



Article: Organizing a Workshop in West Africa

Author(s): Nora W. Kennedy, Debra Hess Norris, Bertrand Lavédrine, and Franck Ogou

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Organizing a Workshop in West Africa

Nora W. Kennedy, Debra Hess Norris, Bertrand Lavédrine, and Franck Ogou

Presented at the PMG session of the 2015 AIC Annual Meeting in Miami, Florida

There is a wealth of photographic heritage dating from the early nineteenth century to the present across Sub-Saharan Africa. Many of these materials are at risk. In response to these challenges, North American, French, and African partners developed and delivered a four-day pilot photograph preservation workshop at the School of African Heritage in Porto Novo, Benin. This workshop focused on preservation fundamentals for photographic materials and was designed to build capacity through enhanced advocacy and to strengthen preservation networks within Sub-Saharan Africa.

This effort is part of a larger focus on the development of sustainable, site-specific, and technology-appropriate projects addressing both access and preservation. This pilot builds on lessons learned from ongoing collaborative work in the Middle East that has been generously supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Getty Conservation Institute (see <http://www.meppi.me/>). The Middle East initiative aims to build photograph preservation awareness, capacity, and networks across the region, from North Africa and the Arab Peninsula through Western Asia where conservation challenges are equally compelling.

The challenge of preserving photographs in Sub-Saharan Africa

African photography has emerged as a significant focus of research and scholarship over the last twenty years. This is a result of a growing interest in postcolonial societies and cultures and the increased value of visual evidence across the humanities and social sciences. At the same time, many significant and fascinating photographic collections have come to light and many face serious environmental and economic risks. They are held privately or housed in regional museums, archives, and libraries where controlled environments are rare, electricity is never guaranteed, and damage caused by flash floods, silverfish, termites, and mold is extensive. Some collections or important single images have been transferred to collections in other parts of the world, because their economic value is higher outside the immediate region. The threat to these collections is substantial and almost completely unacknowledged outside of the continent.

Notably, significant and important photograph preservation initiatives have been directed by WAMP, the West African Museums Program, an NGO that builds cultural capacity within the region and has successfully raised awareness about collections and their needs as well as building networks that promote preservation. Established in 1982, WAMP supported a survey between 1996-1999 that identified nearly 400 photographic collections within museums, libraries, archives and private institutions in 17 West African countries. WAMP has organized seminars, workshops and meetings, and has published both the survey and a *Handbook on Preventive Conservation for Photographic Archives*.

A key colleague in all these efforts is Fatima Fall, director of the Center for Research for the Documentation of Senegal established in 1943, who has nearly single-handedly surveyed many collections, and has consulted with and educated many professionals in the West African region. As a museum, library, and photograph archive, the Center for Research for the Documentation of Senegal has made a significant impact on photograph preservation practice in the region. This work is impressive in its scope and reach, much of it carried out with funding from a variety of organizations. The scarcity of formally trained photograph conservators and the interest in maintaining momentum and securing resources makes the need for further training initiatives imperative. Fatima proved to be an invaluable resource in planning for and executing the workshop.

The *Préservation du Patrimoine Photographique Africain* (3PA) workshop

In response to these challenges, the *École du Patrimoine Africain* (EPA, <http://epa-prema.net/>) partnered with the Department of Art Conservation at the University of Delaware (UDel), the *Centre de Recherche sur la Conservation des Collections* in Paris (CRCC), the Photograph Conservation Department at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), and Resolution Photo (<https://www.resolutionphoto.org/>) to identify important photographic repositories at risk and to develop, organize, and administer a four-day photograph preservation workshop held April 22-25, 2014. Key to these efforts were Resolution Photo's extensive knowledge of and contacts in the region which established relations with the host institution and introduced networks through which to promote the event.



Fig. 1. Identification of photographic processes during the 3PA workshop in Benin.
Image courtesy of Caroline Lacey, Resolution Photo and 3PA.

Core lectures and hands-on demonstrations were taught by authors Bertrand Lavédrine (CRCC), Debra Hess Norris (UDel), and Nora Kennedy (The Met) addressing topics ranging from risk assessment, identification of negative and print processes, and creative storage solutions, to advocacy and grant writing. Additional discussions led by Fatima Fall as well as Henrike Grohs

(director of the Goethe-Institut in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire), Franck Ogou (curator, cultural producer, and cultural heritage manager at the *École du Patrimoine Africain* in Porto-Novo, Benin), and Erin Haney and Jennifer Bajorek (co-directors of Resolution Photo and organizing partners) addressed diverse issues related to public programming, community outreach, advocacy, intellectual property, and digitization. Teaching was hands-on where possible and translated simultaneously between English and French to ease communication. Participants received key photograph preservation texts, as well as materials to assist with the development of educational, artistic, and public programming and basic tools for process identification and creating protective enclosures.



Fig. 2. Examining negatives from a local collection in Porto Novo, Benin.
Image courtesy Nora Kennedy.

Workshop participants included 24 established curators, photographers, collection care professionals, and directors of contemporary art centers, museums, and regional archives deeply committed to the preservation of African heritage *in Africa*. Well over 50% of the participants were talented artists/photographers who care for influential family or cultural archives, including the collections of J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere of Nigeria, Roger DaSilva of Senegal, Paul Kodjo of Côte d'Ivoire, and Adama Bamba of Mali. Our African participants represented important initiatives across Sub-Saharan Africa such as History in Progress Uganda developed by Dutch photographer and workshop participant Andrea Stultiens (see <http://www.hipuganda.org/>). During our workshop, participant Bisi Silva, founder and director of the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Nigeria, spoke with contagious enthusiasm about the vibrancy of contemporary art across Africa despite serious infrastructure challenges and a lack of governmental support. In 2007, she established the CCA in Lagos in a concerted effort to build a dynamic regional artist collective with a gallery space, library, and meeting space for the community within Nigeria and beyond. See <http://www.ccalagos.org/>.

