Imaging Parliament: Visual and Audiovisual Archives in the Experience of the Italian Senate and Chamber of Deputies

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The evocative power of images is well known in the Italian cultural tradition. Since the most ancient times, people and events have been portrayed and depicted to become part of the collective memory. From the graffiti on Neolithic stones to Roman sculptures; from Renaissance paintings to contemporary holograms, the evolution of technical supports and tools has significantly contributed to the development of this powerful form of communication.

Parliaments are no exception to this trend and since their origins, hand in hand with the evolution of figurative techniques, they have produced a vast heritage of photographs and films that document their more significant activities, procedures and personalities over time.

In this regard, the Historical Archives of the two Chambers of the Italian Parliament have played a decisive role in the conservation of these variegated materials and, more recently, in adapting their consultation to the most advanced web technologies, in order to allow their use to the entire national and international community.

We can therefore start from the web to briefly illustrate the contents and the wide variety of initiatives which have concerned the parliamentary visual and audiovisual heritage in recent years. The organizational choice made by both Chambers of the Italian Parliament primarily concerns the chronological division of materials: those relating to the current legislature converge on the institutional website while those relating to previous legislatures are collected in a historical website or portal.

Like most Parliaments of the European Countries, the institutional websites of the two Chambers contain audiovisual footage of the sittings of the two Chambers and images relating to the activity of their bodies. A particular photographic archive is dedicated to the activities of the Speaker of each Chamber.
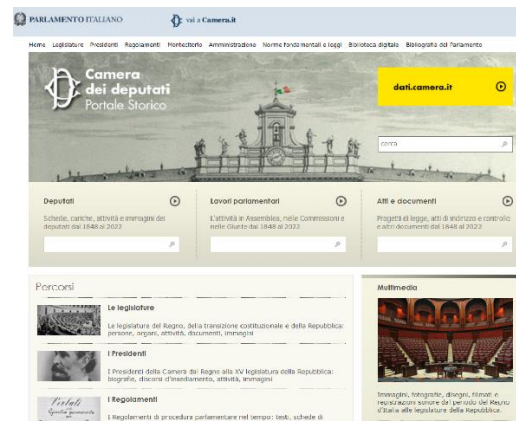
The historical websites or portals of the two Chambers instead constitute the confluence basin of all the materials entrusted to the historical, political and parliamentary memory of the country.

Senate Historical Website	**Chamber of Deputies Historical Portal**
https://www.senato.it/SitoStorico/home	https://storia.camera.it/

In particular, in the section called "*MemoriaWeb*", the Senate of the Republic give public notice about periodical acquisitions of his Historical Archive, including photographic and audiovisual documents.

Senate – MemoriaWeb

https://www.senato.it/4149
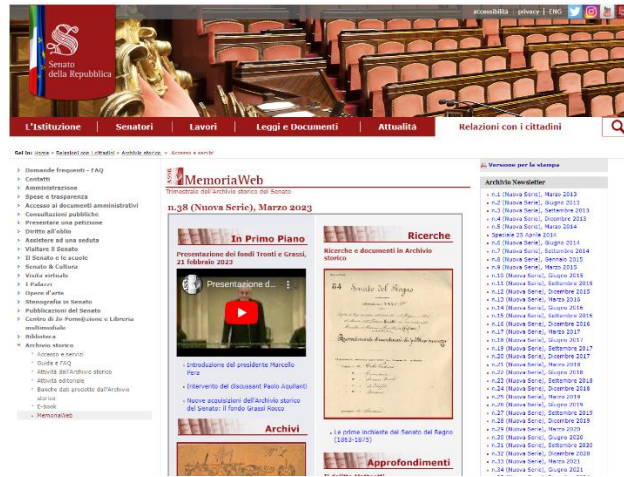
Similarly, the Chamber of Deputies has provided two specific sections in its historic portal dedicated, respectively, to the photographic archive and the audiovisual archive. The first one brings together and allows browsing the approximately thirty thousand photos of the "Ceremonial Photographic Archives" kept by the Historical Archives. The images, initially preserved in the original paper format or on film, have been digitized and indexed in order to allow identification of the date and event to which they refer and the MPs or other authorities appearing therein.

Chamber of Deputies Ceremonial Photographic Archives

https://storia.camera.it/foto#nav
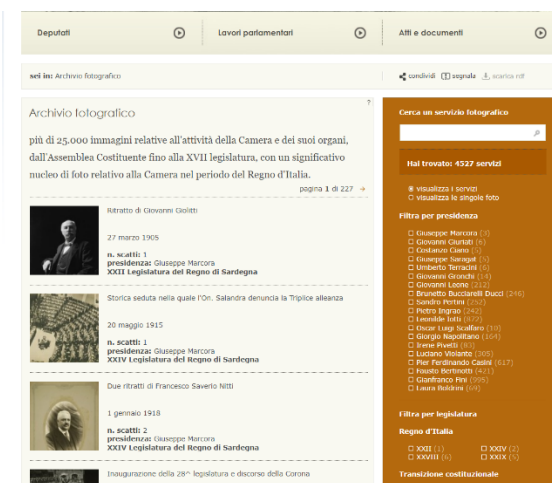
The second archives allow access to the audiovisual footage of the sittings that the Chamber of Deputies has produced autonomously since September 1989. The set of

recordings delivered to the Historical Archive on VHS or Betacam support for the period September 1989 - May 2001 (from X to XIII legislature) amounted to 4549 pieces, equal to approximately 13,325 hours of shooting, which were fully transferred to digital format, for a total IT weight of approximately 170 Terabytes (TB).

