



Article: Conservation versus Historicity: A Necessary Reconciliation for the Intervention in the Photographic Collection of Frida Kahlo

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Conservation versus Historicity: A Necessary Reconciliation for the Intervention in the Photographic Collection of Frida Kahlo

Elisa Carmona Vaillard & Karla Castillo Leyva

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

Abstract

In 2004 the Frida Kahlo Museum in Mexico City opened a sealed bathroom and discovered the contents of a photographic collection belonging to the Mexican painters Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Diego Rivera (1886-1957). It became evident that the conservation of the photograph collection was required and a protocol was developed. This paper examines the challenges of conserving the archive: how to restore the photographs while simultaneously preserving evidence of use, which in a fine-art photography context could be considered disfiguring.

The Discovery

In April of 2004 an important event took place at the Frida Kahlo Museum in Mexico City. Formerly known as the Casa Azul, Kahlo's life is intertwined with that of the house. She was born and raised at the Casa Azul and later lived there with the muralist Diego Rivera. After her death in 1954, Rivera placed a number of Kahlo's belongings into a bathroom and sealed the door. It was this room, with its unknown and unseen contents, which was reopened.

The Frida Kahlo Museum and the technical committee of the Diego Rivera-Frida Kahlo Trust at the Central Bank of Mexico authorized the reopening of the bathroom and the recovery of its contents. This was a highly controversial event. The approximately eight square meter space contained trunks and sealed boxes of Kahlo's personal belongings; clothes, shoes, jewelry, braces, letters, photographs, sketches and a number of books, drawings, and plans belonging to Diego Rivera and other painters of the couple's acquaintance.

Individuals Involved

The individuals supervising the initial discovery and resulting projects were Carlos Phillips Olmedo, former director of the Frida Kahlo Museum; Hilda Trujillo, current Director of the Frida Kahlo Museum; restorers Magdalena and Denise Rosenzweig; the Association for the Development of Archives and Libraries in Mexico (ADABI); photographers Graciela Iturbide and Pablo Aguinaco; and 20th century art historians Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, Teresa del Conde and Marta Turok, who identified and catalogued the archive contents.

As the room was opened, contents were photographed *in situ* and, with the advice of ADABI, a cataloging project begun. The cataloging project, which started in 2004 involved several months of work, identified and described 27,000 documents, 6,500 photos, 300 dresses, and 400 works of art.

Magdalena and Denise Rosenzweig found that the photograph collection was in a good state of preservation because the objects were sheltered from many external agents of deterioration during their time in the bathroom.

Importance of the Photograph Archive

Once the condition of the archive was recorded, further object-level cataloging and condition reporting was done. The content of the images is an important source of information pertaining to the first half of the 20th century while objects themselves are an informative collection of the types of photographic processes common during the same time period. The value of the collection to Kahlo is evident by the use that the prints exhibit: there are inscriptions, paint stains, and cuts in at high percentage of the collection.

Condition Assessment

The assessment of the collection, performed by the Centro de Permanencia de Imagenes (CEPI), classified the photographs into three levels according to their current condition.

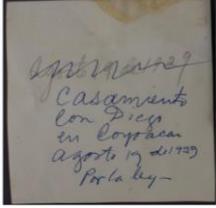
Table 1. Condition Rating Levels

Level	Degree of Damage	Conservation Priority
3	Severe	Urgent
2	Serious	Immediate
1	Moderate	Low

The items classified as Level 3 included photographs with a severe degree of instability and which were in immediate risk of further deterioration. Level 2 indicated that the objects had a degree of serious deterioration; if issues were not addressed in the short term, the long term permanence of the photographs could be compromised. Level 1 included photographs in stable condition but with some aesthetic issues.

Table 2. Examples of Condition Levels

Level	Common Condition Issues	Example(s)
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall surface dirt recto and verso • Paper fibers stuck to the emulsion • Cracking, flaking, and loss to the emulsion • Delamination of the primary support • Black, pink, green, and brown mold stains • Yellowed adhesive along edge of verso 	 <p>(recto – left; verso – right)</p>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cracking, flaking, and loss to the emulsion • Multiple vertical folds and breaks overall • Major loss at the bottom right quadrant, minor losses at the upper right 	 <p>(verso)</p>

<p>1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall surface dirt recto and verso • Diagonal creases with associated cracking and loss to the emulsion 	 <p>(verso)</p>
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Conservation Treatment

In 2014, during the first half of the year 310 objects were treated: 305 objects from Levels 1/2 and five from Level 3. The treatments typically consisted of dry and/or aqueous surface cleaning, though more extensive treatment was required in some cases.

Reconciling Evidence of Use with Idealized Conservation

A number of photographs exhibited evidence of use, including many different inscriptions on the secondary support versos: dedications, captions identifying the sitters, and messages. Oil stains, graphite notations, watercolor, and lipstick marks were found. There were also intentional cuts, scratches, and folds to the photographs, and various adhesive tapes from past repairs or exhibitions.

This evidence, which in another collection could be considered as disfiguring, tells the history of these objects and how they were used by Kahlo and Rivera. Taking this into consideration, it was proposed to preserve as much evidence of the history of the objects while slowing their deterioration as much as possible.

