

Mulberry Archive

Data Chigholashvili, 2023

Mulberry Archive

As if time was slowly passing there – I often have this feeling when I start going through archival photographs. As I look closely and gather information about images, they gradually start to animate in my mind. The diverse photo material of the State Silk Museum, as well as its other objects, can be explored in many directions. However, without considering the museum's history and specificity, their in-depth analysis becomes a challenge. Hence, I decided to talk about the photo collection of sericulture by interconnecting one of its subcategories, photos of mulberry trees, and a specific exhibition space of the museum. This essay consists of three symbolic parts – root, trunk, and crown – wherein I link selected visual material, fragments of the museum's history, and parts of my research to discuss the layers of museum photographs.

Those who have been at the Silk Museum will be more familiar with early photographs, taken around the verge of the 19th and 20th centuries. Before the ongoing rehabilitation works at the museum, these pictures were presented as part of the permanent exhibition, or at temporary shows. The photo collection also includes glass plate negatives that are mostly from the 1930s-1950s and are relatively less known for now. The works implemented in the previous few years made it possible to see and use their digital versions. I will mostly refer to this material, however, I cannot omit the museum's photos from other categories. This also includes the group of images captured approximately during the 1960s-1980s, which are the most under-researched at the moment.

Root



SP6362

Time was slowly passing there – I often had such a feeling inside the Silk Museum’s so-called Mulberry Room that was at the end of the main exhibition hall. Mulberry leaves are the main food for silkworms, and this room was dedicated to mulberry cultivation, a field connected to sericulture. I also considered this space as a smaller-scale representation of the overabundant museum, allowing me to rest and think while exploring. Compared to the main hall, this room had more light as well. Daylight created an interesting atmosphere in the room with a “faded” tonality. I always felt like it lacked colors, which is not surprising considering the museum objects that used to be there – herbaria, parts of trees, roots, black and white photographs, etc.

Similar to the main hall, this room also included images from the above mentioned earlier group. Because of their oldness and aesthetics, they might be directly called ethnographic photographs. This would be fair, however, it also poses many questions such as – What is an ethnographic photo? How can we analyze and present such material in a museum?

This is often discussed in visual anthropology, which generally speaking, can imply an anthropological study of visual manifestations (e.g. art, architecture, or textile) of societies and cultures, and/or representing knowledge about them through visual forms (e.g. film or photography), and at the same time – discussions on connections between art and science.¹ David MacDougall starts talking about the role of visual in anthropology by discussing an

¹ See:

Banks, M. and Morphy, H., eds. 1997. *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Banks, M. and Ruby, J., eds. 2011. *Made to Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

earlier and very problematic topic of the discipline. He mentions the colonial practice when indigenous people from research locations were brought for “illustrative” purposes at Western exhibition venues. Later this was replaced by visual material with an expectation to show research contexts, however, according to the author, a paradox emerged – visual material showed a lot, indicated cultures, but at the same time, was not able to represent them, in reality, did not say much, hence, at the museums it became a metaphor of anthropology.²

It is interesting how this metaphorical understanding of visuals can relate to the photo material preserved at the Silk Museum. For this purpose, I should mention key moments from its early history. Today’s State Silk Museum was part of the Caucasian Sericulture Station. It was established in the Caucasus region by the initiative of the Russian Empire in 1887. Located in Tbilisi, on the left bank of the Mtkvari River, it was a research and educational complex consisting of 23 buildings.³ The station worked in different fields of sericulture. Apart from the museum and the library, it had laboratories, buildings of various functions, and nurseries. The station’s employees also used to organize expeditions in the Caucasus region. This is where many of the earlier photographs come from, the majority of which were taken by photographer Konstantin Zanis. These images have diverse themes and propose discussions on topics between ethnographic and artistic, documentary and staged. I will come back to this a bit later when talking about the photos of mulberry trees.

When reviewing the historical context, a key aspect should be mentioned as it shows an additional layer of this scientific and research institution. The museum’s library preserves early publications by the Sericulture Station. These are detailed accounts of its work, demonstrating the history of this establishment. The issue of 1892 is about the first five years of the station’s work. In the introduction, we read about the attempts of the Russian Empire to develop sericulture. Here we also find a review of similar establishments in Western Europe and information on founding the station in the Caucasus.⁴ Silk production was important for expanding the economy. Therefore, we can think that developing the imperial station and its network in the Caucasus region served the collection of knowledge, which itself was to support the production and the empire. The understanding of these photographs and material will be insufficient without considering the imperial power and layers of hierarchy. This knowledge can help us to differently interpret museum objects – for example, in the case of this early photograph, where the “guardian of a mulberry nursery”

² MacDougall, D., 1997. The Visual in Anthropology. In: M. Banks and H. Morphy, eds. 1997. *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp.276-295.

³ For more information see the [website](#) of the State Silk Museum.

