

Cite this article: Carolin Görgen, “Californian Women Photographers in the US Archival Landscape: Toward a More Inclusive History of American Photography,” in “Toward a More Inclusive Digital Art History,” special section, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.12824>.

Californian Women Photographers in the US Archival Landscape: Toward a More Inclusive History of American Photography

Carolin Görgen, Associate Professor of American Studies, Université Paris-Sorbonne

My digital art history project traces the contributions and archival legacies of Californian female photographers around 1900. In this period, photography became an increasingly accessible practice; simultaneously, California emerged as the eminent cultural symbol of the American West. Although the region was home to the largest photo community in the country—the four-hundred-member-strong California Camera Club (CCC)—scholarship has tended to frame this history as a succession of male “master” photographers. This canonic narrative has marginalized the disproportionately large number of women photographers (twice the national average!)¹ active in the camera club, as well as their archival legacies.

Based on a dataset I created of the CCC’s fifty most productive members, my project aims to visualize the exhibition work of female club members during their lifetimes as well as their current preservation in US photo archives. The data is drawn from exhibition catalogues, the club’s periodical *Camera Craft*, as well as regional archives consulted over the course of four years. The selection of members in the dataset reflects the gender ratio of the CCC around 1900, when women represented some 20 percent of the total. Since the CCC practiced exclusionary policies toward the state’s minority populations—notably Black, Asian American, and Indigenous—the data can only integrate the contributions of the Bay Area’s European American circle. Unfortunately, it does not take into consideration works produced by people of color outside of this network (for whom very few records survive).

In the 1900s, as the club sought recognition amid the fine arts, members launched a series of salons (fig. 1). The first three in this series, hosted between 1901 and 1903, represented an unprecedented exhibition opportunity for western women photographers. Over the course of two years, their numbers steadily rose, from 10 percent in 1901 to almost 33 percent by 1903. This count reflects the tenor of both periodicals and correspondence of the time. We can observe an overall decline in salon participation by the mid-1910s, due to the dispersal of first-generation membership—that is, photographers who had been active since the 1890s and gradually abandoned the group. Nevertheless, the *proportion* of female contributors grew steadily. Notably, by the time of the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, for every four male photographers exhibiting, there were three female club members.

Going forward, I want to expand my dataset and data visualizations both chronologically and geographically with data from the next generation of California women photographers. By the 1920s, a set of prolific practitioners, such as Imogen Cunningham and Laura Gilpin,

showed their work up and down the West Coast with a variety of photography clubs. Data from this later moment in time will allow me to trace whether the upward trajectory in the share of women photographers participating in exhibitions persisted. I also want to extend my dataset to gather information about the number of female photographers taking on positions as salon organizers or photo-journal editors.

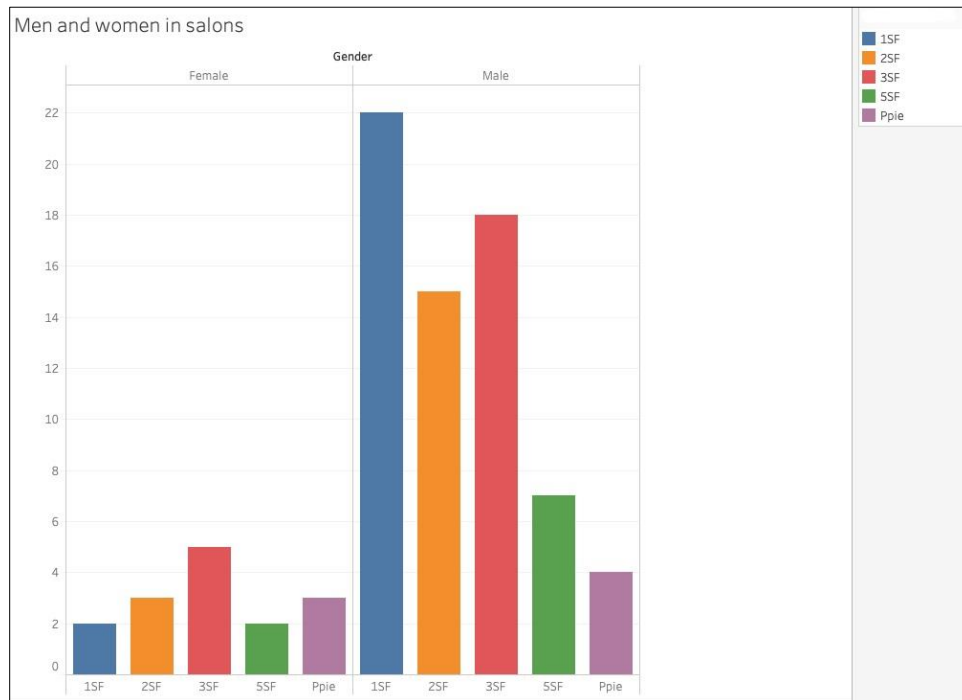


Fig. 1. Men and women in salons. 1SF = First San Francisco Photographic Salon, 1901; 2SF = Second San Francisco Photographic Salon, 1902; 3SF = Third San Francisco Photographic Salon, 1903; 5SF = Fifth San Francisco Photographic Salon, 1916 (NB: the fourth San Francisco salon did not take place); PPIE = Pictorial Salon at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, 1915

