

**PHOTOGRAPHY
AND FEMINIST AESTHETICS.
ITALIAN AND TRANSNATIONAL
PERSPECTIVES**

Edited by
Federica Muzzarelli
Giorgia Ravaioli



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM | DIPARTIMENTO
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA | DELLE ARTI

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SECTION I: RESEARCH, NETWORKS, AND THE
MAKING OF FEMINIST PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORIES

FOTOGRAFISTE: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON ARCHIVAL SOURCES FOR WOMEN'S WORK IN PHOTOGRAPHY¹

Linda Bertelli, Agnese Ghezzi

«[...] Silence may be a plan
rigorously executed the blueprint to a life

It is a presence
it has a history a form

Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence»

Adrienne Rich, *Cartographies of Silence*, 1975

INTRODUCTION: TIME, MEANS AND PLACES

In the 1976 issue of the journal *Sottosopra*, a short text by the Via Cherubini Feminist Groups' Collective significantly entitled *Il tempo, i mezzi e i luoghi* (Time, Means, and Places), offered a retrospective assessment of the first years of the feminist movement. The text identifies a set of elements, at once concrete and indispensable, for understanding the specific oppression of women and for transforming the social reality that produces it. Asking themselves «What do we need?», the women of Via Cherubini respond: «Stable spaces of action grounded in the absence of delegation, and continuous work capable of strengthening our bonds»² (Collettivo dei gruppi femministi di via Cherubini Milano, 1976). Certain texts, or small constellations of texts, while not directly intervening in a given field of research, nonetheless function as its conceptual

¹ This essay was jointly conceived, discussed, and developed in all its parts by the two authors, who assume equal responsibility for it. As regards the drafting of the text, the introduction and the first paragraph were written by Linda Bertelli, while the second paragraph and the conclusion were written by Agnese Ghezzi.

² When not otherwise stated, all the quotations are translated from Italians by the authors.

background, providing a dominant image that structures the work itself. *Il tempo, i mezzi e i luoghi* has become one such text, beginning with the resonance of the three signifiers articulated in its title.

During the two years of the national PRIN 2022 PNRR project «*Fotografiste. Women in Photography From Italian Archives (1839-1939)*»³, some of us have taken this opportunity to engage in a broader reflection, never ignored, but here made explicit, on what it should mean to inhabit the university, its structures and its rules, as feminists. A project that set out to reconstruct the time, means, and places available to women who sought to pursue a career in the photographic field during the medium's first century, has offered us the time, the means, and the institutional space to reflect on the conditions under which feminist practice can be sustained within academic research. This reflection exceeds the application of a feminist methodology to women's history: it entails an ongoing interrogation of our own positioning, and of the forms of responsibility, collaboration, and ways of occupying institutional spaces that such positioning demands.

At its core, the project *Fotografiste* aims to recover the identities, histories, and experiences of women who, between 1839 and 1939, worked in a wide range of roles within the photographic field. These include employees in studios or businesses directed by men; owners of photographic studios (as examined in the second part of this paper); workers in industries producing photographic materials (as discussed in Greta Plaitano's contribution to this volume); and, to a lesser extent, women who practised photography within the domestic sphere, either professionally or as amateurs. The project is situated at the intersection of the history of photography and the social history of women's labour, and deliberately shifts the focus from authorship to the professional and material dimensions of photographic work. It adopts an expanded notion of labour that encompasses both paid and domestic forms of work, in order to address the conditions, practices, and cultural frameworks through which women were able to access and to construct for themselves a career, or more broadly a working life, within the photographic sector. While attentive to the wider Italian panorama and to international comparisons, the *Fotografiste* project has concentrated primarily on Tuscany and Lombardy, which constituted the main territorial hubs of the research⁴.

As this volume demonstrates, the project emerges at the intersection of several strands

³ The project started in December 2023 and ended in February 2026, founded by the European Union - Next Generation EU. It was promoted by IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca (Principal Investigator: Linda Bertelli) and the Brera Academy of Fine Arts (Co-PI: Nicoletta Leonardi). For further information, see <https://www.fotografiste.com/> and <https://www.instagram.com/fotografiste/> last accessed January 21, 2026.

