

**PRESERVING YOUR FAMILY
PHOTOGRAPHS**



Cornell University Library
Department of Preservation and Conservation
Ithaca, NY
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Photographs are some of the most treasured family heirlooms. Family collections often contain a wealth of images capturing everyday life, significant events, and special memories. In the history of photography, many different types of materials have been used to create photographs, and family collections often represent a fascinating variety of black and white and color processes. Most black and white photographs are composed of silver particles suspended in a protective gelatin binder, or emulsion, which is coated on a paper support. Color photographs employ dyes to produce the image. Many formats are found in family collections, from small snapshots to large, mounted portraits. For information on the history of photography and the identification of photographic processes, see ***Selected Reading*** at the end of this pamphlet.

Because photographs are made from a variety of sensitive materials, they are easily damaged and may not survive to pass on to future generations if improperly stored, displayed, and handled. Photographs are best preserved by handling them with care, providing a good storage environment and by using good quality enclosures.



Handling

Take care when handling photographs, especially older photographs and albums, and be sure there is ample clean space to view and examine them. Rough and hurried handling can cause tears, scratches, creases, and cracks, and oils, lotion residues, and perspiration on hands can stain photographs. Make sure hands are clean and dry when handling photographs, or for better protection, wear clean white cotton gloves (available from photographic and preservation supply

companies). Avoid touching the emulsion of a photograph; hold a photograph by its edges and from underneath, using two hands if necessary. Support large or fragile photographs by placing a rigid board, like matboard, beneath them when lifting or moving. Do not force albums or scrapbooks to lie flat and be aware that photographs in albums may be loosely attached or completely detached. Food and drinks can stain photographs so avoid their use near photographs of value.

Environment

Store photographs in a place in your home where the temperature and relative humidity can be controlled year-round. Storage conditions of 68°F and 30-50% relative humidity are recommended. An internal closet (like a hall or bedroom closet) or rooms surrounded by other living space often provide the most stable environment for the storage of photographs. Avoid storing photographs in basements and attics; these areas get too hot and damp. Do not store photographs on the floor where they are more susceptible to physical damage and water exposure. Pollutants given off by fresh paint fumes, plywood, cardboard, and cleaning supplies can cause photographs to deteriorate. Clean air, adequate air circulation, and good quality enclosures reduce the risk of damage by pollutants.

Light can be very damaging, causing fading and staining, especially of color prints and slides. Avoid displaying photographs in direct sunlight and limit all other types of light exposure. Since the damaging effects of light are cumulative and irreversible, continuous or permanent display of photographs *is not* recommended. Safeguard the original photograph by displaying a copy print or a color photocopy.

Housing

Folders, envelopes, sleeves, and boxes provide protective layers which mitigate changes in the environment, limit light and dust, and assist with safe handling. Sorting and organizing your photographs will help you determine what type and quantities of housing materials to use. The size and shape of the enclosures should closely match the photograph(s) they hold. Individual

housing (one photograph per enclosure) is ideal; consider individual housing for fragile photographs or photographs with great sentimental, historic, or aesthetic value. Small groups of the same type photograph of similar size and condition can be stored together in a folder, envelope, or sleeve, and then placed in a good quality box. Avoid paper clips, rubber bands, pressure sensitive tapes and labels, rubber cement, glues, and lamination—all of which can damage photographs.

Negatives benefit from the same type of good quality paper or plastic enclosures as used for prints. Preservation supply companies offer negative enclosures in a variety of safe formats. The plastic negative sleeves used now by photo labs appear safe for film. Replace older plastic or paper enclosures from photo labs if damaging interactions (brittle paper, staining or fading) are noted.

The term “archival” is often seen in reference to housing materials; however, manufacturers have used it to describe a wide variety of products with varying degrees of quality. It is important to look at the actual composition of the enclosures and select those that are constructed well, have a high degree of purity, and are acid-free, lignin-free and sulfur-free. Paper enclosures can be buffered, meaning they contain an alkaline material that can neutralize acids as they form, or non-buffered. Buffered enclosures last longer than non-buffered and offer protection to photographs mounted on poor quality board. Non-buffered enclosures may be preferred if the relative humidity cannot be controlled and often exceeds 60—70%.

