



Article: Current Status of Treatment Practices in Photograph Conservation

Author(s): Alejandra Mendonza

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Compilers: Camille Moore and Jessica Keister

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CURRENT STATUS OF TREATMENT PRACTICES IN PHOTOGRAPH CONSERVATION

ALEJANDRA MENDOZA

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Abstract

This research presents an analysis of the current status of treatment practices in photograph conservation based on the information obtained through fifteen video taped interviews with senior photograph conservators, conducted from January to May 2009. The interview questions were designed to define and describe current conservation treatment practices and discuss their transformation over time. Training and future challenges of treatment are discussed briefly. The interviews and the documentation of the research process are available in the blog entitled Conservation Treatment of Photographs <<http://photograph-conservation.blogspot.com/>> created as one of the products of this project. Finally, a graphic and textual analysis is presented: a synthesis and interpretation of the information obtained through all the interviews.

Outline

This paper describes research undertaken by the author as a fifth cycle fellow at the Advanced Residency Program in Photograph Conservation in Rochester, New York. The paper is divided into six major sections: introduction, antecedents, the interviews, the blog, analysis of data and conclusions.

Introduction

Treatment is an activity that characterizes and differentiates photograph conservators from other closely related specialists. It is understood that appropriate treatment options for photographic materials depend on a combination of complex case-by-case variables and the present accepted guidelines for practice. It is the conservator's role to gather the proper information, propose the most appropriate treatment possibilities and, if collectively agreed with the object's owner or stewards on a treatment, intervene on it. From these few sentences, we can infer that if the meaning of appropriateness and adequacy is time, place, object, owner and conservator dependant, then describing the current status of treatment practices in Photograph Conservation becomes a challenging endeavor.

This project was designed with the goal of understanding, documenting and communicating the ways in which treatments are approached, decided, conducted and evaluated, both within institutions and in private practice. The project was designed deliberately considering that personal knowledge, experiences, recollections and examples can best explain treatment implementation, history and development.

Antecedents of the project

The proposal preceding this project included the assessment and definition of evaluation criteria for conservation treatments of photographs. However, while developing this idea, a fundamental question that is inherent to the nature of conservation treatments was faced: How can evaluation methods be proposed when the context of each treatment is so particular and each photograph treated uniquely?

With this question, it became clear that to begin proposing evaluation methods, a better understanding and articulation of the current status of treatment practices in our field was needed. What treatments are being done? Where? Why? How are they being justified and evaluated? As the author recognized that experienced conservators were a firsthand source of information to do so, the idea to perform the interviews originated.

An interview is the formal questioning of a person, or a conversation in which information is elicited. Interviews represent a unique research tool that provides special information, otherwise difficult to obtain, since the interviewee plays a key role in the study. Thus, an interview can be seen as a conduit of personal judgment, experience and information.

In the field of Conservation, other projects that include interviews have been developed in recent decades, such as the Oral History Project of the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation and the Oral History of Photograph Conservation. However, these projects are meant to produce oral history, which is a specific type of interview that aims to systematically collect individual testimonies about personal experiences. In contrast, the focus of this project was to collect information about a defined topic.

The interviews

Fifteen video taped interviews with senior photograph conservators were conducted in 2009 between the months of January and May as the core product of this project.

The main topics addressed during the interviews are:

- Definition of treatment
- Criteria or need for treatment
- Type, aim and frequencies of treatments performed
- Degree or extent of intervention
- Methodology followed for treatment
- Evaluation of treatment results
- Transformation of treatment practices
- External influences for treatment decision-making
- History of treatment practices
- Specific treatment topics:
 - Daguerreotype cleaning
 - “Chemical” intensification
 - Un-mounting/remounting of photographs, and
 - Treatment of modern and contemporary photographs
- Training and education, and
- Future challenges for the field in terms of treatment

The interviews conducted are *semi-structured interviews*. The questions and development of the interview are pre-planned, but allow a certain degree of freedom to approach new themes that may come up during the course of the interview. A template (or protocol) is followed to maintain the pre-established model.

