



Article: AICPMG Color Committee: 1992 Report

Author(s): Robin Siegel

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Compiler: Robin E. Siegel

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AICPMG Color Committee: 1992 Report

Robin Siegel, Conservator
National Geographic Society

presented by Nora Kennedy to the April 1992 Conference
"The Imperfect Image, Photographs: Their Past, Present and Future"

Although the field of photo conservation has long been dominated by the various black and white media, it was only a matter of time before the preservation of color formats would become an unavoidable problem. In fact, color photographs are a far more complex challenge than black and white, and the technology involved demands that the conservator be familiar with a new field of chemistry.

In this paper I would like to review three activities I have been involved in during the past few years. I hope that others will contact me to participate in these activities, and to include me in any others that might come up.

The first effort in reaching out to the color community was a one-day symposium on Autochromes.

1989 Autochrome Symposium

In May of 1989, the National Geographic Society hosted an informal four-hour symposium on Autochrome Duplication. In attendance were fourteen conservators, collections curators, and color lab technicians from the National Geographic Society, Winterthur, and the Library of Congress. The impetus for the meeting was a series of inquiries from the curators of the Winterthur Autochrome collections, especially on the subject of photo-reproduction. The meeting, which lasted four hours and included a short tour of the National Geographic color lab, provided a very fruitful exchange of ideas between the color technicians and an education for the conservators. The meeting was small, easy to organize, and productive, and I would highly recommend the format to others.

AICPMG Color Committee

Having been frustrated for years by the scarcity of available expertise on problems concerning the preservation and treatment of all color materials, and the number of questions that were being referred to me that I could neither answer nor refer to anyone else, I asked for the support of my fellow members of the American Institute for Conservation, Photo Materials Group, in a brainstorming session on the problems they encounter with color. The agenda was to be determined by the responses to a two-page questionnaire.

Color Committee questionnaire

The questionnaire elicited 24 responses. Respondants with collections of color photographs cited collections ranging from a few hundred to several million, including color media representative of the whole history of color photography. In fact, most respondants who went into detail to describe their collections listed at least five completely different color media, such as the Victoria & Albert Museum, represented by Elizabeth Martin, who listed Autochromes, color transparencies, Cibachrome, Type C-prints, Polaroid, holograms, cyanotypes, "Hockney snap shots," Fresson prints, mixed media, and hand-colored prints. In fact, the generic category "color

transparencies" could be subdivided into a number of emulsion types, each of which has its own keeping characteristics and each of which must be handled in conservation treatments according to its own set of specifications.

With only a few exceptions, the responding institutions store their collections under conditions similar to those used to store their black and white collections. Of the institutions able to provide special environments for their color collections, only one stored any part of the collection in temperatures lower than freezing.

Respondants were asked to provide both questions and answers to share at the meeting, and from which I designed the meeting agenda.

Color Committee Meeting

Thirty-five members attended the informal meeting on the morning of Sunday, February 24, 1991, following the 1991 AICPMG Winter Meeting. Attendees included scientists, students, and conservators from museums, governments and private institutions in six countries.

Subjects discussed were diverse and controversial, including recommended safe light exposure of exhibition photos, the mounting of oversized prints, the use of buffered paper with color photographs, storage of dye transfer prints, and the lack of expertise in the conservation of color photographs. Needless to say, the problems far outnumbered the solutions, but a productive exchange of ideas and test information proceeded, which could be repeated and expanded if we were to spend more time in this way.

We discussed in depth the need for training in color conservation, both for students and professional conservators, as well as the need for product testing. Specific suggestions included an entire day to be devoted to color at the 1993 PMG meeting in Austin. Names such as Peter Krause and Henry Wilhelm came up several times. The consensus was that if training in color processes became available, professional conservators would take advantage of it. It is of interest that the Rochester Institute of Technology, under Jim Reilly and the Image Permanence Institute, is launching a graduate program in photo preservation.

Stan Anderson, an engineer from Kodak, suggested several times that conservators consult the Kodak Information Center to obtain literature on various subjects. Within the context of conservation treatments, however, the technical information I was able to obtain from Kodak did not contain the kind of technical data needed by the professional.

In the course of the meeting, we considered the possibility that intrusive restoration is not possible with color materials. Although we agreed that the emphasis today is and should be on preservation and duplication, treatments are being done, and safe and effective ways of performing these and other treatments must be established.

Finally, we discussed cold storage and refrigeration, and especially the need to share information on the design and installation of cold storage facilities. This subject was also recommended for the agenda of the Austin meeting, as well as a separate conference. As far as I know, this has not been pursued further.

Conservation Research Task Force questionnaire

In December of 1991, I sent out the AICPMG version of a questionnaire for the AIC Task Force on Conservation Research. The results of this questionnaire were sent to Eric Hansen at the Getty, to be compiled and interpreted. As the questionnaires from Photo Material Group members were sent to me, I can share some of the results that pertain to the conservation of color materials.

About half of the respondents were conservators. The remainder were conservation administrators, curator/archivists, students, manufacturer/vendors, and conservation or other scientists.

In answer to the question of what **deterioration problems** the respondent wanted researched, the list included:

- the need for separation of materials in storage due to chemical interaction;
- the best mounting procedures;
- best monitoring system;
- fading color; and
- damage to slides and prints due to poor quality plastics in storage

In answer to the question of what **conservation treatments** the respondent wanted researched, the list included:

- hinging or "presentation methods;"
- how to restore damaged Polaroids; and
- cleaning of photos contaminated by plasticizers and other additives from plastic enclosures

In answer to the question of what **materials** the respondent wanted evaluated, the list included:

- labels for storage of color

In answer to the question of what **archaeometric or materials analysis** the respondent wanted addressed, the list included:

- identification of color processes

In answer to the question of what **short courses or technical updates** the respondent thought were most needed, the list included:

- color photographic processes and chemistry;
- history of color processes;
- identification of color processes;
- longevity of color processes;
- deterioration and preservation of color processes;
- cold storage of color; and
- chemicals used in conservation treatments of color

I am preparing to share the entire results of this survey, especially with those respondents who expressed an interest in performing the research.

I have made no effort to describe specific treatment, preservation and storage innovations or discoveries. I hope that we are only beginning to develop this field, and that, with the new RIT program, the color meeting at Austin in 1993, and the conference on cold storage, our status as conservators of color photographic materials will be further examined and that questions and problems confronting us today will coalesce into a long-term agenda for the field.