Acceptable plastics for storage of photographs are uncoated polyester (often seen by the trade name Mylar-D), polypropylene, and polyethylene. Polyvinylchloride (PVC) plastics are not recommended since they are chemically unstable and can damage photographs. PVC plastics are sometimes identified by the label “vinyl” and often by a strong plastic odor. Not all PVC plastics may emit a strong odor so read labels carefully.

Enclosures that pass the Photographic Activity Test, or PAT, are excellent choices for both prints and negatives. The PAT evalu-

ates potentially harmful physical and chemical interactions between the photograph and the enclosure. Many preservation supply companies will indicate when their enclosures (folders, sleeves, album pages and boxes) have passed the PAT.

Matting and Framing

Heirloom or keepsake photographs should be matted to museum standards. Conservation or museum quality mat boards, photo-corners, and UV-filtering Plexiglas are recommended. Photographs should be matted to prevent direct contact with the frame or glazing. Avoid pressure sensitive tapes, rubber cement, and glues when securing photographs in mats. Older mats and frames should be carefully examined and photographs removed if mats or frames are poor quality. Seek assistance from a qualified framer or conservator before removing photographs from old mats or frames.

Albums

Albums can be a good way to organize and store photographs if the albums are constructed from good quality materials. Consult the labeling and product information of albums and choose albums with readily identifiable good quality paper or plastic pages. If important or heirloom photographs must be attached in an album, use reversible mounting techniques, such as paper or plastic photo-corners. More damage may be caused by trying to remove photographs from older, historic albums than by leaving them intact. Self-adhesive or “magnetic” albums can be damaging to photographs and should not be used for photographs of value. Store valuable, historic or fragile albums horizontally (flat) in a good quality box or wrap with good quality paper to protect from light, dust, and to keep the album together. If an album is damaging photographs of value, contact a conservator.

Labeling

Identifying the subject(s) of photographs enhances their long-term use, value and enjoyment. However, labeling must be done with care to avoid damaging the photographs. When possible label the enclosure rather than the photograph. If photographs must be directly labeled, write only on the *back* of the photograph,

keeping notations small and confined along one edge. Use a hard, clean surface underneath the photograph while labeling and use light pressure to avoid embossing the photograph. Soft graphite pencil (like 2B) is recommended because it is harmless to photographs, will not fade, and is not water-soluble. India ink in a technical pen, film-marking pens, or blue photo pencils (which pass the PAT and are available from the preservation supply companies) may be used to label the back edge of contemporary color prints, which are resin-coated (RC prints). Always allow ink to dry before stacking photographs together. Ball point pens and Magic Markers are not recommended since they can fade, migrate through and stain the photographs, offset onto adjacent photographs, and bleed if exposed to water. Negatives and slides also should be labeled to help locate desired images for copying or use. Label the top edge of plastic negative sheets and slide pages using a film-marking pen. Slides can also be labeled carefully on their mounts.

Duplication

Using a copy during handling and display can reduce the wear and tear of the original photograph. Fragile photographs, frequently handled photographs, and photographs expected to be displayed for long periods are candidates for duplication. Copies can be created by reprinting negatives. If no negative exists photographic prints can be re-photographed and copies made from the new negative. In printing from a new negative, it may be possible to use filters to reduce staining, and to reduce minor scratches or imperfections. Contact area photographers for their experience in duplicating photographs, especially old and fragile material. There are companies specializing in the duplication of fragile and historic photographs; see ***Resources*** for assistance in locating these companies.

Color photocopying can also be used to create copies, with very good results. Photocopies can be convincingly used for display, allowing the original photograph to be stored safely away. Using good quality paper, like acid-free thesis paper, will help the

photocopy last longer. Albums and scrapbooks may not be able to be safely photocopied; photographic duplication may be appropriate in these cases.