The final version of the interview questionnaire consisted of 20 questions sent to the participants prior to the interview date. The majority of these questions were open-ended. Although the responses to these are more difficult to catalogue and interpret, they are generally more informative and thus more useful for the project. Also, some questions were addressed only to particular individuals, based on their answers, reactions, or their previously identified expertise.

The aim for the questions asked fall into one or more of these categories:

- To serve as introductory questions
- To obtain information relative to the definition of terms
- To address and describe current treatment practices answering the fundamental questions of knowledge (who, where, when, why, how much, how often)
- To address areas of interest relative to treatment of photographs, including: transformation/history, external interactions/influences, training/education, future
- To address specific treatment topics, which can be labeled as controversial, but are/were frequently performed, discussed, investigated and published about
- To investigate the process and argumentation by which judgment and ethical considerations are reached
- To serve as final/closing questions

The primary selection parameters for the interviewees were based on experience, availability and geography: senior photograph conservators working in the U.S. (practicing conservators or current heads of conservation departments or research/educational institutions).

List of the interviews performed

Key: number, date, interviewee's name, interviewee's title, *main institution name*, institution location; (Interview location, if different from the first).

1) Monday January 26, 2009 - Tom Edmondson, Conservator in private practice, *Heugh-Edmondson Conservation Services LLC*, Kansas City, Missouri; (Tucson, Arizona).

2) Wednesday February 4, 2009 - Gary Albright, Conservator in private practice, Honeoye Falls, New York.

3) Saturday February 7, 2009 - Grant Romer, Director of the Advanced Residency Program in Photograph Conservation, *George Eastman House*, Rochester, New York.

4) Wednesday February 11, 2009 - Peter Mustardo, Conservator in private practice, *The Better Image*, New Jersey-New York City; (New York, New York).

5) Thursday February 12, 2009 - Nora Kennedy, Sherman Fairchild Conservator of Photographs, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, New York.

6) Tuesday February 17, 2009 - Debbie Hess Norris, Chair of the Art Conservation Department, *University of Delaware*, Newark, Delaware; (New York, New York).

- 7) Thursday February 19, 2009 - Lee Ann Daffner, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Conservator of Photographs, *The Museum of Modern Art*, New York, New York.
- 8) Monday March 9, 2009 - Barbara Lemmen, Senior Conservator of Photographs, *Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- 9) Wednesday March 11, 2009 - Martin Jürgens, Conservator in private practice, Hamburg, Germany; (Rochester, New York).
- 10) Wednesday March 18, 2009 - Paul Messier, Conservator in private practice, *Paul Messier LLC, Conservation of Photographs and Works on Paper*, Boston, Massachusetts.
- 11) Thursday March 19, 2009 - Brenda Bernier, Paul M. and Harriet L. Weissman Senior Photograph Conservator, *Weissman Preservation Center, Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 12) Friday March 20, 2009 - Monique Fischer, Senior Photograph Conservator, *Northeast Document Conservation Center*, Andover, Massachusetts.
- 13) Thursday April 16, 2009 - Pau Maynés, Conservator in private practice, *Corebarna, Conservació I Restauració de Béns Culturals*, Barcelona, Spain; (Rochester, New York).
- 14) Saturday May 9, 2009 - José Orraca, Conservator in private practice, Sharon, Connecticut.
- 15) Thursday May 21, 2009 - James M. Reilly, Director, *Image Permanence Institute, Rochester Institute of Technology*, Rochester, New York.

Technical description of the interviews

The interviews were videotaped using a miniDV 1080i Canon camera. A backup capture file was produced simultaneously, using the built-in camera of a laptop computer. In a later phase, the interview files were imported from the tapes, edited using iMovie software, exported as middle size .m4v files and included in the corresponding dissemination tools.

From the beginning of the project different levels of dissemination and access were projected for the interviews. The final levels of dissemination were: The Richard and Ronay Menschel Library at George Eastman House, nine conservation schools that impart Photograph Conservation studies, and the blog Conservation Treatment of Photographs <<http://photograph-conservation.blogspot.com/>>, under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial- No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License. Each interviewee decided the level of dissemination allowed for their interview and signed a release form.

