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Preserving Underserved Historically Significant Photographic Collections: An Overview of the Andrew W. Mellon Funded Photographic Preservation Project with the Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

The role of the photograph conservator has evolved from a solo individual conducting conservation treatments to include advisor, advocate, surveyor, and teacher. From 2007 to 2013, photograph conservators at the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts (CCAHA) have been participating in a major project involving Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that reflects the current, expanded responsibilities of the photograph conservator.

This Andrew W. Mellon Foundation-sponsored HBCU Photographic Preservation Project is now in the second cycle of the program, which is currently drawing to a close. The primary goals of the project were to empower the institutions to care for their photographic collections and to involve minority students in preservation and conservation activities. Each institution was provided with specialized education and training for the staff and students and a generous grant that was used to improve the overall environment and housing for their historically significant collections. This project illustrates how outreach programs can benefit underserved collections and provide basic training to those who otherwise do not have access to it. It can also serve as a model for interactions between conservators and affiliated professionals as well as fostering creative and beneficial teamwork within a group of conservators. Other participating institutions include LYRISIS, the HBCU Library Alliance, the University of Delaware Art Conservation Department, and the Image Permanence Institute.

This paper will focus on the roles and experiences of the CCAHA photograph conservators. For further information on the first cycle of the HBCU Photographic Preservation Project, please refer to *Topics in Photographic Preservation*, Volume 13 (Gutierrez, 2009).

The HBCU Photographic Preservation Project

Historically Black Colleges and Universities are institutions of higher education in the United States that were established prior to 1964 with the specific intention of serving the African-American community. As of 2013, there were one hundred and five HBCUs and all but five are in the former slave states and territories.

These institutions, several of which existed prior to the end of the American Civil War in 1865, hold some of the most important primary documents relating to the history and cultural identity of African Americans. However, when it comes to preservation knowledge and awareness, the

Southern states - where the majority of HBCUs are located - are one of the more underserved regions of the United States.

Project Goals

The goals of the HBCU Photographic Preservation Project were to provide practical training in photograph preservation and environmental monitoring and control, to stabilize at-risk photographic collections at the selected HBCUs, and to build preservation capacity within HBCU institutions. Further project ambitions included involving HBCU students in the grant projects and introducing them to careers in preservation and conservation, strengthening connections between individual HBCUs, and creating connections between HBCU library and archives staff and preservation and conservation professionals.

Grant Summary

There were two rounds of grants. Each round was approximately three years in length, and each included ten HBCUs. The first round of the project began in the summer of 2007 and the second round in the summer of 2011.

Each HBCU received conservation assessments of their photographic collections, multiple training programs, assistance in establishing an environmental monitoring program, and funding to execute a number of demonstration projects. In each round, institutions selected were able to apply for up to \$50,000 to complete their demonstration projects. A summary report and subsequent public presentation were expected at the conclusion of each round. The selected HBCUs were also expected to involve at least two student workers in the completion of these projects.

A consulting photograph conservator helped each HBCU to identify and execute these projects. Four photograph conservators (Barbara Lemmen, Rachel Wetzell, Jessica Keister, and Laura Wahl) from the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts were involved in this initiative. Photograph conservator Jae Gutierrez from the University of Delaware's Art Conservation Department also served as a consultant in the initial phase of each round.

The Role of the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts

CCAHA's photograph conservators were involved in both rounds of the project. Each consulting photograph conservator was assigned three to four schools for the duration of a grant round. Consultant consistency allowed for a relationship to develop between the conservator and the HBCU, ideally one of mutual trust and respect. This was especially true for schools selected for both rounds. In these cases, it was decided that the conservator who worked with them as the consultant in 2007 would continue in 2011.

This continuity was a definite advantage to both the HBCUs and to CCAHA, especially for the institutions that were selected for both rounds. Familiarity with the institution's staff, strengths, limitations, and particular needs, allowed for consultants to make the most efficient use of each institution's time and money. In the second round, consultants could pick up where the previous round had left off.