⁴ As part of the project, a relational database that offers a mapping of women working in photography across the Italian national territory has been developed.

of research developed over the past thirty years, and particularly intensified in the last decade, centred on women and photography. These include studies on women's photographic practices (Leonardi, 2001; Di Bello, 2007; Hudgins, 2020; McCormick, 2026); analyses of women's artistic representation and self-representation in photography (Muzzarelli, 2007; Perna, 2016; Lederman, Yatskevich, 2021); efforts to construct local, national and international catalogues of women photographers (Rosenblum, 1994; Johannesson, Knappe, 2004; Bouveresse 2020; Lebart, Robert, 2020); investigations into women's professional involvement in photographic labour and industries (Gębarowska, 2019; Mitchell, 2023; Di Barbora, 2025; López Beriso, 2025; Lien, Sandbye, 2026); and studies addressing the relationship between feminism and photography (Raymond, 2017; Bertelli, 2021a; Casero, 2021; Lewis, 2021; Muzzarelli, Marino, 2024). Taken together, this body of scholarship reflects not only a growing interest in the subject, but also a sustained effort to move beyond isolated case studies, to expand the focus from single authors to broader cultural contexts, and to connect diverse national and transnational experiences⁵.

ARCHIVES, MEMORY, AND FEMINISM

One of the project's most significant methodological issues, addressed in the first part of this paper, concerns its engagement with primary sources and with archives (both photographic and non-photographic) as institutions of preservation and systems of knowledge production. This dimension is particularly crucial given that the histories and experiences of these women had to be reconstructed almost entirely from scratch. Two main questions frame this investigation, questions that, while by now classic, remain pressing. First: what does it mean to engage with standard archives, organized according to hierarchical structures that have historically marginalized certain histories and experiences, including those of women, in order to recover such data and, subsequently, to render it descriptively visible within the archive itself? Second, at a methodological level, what role does feminist historiography play in this process of emergence? How does it operate both in the technical sense of information retrieval and cataloguing, and in the interpretative and memorial sense of describing, reconstructing, and giving historical meaning to these lives and professional trajectories? In other words, how can one intervene in existing archival frameworks so as not only to extract information, but also to inscribe new forms of visibility and memory within them?

⁵ This perspective has been recently at the centre of a number of research and valorisation projects dedicated to different contexts: *What They Saw/What We See, Women Photographers in Portugal 1860-1920* (<https://womenphot.fba.up.pt/> last accessed 21 January 2026); *Behind the Camera: Gender, Power, and Politics in the History of Japanese Photography* (<https://behindthecamerajapan.arts.ubc.ca/> last accessed 21 January 2026); *Fotografia Arte Femminismi* (<https://site.unibo.it/fotografia-femminista-italiana/it> last accessed 21 January 2026); *Fast Forward* research project and network (<https://fastforward.photography/> last accessed 21 January 2026).

In the Italian context, the feminist movement of the 1970s marked the beginning of a reflection on the construction of women's historical memory, and consequently on the elaboration of archives as instruments of self-representation and self-historicization. From the outset, this memory was conceived as non-linear. Conceptually, drawing here specifically on Carla Lonzi, feminism has no past on which to rely: women's oppression is, literally, historically irrecoverable, lost in the «dark past of the world» (Lonzi, 1970, p.61). Women's history is therefore marked by an «originary amnesia» (Passerini, 1990, p.46), a condition that also shapes feminist archival practices, which were never conceived as producing a cumulative or linear image of the past. Linked to this concept of amnesia is Lonzi's further idea of the present as the constitutive temporal dimension of feminism (Lonzi, 1970). It is the present that describes, temporally, the gesture that erases previous experiences in order to respond to a need for innovative rupture, breaking the monologue of patriarchal history. Within this framework, feminist historiography does not seek to reconstruct a continuous narrative, but rather to intervene critically in the very conditions under which the past, the present, and the future become thinkable. We must recognize and valorize that this history is built primarily on perishable, non-monumental traces, on what Lonzi evocatively called «gestures made of air» (Lonzi, 1978, p.767). It is precisely these traces, which can only appear in the form of fragments, that we must set out to recover.

Starting in the 1980s and 1990s, a significant debate emerged in Italy around the writing of women's history from the perspective of women's own subjectivity, that is, without eliding the perishable and fragmentary elements that constitute its very fabric. One of the earliest publications in this field was produced by the *Società Italiana delle Storiche*, founded in 1989 «out of the need to create a coordination among women engaged in historical research in Italy, both within academic institutions and outside them» (Palazzi, Scattigno, 1990, n.p.). As stated at the beginning of the volume «One of the defining elements of the Society's project is the adoption of female subjectivity as a foundation of knowledge» (Palazzi, Scattigno, 1990, n.p.). This theoretical and historiographical debate was closely intertwined with reflections on documentary practice: the collection, preservation, and re-ordering of the materials produced by the feminist movement. Across many Italian cities, archives dedicated to the movement were established (more precisely referred to as Documentation Centers) which functioned not only as repositories but also as laboratories for developing archival techniques suited to constructing the memory of the women's movement, as well as research methodologies for analysing and valorising its sources.

