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2012

Collecting and Preserving Photographic Materials

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Collecting and Preserving Photographic Materials

Amanda Drost

Introduction

One of the most interesting, valuable and challenging types of materials an institution can have in its possession is the photograph. A photograph can serve an institution in a variety of ways. First, a photograph can provide a window into the past by accurately representing architectural styles, period fashions, geography, and many other aspects of culture. Secondly, a photograph can serve an evidentiary purpose by identifying people, places, and events accurately. Where written accounts are wanting, a photograph can fill in many missing and important details. Photographs can be a great asset to a collection if they are well taken care of and organized.

In order to care properly for any photograph collection, an institution must know what kind of process was used in making that particular photograph in order to best care for it. Different chemical processes have been used in making different types of photos over the years and some of those chemicals can break down, causing major problems to a particular photograph in question and to other photographs that may be stored with it. It can be very costly and time-consuming to deal with the chemical breakdown of photographs. In some cases, photographs can be treated and "saved," but in other cases duplicates must be made and the originals disposed of in the appropriate manner.

Collection Management

When accepting photographs as gifts for a collection or when purchasing them, an institution should make sure that it is capable of caring for and storing the photographs properly.

It is important to make sure that there is enough staff, space, money, and expertise to support a photograph collection. Here are some questions to consider when deciding whether or not to keep a photograph:

- Does it fit the scope of the collection? Do you or will you consider collecting photographs on the subject? For example, if the institution is a costume library, it would not collect nature photographs.
- Can you identify the person, place, or occasion of the photograph? If nothing is known about the photograph, it is hard to add metadata to make it findable and it is hard to know if it fits the scope of the collection. If nothing is known about the photograph, it is possible that it will not be very valuable to the institution unless it is kept as an example of a certain type of photographic process or time period.
- Is the photograph in good shape? If a photograph is not in good shape (i.e. moldy, bent, half missing, cracked), the institution should consider whether or not it is worth keeping. If the photograph is deteriorating, it could ruin other photographs stored with it and be costly to maintain or restore.
- Is it a duplicate? Is the original housed somewhere else or does the institution already own a copy of the photograph? Unless it is a well-used photograph, the institution might not want to take up extra space with a duplicate photograph. If the photograph is a duplicate and the original is housed elsewhere, the institution likely will not hold the rights or the copyright to the photograph.
- Does another institution nearby have a similar collection? If an institution has a collection that duplicates a nearby collection, it may be wise to consider combining collections

unless photographs are in great demand at both places. Doing this is often more cost effective.

- Do you own the rights to the photograph? If an institution does not own the rights to the photograph, it might be more trouble than it is worth to keep it. Whenever an institution acquires a photograph, it is best to make sure that the rights come with the photograph. This will allow the institution to sell, duplicate or display it.
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- How much will it cost to preserve and maintain the collection? Does your institution have enough money to buy preservation supplies? Does it have the money to hire and educate the staff to oversee the processing of the collection? Does it have the space?
- Who donated the collection? If a prominent funder of your institution or a person of influence over your institution either donates a collection or insists a collection be accepted, it may be in the institution's best interest to accept the collection. Sometimes if an undesirable item is accepted, other items of more value may be donated in the future.

(Ritzenthaler and Vogt-O'Connor 2006)

Considering all these questions will help those in charge of acquiring photographs to more accurately gauge what the presence of photographs will add to their collections. Carefully documenting the process of a questionable purchase or donation will allow others to see the reasons behind accepting the photographs and help to make the institution (especially publicly-funded institutions) more transparent in its actions.

Privacy

Sometimes photographs can contain subject material that is confidential in nature. For example, the Robinson Studio Collection at the Grand Rapids Public Library in Michigan

contains a photograph of a sick person in a hospital bed. The collection of crime-scene photographs in Western Kentucky University Libraries' Special Collections is another example of confidential materials. The graphic images were part of a collection donated to the university. In order to maintain privacy, there are factors to be considered in order to decide which users of the collection can view a possibly restricted photograph.

First of all, consider who donated or purchased the photograph. Did John Doe donate his photographs with the stipulation that only members of the historical society could view them? Did Jane Doe give her family photographs to the university library so that anyone can use them? If the donor or seller set guidelines or restrictions, the staff of the institution must follow them.

Secondly, is it ethical for just anyone in the general public to view the photograph? Most institutions (e.g. libraries, archives, museums) that collect photographic materials follow codes of ethics. An example from the American Library Association's code of ethics states that "we...resist all efforts to censor library resources." The Society of American Archivists' code of ethics states that "Archivists strive to promote open and equitable access to their services and the records in their care without discrimination or preferential treatment." Codes of ethics statements like these can help an institution to decide how restrictive it must be when displaying certain photographs of a private nature.

