munich in 1903, Felbermeyer, was educated as an engineer, later embracing photography as his profession. From 1929 to 1938, he was in Rome as the official photographer to renowned archaeologist Ernst Ludwig Curtius, Director of the German Archaeological Institute.

After World War II, Felbermeyer was working in Germany as the chief photographer at the Allied Forces’ Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section’s Central Collecting Point in Munich, where over one million artworks that had been confiscated by the Third Reich were inventoried, photographed, and ultimately repatriated. The GRI holds about 700 of Felbermeyer’s photographs from the MCCA documenting the people involved and about 500 photographs of European paintings and sculptures of known and unknown provenance.<sup>3</sup>



*Auguste Rodin’s Burghers of Calais recovered from a forest at the Central Collecting Point, Munich (Johannes Felbermeyer). The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (89.P.4)*



*Art racks inside the M CCP (Johannes Felbermeyer) The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (89.P.4)*

The photographs are complemented by letters in the collection's research files to the photo archivists from the likes of former Getty Trustee, Otto Wittmann, who worked for the OSS (now the CIA) during the war tracking looted artworks and was still in contact with several M CCP staff pictured in Felbermeyer's photographs.<sup>4</sup> Wittmann put the Photo Archive in touch with other prominent MFAA figures such as S. Lane Faison who wrote several reports on for the Art Looting Investigation committee of the OSS and served as the Director of the M CCP from 1950-51. For example, Wittmann connected archivist Katherine McIver with Lane Faison, other officers who were involved in collecting point operations, and other notable scholars in a 1990 memorandum:

“I telephoned Lane Faison on April 6. I gave him your name and he would be glad to hear from you... he said you might also want to get in touch with Craig Smythe [sic]... and also Charles Parkhurst... Faison also said that there was a Mrs. [Lynn] Nichols who is a private scholar working with Carter Brown, Director of the National Gallery in Washington. He said she is working on some aspect of the restitution of works of art...”<sup>5</sup>

McIver wrote to Faison, and received the following response regarding the photographs in the Getty's Felbermeyer collection:

“I told Otto I gave all of my papers to the National Gallery of Art about 1 ½ years ago... I suspect you have all of the photos I have – or had. I gave photos of works of art (primarily Goering collection) to the Clark Art Institute (where you could see them). [...] I told Otto you should get in touch with a Mrs. [Lynn] Nicholas. [She is] working on a book on the whole history of German/Nazi art collecting /looting and subsequent repatriation.”

Wittmann and Faison’s letters communicate an open, enthusiastic tone and they provided the Photo Archive with numerous contacts and research leads regarding the activities of the OSS, MFAA and the MCCP. This sense of optimism is visible in the photographs at the Getty Research Institute – especially where MCCP personnel are pictured.

Author and scholar Lynn H. Nicholas visited the Getty Research Institute in 1990 to study Felbermeyer’s MCCP photographs ultimately requesting several for publication in her resulting book: *The Rape of Europa : the fate of Europe's treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*.<sup>6</sup> During her visit, Nicholas shared information with photo archivist Cynthia Hoyt-Grimes – McIver was traveling. Nonetheless, Nicholas connected with McIver via post and sent her copies of sample pages from Erika Hanfstaengl’s diaries which were intended to possibly shed some light on the organization of the photographs.<sup>7</sup> Many of the Felbermeyer photographs in the MCCP collection have been identified on their verso; however, most have not been identified. Nonetheless, the Felbermeyer collection forms an important part of the GRI’s Holocaust Era resources.<sup>8</sup>

In 1949, Felbermeyer returns to Rome for good as the official photographer for the American Academy. The majority of Felbermeyer’s collection focuses on photographic documentation of Greek, Roman, and particularly Etruscan archaeological sites and antiquities. Photographs are grouped by subject, noting the scholar’s name who commissioned the images. Major commissions were carried out for scholars Axel Boethius, Larissa Bonfante, Otto Brendel, J.J. Deiss, Hugh Hencken, Anne Laidlaw, Anna Marguerite McCann, Emeline H. Richardson, Gisela M.A. Richter, and Arthur Steinberg.