Collection Surveys

The consultants' involvement began by conducting surveys of the photographic collections held by the HBCU libraries and archives. This typically took one full workday, and included meeting the library and archives staff and student workers, and touring the storage and exhibition facilities. A small number of items were usually pulled from the collection, allowing for the assessment of the storage enclosures, the secondary housings, and the physical condition of the collections. Talking with the staff allowed consultants to get an idea of the HBCU library/archives experience in archives and in dealing with photograph collections. The level of experience proved to range widely.

The goals of the survey were to identify the needs of the collection and to assist the archivists in developing projects for their grant proposals. Possible projects for the grant may include the following: a pilot rehousing project for a well-defined portion of the photographic print collection; a project to remove original photographs from permanent display, to replace them with high-quality facsimiles and safely house the originals; the conservation treatment of a few highly significant items; or the purchase of a freezer and packaging film for cold storage.

In order to assist the HBCU staff, the consultants needed to know a number of facts, including the most significant portions of the collection and what the HBCU's own goals for the project were. So that suggestions were practical, it was necessary to be aware of any limitations each archive might have. Was staffing sufficient? Were there physical space restrictions? Did they have careful and reliable student workers or volunteers? Was the HVAC system operating correctly? Did they have security issues? Did their institution support professional development activities?

The typical HBCU archive has a number of beautiful and important objects, but staff are challenged by overcrowded storage spaces, limited intellectual control of collections, staff shortages, and large backlogs of material. And like many libraries and archives, they have limited funding for supplies and for professional development activities. However, what was especially striking and universal was the pride that HBCU staff take in their institutions and in their collections.

Workshops

Teaching workshops was a major component of the photograph conservators' role in the project. Because every year CCAHA hosts more than 45 workshops on a variety of topics, CCAHA was in an ideal position to bring a great deal of teaching experience to the table. And once again, CCAHA's involvement in both rounds of the project was also an advantage in designing the workshops: the photograph conservators were able to evaluate the effectiveness of the workshops and to tailor them to better fit the needs of each HBCU.

Differences between Round One and Round Two Workshops

In 2007, a major multi-day symposium opened the project. This involved lectures on topics such as process identification, storage enclosures, and environmental monitoring, as well as smaller,

hands-on sessions. It was followed up a year into the project with site-specific workshops at each institution.

In 2011, the project began with a one-day workshop taught by the consultant photograph conservator in combination with the one-day photograph collection survey at each school. While the workshop did include a brief lecture on the history of photography and process identification, the focus was on identifying and selecting appropriate storage materials and on defining terminology such as alkaline buffered, neutral pH, and Photographic Activity Test. This knowledge was essential for planning projects and budgeting for supplies.

Most of the archivists had minimal experience with selecting appropriate storage enclosures. However most had trained as librarians, not as archivists, and were quick learners with good instincts.

In the 2007 and 2011 rounds, each follow-up set of workshops was tailored to the site, often incorporating hands-on lessons in rehousing or unframing, whatever was most vital for the HBCU to accomplish its demonstration project.

Standardized Workshops

To make the workshop process as efficient as possible and to ensure that the workshop content was consistent from site to site, standardized workshops were developed and utilized by CCAHA conservators. The same PowerPoint lectures, handouts, and hands-on or group activities were done at each participating HBCU. The workshop materials were stored online in a Dropbox (a free online file-storage and sharing system) folder accessible to all consultants and could be accessed anywhere there was an Internet connection.

Workshop Development

The workshops were based on pre-existing CCAHA workshops. CCAHA evaluates workshops before and after each event in order to monitor its effectiveness. Over time, this has allowed for the refinement of CCAHA-sponsored training sessions.

CCAHA photograph conservators worked together to select the topics that that would be offered as workshops to the HBCUs, and then divided the tasks of developing handouts, activities, and presentations. In designing the workshops, it was important to include a hands-on component for each session.

