Introduction

As a Summer Reference Assistant at the Newberry Library in 2019, I assisted Reference Librarian Ana L. Lopez with processing a collection of photographic postcards. In this project, I conducted research to identify the unknown photographer(s) who produced this collection. This process combined traditional research techniques with visual analysis methods I developed as an Art History grad student.

I began the investigation with limited information about the postcards:

- The photos were taken in the Philippines and some were dated in 1916.
- The acquisition date and general provenance of the collection was unknown, but the owner of the collection was an Evangelista L. Lewis.

The photo postcard collection may have some connection to another archival collection at the Newberry: The Lloyd Lewis Papers (Lewis was Evangelista’s nephew).

Step 1: Assessing the Collection

After reviewing the 354 photo postcards in the collection, I identified patterns that suggested that these photographs were likely taken by the same photographer. I then photographed each postcard and analyzed it to identify common characteristics.

- **Visual patterns**: Each photograph usually depicted one of several themes: cityscapes, portraits, military scenes or events (like the Manila Carnival). I noted similarities in lighting, depth of field, and composition among these images.
- **Possible signature**: Several postcards had a small “S” inscribed on the front corner. I believe it was likely that this could be the photographer’s signature and the “S” may be the photographer’s last initial.
- **Handwriting**: Many of the postcards had handwritten inscriptions on the back. I transcribed the contents of the photos and the text appeared similar throughout this collection, based on the language. I believe the photographer may have written them. The handwriting had a few unique characteristics; for example, nearly all iterations of the letter “S” were uppercase in this cursive script.

Step 2: Comparing the Collection to a Photo Album in the Lloyd Lewis Papers

The Newberry’s Lloyd Lewis Papers include a photo album titled “Gardening through the Philippines.” After reviewing the contents of the album, I noted that it was produced by the same photographer who produced the postcards:

- **Photos**: Many of the photographs depicted similar subject matter and demonstrated similar compositions, such as including military exercises and Manila architecture.
- **Handwriting**: I found a photo in the album that also appeared in the photo postcard collection (see below).
- **Inscriptions**: In the front cover of the album, the creator inscribed “Compliments of your friend S.M.S.” This suggested that the photographer’s initials may have been S.M.S. (or simply S, as on the postcards). The handwriting bore the same capital E’s in a similar cursive, reinforcing the connection between the album and the postcards.

Step 3: Broadening Research

I conducted general online searches for photo postcards in the Philippines and Manila in the 1920s. I also searched for photographs named S.M.S. in the Philippines in the early 20th century. The Newberry’s collection included several photo postcards of the Manila Carnival Queen, so I researched the Carnival in Manila to see if I could find similar photo postcards. A blog on Manila Carnivals included many photo postcards from the same era. In one post, the author mentioned that photo postcards were sometimes included in a periodical called the Philippine Magazine. I then searched for issues of Philippine Magazine in libraries, which provided many full text issues. I located a 1919 issue (Philippine Magazine, Vol. 32), which featured many full text issues.

Step 4: Finding S. M. Shera

After searching for S.M.S. “photographer,” and “Philippines,” I found sufficient evidence to claim that Shera must be the photographer of the photo postcards.

- **Other Collections**: I found a film record for a photo album by Samuel M. Shera in the UCLA Library. This photo album included photographs from the Philippines in the early 20th century. Based on the subject headings used, it seemed that many of the photos in this album shared subject matter with the Newberry’s photo postcards.

- **Returning to the Newberry**: I then searched for Samuel Shera in the finding aid of the Newberry’s Lloyd Lewis Papers. Folder 56 included correspondence to and from Samuel M. Shera. Letters from Shera included his own descriptions of his photo studio, even mentioning his photo studio “Gardening through the Philippines” by name.

Conclusion

In this project, I successfully used a cross-disciplinary research approach to identify the photographer of this photo postcard collection beyond a reasonable doubt. Making visual connections between the photo postcards and the Lloyd Lewis photo album allowed me to ascertain the photographer’s identity, based on searching and investigation into secondary and primary source documents allowed me to first and confirm the full name, identifying the photographer as Samuel M. Shera. Shera allowed me to write a more robust article for this collection, which will help future researchers find more thorough information about the photo postcards and, of course, the artist himself.

Analyzing the visual components of archival material can enrich the overall processing of the collection, allowing the researcher to make connections between items within the collection and beyond it. Although not every archive includes visual material — especially letters and diaries — it can be helpful to access visual qualities and develop visual vocabularies for each item to best describe them.