In searching for appropriate systems of classification, historians and activists soon realised that existing archival and bibliographic standards had failed to incorporate the epistemological shifts introduced by feminist thought within disciplinary knowledge (De Lorenzo, 2020/2021). The issue was not merely technical, but structural: how could

women's experiences be made retrievable within systems that had not been designed to recognise them? Among the initiatives emerging from this context, two project stands out for their methodological and conceptual importance. The first, *Soggetto donna*, is a bibliographic repertory developed in 1985 by the *Centro Documentazione Donna* in Pisa (Baldacci, Biagioni, 1985). This project addressed the problem of situating texts on women within bibliographic repertoires, raising fundamental questions regarding subject indexing, classification, and the visibility of women's writing within scholarly and public knowledge systems. The second, perhaps more relevant for our project, is *Linguaggiodonna* (1991), created within the *Centro di studi storici sul movimento di liberazione della donna*, today Fondazione Badaracco, in Milan [FIG. 1]. It is a thesaurus built from the lexicon of feminist documents produced between 1965 and 1989, which did not adapt pre-existing documentary tools but instead constructed a new vocabulary grounded in the words and categories used by women in their texts and political practices. Its five principal connectors (body, culture, work, politics, reproduction) map the central areas of feminist experience and conflict, with the explicit aim of rendering transmissible a memory otherwise destined to remain marginal. *Linguaggiodonna* introduced what was explicitly conceived as a gendered gaze, interrogating «what problems do current documentary languages pose for those who start from the recognition of two distinct subjects, men and women, with different experiences and life perspectives» (Perrotta Rabissi, Perucci, 1990, p.15).

Fotografiste inherits and simultaneously studies this tradition, focusing on two aspects that derive directly from it. The first concerns the methodologies for interrogating standard archives, understanding, as in the case of *Soggetto donna*, the organizational dynamics of archival systems that have perpetuated the marginalization of women's experiences, and thus, linked to this, the ways in which information on these invisible subjects can be retrieved. The second concerns how to organize such information and data: as with *Linguaggiodonna*, it requires reflecting on a language that emerges from the recovered documents and the subjectivity of these women, as well as developing methods for reconstructing extremely fragmented histories, regularly infiltrated by silence. In the next minutes, we will present a single case study, to show how we have sought to «give shape to silence», to use the expression of historian Anna Rossi-Doria (2007).

FRAGMENTED STORIES

We have so far outlined the historical and theoretical background that, in Italy, created the conditions for the emergence of women's stories and histories, as well as the deep connection between this emergence and practices of archiving, labelling, and naming. In this second part, we aim to illustrate some of the concrete and material implications of these historiographical issues by examining one case studies that has strongly influenced

and shaped our research project and one of our earliest encounters in the archive with women photographers: the Marsini sisters. Despite their significant activity as owners of photographic studios and as professional photographers, reconstructing their careers proves difficult due to the fragmentary and dispersed nature of the available sources. To make visible not only their story but also our research process, we have chosen not to present their case as a polished historiographical narrative in which clues are seamlessly assembled and gaps are smoothed over. Instead, we unroll it through the very fragments that have shaped our work, explicitly foregrounding the challenges posed by the scattered availability of primary sources as well as by the limited and discontinuous secondary bibliography. For us, this does not represent a disengaged approach, but rather a deliberate methodological proposal: an attempt to confront and address the blank spaces that persist around figures and presences that have been historically marginalised.

The first fragment emerges from a local Exhibition of Fine Arts, Arts and Crafts (*Esposizione di Belle Arti, Arti e Mestieri*) held in Lucca in 1867. Among the prizes awarded, the jury granted the Marsini sisters an «Honourable Mention» for their portraits, which were praised for their sharpness, tonal variety, and artistic use of lighting (Società Filo-caristica Lucchese, 1867, p.14). This document provides us with both an early date for their professional activity and an indication of their specialisation in portrait photography. On this occasion, the sisters described themselves as *fotografiste*, the term that inspired our project's title. This designation differs from the expected feminine form of *fotografo* in Italian, which would be *fotografa*. According to existing historiography, the use of *fotografiste* suggests that women entering the profession lacked an established or widely recognised designation and therefore adopted alternative labels. These terms have often been interpreted as signalling a more amateur status, or at least as marking a difference from the masculine *fotografo*. This interpretation appears to be supported by the presence of other unusual forms, such as *fotografesse*, adopted by other photographers, the Angiolini sisters, who were awarded at the National Exhibition of Women's Work (*Esposizione nazionale dei lavori femminili*) held in Florence in 1871 (Finocchietti, 1871).

