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# PHOTOGRAPH PRESERVATION IN RUSSIA

ELENA SIMONOVA-BULAT

## *BACKGROUND INFORMATION*

### *Russia's Photographic Heritage*

The Russian nation possesses an immensely rich photographic heritage little known by those outside the country. The city of Saint Petersburg, in particular, is the center of this photographic legacy. Long the cultural capital of Russia, the city holds the greatest concentration of historic collections particularly from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also, it was the location of three revolutions, which led to the transformation of the society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is largely documented in the photographic archives of the city.

Until recent times access to collections was very limited. Currently there is a dramatic growth of interest, both within and outside of Russia to access and utilize its historic photographs. However, it is impossible to find information on the history of Russian photography that is adequate and complete, even when referring to World History of Photography. History of Russian Photography does not exist in English, and there are few such books in Russian, with the exception of some written during the Socialist Era, which are heavily influenced by socialist ideology. There is currently research into the history of Russian photography that is going on in Russia and even in the United States, but there is little possibility to complete and publish them at this time, because the lack of funding.

The increased interest in photography means that photographs are finding a significant place for themselves in the art world. Traditionally, most museums, archives, libraries, and other institutions in Russia considered photographic materials as mostly archival documents, but these opinions are beginning to change. Photographs are becoming popular objects for exhibition and research in Russia, much in the same way they began to be popular in the United States 20 to 30 years ago.

### *Preservation Planning*

In Russia there is extremely little funding going toward photograph conservation and support for advanced preservation planning that will ensure that these important photograph collections will be preserved for future generations.

On November 2003, the Russian Museum of Ethnography invited me as a conservator to make a conservation assessment of their collection of photographs and negatives. This collection is one of the most interesting photo collections in St. Petersburg. The Russian

Museum of Ethnography (REM) is located in the building that had been constructed for this purpose during the years 1901-1911.

There is no air conditioning system, but only a water heating system. The Russian Museum of Ethnography is located in St. Petersburg. This city is rightly famous as the cultural capital of Russia. Also, it is well-known for its very severe climate. The city of St. Petersburg was established on a swamp in 1703 by Peter the Great. Malaria was a very common disease in this area and it had always been previously uninhabited. Winter was very cold and damp (10-15° C, and 50-60 % RH) while summer was mild but humid also (18-23° C, 70-90% RH). Later on, the climate changed, with winter and summer becoming warmer, but still very humid, and an extended fall and spring season of high humidity.

The Russian Museum of Ethnography is a state museum.

Centralized heating systems are activated just during the cold season, from 15<sup>th</sup> of October to 15<sup>th</sup> of May and are regulated by the government. Some circumstances might extend this time period, but this is rare.

There is no climate control at all in the museum. As a result of all this, the climate inside the museum is far off the recommended standards. There is a warm and very humid environment during the summer and a hot and very dry environment during the cold season. The museum staff is knowledgeable about the environment and its effects on the collection. They check the RH and temperature on alternate days; it is a first step to positive changes.



Control of the temperature is very important. High temperature increases the level of chemical deterioration of paper and photographic objects. There was a very high temperature (26° C), even with windows open, in November in the Print and Negative Archives in the Russian Ethnography Museum. Both the central heating system and lighting are the cause of this problem.

The Russian Museum of Ethnography is located in the middle of St. Petersburg, downtown on a very busy street. Because there is no climate control in the museum, the windows are open in the Main Print Archives and Negative Archive. This creates a very high risk for the acceleration of photograph deterioration because of the then increased presence of atmospheric pollutants.

The condition of the storage area for this collection is a very typical one for any collection in Saint Petersburg, located in an old historical building. No special climate control usually exists, with no clear cataloguing system and a data base. There is no proper housing for the photographic artifacts. This situation creates a very dangerous environment for the collections. Photographs are very sensitive to relative humidity and

temperature changes, as well as to different pollutants in the air. An understanding of all needs for preserving these photographs is very important.

Since photography can be defined as the international heritage, I agree with the importance of using invaluable international experience to establish an adequate understanding of a photographic collection's needs and preservation-conservation priorities.

The systematic condition survey conducted for the Russian Museum of Ethnography in St. Petersburg in November 2003 conclusively demonstrated the imperative for priority-based preservation planning at that institution.

### ***Photograph Conservation Training***

As stated earlier, photographs are becoming popular objects for exhibition and research in Russia, much in the same way they began to be popular in the United States 20 to 30 years ago. In this period of time, a great deal of experience in conservation and preservation was collected. The American Institute for Conservation (AIC) is the leading association in the world on the subject. Many high-level professionals went to the U.S. to develop their knowledge and skill.