Chamber of Deputies Historical Audiovsual Archives

https://storia.camera.it/video#nav

For the indexing of these audiovisuals, it was decided to proceed from the most recent legislature (XIII, 1996-2001) to the most remote one (X, 1987-1992, with footage available from the month of September) in order to ease their connection with the filming concerning the most recent successive legislatures. As a result, the footage relating to the period 1996-2001 was made available for consultation from the audiovisual archives of the historical portal of the Chamber of Deputies.

The audiovisual footage of the Senate sessions can be consulted online starting from 2008 to the URL https://webtv.senato.it/; by the way, the Historical Archive has made available on the web (URL: https://patrimonio.archivio.senato.it/) many photographic and audiovisual documents as digital attachments to the metadata system, while a wider range of this typology of documents is available to users in the study room. Similarly, the Chamber of Deputies has a specific Web TV channel.

Senate Web TV	**Chamber of Deputies Web TV**

https://webtv.senato.it/   https://webtv.camera.it/

An agreement has also recently been signed by the Senate with the Central Institute for Sound and Audiovisual Heritage of the Ministry for Culture (ICBSA, former State Discotheque), for a technical-scientific collaboration concerning physical restoration, digitization, post-production and editing of magnetic reels of the recordings of the plenary and restricted sittings, concerning other parliamentary activities typical of the Commission of Inquiry. The digitization of the 123 tapes of the Commission of Inquiry on the Moro Affair (VIII legislature), which began on 14 October 2021, is still ongoing: to date 26 tapes have been digitized and 14 are still ongoing. The Senate Historical Archives plan to continue this activity with the digitization of the additional approximately 600 audiovisual reels delivered by the Commissions and, on the other hand, approximately 10,000 audiovisual reels on various types of media, relating to the sessions of the Senate Assembly between the VIII (1979-1983) and the XIV legislature (2001-2006).

In the Chamber of Deputies, these holdings are completed by the series of photographic portraits of the MPs, included in the historical portal, starting from 1848, date of enactment of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Piedmont, from which it developed, in 1861, the Kingdom of Italy. For the period of the Republic, starting from 1948, the portraits of MPs are available online, in a larger format, in the digitized version of the archival photographic fund concerning the period from the I (1948-1953) to the IX (1983-1987) legislature.

Italian MPs of the Republic

https://archivio.camera.it/patrimonio/main-page/fondo-cantera-luxardo
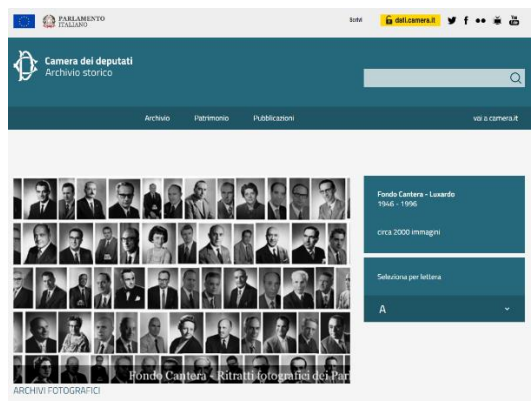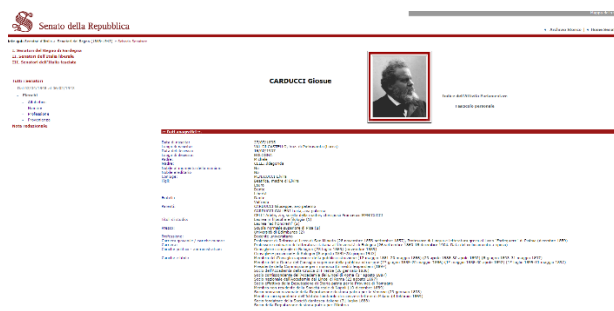
Similarly, the Senate has placed photographic portraits in the online directory of all Senators since 1848.

Italian Senators since 1848

https://notes9.senato.it/web/senregno.nsf/96ec2bcd072560f1c125785d0059806a/c710be29d10102b54125646f0059c69c?OpenDocument

The importance attributed by Parliament to this particular type of archival sources is also highlighted by the agreement signed with one of the most important Italian photographic and documentary production centres, the Istituto Luce, with which the creation of a special portal was agreed concerning photographic and cinematographic materials related to the history of Parliament.