The blog

A blog is a type of website usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other materials such as graphics or videos. In 1999, the proliferation of free *weblog-creation* programs made blogs accessible for anyone to create.

Before this most blogs were hand-coded by individuals with certain knowledge of Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML).

Currently blogs represent one of the easiest web tools for knowledge sharing, allowing users to systematically publish their ideas to an extended audience without the need of technical understanding or experience (hence the creation on this project's blog).

Blogger was selected as the blog publishing system. The files were uploaded to the blog through *Vimeo*, a high-end video-centric network site, which supports embedding, sharing and video storage for registered users.

The *Creative Commons* license selected for the blog and its content allows sharing with the corresponding attribution, prohibits the use of the licensed work for commercial purposes, and also prohibits the creation of derivatives from the original work.

Analysis of data

The following graphic and textual analysis is a personal synthesis and interpretation derived from the data obtained through the interviews. For specific answers and complete opinions, I strongly encourage watching the interview videos. Only some sections of the analysis are included in this paper. The percentages are calculated from 15 answers, or otherwise noted.

Profile of the group of participants

The affiliation type of the interviewees is the following: 47% Private practice, 20% Art museums, 13% Conservation centers, 13% Academic institutions, and 7% Archives & libraries. The interviewees' years of experience in the field are presented in four ranges: 46% between 26 and 35 years of experience, 20% between 25 and 16 years, 27% less than 16 years and 7% more than 35 years of professional experience.

How do you define treatment?

In 2008, ICOM-CC addressed the still present need for a clear and consistent terminology in conservation. While reaching consensus is a complicated task, it is impossible to communicate effectively if each of us refers to varying definitions of terms.

Using the term treatment for this project was not unintended. It is a word we use on a daily basis to refer to our work: it supersedes the discussion between the meaning of conservation and restoration. It is also a term that we use in treatment reports, treatment proposals, and other documents that we create to communicate with conservators and non-conservators.

The answers for this question showed that the main difference between definitions is the scope. For some interviewees treatment is only the deliberate, direct intervention of an object, which always produces an alteration. For others, it includes any action that aims to prolong an objects existence.

How do you determine the need for treatment? What are the factors involved in the decision and performance of treatment?

Categories in order of frequency of mention:

- Client needs: present use (access, research, personal use) or projected use (imaging, exhibition, sale)
- Materiality of the object: condition (damage, deterioration), composition, structure, finishing
- Characteristics of the treatment: possibility to be performed (defined by the treatment), individual abilities, knowledge of the treatment effectiveness, practical implications, risk assessment

What is the scope of treatments that you perform and the types of photographs you treat most frequently?

Photographs treated, categories in order of frequency of mention:

- Prints: gelatin-silver prints, albumen prints, platinum prints, salt prints, chromogenic prints, digital prints, carbon prints, cyanotypes
- Cased objects: daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes
- Negatives: calotypes/paper negatives, gelatin dry plate negatives, plastic roll film (acetate and nitrate), collodion negatives

Treatments performed, not specific for each interviewee, in alphabetical order:

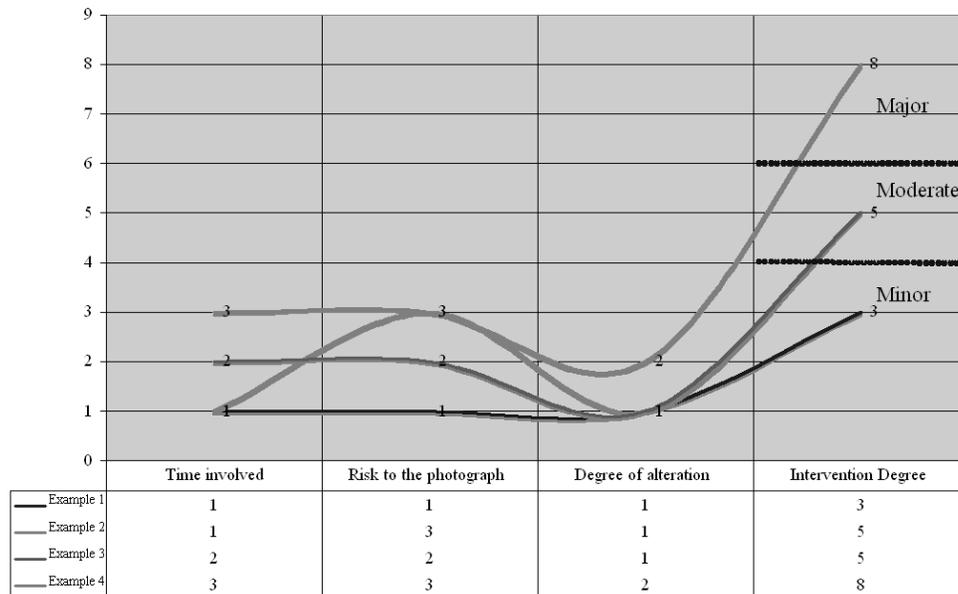
Accretions removal, bleaching, case repair, chemical intensification, consolidation (of cracks, binders, and surface coatings), cosmetic inpainting, crease reduction, electro-cleaning of daguerreotypes, filling of losses, flattening (with or without humidification, heat, weight/pressure, stress), lining, mold remediation, removal of poor quality secondary supports or housings, silver-mirroring reduction, stain reduction, surface cleaning, tape removal, tear repair, washing.

What do you consider as a minor, moderate and major intervention? What factors determine the degree of an intervention?

The responses to these questions included mainly three factors: the time involved, the risk to the photograph, and the degree of the produced alteration. Based on these, a schematic model was developed to help in the description of our assignment (as conservators) of the degree of an intervention. This model does not intend to be absolute and the initial values used are arbitrary.

For modeling purposes, the author assigned initial values for each factor (from one to three, with one meaning low, two medium and three high) and a range of values for the degrees of intervention (minor from 3 to 4, moderate from 5 to 6, and major from 7 to 9). Then the sum of the values of the factors can numerically represent the degree of an intervention.

In this model, the seven possible outcomes to describe the degree of an intervention (values ranging from 3 to 9) can be reached through 27 combinations of factors. From these, 4 (or 15%) fall into the category of minor, 13 (or 48%) into moderate and 10 (or 37%) into major interventions. (It is interesting to note that for two interviewees, all interventions are major interventions.)



For example, the graph shows example 1, low time, low risk, and low alteration produce a minor intervention. While example 4, high time, high risk, and medium alteration, produce a major intervention. (This is an interpretation schematic model and its intended use is theoretical or conceptual not mathematical).

How do you evaluate treatment results?

All the treatment conservators interviewed perform treatment evaluation in one or more of the following ways:

Objectively (or quantitative, semi-quantitative or qualitative):

- *Material characterization*: Did the material characteristics of the photograph remain constant (when desired)? Measured in terms of size, shape, color, gloss, texture, thickness, hardness, and composition.
- *Efficacy*: Were the proposed treatment steps followed as planned? Was the treatment finished in the expected time frame?

Subjectively (or relative to individual judgment):

- *Effectiveness*: Does the treatment meet its goals? How, why?
- *Appearance*: Does the outcome look right? Why?
- *Client satisfaction*: Is the client satisfied? Does the treatment outcome meet the expectations?
- *Adherence to the code of ethics*.

What changes over time do you perceive in the way treatments are approached and performed?

The answers to this question address both general tendencies in the field and personal changes.

General transformation tendencies in the field:

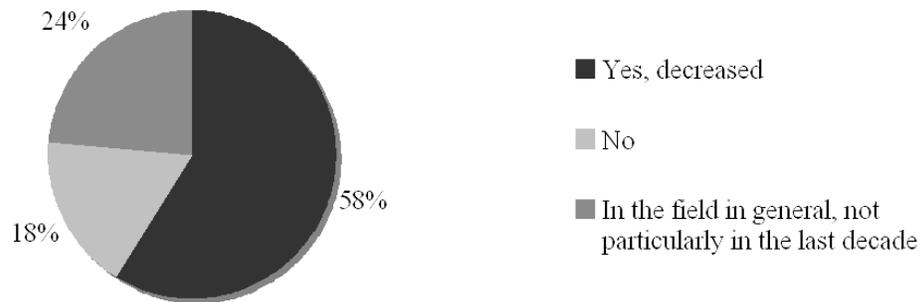
- Increased levels of documentation
- Increased knowledge and understanding of the objects (in terms of materials, history, meaning, use)