Workshop Example: Storage Lecture and Activity

During the initial workshop, a session on selecting storage enclosures began with a thirty-minute PowerPoint lecture. The lecture concluded with photographs of actual, but unidentified, archive collections surveyed by CCAHA staff. The workshop participants were encouraged to discuss the archive pictured: Was there a clearly visible problem? How could it be addressed?

After the lecture and discussion, the participants were split into small groups of four-to-five people. Each group was supplied with multiple archival supply catalogues and a typed card outlining a storage scenario. There were five different scenarios that were designed to reflect the conditions and collections of an HBCU archive. The members of each group needed to work

together, using the supply catalogues, to design a housing solution for their scenario. They could be as detailed as they wanted, some choosing to outline multiple options, some giving themselves budgetary constraints and carefully calculating quantities and prices. Afterwards each group shared its scenario and its solution with all of the participants. They were encouraged to explain the reasoning behind their decisions and to use the appropriate preservation terminology.

This lecture/discussion/activity was based on a workshop session that CCAHA has been doing for over two years. After the appropriate terminology is introduced in a separate lecture and activity, it is reinforced through repetition. Using up-to-date catalogues from archival suppliers introduces participants to their existence, to navigating the catalogues, and to critically evaluating product descriptions. The various scenarios prompt discussion of collections in a similar condition or of past experiences.

Reaching Beyond the HBCUs

During both rounds of the project, whenever an HBCU was hosting an on-site training session, they were strongly encouraged to invite archives and library professionals from neighboring institutions, as well as individuals from other departments on campus. Opening the workshops beyond the HBCU strengthened connections between archives and library professionals within the wider community. Because the workshops are designed to start dialogues, a group from diverse backgrounds makes for better discussions and a better learning experience for all involved. And because these workshops were free and in their area, archives and library professionals in underserved areas of the country were able to attend a workshop they might not have had the opportunity to otherwise.

Conservation Treatment

Conservation treatment was one of the options under the umbrella of the grant guidelines. While not required, those HBCUs that had items in great need of conservation treatment were allowed to send their materials out to conservators. Since the South is an underserved area for photograph conservation, and because CCAHA staff had made such close connections with the staff of the HBCUs, many of them decided to ship their items to Philadelphia for conservation treatment.

CCAHA was an ideal setting for those treatment projects. In addition to having four photograph conservators on staff, CCAHA was able to offer imaging and housing services and treatment for objects such as photographic albums, as there are a number of book conservators on staff.

One of the most popular items for conservation treatment was the rolled panoramas. The HBCUs take pride in their school alumni, so these panoramic images of former classes are of great value to the schools. Having the panoramas humidified, mended, and flattened was a high priority for the schools, even though these often posed housing challenges post-treatment. Custom storage folders or boxes were made for these oversized pieces, ensuring their safe storage upon return to their HBCU.

Almost all of the schools had handmade class photo collages in their collections. Due to the poor quality materials used in their construction and their large sizes (up to 40 x 60”), these presented

both conservation and housing challenges. In some cases full treatments were performed, while others were stabilized in situ.

In addition to these materials, conservation was also done on a number of cabinet cards and carte-de-visites, crayon enlargements, photo buttons, and photograph albums. In the cases of the albums, the photographs were treated by the photograph conservators and the pages, covers, and binding components were treated by the book conservators. One of the most exciting artifacts discovered within an HBCU collection and treated at CCAHA was a very rare ambrotype campaign button of Abraham Lincoln.

Conclusion

For the CCAHA conservators, the most rewarding part of the project was the relationships formed between the people involved in the project. Having the opportunity to work intensively with the staff at several institutions over time has been invaluable, and has enabled all parties involved to look holistically and long-term at preservation goals and outcomes. Helping the HBCUs to form support networks, not only within their own communities but with related professionals and preservation specialists across the country, has been an extremely gratifying endeavor. For the HBCUs, knowing that they all face similar challenges, no matter the geographical location or contents of the collection, is a very reassuring thing.

References

Gutierrez, J. J. 2009. The preservation of photographic collections in historically black colleges and universities. *Topics in Photographic Preservation*. 13: 27-41.

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