



Article: DEVELOPING TREATMENT CRITERIA IN THE CONSERVATION OF
PHOTOGRAPHS

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DEVELOPING TREATMENT CRITERIA IN THE CONSERVATION OF PHOTOGRAPHS

The conservation of photographs, as a professional endeavor, had its beginnings in the mid 1970's at the Art Conservation Department of the University of Delaware. But from the beginnings of photography, photographers have had a keen interest in the stability and permanence of the photographic image. In fact, many improvements in the photographic process, such as gold toning and carbon prints, came about as a response to problems of deterioration in photographic images. Gernsheim's 1969 edition chapter 28 is useful in understanding the concerns that were prevalent in the 19th century and which continue today as we pursue the preservation of our photographic heritage. With the advent of the twentieth century the newly emerging industrial barons of photography realized the commercial value of marketing photographic materials with a certain degree of permanence. Kodak, in particular, has to a great extent attempted to address the problems of impermanence and deterioration found in paper supports, emulsion layers and processing chemistry. While it must be realized that industry's ultimate goal is profit, in the process of making money the photographic industry has exhibited a considerable degree of responsibility in making photographic materials more lasting. It is in color materials that this degree of responsibility begins to diminish.

Through the 1960's there had been individuals interested in the preservation of photographic images. Significant among these has been Eugene Ostroff, Curator of Photographs at the Smithsonian, whose early writings in Museum News did much to elevate the general interest in these issues. What was needed in the 1970's however, was an approach to photographic conservation that was rooted in the already important field of Art Conservation and away from the pervading influence of the photographic industry as evidenced in material standards of the period and in the fact that preservation came to be defined in the third quarter of this century as simply copying. The photographic industry can provide us with useful information and insights, but it can never define the parameters of the practice of conservation, for its scientists can seldom understand how a conservator thinks and what criteria he or she must apply to their work. This is not meant as a criticism, but merely to state that theirs is a different frame of mind when discussing the preservation of photographic images.

Today the conservation of photographs is defined within the larger context of art conservation, in terms of training, ethics and practice. In fact, we make a grave

mistake when we as photographic conservators isolate ourselves from the larger profession and when we are ignorant of issues and answers found in the fields of paper, paintings, metals, and textiles conservation. If there are any regrets in my starting the movement toward specialty groups is that it tends to polarize us and to move us away from important information found in other areas of specialization.

Since that beginning in Delaware, other conservation programs have become involved in the conservation of photographs. Extremely useful information has also come out of RIT and Ottawa. Also, after my early years teaching in Delaware, apprenticeships have proven in my practice to be an excellent avenue for training if the right student can be found. But in the end, I believe that conservators are not made at graduate programs, or in apprenticeships, or simply because one wants to be one. Essential information is gained in graduate programs and apprenticeships, but Conservators, in the full sense that term implies, are made through an ongoing, unstinting and practical relationship with objects. This is in fact the principle under which the graduate programs were founded. We still have the need for more knowledge, for better techniques, and for a more mature practice of conservation.

By now you are wondering what all of this has to do with "developing treatment criteria in the conservation of photographs", which is the title of my talk. Let me bluntly state that it has everything to do with it. A conservation treatment, after all, begins with the conservator in whose hands lie the object, and the commitment, knowledge and skills that he or she brings to that object. No doubt, the cliché is true, it is the object that makes its own demands on the conservator. But to recognize and meet these demands requires of the conservator the following qualities.

First, a conservator must have love and respect for the work of art. It is much more than a "challenging object" or the possibility of a "neat treatment", or a good research project. A photograph is after all a work of art, an object of historical importance or of sentimental attachment. In spite of all the photographs that I have handled, I stand in awe at the photographic image and the process that created it. It is still amazing to me that such a thin layer contains so much information, so many distinct areas of light and shade, and that in those areas is so clearly expressed the intent of the photographer who created it, and the period of history in which it was created. It is still possible for me to jump with private joy at the beauty of the work of art which has been

entrusted to my hands.

Second, a responsible conservator must have in depth knowledge of all aspects of the work of art. Recognizing that what is before you is an albumen print, as important as that is, is but a small part of what you ultimately need to know. You need to know the artistic temperament and historic environment in which this photograph was created. You need to know the technical elements that brought it about, its chemistry, and the materials that were used in the photographic system. You need to know the manner and style in which photographs of this period were presented. And you will constantly need to be informed of how these photographs deteriorate. Thanks to Jim Reilly and Klaus Hendricks, we are beginning to do that.