Ritzenthaler and Vogt-O'Connor (2006, 298) give a good summary of needs to balance regarding privacy:

1. Democratic society's need for access to photographs for research
2. The creator's desires to make a profit and need to control how her works are used

3. The donor's need to ensure that what he has donated is cared for and accessible based on his guidelines
4. Individual and group needs for privacy and control over how sensitive information is used

Those in charge of deciding how photographs are used and available to the public should take all these needs into account and try to balance them. In the case of the Grand Rapids Public Library, the photo could be used by the general public for research needs. Western Kentucky University Special Collections decided to restrict the use of their crime scene photographs. There is no hard and fast rule for deciding what to do with photographs that are confidential in nature. Each institution serves a different community and has different needs to balance.

Types of Photographs

The modern photograph traces its origins to the early 19th century (Ritzenthaler and Vogt-O'Connor 2006, 1). Diane DeCesare Ross (2001, 40) describes a photograph like a sandwich with four layers: a support material, an interlayer, a binding medium, and an image-forming substance. There are quite a few different types of photographic processes and their products. Once an institution knows the kind of photographs it is handling, it is easier to determine the type and cost of care. The purpose of this section is to give an overview of common types of photographs that an institution may come into contact with, not to give an exhaustive list of all the types and processes. The following is a list of some of the types of photographic materials and negatives that an institution might own.

Salted paper prints

- popular around the 1840s to the 1860s

- this type of print was not very common in America
- lack fine detail
- made from paper and glass negatives

Daguerreotype

- most popular between the 1840s and the 1860s
- this is the oldest type of photograph an institution is likely to come across
- it is a positive image on a copper plate covered with coating of polished silver
- it could not be reproduced at the time it was popular (today, of course, it can be reproduced digitally)
- very fragile; usually presented in a case with glass protecting it

Albumen prints

- popular around 1850-1900
- printouts made of thin paper, usually mounted on cardboard
- often hand-colored
- warm brown or purplish brown in color
- people appeared less stern and rigid in their poses than in other early processes due to the decreased exposure times necessary to produce the photograph
- examples of albumen prints are carte de visites, which are 2 1/4 x 3 1/2 inch photographs attached to a 2 1/2 x 4 inch paper card; stereographs, and cabinet cards

Ambrotype

- most popular between 1855 and 1865
- very similar to a daguerreotype (see Daguerreotype)
- almost always appears as a positive image (i.e. no negative is produced)

- the image is sandwiched between glass and backed with a black background (paper, cloth)

Glass plate negatives

- popular from the 1850s to the 1920s
- easy to identify -- a light sensitive emulsion fixed to a glass plate
- very fragile

Cyanotype

- popular in the 1880s
- also called blueprints
- used by professional photographers to proof their negatives
- not widely used as final prints because of their blue tint

Tintype

- late 1800s to early 20th century
- a positive image on a sheet of thin metal
- very popular with soldiers because they were inexpensive and durable

Platinum print or platinotype

- 1880s to 1930s
- paper prints with images of metallic platinum
- the image could be reproduced

Cellulose nitrate film

- popular from around 1889 to early 1950s
- can be very dangerous since it is highly flammable; gives off a gas when deteriorating, which can be hazardous to human health and materials around it

- sometimes has the term "nitrate" printed on the border
- stages of deterioration: the film turns yellow-brown, the emulsion becomes tacky, it emits nitric acid gas, it gets covered with viscous froth, and eventually it turns into a brownish acid powder

Cellulose acetate/diacetate (safety) film

- introduced around the mid 1930s; replaced all other types of film by 1951
- usually has the word "safety" printed on the edge, but not always
- Can shrink and warp as it ages
- can give off a smell like vinegar and if the smell of vinegar is present, the film is deteriorating and can damage other negatives and prints around it

Polyester film

- began use around the mid 1950s
- ester or Estar sometimes printed on the edge
- strong and stable with excellent keeping properties

Digital photographs

- first appeared in the early 1990s
- these are the newest type of photographs
- they are produced in several ways (photo lab, print-at-home, kiosk printing)
- can be black and white and color

Preservation or Conservation?

The two terms “conservation” and “preservation” are often used interchangeably, yet they mean different things. The New York State Archives gives the following definitions: preservation is working to *prevent* deterioration while conservation is to *repair* damage already

done (http://www.archives.nysed.gov/a/records/mr_storage.shtml). This section is concerned with preservation. Conservation is costly; practices depend on the type of material. Conservation is best done by a professional and is beyond the scope of this chapter.

The first step in preserving photographs is prevention. Following some simple practices can ensure that your photos will not suffer preventable harm. Make sure staff are educated as to the proper handling of photographs. In turn, staff should teach users how to properly handle photographs. Simple things like wearing archival gloves, not writing on top of photographs, and avoiding food and water while working with them are some minor steps to take towards non-damaging use.