Chamber of Deputies – Luce Institute Portal

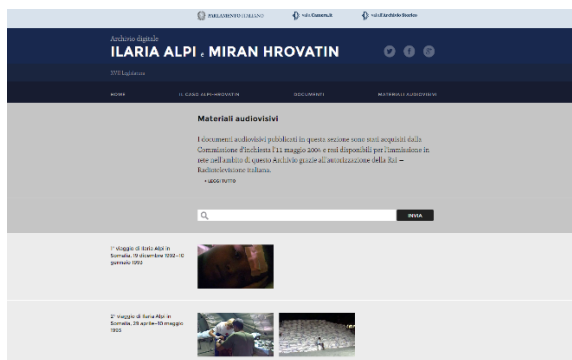http://camera.archivioluce.com/camera-storico/home.html

This portal includes, for instance, visual and audiovisual materials of historical interest relating to the institutional referendum of 2 June 1946, which sanctioned the passage from the Monarchy to the Republic, and the election of the Constituent Assembly.

Moreover, as far the social history of the Country after the Second World War is concerned, the film report on the final results and proposals of the Parliamentary Inquiry into poverty in Italy and the means to combat it, 1951-1954, presents nowadays a particular documentary interest. This audiovisual documentary, approximately 30 minutes long, turned out to be, at the time, a particularly effective tool for disseminating knowledge of parliamentary activities with reference to the most urgent economic and social problems of the country and constituted – from a current point of view – an authentic media intuition.

Following this model, many bicameral Inquiry Committees audiovisual archives are nowadays directly accessible on the web.

Bicameral Inquiry Committee on the death of the journalists Ilaria Alpi and Miran Hrovatin, 2004-2006

Bicameral Inquiry Committee on the kidnapping and death of Hon. Aldo Moro, 2014-2018

https://archivioalpihrovatin.camera.it/audiovisivi

https://inchieste.camera.it/inchieste/moro/video.html?leg=17&legLabel=XVII%20legislatura
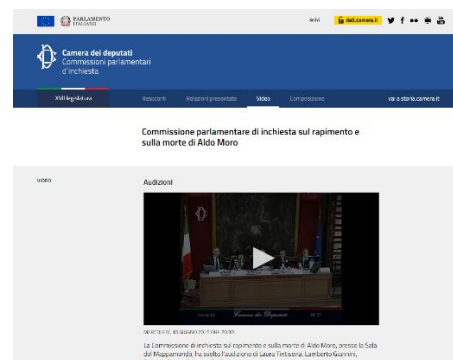
This heritage of images is completed, in the Italian parliamentary experience, by a specific and valuable nucleus of architectural projects for the construction of the Chamber of Deputies and adjacent parliamentary buildings, which present, in the spirit of their time, their own political meaning and a significant artistic value.

In particular, these are the 1922 architectural tables of the project by the architect Ernesto Basile for the widening of Palazzo Montecitorio and the construction of the new 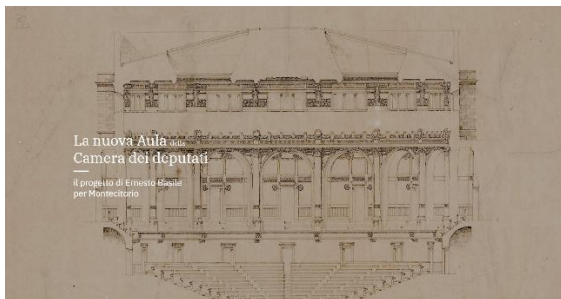meeting room of the Chamber of Deputies (1908-1928), which have been entirely digitized and made available online with "IIIF" technology which allows the enlargement and analytical reading of the most specific details.

A similar experience concerns the archival collection of the public competition for the construction in 1967 of a new building for meeting rooms of parliamentary committees and offices of the Chamber of Deputies. At the end, the construction of the building was at first postponed, due to political and economic reasons, and never decided. Nevertheless, the projects of the 64 competitors, whose main images are now available for consultation on the website of the Historical Archives, still constitute a valuable study material and a significant stage in the development of parliamentary architecture.

Chamber of Deputies Historical Archives "Ernesto Basile"	**Chamber of Deputies Historical Archives "A new building for the Chamber of Deputies, 1967"**
https://archivio.camera.it/patrimonio/main-page/fondo-ernesto-basile	https://archivio.camera.it/patrimonio/main-page/fondo-concorso-costruzione-del-nuovo-palazzo-uffici-della-camera-deputati

So far the past: but which plans are underway for the future management of this particular archival heritage? At present, we can only mention some experimental projects concerning the use of generative Artificial Intelligence algorithms.

In this regard, the development of A.I. allows us to hypothesize the production of an image, a hologram for projection or a three-dimensional file for a 3D printer of single MPs or moments depicted in vintage photos or videos. Or to produce a synthetic interview with a political exponent, on the basis of the photographs or videos that portray her/him and the sound analysis of the frequencies of one or more of her/his voice recordings. Or finally to create a synthetic audiovisual product, for example a video Breaking News or a "Political Tribune" with one or more synthetic conductors, on the model of similar TV broadcasts.

Obviously, these are only hypotheses that at the moment may appear surreal or typical of dystopian literature; or perhaps also of the thorny topics that Parliaments will soon have to deal with and worry about in reference to the necessary aspects of guaranteeing the

truthfulness of the contents of public communication. It is a future perhaps closer than one might imagine.