



Article: Digital Photography! But What About Our Careers! (Or, What is Photograph Conservation?)

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**DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY! BUT WHAT ABOUT OUR CAREERS!
(OR, WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPH CONSERVATION?)**

THOMAS M. EDMONDSON

Presented at the 2004 AIC Meeting in Portland, Oregon

The question about what constitutes a photograph has been around in one form or another since the early days of photography, as evidenced by M. P. Simons in a short article titled “A Few Words on Cleaning the Daguerreotype” in *Anthony’s Photographic Bulletin* (October 1875). The opening sentence reads, in part, “As daguerreotypes are frequently brought to photographers to be copied into photographs it is well.....that they should know the best and safest mode of cleaning them.....that the best results may be had in the copy.” From this it would seem that less than 40 years after the introduction of the daguerreotype as the first commercially successful photographic process, the daguerreotype is no longer a photograph, but is simply a daguerreotype. In today’s art market, photogravures, which are copper-plate etchings whose plates are prepared in part through the use of photography, are sold as photographs. Several types of inkjet printed images, which come from electronic or digital data created through the photographic process, also are frequently referred to as photographs, rather than inkjet prints, which is what they are. There is no doubt that image capture with a digital camera is indeed photography, but the outputs are not photographs, they are ink on paper. In fact, there may come the day when a photograph conservator receives a call for help with an inkjet or laser print that the best response may well be “What do you want from me? I’m just a hologram.”

The casual (if not lazy and sloppy) and inaccurate use of the terms “photograph” and “photography” as universally interchangeable is a symptom of a larger problem looming on the horizon for the professional photograph conservator. Any practicing Photograph Conservator can look at the number of albumen, gelatin, platinum, or collodion prints in her/his studio, and attest to the fact that there is no real shortage of work. The hundreds of thousands of the millions of photographs housed in repositories across this country alone which are in need of some level of attention by a trained Conservator, would suggest that all our futures are quite secure. But since digital reconstruction and manipulation of traditionally as well as digitally captured images is enormously popular with professional and rank amateur alike, we all may be lulled by a false sense of security.

Digital reconstruction is a viable if not the only feasible option for many damaged images, particularly when it is the image that is valuable, not necessarily the photograph as an object. (There is not room here to debate just who makes that call.) However, making these choices is becoming more difficult because institutional budget constraints can make storage of originals very attractive, especially with recent price reductions for high quality scanners as well as printers that can use pigmented inks. Soon we may start hearing “These photos (because no one says photographs anymore) are old and they’re

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supposed to look like that.” Or, “Let’s PhotoShop it because I don’t want to alter the original.” (A classic example of missing the point that the original is already altered because that is what damage is: alteration of the original.) This slippery slope poses a real threat for the loss of recognition of the “original” as an object, and not just an image that can be moved around and manipulated anyway anyone wants. The latter also is not a new concept; there still are discussions about what “vintage” means, and whether or not a later print made from an old(er) negative with better paper and better processing is of greater or lesser value than one made at the same approximate time that the negative was made. What is new is the potential for manipulation of the image, and loss of qualities that only the original print may retain.

Chemically degraded photographs remain a tremendous problem to be solved. However, the few scientists who once specialized in photograph conservation now seem to be more enamored of finding pigmented ink-compatible desktop printers, and counting pixels instead of image particles, or have left the field due to lack of adequate support for their expertise and research. Conservators who remain committed to solving the problems we encounter when dealing with chemically deteriorated and/or physically damaged photographs have been set back by this abandonment. The concept or attitude that these problems can be digitally “solved” and the originals stored away ignores the intrinsic values of photographs as aesthetic and historic objects of unique value in their own right.

What is one left to think of the impact of advancing imaging technology on the discipline of photograph conservation? Perhaps this: It is our responsibility to formulate a protocol for image manipulation in accordance with currently understood standards of practice for the applied conservation and accurate duplication of photographs. It is our responsibility to establish a glossary of terms defining photographs and related materials and subjects, if for no other reason than to force others to define what they mean. It is our responsibility to continue to advocate for the proper care and preservation of photographs as the unique objects that they are. Recently, the AIC Photographic Materials Group established a committee to develop a protocol for image reconstruction to be presented for review and approval for inclusion in the Guidelines for Practice, along with appropriate commentaries. PMG has also established a committee to create a glossary of approximately 50 terms considered critical to the definition and/or description of photographs and related and relevant materials. The results of the work of these two committees will accomplish at least two important goals: The first is the recognition and acceptance of the significance of the development of digital imagery, and the role it has in the discipline of photograph conservation. By standardizing our vocabulary and reconfirming the intrinsic artistic and cultural/historic values of photographs, whether they are preserved through conservation treatment procedures, or by digital reconstruction, we will extend the role of our discipline in the preservation of our photographic cultural heritage.

It can be argued that the advent of digital photography has little to do with photograph conservation, other than presenting itself as another useful tool. Photographers who choose to use digital cameras as their preferred means of image capture will have to rely on technologically trained persons to preserve their images. They will be at the mercy of

their industry, and of the skill of the following generations who will be much more immersed in the ever-evolving industry of technology than many of us now.

Finally, it is of the utmost importance that we all begin to think more about how we use the vocabulary available to us. Allowing ourselves to fall into using words for our own convenience only leads us into a terminological chaos. As e.e. cummings might put it, a photograph is still a photograph though called by any other name, and all other things are not photographs.

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