As this research is rooted in regional archives, the project also explores the archival repercussions of female production. To what extent is the constant growth of female photo work around 1900 represented in collecting institutions? Figure 2 provides a glimpse into this ongoing research, which currently confirms two of my hypotheses. First, the overall archival presence of male club members is much larger than that of female photographers, whose work oftentimes is recorded only in the contemporaneous literature and not extensively preserved in photography archives nor discussed in later literature. Second, while the overall archival presence of western women is low, there are exceptions to this pattern in the two archival collections that hold the greatest variety of club materials—the Bancroft Library at Berkeley and the Beinecke Library at Yale. While, on the whole, CCC materials are scarce, and women tend to be underrepresented, the two institutions that hold larger troves confirm the club’s gender ratio and reflect the broader impact of women: at the Beinecke Library, almost half of the collected materials come from women (especially thanks to the Peter Palmquist Collection), and at the Bancroft Library they amount to almost 25 percent of the CCC’s overall presence. In the future, my inventory would benefit from data in archival collections beyond the two coasts, notably the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, which is home to significant collections of later women photographers, notably Laura Gilpin.

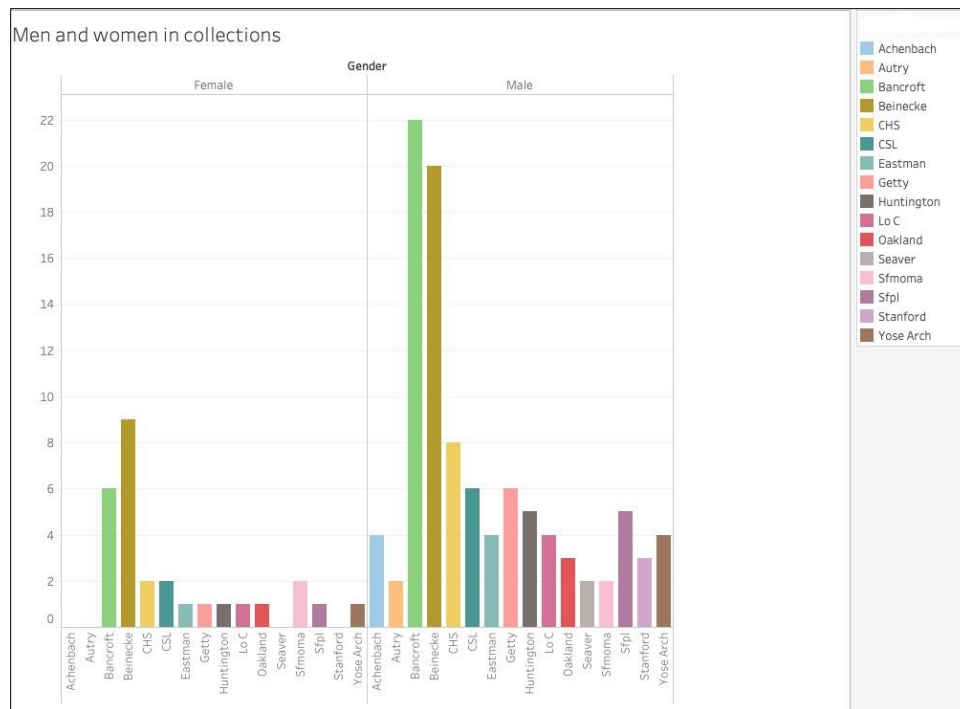


Fig. 2. Men and women in collections. Collecting institutions, right column, in alphabetical order: Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Legion of Honor Museum, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles; Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; California Historical Society, San Francisco; California State Library, Sacramento; George Eastman House, Rochester; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens; Library of Congress; Oakland Museum of California; Seaver Center for Western Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; San Francisco Public Library; Stanford University Special Collections and University Archives; Yosemite Archives, National Park Service

As part of an ongoing project, the data visualizations presented here have helped me envision my corpus on a new scale. Assembling the mass of material in a spreadsheet and analyzing it with Tableau software has brought to light some of the striking lacunas of photo-historical research, notably regarding the archival absence of female camera club members. At the same time, visualizing the proportional contributions of women and men has allowed me to trace membership trends over an extended period and to understand the CCC’s social dynamics. I am eager to continue to use these methods to analyze these trends over a broader time scale and in other areas of photographic activity, like editorial work.

Notes

¹ The average female membership in US camera clubs was 7.6 percent in the 1890s; see Margaret Denny, “Catherine Weed Barnes Ward: Advocate for Victorian Women Photographers,” *History of Photography* 36, no. 2 (2012): 160. The CCC roll call listed at least 15 percent women during that period, and the number continued to grow in the 1900s.