Digital Imaging

Scanning photographs is a popular way to provide greater access to the images and share them widely with family and friends. Older photographs may be brittle and have fragile surfaces so exercise care while scanning to avoid damage. Remember that digital imaging is a rapidly changing technology and that it is necessary to copy (migrate or refresh) image files periodically as software is updated so that files can continue to be retrieved (a good reason not to discard important originals after scanning). The longevity and stability of hardcopy digital prints (e.g. ink jet printing) is highly variable with many print processes very susceptible to fading, and staining from high humidity and water exposure.

Disaster Preparedness

The layers of enclosures you give your photographs—the folders, envelopes, sleeves, and boxes—will offer some protection to your collection in the event of a disaster. Storing negatives in a separate location from the prints is advised. If a disaster strikes in one location, some portion of your valuable collection will be spared because it was stored elsewhere. Contact a conservator in the event of a disaster for advice on recovery and salvage. In addition, the web site for the American Institute for Conservation (see *Resources*) has helpful information on disaster preparedness and recovery.

When to Contact a Conservator

Do not attempt to clean or repair photographs of value. Over-the-counter products such as pressure sensitive tapes and labels, rubber cement, glues, and household cleaners can be very damaging. Stabilize and protect fragile photographs with good quality enclosures and duplicate them to reduce handling.

Contact a conservator:

- In the event of a disaster
- If negatives show signs of rapid deterioration (stains, odors or wrinkles)
- If photographs exhibit active mold growth, flaking emulsions, or staining from pressure sensitive tape
- If photographs are tightly rolled, curled, or folded
- If photographs have severe tears, cracks or broken or brittle mounts
- If a photograph is adhered to its enclosure or to the glazing in a frame.

Resources

Contact these organizations for advice, and assistance locating a photograph conservator in your area. The AIC web site contains information on many collections care topics and disaster recovery. The Cornell University Department of Preservation and Conservation web site has a selection of manual guides and technical reports on several preservation topics.

American Institute for Conservation
1717 K Street NW, Suite 20001
Washington, DC 20006
202-452-9545
<http://aic.stanford.edu>

Department of Preservation and Conservation
215 Olin Library
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853
607-255-9440
www.library.cornell.edu/preservation
E-mail: preserve@cornell.edu

Suppliers

This is a selected list of suppliers and is not intended as an endorsement. These preservation supply companies will send a free catalog upon request.

Light Impressions
PO Box 22708
Rochester, NY 14692
800-828-6216
www.lightimpressionsdirect.com

University Products
PO Box 101, 517 Main St.
Holyoke, MA 01041-0101
800-628-1912
www.universityproducts.com

Gaylord Bros.
PO Box 4901
Syracuse, NY 13221
800-448-6160
www.gaylord.com

Hollinger Corporation
PO Box 8360
Fredericksburg, VA 22404
800-634-0491
www.hollingercorp.com

Conservation Resources International, Inc.
8000 - H Forbes Place
Spring Field, VA 22151
800-634-6932
www.conservationresources.com

Selected Reading

Baldwin, Gordon. Looking at Photographs: A Guide to Technical Terms. Malibu: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1991.

Caring for Your Collections: Preserving and Protecting Your Art and Other Collectibles. The National Committee to Save America's Cultural Collections; Arthur W. Schultz, Chairman. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992.

Coe, B. and Haworth-Booth, M.A. A Guide to Early Photographic Processes. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983.

Crawford, William. The Keepers of Light. New York: Morgan and Morgan, Inc., 1979.

Reilly, James. Care and Identification of 19th Century Photographic Prints. Rochester: Eastman Kodak Company, 1986.

Schwalberg, B., H. Wilhelm, and C. Bower. "Going! Going!! Gone!!!" Popular Photography. 97, no. 6 (June 1990):37 - 60.

Notes

This pamphlet was written by Michele Hamill and produced by the Cornell University Library Department of Preservation and Conservation as a public service. The preservation procedures described are considered appropriate at this time. Procedures are re-evaluated as new information becomes available.