⁴ Труды Кавказской шелководственной станции. Томъ VI. - Выпускъ 1. *Обзоръ пятилѣтія организаціи и дѣятельности Кавказской шелководственной станции* [Reviewing Five Years of Organization and Activities of the Caucasian Sericulture Station]. Тифлисъ, 1892.

looks anxious, which besides the camera's unfamiliarity, talks about additional layers of subordination.



SP1064

In the 20th century, the silk industry developed very actively in Georgia. At this time, the Russian Empire had ceased to exist, however, Georgia was under another dominant power, the central regime of the Soviet Union. The Caucasian Sericulture Station's name and scale were gradually changing. During the last decade of the 20th century, the massive silk industry of Georgia collapsed due to the economic crisis and never managed to resume. Only two buildings of the research complex survived. One of them is the State Silk Museum,⁵ which functions since 2006. It is currently undergoing rehabilitation works and the objects are temporarily wrapped.

The last time I was in the Mulberry Room, one object was not covered yet, perhaps because of its size and complexity – from the ceiling to the floor mulberry roots are installed next to soil samples. On its label, we read: "... planted in 1930. ... Uprooted in 1934 by the institute's soil scientist G. Aleksidze."⁶ Supposedly, this is the root that scientist G. Aleksidze is holding in the picture at the beginning of this subchapter, however, we do not know much about this image yet. When I started going through the photo collection, I was immediately intrigued by this photograph – the person dressed in white clothes is almost invisible on the white

⁵ Other than the museum, the former employees' house remains, which currently consists of privately owned apartments and spaces. The architect of both buildings is [Aleksander Szymkiewicz](#). Today they are listed as monuments of cultural heritage.

⁶ This object, as well as the Mulberry Room, the museum's exhibition hall and library can be seen in the [virtual reality documentation](#), which was made before commencing the rehabilitation works.

background, and the root is in focus. I discovered another important aspect after carefully observing and researching the group of photos showing mulberry trees and people.

Trunk



SP6003



SP6005

From the museum's photo collection, I selected up to 130 photographs that show people with mulberry trees.⁷ A big part of them is in the collection of glass plate negatives, where we find rather similar shots as well. For example, in addition to the two images above, there are a few more from the same series, which are like animation if you go through them fast enough. Photographing people by the trees has another function of showing the scale, pointing at the sizes of trees by human bodies – in the earlier photos we find people with relatively bigger trees, then in the nurseries, sometimes they are working there (or they are demonstrating the process), sometimes they are just standing, afterward they are holding measuring tools.



SP6048



SP6085

⁷ In the framework of "The Whole Life. Archives & Imaginaries" congress (HKW, Berlin, Germany), "They Are There, Sometimes" was an event including this direction of my research and a presentation by artist Nino Kvrivishvili about her practice, which concluded by a public talk concerning the topics between our research and approaches. The recording and details of the event can be seen on this [link](#).



SP6034



SP6209



SP6119

When discussing the complex role of photography in anthropology, Elizabeth Edwards introduces three thematic categories. In one of them – “questions of evidence,” approximately covering the period during the 1890s-1970s – she also discusses the topic of posing in photos. Here we read that sometime until mid 20th century, the realistic understanding of photography created an illusion in anthropology that images represented the experience of fieldwork. Edwards questions the dichotomous division of natural and staged and mentions – *“In the early period, pose and reenactment have to be understood as a form of scientific demonstration in which replication is itself part of the evidential system.”*⁸ If we see these photos from this perspective – and not simply as proof of reality or staged shots, as they do not belong to just one unequivocally – it is already interesting what such posing and visual representation of information can show us.

The images of mulberry trees demonstrate yet another layer of power – a human attempt to dominate nature. This is not uncommon in sericulture. Here we can even remember the fact that the silk moth (*Bombyx mori*) is a domesticated insect that cannot survive without human care. It mostly feeds on mulberry leaves. Therefore, it was important to develop species of trees that would give bigger leaves, in other words, more food for silkworms. That’s why the trees in the visual archive of sericulture start to resemble each other as if they were clones. Gradually the focus is shifting solely to mulberry trees, and humans are disappearing from pictures. If we look closely at the pictures below, in one of them (SP6249), we will see a leg of a person behind the background, otherwise, we might think that there humans are only present behind the camera. However, the mulberry tree is of interest here, the environment of which is gradually replaced by a neutral background and it turns into a museum object.

⁸ Edwards, E., 2011. Tracing Photography. In: M. Banks and J. Ruby, eds. 2011. *Made to Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp.159-189, p.165.



SP6248



SP6249



SP6077



SP6230



SP6313

We rarely find names in this collection, and when we do, it is mostly those of successful scientists or high-ranking people. Possibly, we might not find out much about other people. Later humans reappeared in the photographs of mulberry trees. Their bodies still hint at the height of trees, however, posing is more noticeable in these photos. Hence, we can think that these images were created rather for labor propaganda, which was a popular practice of the Soviet system. Here I would like to highlight the fact that the photographs of earlier or later periods, all constitute ethnographic material, and preserve the layers of respective time and lifestyle. If we see the mix of realism and posing in them, and think about the context, they will help us in an interpretative and in-depth viewing of other museum objects.