However, this reading is contradicted by the 1861 census of Lucca. In the summary tables listing professions in the city, organised alphabetically and divided by gender, the term *fotografisti* appears in the section dedicated to male occupations⁶. This evidence suggests that *fotografista* was neither an exception nor a specifically female neologism, but rather a commonly used term in the 1860s, at a time when photographic terminology was still fluid and in the process of consolidation. Significantly, in the same census

⁶ 1861 Population census, *Stati riassuntivi*, Archivio Storico Comunale, Lucca.

the summary table for female occupations, under the corresponding alphabetical section, does not include *fotografiste*, listing instead professions such as flower sellers, fringe makers, bakers, and fruit vendors. This discrepancy exposes a cultural expectation that has been reproduced within historiography itself: the presumed absence of women from photography has led to the assumption that women required a distinct or newly coined label in order to be recognised as practitioners. Seemingly marginal or incidental data, such as an occupation recorded in a census, can therefore bring to light contradictions within gendered expectations and destabilise interpretative frameworks. This, however, is only possible if research actively interrogates classificatory systems themselves: in the present case, consulting the male occupational lists, rather than confining the search to those designated for women, prevents the uncritical reproduction of long-standing historiographical assumptions.

Adding another fragment, the consultation of the 1861 census entry for the Marsini family provides the first information regarding their biographies and background. The father, Felice, originally from Lucca, is listed as a confectioner; the mother, Carolina, born on the island of Elba, is recorded as a housewife. Of the two daughters, the elder, Giuseppa (26), was born in Bastia, Corsica, while the younger, Emilia (15), was born in Lucca. At the time of the census, both daughters were still registered as homemakers (*donna di casa*)⁷. Although this fragment does not offer direct evidence of their activity as photographers, suggesting they were not yet professionally active in 1861, it provides valuable information about the family's social position and allows us to reflect on their economic resources. The Marsini family can be situated within the lower urban middle class, characterised by a migratory background and connected to a small-scale commercial activity in confectionery. Moreover, this source supplies two important biographical details that are often absent from other documentation: the sisters' first names, omitted in most of the sources in favour of the collective designation *Sorelle Marsini*, and their year of birth (1835 and 1846).

To better understand the origins of Giuseppa (or Giuseppina) and Emilia's photographic activity, and to reconstruct the gradual consolidation of their professional careers, we can turn to the few surviving photographic traces, which offer valuable clues about the years around 1867. A first significant indication is provided by few *cartes de visite* that, amid light decorative flourishes, bear the imprint «Sorelle Marsini – Via del Castellaccio no. 45 – Lucca» [FIG. 2]. A further handful of surviving *cartes de visite*, produced a few years later, marks a shift in the sisters' professional self-presentation. These prints bear a

7

1861 Population census, Parrocchia di Santa Maria Forisportam, box 5, folio n. 444, Archivio Storico Comunale, Lucca.

new stamp incorporating the reference to the award «Prized at the Provincial Exhibition of Lucca, 1867» and adopt a more solemn designation: *Stabilimento fotografico Sorelle Marsini* [FIG. 3]. This formula was clearly intended to present the sisters as established and publicly recognised professionals, signalling a greater degree of autonomy and stability in their activity. The imprint also records a change of address, now given as Via San Nicolao n. 591. This new location is confirmed by a handwritten letter signed by Giuseppina and Emilia Marsini. In this document, the sisters formally request authorisation from the municipal authorities, informing them that:

The undersigned will shortly open to the public a Photographic Establishment in Lucca, Via San Nicolao N. 591, for which they hereby request permission to write, in large characters, between the first and second floor of the building, both from the San Nicolao side and from the street of the Fossal Giardino, along the wall of the building itself, the following inscription: / Photographic Establishment / Marsini Sisters⁸.