- Greater appreciation for cultural context
- Stronger implementation of treatment evaluation
- Decreased levels of intervention
- Incorporation of new materials for treatment
- Development of new treatment techniques
- Incorporation of treatment materials and techniques from other branches of conservation and allied disciplines (arts, craftsmanship, material science)

Personal transformations:

- Increased knowledge and skill levels
- Development of predetermined (habitual) treatment methodologies (which can be beneficial or harmful when carrying out treatment procedures)
- Increased or decreased confidence levels
- Establishment of a solid clientele base

Do you perceive changes in the level of intervention?



Do you consider that the perception of how a photograph should look, in terms of its condition, has changed through time?

Yes, towards:

- Increased acceptance and appreciation of the photograph as an object
- Greater acceptance of signs of natural deterioration (aging) of objects

From the answers to this question, I can conclude that there is no agreement in the use of the word “patina” for photographs. The answers range from the complete acceptance and routine use of this term when describing photographic materials to the absolute rejection of its use and its appropriateness, regardless of the type of photographic material in question (and of the age of the respondents).

What is your observation of the work performed in other institutions and in private practice in relation to the work performed here? Do use and context of photographs define their treatment approach?

- Institutional work can be considerably less treatment oriented for various reasons: the institution's mission, the condition of the collection, the use of the collection, or the outsourcing of (private) conservation laboratories to perform treatment when needed.
- The established clientele base of private laboratories determines the type of photographs treated and the treatment procedures that are carried out. Therefore, the levels of intervention are affected by these factors.
- Within an institution, the treatment approach for a given object can be influenced (and/or changed) by a deeper (or revealed) understanding of the object's context(s) and meaning(s).

Does market (value/trends) influence treatment decision-making and performance?

All the answers to this question were affirmative, but differed in the way the interviewees perceive the influence:

- It has an influence only to objects with high market value.
- It defines what objects are treated in their practices.
- It doesn't influence treatment performance, but influences the level of documentation.
- It has a positive influence in the field of photograph conservation as a whole, setting tendencies and priorities, raising standards.
- Value –not only monetary- influences the treatment approach to be followed, among various possibilities.

Specific treatment topics: Chemical intensification

What is your opinion about chemical intensification of photographs?

“Chemical treatment” of photographs is a term that has been used to include treatments (chemical intensification, bleach and redevelopment, sodium borohydride, etc.) that aim to strengthen/recover image characteristics or reduce/remove alterations like silver mirroring, yellowing and stains. By convention, in photograph conservation chemical treatments include those that, through a single or series of reactions, produce a photograph that is potentially different in chemical composition or in image particle morphology. However, in the author's opinion, “chemical treatment” is a general term that does not clearly define the group of treatments it encompasses since almost any treatment can, or does, fit into this category (in other specialties of conservation it is used as a general term as well).

During the interviews, this topic meant to address those treatments that aim to alter (strengthen, improve, recover) the image of photographs, as exemplified by the use of the term *chemical intensification* in the initial question. This goal was achieved in all conversations, though in some cases discussions about other treatments were addressed, such as silver mirroring removal or light bleaching.

Intensification of photographs is a historical restoration treatment inherently related to one of the major manifestations of deterioration in photographs: fading. Therefore, it has largely transformed through conservation epochs (conservation as a social phenomenon and later as a professional field), and has been a complex, and at times controversial, subject, practice and research topic.

It is important to note that the term chemical intensification is used to refer generically to those treatments that aim to strengthen or recover photographic images, regardless of the specific chemical reactions they might include. The variety of opinions and remarks expressed by the interviewees include:

- The individual case for the need to intensify a photograph can undoubtedly be made.
- Potentially, a faded image can misrepresent the values of a photograph as much as any other form of deterioration.
- Chemical intensification treatments are technically difficult to predict, conduct, reproduce and evaluate.
- During these treatments, the risk exerted to the photograph is very high.
- Philosophically, these treatments raise issues of authorship and authenticity.
- Historically, one of the reasons for the objection of the performance of these treatments was the change of monetary value of the treated photographs.
- The misrepresentation of photographs that are socially considered to be works of art has produced complex reactions.