In order to provide the best conditions for preserving them, all types of photographs should be stored in a cool, dark environment; a temperature around 68 degrees Fahrenheit and a humidity level between 35-40% is ideal. Keep photographs and negatives in a consistent environment. Fluctuations in temperature and humidity can cause them to deteriorate. Exposure to light and ultraviolet light (such as sunlight and some fluorescent lights) should be limited as much as possible. Prints and negatives should be stored separately from each other, as should color and non-color photographs. Ideally, photographs should be handled only while wearing white cotton gloves (Buchanan and Domer 1995, 2), unless you are handling items where the emulsion can be snagged by the gloves (e.g. glass plate negatives). In that case, use latex gloves (National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/preservation/storage/glass-plate-negatives.html>). Deteriorating film negatives should be stored in a frost-free freezer until they can be dealt with in the appropriate manner.

One of the best ways to preserve photographs and film negatives is to make either physical or digital copies of them for use, and to permanently and properly store the originals.

Unfortunately, this option can be expensive. However, it should be a priority for heavily used items or items that are in poor condition and should no longer be handled. Before storing items long-term, it is a good idea to write down information from the photograph, case, or accompanying materials, such as any label written on it, such as captions, names, dates, and places (Ritzenthaler and Vogt O'Connor 2006, 238). Doing this will aid in later classification and organization.

Another important preservation practice is the development of a written emergency plan in case of a disaster (Ritzenthaler and Vogt O'Connor 2006, 268). The most likely types of disaster are fire and flood, but there are others.

The following are care instructions for the various types of photographs.

- Daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes. If possible, these should be left in their cases, if available. They should be wrapped individually with acid-free tissue paper and stored in a single layer in a box. Pasting a copy of the photograph on the box will help to reduce handling. If the photograph is not in a case, one can be made to protect it. Tintypes are prone to being bent since they are flexible. One should not try to straighten it because the emulsion could crack (Ritzenthaler and Vogt O'Connor 2006, 238-242).
- Paper prints (salted paper, albumen, platinum, cyanotypes). These types of photographs can be stored in acid-free envelopes or folders. They should be kept separate from each other and remain flat. If a photograph needs extra support, it can be housed between alkaline buffered boards. Albumen prints are subject to curling, so they require rigid support in storage (Ritzenthaler and Vogt O'Connor 2006, 243-245).

- Glass plate negatives. These are heavy and fragile and should be handled with care. Intact plates should be stored with like sizes grouped together. The plates should be stored standing vertically like recipe cards in a recipe box. They should be wrapped individually in heavy paper. Do not stack plates on top of each other. Cracked and broken plates can be stabilized by sandwiching them between 2 other clear glass plates (National Archives website).
- Film negatives. Cellulose nitrate film is very unstable and flammable. Cellulose acetate/diacetate film is prone to vinegar syndrome, which is harmful to human health and other negatives and photographs around it. Both types of film should be copied and/or digitized and discarded appropriately. If duplication is not possible right away, film should be stored at 0 degrees Fahrenheit or below until it can be dealt with properly. Polyester film is stable and can be stored in buffered paper or stable plastic enclosures (Ritzenthaler and Vogt O'Connor 2006, 253-254).
- Digital photographs. Since a few different processes are used to print digital photographs (mentioned above), products of those processes last for different amounts of time. The best thing to do with digital print photographs is to store them away from light sources and to avoid moisture; digital prints are especially vulnerable to water (Ritzenthaler and Vogt O'Connor 2006, 246). Digital files of images should be transferred to the latest and most reliable media for long-term storage. Periodically, as digital storage improves or changes, the files should be transferred in order to make sure they are still viewable by the latest technology.

If an institution needs to unroll paper prints, fix glass plate negatives, remount daguerreotypes, or use any other advanced restoration techniques, it should employ the services of a professional

photograph conservator. Otherwise photographs or negatives could be irreparably damaged by untrained personnel.

Conclusion

Unlike the written word, whose meaning can be derived from a text which does not change over time, a photograph's meaning and usefulness is dependent primarily upon visual forms which may be threatened by deterioration or improper handling. These factors, among others, present a unique challenge to the librarian when a photograph or photographic collection is presented for inclusion into a collection. With proper selection and care, it is possible to have a useful and well-preserved photograph collection.

Resources

There are many good resources available to help an institution manage a photograph collection. However, two resources stand out.

- *Photographs: Archival Care and Management* by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler & Diane Vogt-O'Connor is a wonderful book that covers all aspects of collecting and preserving photographs, from privacy and copyright issues to description and cataloging.
- The Image Permanence Institute (<http://www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/>) has many useful resources for preserving images.

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