According to Emeline Richardson, an Academy scholar who traveled frequently with Felbermeyer, his documentation of archaeological sites and especially of ancient artworks in remote provincial museums throughout Italy was original and important because many of the artifacts he documented had never been photographed or published – as these small institutions did not have the resources to produce a catalog. Richardson recounts traveling with Felbermeyer to museums in Arezzo, Cortona, Perugia, and Volterra. Richardson corresponded several times with the Photo Archive providing insight and edits to the organization of the archive’s content when needed. Felbermeyer’s work was routinely praised warmly by numerous Fellows in their resulting publications, and he often received author credit for his illustrations.<sup>9</sup> Totalling 83 libraco boxes of over 10,000 prints both in color and black-and-white, the photographs he created to support Academy scholarship form an important cornerstone in the antiquities section of

the GRI's Photo Archive. Lastly, Felbermeyer published articles on his own, establishing himself as an archaeologist in his own right.



*Inside a tomb at Cerveteri, Italy (Johannes Felbermeyer) The Getty Research Institute (89.P.4)*

The GRI's Felbermeyer photographs and Johannes Felbermeyer himself illustrate a unique relationship between a photographer, or imaging scientist, and art historians – art history for that matter – and point to how photography added enormously to the value of scholarship and art historical documentation. The collection's arrangement reflects this intersection; however, much of this information is limited to notations on physical containers. Felbermeyer's CCP images are now available through the GRI's Digital Library.

Virtual access across all catalogued areas of the GRI's Photo Archive can be searched simultaneously through the Photo Archive Database.<sup>10</sup> Adding more information to these records about the origins of the photographs, e.g. the photographers, photographic techniques and formats, would allow the collection to transcend its role as a secondary resource for art historical research into a primary collection for the study of photography and how it presented art historians with new avenues of investigation. It is our hope that in coming years, these archives will extend their reach to scholars and all researchers through digitization and encourage discoveries through social networking and other opportunities for digital discovery, analysis, and collaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Felbermyer collection, see the Getty Research Institute's library catalog records for the Felbermeyer Collection of antiquities and art in Italy (acc.no. 89.P.4): <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cat375151> and the Felbermeyer photographs for the Central Collecting Point, Munich: <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cat375151>. The MCCP photographs have been digitized and are part of the GRI's digital collections. For access visit: <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/89p4b73b75>

<sup>2</sup> *Emeline Richardson to Cynthia Walsh, December 3, 1993*. Letter. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (89.P.4). Emeline Richardson was also the sister-in-law of Getty Trustee Otto Wittmann who worked for the Office of Strategic Services during World War II tracking artworks across Europe. Getty photo archivists were likely put in touch with Richardson via Wittmann.

<sup>3</sup> The German Historical Museum produced the Database on the Munich Central Collecting Point through which property cards and photographs can be searched: <http://www.dhm.de/datenbank/ccp/>. At the MCCP, Felbermeyer was assisted by Magnum photographer Herbert List (1903-1975). List's biography can be found on his estate's website at: <http://herbert-list.com/>

<sup>4</sup> A Harvard graduate, Otto Wittmann, Jr. was the Director of the Toledo Museum of Art and a Getty Trustee from 1979-1989. He acted as the J. Paul Getty Museum's Chief Curator from 1980-1983. He was named a Trustee Emeritus in 1989. He died in 2001. See: Oliver, Myrna. "Otto Wittmann, Helped Guide Getty." *Los Angeles Times* July 26, 2001, p. B12 and Sorensen, Lee. "Otto Wittman, Jr." *Dictionary of Art Historians* (website). [www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/wittmanno.htm](http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/wittmanno.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Wittmann, Otto Jr. *Otto Wittmann to Katherine McIver, April 9, 1990*. Memorandum. From the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (89.P.4). Wittmann is referring to Craig Hugh Smyth.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas, Lynn H. *The Rape of Europa : the fate of Europe's treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> "Erica Hofstaengl" in the GRI's library catalog record is likely Erika Hanfstaengl. Dr. Hanfstaengl was the record keeper at the MCCP during Felbermeyer's time there.

<sup>8</sup> The Getty Research Institute. *Holocaust Era Research Resources*. [http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/guides\\_bibliographies/holocaust\\_provenance.html](http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/guides_bibliographies/holocaust_provenance.html) (Accessed, February 12, 2012)

<sup>9</sup> See publications such as: Laidlaw, Anne. *The First Style in Pompei: painting and architecture*. Rome: G. Bretschneider, 1985.

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/photo/index.html>