Third, to understand all aspects of the work of art you need to do more than read, you need to see. Studying one albumen print, or even ten, does not tell you everything you need to know. I consider myself lucky to have worked with two major collections in my early years, The Library of Congress and the George Eastman House. These extremely varied and rich collections were the stage set on which everything that I have done in photography had its beginnings. New York's many fine and comprehensive collections added what I lacked in depth. At every opportunity my intention was, and still is, to observe and to discern by the simple act of seeing. When studying a photograph you need to keep in mind what are the succinct qualities that deserve close examination: process, tonality, surface character, presentation and the relationship of one photograph to the magnitude of a photographers's work or to the breadth of the accomplishments of a period of history. All of these qualities will give you important clues as you decide on what treatment, if any, the object requires.

The sum total of what I have said adds up to that body of information that is absolutely necessary for you as a conservator to have before you intervene in a photograph, or for that matter in any other artistic or historic work - CONNOISSEURSHIP.

Now that we have finally arrived a TREATMENT please allow me to make some points that will help clarify what I need to say later.

1. Treatment is at the core of our profession. There are other fields; archivists, conservation scientists, collections management, researchers, and curators. They each play their important and unique role in the world of art and history. But it is entrusted to the Professional Conservator the privilege and responsibility to

intervene, or not to intervene, in the physical well being of the object.

2. In the conservation of artistic and historic works, not every treatment that is wanted is possible, not every treatment that is possible is necessary, and not every treatment that is necessary is advisable.

3. The term "mass conservation" is, to say the least, a difficult term. It conjures up images of survival rates, or casualties from "friendly fire". Truly, different collections have different requirements. Archival collections, due to their nature and size, require different approaches. But the treatment criteria for objects that come in such quantities should be no less informed, no less respectful, and no less ethical than the criteria we apply to a single object of value. When we place conservation concerns on the same level as quantity and money then we prostitute our profession and we place at risk the objects entrusted to our care.

4. I take my work very seriously, but I do not take myself very seriously. Individuals that place such importance on what they can do for the object seldom consider the appropriateness of a treatment. The decisions that I make for an object are an infinitesimal part of its total history. What I want to assure is that at another point in history another conservator may be able to intervene without being hindered by what I have done.

As a conservator, many tasks are asked of you. They come in different forms, written orders, verbal commands, and actual threats. These requests can provide you with an excellent opportunity to educate your curator or client. You can share with them your knowledge of the object, the intrinsic characteristics that are important to preserve, and you can elicit from them useful information. You can also discuss with your client your knowledge of the type of treatment being requested. It is important that you also consult with other conservators in the field. But when it comes to a decision as to what treatment, if any, should be carried out, then the responsibility is strictly in your hands. It is you who must be true to your sense of ethics. Just because an object is brought to a conservator for treatment is not in itself sufficient reason to do the treatment. The Nuremberg excuse that you were following orders is not sufficient to the responsible conservator. He or she has the responsibility to inform, to discuss, to pursue possible avenues, but also he or she has the responsibility to say no when their treatment criteria might be violated. This is not to say that I personally experience a lily white practice. I have sometimes succumbed to the lure of an exciting treatment or to the pressure of an overzealous client, and in retrospect I

wish I had not carried out some treatments. But the pain that these have caused me strengthens my determination to remain true to my treatment criteria.

Developing a criteria for the conservation of photographs is a difficult task. It assumes that I have the expertise to do it, and that it can be done. The difficulty of establishing treatment standards for the profession has always been that.(1) As I have said previously, every object has its own chemical and physical makeup, its own environmental history, and its own needs. Success with one salted print, does not guarantee success with another salted print, even by the same maker. , 2. We as conservators are a stubborn and opinionated lot. When the AIC Board last year presented a revised code of ethics to the membership, they could hardly expect the fury that this engendered. Often our judgment is formed through diversity of training, variety of treatment experiences, and just sheer will. Seldom can we generalize productively.

And now, to reinforce some of the crucial issues I've raised, perhaps it is best if I present you with some of the objects that have come into my studio, state what condition brought them to me, explain to you what I could decipher or already knew about the object, and what was my decision as to treatment. I do not hope that you will agree with each of my choices, nor am I foolish enough to think you will. What I hope is to start you down the road of analytical thinking that will lead you to develop your own treatment criteria in the conservation of photographs. After all, it is not as important what I say as what you do.

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