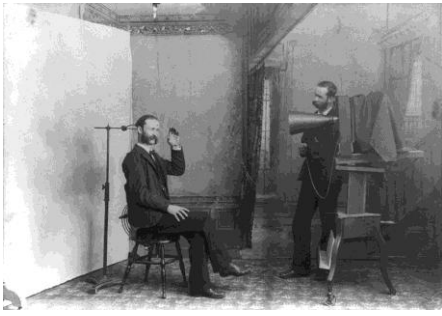


Fundamentals of the Conservation of Photographs



Why Conserve Photographs?

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TECHNICAL NOTE

Normally, it is not necessary to ask the question – Why conserve photographs? There is an abundance of obvious answers. Photographs of all types are valued on many levels in varied contexts, worldwide. An international professional conservation specialty has developed in the last thirty years in response to the widespread understanding that photographs need and warrant special attention for their preservation. However, these are not normal times for either photography or photographs. It is now quite timely to ask the question, particularly of the conservator of photographs and listen to the answers given.

The work of a photograph conservator is not as clear to all as might be assumed. They work not only to preserve photographs. True photograph conservators work to *know* photographs, as much as to preserve them. As the study of history is essentially an inquiry, so is the study of photograph conservation. The inquiry is very much the same as that of the historian – What is photography? What is a photograph? What is *this* photograph? Answers to such questions must be had in order to do the work of conservation. Despite the presence and profound influence of photography for over 150 years, we must still labor to know photography and photographs better.

Today there is as much work for the conservator to properly know a photograph, as there is in cleaning, repairing, housing, duplicating and storing it. The conservator gains unique understanding of the photograph, particularly through treatment, which cannot be had through other approaches. This knowledge has greatly influenced the general appreciation of the individual processes of photography and the aesthetic values of each type of photograph. Today's collector, curator and critic possess knowledge gained through the work of the photograph conservator.



TECHNICAL NOTE CONT'D.

Much conservation research is now directed towards the characterization of photographs, which entails analyzing and documenting photographs in order to build reference databases, by which the question "What is this photograph?" may be answered correctly for all those who need to know. The conservator also works to validate photographs to keep them from "traveling under false identities." This is a labor purely to "know" the photograph, not to preserve it.

The conservator must know what is and what is not a photograph. There are many forms of imagery that resemble photographs, but are not directly derived by either chemical or physical response to radiant energy. Photograph conservators have evolved the concept of the "true photograph", to distinguish their purview from that of the paper conservator and other preservation specialists. A "true photograph", by that definition, is an image-object that was sensitive to the action of radiant energy at some stage of its creation. Hence, a photomechanical reproduction in a newspaper or magazine is not a "true photograph."

For the last 150 years silver-halide technology, a form of chemical imaging, has commercially dominated the popular manifestation of photography. The vast photographic legacy, which now exists, was predominantly created by chemical imaging systems. Much of the past task of knowing a photograph for the conservator has been in understanding the chemical origins, make-up, and transitions of the image-object we know as photograph.

Currently, electronic imaging is gaining commercial dominance. The definition of photography and photograph is being stretched and changed. New forms of prints, which were never light sensitive at any point of their creation, are now being called and thought of as photographs. The traditional silver-halide based photographic industry is in the process of transforming. New industries are evolving which blend imaging and information technology. The general consumer and practitioner of photography is encouraged by these industries to see these changes, not as the end of chemical imaging technology, but as the progressive and continuous evolution of photography. Many young conservators now follow the industrial lead, broadening their professional scope to be inclusive of new imaging technology products.

Indeed, a new conservation profession is forming which does not yet have a name, just as photography did not have at its birth. This profession will be called something like "Imaging Media Conservation," in which "true photographs" will be only a subset of concern. The current type of photograph conservation specialists may become fewer in number, certainly proportionally, in the future. Ironically, this may be because they no longer know what a photograph is.

The day is not far away when the development of the latent image through chemistry will be rarely practiced and the choices of supplies for the practice of chemical imaging, very limited.

Digital cameras replace film cameras, scanners replace cameras, and printers replace darkrooms, more and more each day. History teaches that once a technology loses commercial dominance, practical knowledge of it is rapidly lost. This is now happening for gelatin-silver-halide based photography. Much of the past work of photograph conservation has been the reclamation of technical knowledge once widely held. Recovery of such knowledge has often proven difficult and incomplete at best. Studying historic processes is essential to the education of the photograph conservator. Early gelatin-based photographic technology is already being demonstrated as historic process along with those that have already passed out of common practice, such as the daguerreotype, calotype and wet-plate collodion process. It will be far harder to demonstrate the gelatin-silver-halide based photographic processes of the late 20th century, since they are considerably more complex and dependent upon highly sophisticated manufacturing technology. Thus, knowing this form of photography will become more difficult with time.

A fresher, more expressive neologism, itself, may someday replace the word "photograph", in the not too distant future. Somehow "photality" now seems appropriate - part light - part mortality. While "true photographs" are still being made, it is highly important to be clear in language, and thus in thought, about photography and photographs. The fundamental inquiry – "What is photography? What is a photograph? What is this photograph?" must continue. It is now necessary for everyone to ask these questions more frequently and give clearer, more definitive and loud answers.

Photographers, curators and critics may give differing answers to these questions, but photograph conservators must find consensus if they are to know what they conserve. Currently a common answer cannot be given. Indeed, yet another question has been raised because of this – "What is photograph conservation?" This question must soon be answered. There is an urgent need for the photograph conservation profession to define itself by defining what a photograph is. Without defining what is a photograph, it is impossible to define what is photograph conservation and impossible to answer "Why?"

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