SP1335

Crown



SP6241



SP6159



SP6163

The State Silk Museum today has a complex conceptual network, where knowledge is branched in different directions. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why a lot of artists and curators were inspired here in previous years, and in parallel to its main work, the museum became an active institution in contemporary art. An example of this is a project⁹ by artists and designers that researched the Silk Museum's neighborhood, the territory that before included various buildings and nurseries of the Sericulture Station or Institute. One of the members of this project, artist Onno Dirker enthusiastically speaks about the museum, its

⁹ Project years: 2014-2018; Members: Onno Dirker, Peter Zuiderwijk, Karin Mientjes, Christian van der Kooy. See: Dirker, O. and van der Kooy, C., 2019. Mulberry Tree Route in the Didube District of Tbilisi. In: D. Chigholashvili, N. Palavandishvili, and M. Splint, eds. 2019. *Tbilisi – It's Complicated*. Eindhoven: Onomatopée, pp.89-98.

surroundings, and mulberry trees that were planted here on purpose, or grew up by chance over the years. The material from this project, colorful photos of trees in the neighborhood, or samples of colors from mulberry fruits were temporarily presented in the Mulberry Room, brought colors to the display, and added a new layer to it. This is also a visual ethnographic material of the museum, narrating the neighborhood stories from the previous years, and the urban environment that has radically changed.

When the objects of the Mulberry Room were wrapped at the commencement of the museum's rehabilitation works, there were interesting traces left on the walls. Emptiness highlighted the museum's vitrines, which were created for this exhibition space following the sketches of the building's architect Aleksander Szymkiewicz. Inspired by this environment, I created a series of events called "Without Museum Objects"¹⁰ that responded to the Silk Museum's rehabilitation period, its transitional stage, the spaces in the process of renewal, and the topics of exposition. At one of the events in 2021, we presented the works by artist Carolanne Patterson: "Cocoon Room" – a meditation space inspired by and featuring images from the Silk Museum's photo collection – was installed in the center of the exhibition hall; the Mulberry Room hosted leaves with laser-etched portraits from the collection, hinting at the fragility of museum materials and collective memory.¹¹



Carolanne Patterson's installation in the Mulberry Room, 2021.

¹⁰ The concept of the project and information on the first exhibition "Leafeaters" is available on this [link](#).

¹¹ For more information see [blog post](#): Chigholashvili, D., 2021. *Without Museum Objects: Meditation on Mulberry Trees*. <https://silkmuseumblog.ge/>

Similar to other museum objects, the glass plate negatives are also fragile. It became possible to see the images after digitizing them. I hope that the Silk Museum's collections and its new phase will continue to amaze a lot of visitors, as well as inspire many interesting works. I do not know how this material will be exhibited at the renewed museum. I also do not know how the Mulberry Room will change. I suppose that the display will essentially transform. It might be that the objects and the visual ethnographic material of various periods are rearranged in different ways, new artworks created based on these photographs, and pictures represented through technological advancements. In any case, these images cannot be seen and understood in depth without the Silk Museum's complete narrative, which is like a deep-rooted tree with an old trunk, and many branches and leaves.

Photographs from the collection of the State Silk Museum:

Names are used according to the museum's inventory. Authors and dates are provided where this information is available.

SP6362 / Givi Aleksidze showing root system on the white background.

SP1064 / A local type mulberry nursery. Azerbaijan, Astara, Shakh-Agachi village, 1895, photographer: Konstantin Zanis.

SP6003 & SP6005 / A woman and a man in the mulberry plantation, researching plantations in Lagodekhi, 1934.

SP6048 / Studying the mulberry plantations of Armenia and Azerbaijan with the participation of T. Japaridze: A man with tall trees in the background, 1930.

SP6085 / A man measuring saplings in the plantation, 1932.

SP6034 / Studying the mulberry plantations of Armenia and Azerbaijan with the participation of T. Japaridze: A man measuring the saplings, 1930.

SP6209 / A man measuring new saplings, 1936.

SP6119 / Experiments of Solomon Bezarashvili: A woman working with tall saplings with leaves, 1934.

SP6248 / Two men while making a neutral background for a sapling in a plantation.

SP6249 / A sapling in a plantation with a neutral background and a measuring tool.

SP6077 / Experiments of Solomon Bezarashvili: Three saplings in the plantation with a neutral background.

SP6230 / "Tbilisuri" species mulberry branch with leaves on a neutral background.

SP6313 / Two leafless mulberry tree trunks with roots, on a retouched background.

SP1335 / Tskhakaia [now Senaki]. The Soviet farm of bay laurel in Nosiri. 1986 mulberry grafts. (according to the label).

SP6241 / 4 people while planting saplings in a leafless nursery, 1950s.

SP6159 / A woman standing in the mulberry plantation.

SP6163 / A woman standing among the leaves in the mulberry plantation.

Carolanne Patterson's installation in the Mulberry Room / "Without Museum Objects" project, 2021. Photos: Data Chigholashvili, Carolanne Patterson.

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