There is a different system of education for archivists, curators and conservators in Russia. Actually, there is no academic training for archivists and curators there. Most curators and archivists have an art history degree. There are different short trainings available for archivists and curators in bigger institutions. Technically, they are developing their professional knowledge through the experience that they are gaining in collections.

The basis for the national school for conservation and restoration in Russia had begun to form in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The special system, with common guidelines for training conservators and restorers and maintaining the quality of work, was actually developed in the 1950s. In 1954, by decision of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, the All-Union Examination Board for conservators-restorers was established under the Ministry of Culture. The purpose of the examination board is to control the grade of qualification of conservators-restorers according to established standards.

Every conservator-restorer, graduated from the conservation school goes through the accreditation process in the Examination Board every four years. This system is designed to upgrade the status of conservator-restorer consistently. The board is made up of leading conservators-restorers and researchers from different institutions.

Four levels of qualification exist for each specialty, reflecting the increasing complexity of the work required of the conservator-restorer at each level, and the responsibilities.

1. Conservator-restorer of the third category should be able to perform simple conservation-restoration treatments, using established methods on works of art of lesser museum and artistic value.
2. The conservator-restorer of the second category should be able to demonstrate the ability to work with higher level of deteriorated artifacts of museum value.
3. The conservator-restorer of the first category should be able to perform work of considerable complexity on works of art of high museum and artistic value, train interns and fellows.
4. The conservator-restorer of the highest qualification is authorized to work with the highest level of complexity museum artifacts, develop new methods, compile training textbooks and aids, direct the work of other conservators-restorers and lecture at schools of higher specialized education.

Conservator-restorers who are not ready to go to next step in their qualification still have to go through this accreditation every four years to prove their ability to work on the same level of their qualification.

The following areas of specialization are covered by the qualification system:

- monumental painting of mosaics on architectural monuments
- monumental decorative works of art in museum collections
- stone and stucco architectural
- easel painting in oil
- easel painting in tempera
- polychrome wooden sculpture and decorative wood-carving
- stone and gesso sculpture
- textiles
- furniture
- gilding
- ceramic and glassware
- metalware
- leather
- tusk, bone and horn
- graphic art (paper)
- library material and bookbinding
- photographic materials

The photographic materials specialization is covered by this qualification system, but there is no place to train in photograph conservation in Russia yet. Few academic schools for getting a masters degree in conservation-restoration exist in Russia since the 1950s and there is no photograph conservation department at any conservation school in Russia today. It is not even a part of a paper conservation department at this point.

There are a few places in Europe where Russian conservators could get an academic training in photograph conservation, for example in France or Denmark. The biggest problem is the necessity to speak in French or Danish languages. Probably the most common foreign language

studied at Russian schools is English. So, the conservation schools with photograph conservation blocks in the United States are a great possibility for Russian conservators, but it is very far away from Russia. This is the reason why I think that it is important to bring the knowledge and experience of the photograph conservation field in the United States to Russia at the beginning stage of development of the photograph conservation profession in Russia.

Because there is no formal academic training for photograph conservators in Russia, institutions have been unable to implement any progressive conservation practices for these collections. Most collections are categorized as “archive,” and either an archivist or a curator is responsible for them. Traditionally, the care of photograph collections in Russia has been the responsibility of paper conservators who have had no specialized training in photographic materials. Only four individuals hold the position of “photograph conservator” in Russian institutions today.

The preservation strategies and conservation treatments for photographs that have been advanced in the United States and Europe are based on understanding the mechanisms of deterioration of photographic materials. The long-term preservation of photograph collections in Russia depends on the dissemination of this knowledge through professional training opportunities that will bring best practices into institutional collections.

Photographs that survived for over 150 years must be studied and preserved for future generations. In order to preserve photographs, it is necessary to understand them as physical objects, as well as learn how to use them in ways that do not contribute to their destruction. Photographic Preservation is a relatively new field of study, and there is much left to discover about the proper care and storage of photographs, especially of objects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The history of photographic processes and their variability are very important for understanding photography’s significance in the market and the value to institutions and private collectors.

### *Early Collaboration Efforts*

As part of the previously mentioned condition assessment at the Russian Museum of Ethnography, I was able to incorporate a teaching component. I gave a seminar for curators and conservators in St. Petersburg on some basic aspects of photograph preservation. Also I gave an introduction to the Advanced Residency Program in Photograph Conservation at the George Eastman House, where I serve as the Senior Workshop Coordinator.