The workshop sparked probing questions and compelling contributions from all participants. Some of the most significant brainstorming sessions focused on the use of clay and earthen architecture to provide passive cooling, other traditional building techniques to promote ventilation and air circulation, and the option of solar-powered refrigeration technologies.



Fig. 3. Demonstration of the printing-out process at the *École du Patrimoine Africain*, Porto Novo, Benin. Image courtesy of Caroline Lacey, Resolution Photo and 3PA.

A pre-workshop trip by some of the organizers aimed to build awareness about our work in preservation within the lively contemporary photography community in Benin and Nigeria, to learn more about artists' work in the area, and to better understand challenges faced. Nora Kennedy, Peter Mustardo of The Better Image, Jennifer Bajorek, and Erin Haney met with numerous artists and art organizers to learn about art movements, photography organizations, and to see first-hand some of the vibrant work being produced. All portfolio viewings were done on-screen, finding meeting places where possible often in cafes and restaurants due to the difficulty of navigating the massive city of Lagos. Actual printed output was not common in part because of the reported lack of good printers in the region, the lack of funds to make prints, and significantly, the unlikelihood of the print's survival in the hot and humid climate along the West African coast. Typically prints are made when a buyer is in sight, and not before. The shift from analog to digital photography and the preponderance of mixed media contemporary works were some of many factors considered in developing the four-day workshop.

While our faculty generously donated all preparatory and on-site time, we secured an additional \$45,000 to cover associated administrative, transportation, housing and materials costs. Participants were provided with grants to cover all expenses. Donors included many individuals and companies, and the Metropolitan Museum awarded Nora Kennedy a grant for her travel to Benin and Nigeria. It was very clear that a relatively small amount of funding can go a long way to support such an important initiative. Travel tends to be pricy within Africa, but once on site

and with the generous support of EPA in hosting the workshop, the \$45,000 was sufficient—something that would not be true in other parts of the world.

Preliminary outcomes of 3PA

While the photograph preservation challenges are clear, significant progress is underway. This workshop is only one effort in a continuum of efforts led by many. Workshop participant Ananias Leki Dago is an accomplished photographer from the Ivory Coast entrusted with the care and preservation of Paul Kodjo's negative archive. Kodjo began his career in the early 1960s as a press photographer and was active in art photography and cinema. With the financial support of the Goethe-Institut, Ananias has had this important collection scanned for access, and rehoused in high quality sleeves and boxes for long term preservation.



Fig. 4. Bertrand Lavédrine discussing risk assessment for collections.
Image courtesy of Caroline Lacey, Resolution Photo and 3PA.

Following our 2014 workshop, EPA's board approved an investment in photograph conservation training and practice that will focus on the cataloguing and assessment of at-risk regional collections combined with institution-wide emergency planning and response training for such holdings. A crowdsourcing platform dedicated to the preservation of African cultural heritage has been launched to support this work.

Conclusion and next steps

In Sub-Saharan Africa there are few institutions with the resources and infrastructure to look after photographs, though across the region, priceless and historically significant local collections are at risk. Thus preservation and capacity-building in Africa must proceed in partnership with education and outreach programs to better protect images from dangerous

environmental conditions and to ensure these materials are shared broadly within school curricula, local museums, and other civic and public spaces.



Fig. 5. Erin Haney and Jennifer Bajorek meeting with artist Andrew Esiebo in Lagos, Nigeria.
Image courtesy of Nora Kennedy.

The broadening of networks and ongoing dissemination of information as a result of this workshop is a further step in connecting and empowering talented African archivists, artists, collection care professionals, directors and educators capable of advancing preservation practice and public programming. Our African colleagues and newfound friends spoke eloquently and with passion about the preservation of these rich photographic resources. While the preservation of photography is in its infancy in Africa, we have left Benin having strengthened the growing network of talented African archivists, artists, collection care professionals, directors, and educators and having forged new connections with colleagues and professionals outside West Africa. It is these individuals who are capable of advancing preservation practice, public programming, and advocacy.

We aim to work together with our African colleagues to ensure that this work continues through additional programming, online mentoring, and an investment of new preservation funding for at-risk collections. All should strive to build on the work by WAMP, ICCROM, UNESCO, the Getty Foundation, and others. The momentum gained must be capitalized on to expand the network, to spark more energy, and further develop the awareness. This will inspire funders, build sustained capacity, provide assistance, and strengthen bonds between our African

colleagues and the larger photography and preservation communities internationally. We encourage your participation, creative ideas, and engagement.

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Debra Hess Norris

Chair and Professor of Photograph Conservation, Department of Art Conservation, University of Delaware / Director, Winterthur/UD Program in Art Conservation

Nora W. Kennedy

Sherman Fairchild Conservator in Charge, Department of Photograph Conservation, The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Adjunct Faculty, New York University Institute of Fine Arts Conservation Center

Franck Komlan Ogou

Archivist, Arts and Culture Mediator and Cultural Heritage Manager
L'École du Patrimoine Africain

Bertrand Lavédrine

Professor, National Museum of Natural History / Director, Centre de Recherche sur la Conservation

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