The letter not only confirms the relocation of the studio, but also attests to the sisters' full assumption of professional visibility within the urban space, through their explicit request to display the establishment prominently on the building's façade. We approached this fragment with a certain degree of emotion, as it reveals the sisters' determination to make their new business unmistakably visible, advertising it through signage displayed on two different sides of the street. This affective response forms part of the archival encounter itself, where fragments of administrative records unexpectedly convey an encounter with the historical subject, supposedly marginalised but whose agency emerge from the papers. We consciously acknowledge here this emotional reaction, aware that the marginalisation of affect in archival discourse has often been tied to gendered models of knowledge production that privilege detachment and objectivity while devaluing engagement and subjectivity as feminised modes of understanding. A feminist perspective on archival materiality, however, inevitably implicates us in affective relations: we become witnesses to lives lived through hope, struggle, ambition, and constraint (Cifor, 2016).

The 1871 census records the Marsini family as residing at Via San Nicolao 591, attesting to the overlap between domestic space and professional activity⁹. A decade later, however, the changes concern not only the address but also the internal structure of the household and the sisters' professional status. In this census both Giuseppina and Emilia

⁸ *Scritture del Protocollo generale*, n. 6097, 1870, Archivio Storico Comunale, Lucca.

⁹ 1871 Population census, folder 3, folio n. 291, Archivio Storico Comunale, Lucca.

are explicitly identified as *fotografa* (photographer). Their father Felice continues to be described as a confectioner, yet he is no longer designated as head of household. This role is instead attributed to the elder daughter, Giuseppina, then thirty-six years old. Such a detail should be situated within the legal and socio-cultural framework of post-unification Italy. The 1865 Civil Code, while introducing certain measures that in some cases expanded women's rights, ultimately reaffirmed marital authority by subordinating married women's economic agency to their husbands' legal authorisation. Civil capacity was structurally tied to property, and women's access to professional autonomy was therefore mediated by family status and patrimonial arrangements. Census records from the early decades of the unified state further illuminate the ambivalent recognition of women's labour (Patriarca, 1998; Pescarolo, 2019). While women engaged in productive activities, whether as independent traders or collaborators within family enterprises, could be registered under a profession, domestic labour was excluded from formal acknowledgment. Moreover, the language through which women's work was recorded reveals an implicit hierarchy: examples overwhelmingly framed female labour as auxiliary to that of a husband or father, leaving autonomous professional practice conceptually marginal. The only unambiguously recognised form of female independence within this administrative framework concerned property ownership rather than professional identity.

When women's work is considered in relation to family status, it becomes evident that the Marsini sisters' unmarried condition played a decisive role in facilitating their professional activity, enabling them to circumvent the constraints of marital authority. As Maura Palazzi has shown, «women alone», whether single or widowed, often enjoyed greater autonomy in the management of economic resources and in the running of businesses (Palazzi, 1997). Giuseppina's designation as head of household in the 1871 census indicates that the sisters functioned as primary economic providers, supporting their elderly parents. Female heads of household were more common among the lower social strata and comparatively rare within the middle bourgeoisie or aristocracy, where the control of property and reproduction was more strictly regulated. Women's autonomy tended to be tolerated when inheritance was limited or when their reproductive role was no longer considered central to family strategies. The Marsini case reflects similar conditions: modest family property, Giuseppina's unmarried status beyond the age of thirty-five, and the absence of brothers within the household, all factors that opened a contingent space within which the sisters were able to negotiate and construct a system of economic support for themselves and their family while asserting a significant degree of professional autonomy.

Turning to the sisters' professional trajectory, their venture in Lucca proved relatively brief. By November 1873 the family had relocated to Livorno. This move, however, did

not mark a change in their professional identity. On the contrary, Giuseppina and Emilia transferred their expertise in portrait photography to the coastal city, where they opened a new studio. Their *cartes de visite* now bore the inscription: «Photographic Establishment / Marsini Sisters / Piazza d'Arme No. 1 / Livorno», as documented by surviving examples. The choice of location was far from incidental. Piazza d'Arme (today Piazza Grande) constituted the civic and symbolic heart of the city, centred around the Cathedral and surrounded by key commercial activities. Its strategic value had already been recognised by other photographers, including the Parisian Alfonso Thaust Doderò and the Bolognese Carlo Napoleone Bettini, who had established their studios in the same square. The presence of multiple photographic ateliers in this prime urban location points not only to its commercial appeal but also to the existence of a competitive and dynamic market.

