

Digital representations:
encountering the past of science through digital collections

As noted by the French historian Arlette Farge, the traditional physical archive promised the privilege of touching the real of the past. No longer anchored in the materiality and physicality of things, the digital archive, instead, replaces tangible objects with their digital representations. In return, it offers unprecedented access to the past, yet also a new mode of interaction with history – a variety of possibilities for re-contextualizing, re-configuring, re-assembling, and re-modeling the past.

My paper will present some reflections toward these new affordances. I will focus on the ways in which digital collections contextualize their items by establishing links between them. By making connections, the archive not only charts the trajectories for the user and fosters information retrieval, but also gives meaning to the object by inscribing it into networks with other objects. On what grounds are these connections based: on thematic or spatial proximity, chronology, historical associations? How do they frame and situate archival artifacts? How do they shape archival architectures? And to what extent are they capable of reflecting existing historical knowledge and producing new knowledge?

These reflections will be grounded in the analysis of the corpus of one hundred and twenty collections from the history of science. The distant reading of the corpus will be complemented by some close-reading examples.