Table 3. Typical Treatment Procedures

Surface cleaning	
Removal of dry mount tissue and other adhesive residues	
Washing paper tapes	
Mending and reinforcing weaknesses	
Filling losses	
Consolidation	
Inpainting	
Lining	
Mold remediation	

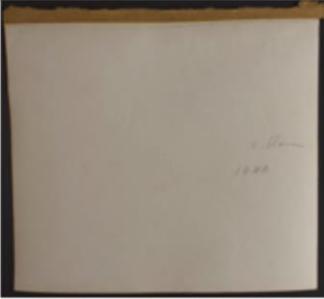
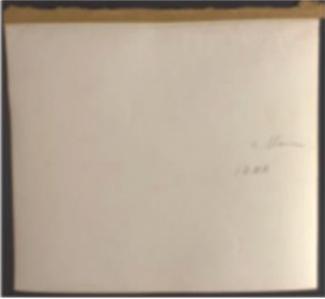
This dialogue between preserving evidence and preserving the object was especially important in regards to the treatment approach for the secondary supports, paint stains, cut, and adhesive tapes.

The poor physical condition of some secondary supports may ordinarily have been addressed by removing them from the photographs and discarding them. However, because of the contextual value they provided they were retained and sometimes separated from the photographs, treated, and reattached to the corresponding image.

Paint stains were approached similarly. They speak to the use of the photographs by painters, as models and references, and are a valuable source of information regarding their materials and techniques. Cuts to the photographs also show how Frida Kahlo modified her own photographs, providing information about her working habits.

Two types of adhesive tape were found throughout the collection, a paper tape with a water-soluble gummed adhesive and a pressure sensitive tape with a synthetic adhesive/carrier. The presence of adhesive tapes on many photographs is also evidence of their use, however its inherent vice had already caused damage to several photographs. A compromise between the removal and retention of the adhesive tapes was found. Paper tapes were removed with a cotton swab dampened in 1:1 ethanol/water. They were washed and the gum adhesive removed, after which they were reattached in their original locations with Klucel G in ethanol. Tapes with synthetic adhesives and carriers were removed and discarded: their treatment and reapplication was not practical.

Table 4. Typical Treatment Protocol for Paper Tapes

	 <p>Verso, before treatment</p>	 <p>Verso, after treatment</p>
Process	Silver gelatin developing-out paper photograph	
Condition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall silver mirroring • Overall planar distortions • Brown paper tape with a water soluble adhesive along the verso's tope edge, some slight adhesive migration into the paper support 	
Approach	As the tape was part of the object's history, it was removed, treated separately, and reattached in the appropriate location.	
Treatment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The condition of the object prior to and following treatment was documented photographically. 2. The object was surface cleaned with a grated eraser crumbs and a soft brush. 3. The recto of the photograph was further surface cleaned with cotton swabs dampened in a solution of 1:1 ethanol/water. 4. The paper tape was removed by softening the adhesive with a cotton swab soaked in the same 1:1 ethanol/water solution. 5. Tears were mended with mulberry paper and Klucel G in ethanol. 6. The paper tape was reattached in the appropriate location using Klucel G in 	

	ethanol. 7. Areas of cracks and breaks in the emulsion were consolidated with photographic grade gelatin.
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Table 5. Typical Treatment Protocol for Synthetic Tapes	
	
Verso, before treatment	Verso, after treatment
Process	Silver gelatin developing-out paper photograph
Condition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate surface dirt overall • Minor loss to the emulsion • Synthetic pressure sensitive tapes present on recto and verso • Yellowed adhesive on the verso, at all four corners
Approach	The synthetic tapes were removed and discarded. While they could have been removed and treated, their reattachment would necessitate the introduction of another synthetic adhesive, which was undesirable. More sympathetic cellulose ethers do not adhere well to synthetic surfaces, and would not be effective.
Treatment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The condition of the object prior to and following treatment was documented photographically. 2. The recto was surface cleaned with cotton swabs dampened in a solution of 1:1 ethanol/water. The verso was surface cleaned with a vinyl eraser. 3. Tapes were removed mechanically with a Teflon spatula and an ethanol gel. The yellowed adhesive residues on the verso were reduced by poulticing for one minute with the same ethanol gel. 4. Areas of cracks and breaks in the emulsion were consolidated with photographic grade gelatin.

Conclusions

The treatment project lasted nine months, stabilizing the collection while preserving the unique information that each photograph possesses.

The treatment guidelines established correspond to those outlined by the International Council on Monuments and Sites' 1964 International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, which emphasize the compatibility, reversibility, and retreatability of materials. Though in theory minimal intervention is best, in practice it is not always practical or advisable. For example, reinforcing mends should not be applied or consolidation carried out

before surface cleaning a soiled artifact.

The removal of the synthetic adhesive tapes and the retention of the paper tapes is an irregularity in a treatment protocol designed to retain as much original material as possible, especially as both tapes of tape have been applied for the same reasons. In this case the difference in treatment approach was determined by the chemical stability of the tapes, whose long term effect on the preservation of the photographs must be taken into consideration.

As put forth by Cesare Brandi in his theory of restoration, there should be a dialogue between the conservator and the artwork, in which the materiality of the object is understood and the multiple ways of valuing an artifact are explored.

Part of the value of Frida Kahlo's photograph collection lies in their physical state: the changes that Kahlo and Rivera made to them, the evidence of prior display, and the damage caused by their long-term storage in the sealed bathroom. In this context their non-ideal condition ceases to be "damage" and becomes part of the history of the objects, as witnesses to Kahlo's life and working practices.

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