In March 2004, a Process Identification Workshop was held in St. Petersburg as a joint venture between the Advanced Residency Program (ARP) and the National Center of Photography of the Russian Federation, with the additional support of the National Library of Russia. It was demonstrated at this workshop that there is a great need in Russia for education about photographic history and photographic processes. With the growing awareness and appreciation of Russian photograph collections and an increased call for exhibitions and research, both nationally and internationally, there is an even

greater imperative for improving basic conservation and preservation knowledge of photographs in Russian institutions.

Additionally, to illustrate the continuity of educational collaboration, the invitation to organize a Daguerreotype Workshop in the Hermitage was the direct result of the Process ID Workshop. The State Hermitage holds unique collection of daguerreotypes. Daguerreotypes are very rare in Russia with only a few more than 400 hundred known examples. The Hermitage has 88 daguerreotypes, and they are considered national treasures due to their rarity. A 3-day seminar devoted to daguerreotypes history, the nature of deterioration, and preservation-conservation issues will be conducted by the ARP to promote their care. This program will introduce the ongoing daguerreotype conservation research program within the ARP. I had the opportunity to organize a fundraiser for this workshop at George Eastman House. The four thousand dollars collected indicates the level of interest of private individuals in this project.

These early collaborations yielded many positive results. Among them was the initiative taken by Natalia Paskova, conservator from the State Russian Museum, to apply to and successfully enter the previous Mellon Collaborative Workshop at George Eastman House. Another result was the acceptance of Karina Kashina's application, conservator from the Hermitage, to the Advanced Residency Program in Photograph Conservation as a Mellon Fellow.

### *COLLABORATIVE WORKSHOPS*

Plans are under way to develop a Russian Collaborative Workshop Series in Photograph Conservation in order to fill a gap in the education and training of conservators in Russia. The Andrew W. Mellon Collaborative Workshops in Photograph Conservation, which have measurably advanced the field of photograph conservation in the United States, will be used as the benchmark for establishing a similar series in Russia. This successful model for disseminating current information and for professional collaboration developed by Debra Hess Norris and Nora Kennedy in the United States represents the ideal method for introducing international advancements in photograph conservation to conservation professionals in Russia.

The topic for the proposed pilot workshop, *The Conservation Assessment of Photograph Collections: the First Step in Preservation Planning*, addresses an immediate need, and it can be easily offered at available facilities. Although the Mellon Collaborative Workshops in Photograph Conservation are cited in the United States as a highly successful model for advancing education and fostering professional collaboration, it is not possible to reproduce this level of advanced professional interchange in Russia at the present time. Therefore, the proposed pilot workshop is designed to address the fundamental need for developing survey tools and assessing basic standards of preservation, consistent with the state of knowledge and practice in Russia today. This seminal interchange between professionals working in the service of photographs in Russia and an international faculty of experts will establish the basis for further training and future workshop initiatives based on collaborative assessment.

This progressive approach is based upon the following realities facing the long-term preservation and conservation of Russian photograph collections:

- There are no academic training programs for photograph conservators.
- In most cases, paper conservators, and sometimes chemists, are treating and restoring photographs in Russia.
- There are no resources devoted to creating and disseminating technical literature and information on photograph conservation.

This reality reinforces the premise that the preservation of Russian photograph collections must begin with the basics: surveying the collections and assessing their overall condition. These are the fundamental first steps toward planning the preservation and conservation of photograph collections. The systematic condition survey conducted for the Russian Museum of Ethnography in November 2003 conclusively demonstrated the need for priority-based preservation planning at that institution and proved the merit of similar planning for collections throughout Russia. There is a clear rationale for training Russian professionals in basic survey techniques, condition assessment, and preservation planning within the context of their collections. It is the intended purpose of the pilot collaborative workshop to draw upon and share the established international expertise in these methods.

### **PILOT COLLABORATIVE WORKSHOP**

The pilot Mellon Collaborative Workshop “*Conservation Assessment in Photograph Collections- the First Step in Preservation Planning* “ took place at the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia on November 14<sup>th</sup> through November 17<sup>th</sup> 2005. The workshop had contributed to the development of the field of photograph conservation in Russia by:

- Promoting preservation planning
- Initiating collaboration among related professionals
- Disseminating the most current photograph conservation knowledge to a wide audience of curators and conservation professionals
- Establishing the importance of environmental planning and monitoring in the survey process and introducing the procedures and tools
- Showing the benefit of surveys in preservation planning.

The worldwide representation among the faculty helped with an exchange of ideas, philosophies, and techniques, and strengthened ties among professionals for continued interaction.

#### ***Hosting Institution***

The State Hermitage hosted the pilot collaborative workshop. The fact that the Hermitage is a prestigious, world-recognized institution will help to promote awareness of the workshop and will give prominence to its value to the field of conservation.