Finally, the following oppositional opinions, were expressed:

- Chemical intensification treatments belong to a historical stage of photograph conservation practice and research.
- Chemical intensification treatments have a place in photograph conservation, and might play a more important role in the future.

Specific treatment topics: Modern and contemporary photographs

What has been your experience with treatment of contemporary photographs?

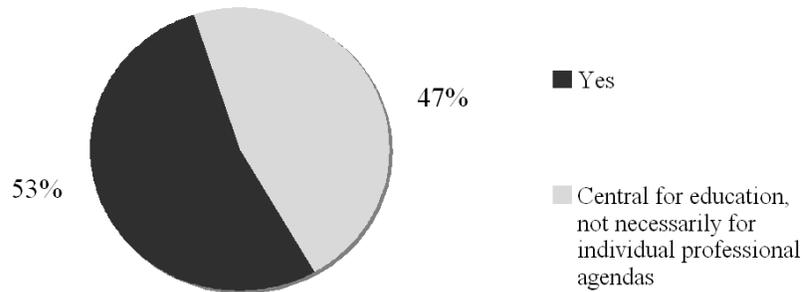
Modern and contemporary photographic materials, the tendency for larger formats, and the use of new materials, like rigid supports, plastic laminates and face-mounting systems, have challenged current treatment practices. However, work and research has been performed on contemporary materials over the past decade.

Some of the observations of the interviewees who deal with this type of materials, are:

- Contemporary materials are essentially untreatable; they are not meant to be treated.
- Contemporary philosophical approaches are needed to conserve and document these objects, including, perhaps, the recognition that there are fewer cases where these objects are treatable.
- The steady increase in the complexity levels of mounting systems, installation requirements, structure and format of contemporary photographic materials, has produced new conservation concerns and to date, fewer treatment options.
- There is a perceived need for continuous research on the subject.

Treatment training

Do you consider that treatment proficiency is central to the competences of a photograph conservator?



In terms of treatment, what are the major challenges that the field faces?

General:

- Monitor the effects of treatment over time
- Continue scientific research for treatment of ‘traditional’ photographic processes
- Preserve and disseminate the current knowledge about treatment procedures
- Address the continued need to pursue new materials and techniques, and improve current ones
- Build stronger international connections and obtain fundraising for treatment research

Specific:

- Continue to improve the understanding and characterization of the effects and effectiveness of surface cleaning
- Continue to improve the understanding of daguerreotype characterization, deterioration and conservation treatments
- Address the topic of mold remediation
- Face and overcome the discontinuation of industrial gelatin-silver photographic materials (paper and negatives) to use as test materials for treatment research and for training of future conservators
- Define and develop options for treatment of contemporary (including chromogenic color and other chemical color processes) and digital materials

Conclusions

The information contained in this research is fundamental not only to a better understanding and explanation of our present professional situation, but also will prove useful for future conservators in tracing the path that led to their own. The interviews, the blog and the data analysis are useful tools for the teaching, explanation and dissemination of the current status of treatment practices. They are needed tools, useful for all conservators, for those entering the field, and for conservators of future generations.

The interviews by themselves serve as a historic record of the individuals that started, shaped or advocate for our field. It is the author’s conviction that the formal questioning of an individual or a group of people in an ordered fashion delivers invaluable information that otherwise might be irreparably lost.

On one hand, the challenges of dissemination and communication are two obstacles to professional development in all fields, and on the other, the rapid and continuous development of web tools in the last decade has provided new avenues to dynamically address those obstacles. To overcome the former and take advantage of the latter, the blog aspect of this project was created. It has proven to be useful, and hopefully will continue to be so.

Finally, I encourage my colleagues to use the gathered information for further research and for teaching purposes.

Acknowledgements

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ALEJANDRA MENDOZA
Andrew W. Mellon Fellow
Advanced Residency Program in Photograph Conservation

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