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# **www.photographicnegatives.net**

Katrin Pietsch

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From April 2005 to March 2007 there has been a two-year research project on the different methods of preserving and conserving photographic negatives. In the course of this project a web site has been developed which will be presented in this paper.

The project was made possible by the cooperation of the FHTW in Berlin (Fachhochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft Berlin or the University of Applied Sciences), in particular the course for preservation and conservation of audiovisual and photographic heritage, and the Dutch institution Nederlands fotomuseum in Rotterdam, in particular the department for preservation and conservation.

Two motives prompted this research project. First it should be stated that historic negatives, even though they are counted among the very first originals in the photographic process, are treated like the poor cousin in many collections. There may be various reasons for that which should be debated in detail. Second it is noticeable that there are very few compendiums or summaries of the complex of negatives which are known from other fields of conservation.

## **Research Project**

Our project aimed at a compilation of the knowledge of photographic negatives. Subdivisions into the categories *Processes, Identification, Degradation, Archiving* and especially *Conservation Treatments* appeared reasonable. A second aim was to complete these chapters with numerous example images and by this means to build a kind of image database.

It was obviously impossible to bring this much material to completion within only two years. Besides with an interactive form of publication, the opportunity should be offered to let this database grow without having a fixed endpoint. Thus a web site was chosen as the form for presenting our results.

The site [www.photographicnegatives.net](http://www.photographicnegatives.net) uses the wiki-system, which means that it offers an open and expandable platform for conservators and other professionals who are concerned with the preservation of negatives. Next to the reading of articles and the examining of images every registered visitor gets numerous active user possibilities. Among these there is the chance to edit, comment and add articles and images. Also every page offers the opportunity to discuss related issues, ideas, suggestions and the content itself.

After nearly two years of research we achieved the following results:

- A list of 280 relevant publications was compiled of which 180 are investigated, summarized and incorporated into the result.
- The structure of the website has been set up and can be used.
- Many articles and images have already been posted into the database.

## Structure of Web Site

At the moment articles are written in English and German. A small amount recently has been translated into Italian by Elvira Tonelli (Fototeca Bologna) and she will continue with this work.

The five main categories are: *Processes*, *Identification*, *Archival Recommendations*, *Degradation Processes* and *Conservation Treatments*.

Next to the illustrating images within every article there are two separate image databases which can be leafed through. One database belongs to the processes, the other to degradation processes. If you enter the chapter *Processes* you will find three subcategories, which are: *Paper-*, *Glass-* and *Film-Based Negatives*. You can retrieve information on the base material itself and on the assigned processes. If you click on an article of a distinct process, you will find passages on the historical background, process, variations and other information. At the end of each article a gallery is provided which contains images of examples and details of that process. By clicking on a single image you will get a higher resolution in conjunction with additional information like the copyright and an image description.

The chapter *Degradation* is divided into the subcategories *Paper*, *Glass* and *Film Negatives*. Also there are the subcategories *Degradation of Image Silver* and *Water Damage and Mold*. Every section describes the analogous degradation processes and shows example images. More complex circumstances are handled in special articles, like for example processes in glass corrosion or hydrolysis of cellulose nitrate.

Next to the textually oriented layer, there's one solely geared to images. In this regard in the index you will find two image databases, one is the *Image-Database of Processes*, the other the *Image-Database of Degradation Processes*. Both these databases are subdivided similarly to their textual equivalents. In the *Image-Database of Degradation Processes* you will find for example *Degradation of Film Negatives* with the subcategory *Deterioration of the Film Base* and thereunder *Vinegar Syndrome*. There you will find numerous example images which can be compared to each other or to negatives you're possibly working on. Another chapter in this category is *Degradation of Image Silver* and thereunder *Silver Mirror*.

In the chapter *Identification* general information should be provided on possibilities and techniques for identification. Also a schedule is compiled of characteristics of every single group of negatives and the belonging processes. In the future there should be several example images of every criterion.

The chapter *Archival Recommendations* should contain those for every group of negatives. This section is not filled yet.

The most important chapter is that of *Conservation Treatments*, in which we also decided to follow the materials by allocating the information. The main categories are *Base Material Related*, *Emulsion Related*, *Coating Related*, *Image Silver Related* and *Information Related* which contains the chapters about *Duplication* and *Facsimilation*. The chapter *Treatment of Mold* stands apart. At the moment mainly treatments for paper and glass negatives have been filled in.

Not every part of the web site could be worked out by the end of the research project, at the end of March 2007. But in the future several missing chapters will be introduced bit by bit. The next big category waiting is the one on *Film Negatives*.

### **Future Aims**

Hopes for the future regarding the contribution of the users focus on the annotation of the posted *Conservation Treatments*. What about personal experience? Are there modifications? Furthermore more example images are desirable, especially some of rare processes which maybe several conservators have perhaps never, or only rarely, seen with their own eyes.

A further idea for a possible add-on came up during the literature research. Mostly it was difficult to actually get hold of a certain article or book. Thus the request was made to make some of the articles available directly on the web site. This certainly has to be checked with the authors. But with their agreement it could present a good opportunity to simplify the access for many conservators to very specific technical literature. We will try to settle this point in the future.

Of course the web site depends on its development in the future, which implies that it is hoped as many conservators as possible will share their knowledge and experience with other users. Especially the contribution of conservators who have at their disposal a rich body of experience is desired but also any other comments, ideas and own tests with conservation treatments. This web site could provide the opportunity to access different topics which can be relevant for dealing with photographic negatives.

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