Furthermore, its established conservation practices and advanced understanding of collection needs will be models for other national institutions as they address the preservation of their own photograph collections.

The faculty was made up of established photograph conservators and educators from the United States and Russia. At least seven professionals from the United States served as the instructors at the pilot workshop. The list of workshop faculty follows:

- Debra Hess Norris - Chair of the Art Conservation Department, Professor of Photograph Conservation, University of Delaware.
- Grant Romer - Co-Director, Advanced Residency Program in Photograph Conservation, Director of Conservation Department at George Eastman House.
- James Reilly - Co-Director, Advanced Residency Program in Photograph Conservation, Director of the Image Permanence Institute at the Rochester Institute of Technology.
- Nora Kennedy - Sherman Fairchild Conservator of Photographs, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Adjunct Professor of Conservation, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.
- Paul Messier – Conservator of Photographs in Boston, Member of the Board of Directors of the American Institute for Conservation.
- Dr. Franziska Frey- Assistant Professor at the School of Print Media, Rochester Institute of Technology and Research Scientist, Image Permanence Institute, Faculty Member, ARP in Photograph Conservation, Member of several International Standards Committees.
- Elena Simonova-Bulat – Director of the Pilot Mellon Collaborative Workshop.
- Karina Soloviova –Leading Curator of the Photograph Collection, Russian Museum of Ethnography, Saint Petersburg.

During the workshop, participants from all the major photo-collections in St. Petersburg and Moscow were present and partaking in the workshop. The participants also included one curator from England and one conservator from Israel, who came to St. Petersburg especially for this venue.

The Pilot Collaborative Workshop at the Hermitage was a great success. I would like to say few words about the high level of organization at the Hermitage. Dr. Viacheslav Fiodorov- the Head of the History of the Russian Culture department and Elena Shishkova- the Head of the Scientific Conservation laboratory of Oriental Painting (both on behalf of the Hermitage) did an outstanding job with preparation for the workshop.

Dr. Mikhail Piotrovsky, the Director of the Hermitage, took time to make introduction remarks at the opening ceremony. I think that it was very significant sign of this workshop's importance.

We can already see some positive results from the Pilot Mellon Collaborative Workshop. At this time, Dr. Fiodorov said that a decision was made to create a photograph conservation department at the Hermitage. This decision was a direct result of the many months Dr. Fiodorov and Elena Shishkova spent preparing for the project.

By far, the greatest accomplishment of this workshop was the sharing of current and practical photograph preservation information and guidelines with the Russian colleagues. This acquired information gave them the basic tools, knowledge, connections, and confidence to conduct the general assessment of the collections. Furthermore, the Russian colleagues understood the value of working together to accomplish plans in regard to photograph preservation.

This is important because it paves the way for a professional exchange. For example, during the workshop, there was a discussion regarding the possibility of summer internships for Russian conservators at U.S. institutions. Additionally, in support of professional exchange, AIC is donating two sets of their publication, *The Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, while the Book and Paper Specialty Group is donating two sets of their *Annuals* and *Conservation Catalogs*, and the Photographic Materials Group is donating two sets of *Topics in Photographic Preservation* and their *Conservation Catalogs*. A set of these publications is going to both the Hermitage and the Russian Museum of Ethnography, all with shipping costs contributed by an anonymous donor to the Foundation for the American Institute for Conservation. Also, through the intervention of U.S. conservators, the framing supplier Nielson & Bainbridge, L.L.C. has agreed to donate acid-free corrugated board to the Material Culture Institute in St. Petersburg.

It is clear already that the investment made by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation certainly paid off. Not only was the funding crucial in making the project possible, but also the project's outcomes go far beyond its predicted impact. Our American specialists visited several collections of photographs in St. Petersburg, and were stunned by the quality, level, and beauty of their priceless objects. Since photography is an international phenomenon, this was very important.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Furthermore, I would like to thank Mrs. Angelica Zander Rudenstine personally, because without her interest and support, none of this would ever have been possible.

I must not forget to recognize the important involvement of the leading American professionals. Their knowledge, experience, and dedication to our profession left a remarkable impression on our colleagues in Russia. Being originally Russian, I am very proud that such an opportunity was created by the Pilot Mellon Collaborative Workshop. I am planning to continue my involvement in following the already-established path of this workshop. Future initiatives may include a series of smaller workshops over a two-three year period designed to address fundamental topics raised in the Pilot Workshop in more detail.

I believe that the direction in which the collaboration between Russia and the U.S., in terms of photograph conservation, is a prosperous one that will lead to development of this profession in Russia. This is important because the level of value of Russian photograph collections is so great, that it will undoubtedly have a sizable impact on the international photographic heritage.

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