Article: Development of a Conservation Database for the Photographic Collection at the MFA, Houston
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DEVELOPMENT OF A CONSERVATION DATABASE FOR THE PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION AT THE MFA, HOUSTON

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Abstract

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) is conducting an extensive conservation survey of its photography collection. Supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the survey is designed to examine and document 9,000 photographic images acquired since the last detailed survey in 1994. The first priority of the project has been to develop a functional web-based computer database that compiles detailed condition reports with high-resolution digital images. The second priority is to create a dialogue by file sharing between Conservation, Curatorial, and Registrar Departments in the museum via an internal network. The third priority is to perform statistical analysis in order to generate a final report detailing the overall condition of the photographic collection. Through analysis, it will be possible to prioritize preservation projects in the future. In particular, the information generated from the survey will be essential for the design of a second two-chamber cold storage facility for the new MFAH conservation building.

In early 2005, after testing pre-existing conservation software, it was obvious that the survey at the MFAH would need a more refined and unique database. Through a series of meetings, the Conservation Department discussed what was essential in the content of this particular survey. Input from Curatorial and Registrar Departments was also considered. Existing conservation survey formats from other institutions were also referenced. With additional guidance from the Information Technology Department at the MFAH, the Photograph Conservator created a detailed blueprint for the survey database. A web designer was then contracted to write the database. Over the following months, the Photograph Conservator worked with the designer to further refine and modify the database. In the fall of 2005, two highly qualified individuals were hired as the Conservation Technician and Conservation Preparator to carry out the procedures necessary and the survey commenced. At present, the survey is being conducted in the museum's Photograph Conservation Laboratory and will continue until February 2007.

The conservation database is licensed to the museum and has been customized to fit our hardware, software, and server capabilities. The programming language is Active Server Pages/ VB Script, the operating system is Microsoft Windows Server 2003, and the Database is Microsoft SQL Server 2000. Advanced functionality is provided by a suite of server-side ActiveX components.

After consideration, a Precision 470 work station was chosen with 1 GB of RAM and a 146 GB Hard Drive to support the large image files. A 17-Mega-Pixels Canon Camera which supports RAW images was chosen and a plug-in which supports the RAW files was installed. The computer uses Canon Zoom Browser EX, the software that came with the camera, to upload

images directly from the camera. Then the images are converted from RAW to .TIFF files using Adobe Photoshop CS2 and Pictocolor InCamera 4.0.1 Software for color correction.

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