Their photographic entrepreneurial activity did not end in Livorno. In 1883 their names appear in the Commercial Acts of the Florence Tribunal, announcing the establishment of a new studio in partnership with Emilio and Cesare Borgiotti, sons of Giuseppe Borgiotti, himself a photographer active in Florence¹⁰. The new premises were located in Via Nazionale, a major avenue connecting Piazza dell'Indipendenza with the Maria Antonia railway station, already known for its concentration of prominent studios, including that of the Alinari brothers. Notarial archival documents clarify the structure of the partnership. The Borgiotti brothers acted as working partners, while the Marsini sisters entered the company as capital partners, investing the considerable sum of 12,000 lire, a further evidence of their financial solidity and entrepreneurial capacity. The firm, however, was officially registered under the name *Fratelli Borgiotti*, with no reference to the sisters. In addition, the Marsinis appointed a male relative, Carlo Marsini, as their *procuratore*, entrusting him with legal representation and the role of company treasurer¹¹. This additional fragment offers a double perspective. On the one hand, it challenges the persistent stereotype of women confined to auxiliary roles, demonstrating the sisters' capacity to mobilise substantial capital and to position themselves within the competitive photographic market of central Florence. On the other hand, their financial investment did not translate into corresponding public recognition: their names were absent from the company title, and male mediation was introduced into the formal management of the enterprise. The partnership with male colleagues thus did not necessarily diminish their economic agency, but it did entail a symbolic contraction of their visibility, reflecting broader structural patterns in women's entrepreneurship in nineteenth-century Italy.

¹⁰ *Foglio degli annunci della Provincia di Firenze*, 08/01/1884, n. 3, in Tribunale di Firenze, Atti in materia di Commercio, folder 62, Archivio di Stato di Firenze.

¹¹ Private act, 21/12/1883, in Tribunale di Firenze, Atti di commercio, Atti di società, folder 62, Archivio di Stato di Firenze.

CONCLUSIONS

The trajectory of the Marsini sisters constitutes an exemplary instance of the kind of research this project seeks to pursue. Through this case, we aim to retrieve the gazes, forms of autonomy, and modes of agency of the many women who, particularly in the early decades of photography, made the medium their livelihood, expressive practice, and means of sustenance. Following these traces has required working through fragments: documents dispersed across heterogeneous archival contexts in which women photographers appear only intermittently, often in forms marked by omission or partial erasure. Our task, therefore, has been to read against the grain, venturing into archives not conventionally associated with photographic history, piecing together dispersed materials, interrogating male-authored and male-indexed records to recover traces of female subjectivities, and attending closely to the silences that structure the archival record as much as the data it preserves (Carter, 2006). This work of recovery is inseparable from a parallel reflection on documentary languages themselves: on thesauri, indexing practices, and descriptive standards that shape access to archival materials and condition the very possibility of historical reconstruction.

Concepts such as margin, void, and archival silence have thus functioned not only as elements of a feminist approach to research, but also as critical tools for questioning classificatory systems that have historically failed to register women's labour, authorship, and professional roles within photographic culture (Casella, Galasso, 2025). To reconstruct women's presence within a social history of photography, in conditions of limited visual and documentary evidence, therefore also entails intervening at the level of archival description, making visible what existing vocabularies and taxonomies have rendered secondary or invisible. We conclude with one final fragment: a simple blind stamp, devoid of business name or address, impressed on the recto of a few photographs likely dating from an earlier phase of the sisters' career, when their activity had not yet acquired a fixed commercial identity [FIG. 4]. Much like the reconstruction of their story, this first signature is neither a conspicuous ink mark nor an explicitly informative document. It is, rather, a fragile and non-monumental trace, an imprint pressed into the paper that brings into visibility, from within the materiality of the document itself, the memory and the «gestures made of air» (Lonzi, 1978; Bertelli, 2021b) of two sisters.

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FIGURE 2: Sorelle Marsini, recto, albumen print mounted on cardboard, 90×56 mm (*carte de visite*), Lucca, [pre 1867], inv. IDF 814. Courtesy Archivio Fotografico Lucchese "A. Fazzi".



FIGURE 3: Sorelle Marsini, verso, 90×56 mm (*carte de visite*), Lucca, [post 1870], inv. VAF 755. Courtesy Archivio Fotografico Lucchese "A. Fazzi".



FIGURE 4: Detail of dry stamp from Sorelle Marsini, 91×56 mm (*carte de visite*), Lucca, [pre 1867], inv. IDF 883. Courtesy Archivio Fotografico Lucchese "A. Fazzi".