



Article: Film Base to Pixels: The Juan Cachu-Ramirez Collection - A Cross-Over Education Experience

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FILM BASE TO PIXELS: THE JUAN CACHU-RAMIREZ COLLECTION – A CROSS-OVER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Juan Cachu-Ramirez was a Mexican photographer and contemporary to the prominent Mexican photographer, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, along with the Americans Edward Weston and Tina Modotti, both of which spent time in Mexico.

In 2005 a collection was donated to the School of Conservation, Restoration and Museography in Mexico City to utilize the collection for educational purposes in photographic preservation. Following a series of grants by the US Embassy in Mexico to help fund an educational initiative in workshops in historical processes and digital imaging, the Juan Cachu Ramirez collection has become the focus of a unique study case with a wide range of teaching benefits.

The collection has gelatin dry plate negatives, early nitrate and acetate negatives on large formats of rigid film bases. The most important topics content in the collection are the daily life in México City downtown historic district from the early 1910s to 1945 and the social and city landscape during the post revolutionary years in the late 1920s. These characteristics define the Cachu Collection as an interesting teaching tool from the aesthetics and historical trends of Mexican history of photography, but as well as, a solid example of the black and white photographic technology defined by the first 60 years of the twentieth century.

This collection is the only photography conservation study collection in Mexico. Therefore, it is important to bring together the knowledge for the preservation of glass and organic plastics-based negatives and the new technologies in the field for access and preservation. The trend is to build up tools for the physical and intellectual controls of the collection, the printing of negatives in vintage media and the printing of reference prints in new printing technologies that could constitute a very complete approach to photography preservation for students at the National School of Conservation. The present project will be a tool with a direct impact in formal education on imaging preservation, both analog and digital photography. The hands-on and technological applications embedded in the project will be a bridge between two imaging platforms that today coexist in the conservation of valuable historic photographs.

Introduction

In 2004, as part of its Cultural and Academic Exchange Program, the US Embassy of Mexico funded the first of a series of educational workshops established at the School of Conservation, Restoration and Museography in Mexico City to address the needs of the photograph conservation department in its long-term strategy to implement an educational track that

addressed issues of image reproduction both analog and digital. Workshops were designed to study from the original photographic collections the historical photographic printing methods that were used in the nineteenth century for reproduction. Also studied was the photographic materials translation from analog media to a sustainable digital surrogate.

Participation in the workshops was not only limited to the students attending the school, but was opened up to people working with photographic collections around Mexico City and the surrounding region. The main meeting point of the workshops was at the National School of Conservation, Restoration and Museography, which is one of the few places in Latin America devoted to the formal education of photographic preservation. Additional talks were presented during the first cycle at the Institute for Aesthetics Research at UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico) and at Casa Lamm Centro de Cultura, both located in Mexico City.

Workshops were conducted on digital scanning and capture with an emphasis on historical glass plate negative collections. Also vintage printing workshops were held in the following medias: gelatin-chloride printing out paper and the albumen print process. In 2005 the Juan Cachu Ramirez collection was donated with a specific intention to be utilized for educational purposes in photograph preservation. The collection was made use of in the second and third cycle of the workshops. By using the collection it provided a case study approach addressing areas of collections assessment and management, obsolescence of technology, and new imaging platforms for access and preservation.

The Juan Cachu Ramirez Collection

Juan Cachu Ramirez lived from 1888-1973. Born in Zamora, Michoacan, Mexico he was an active photographer for over 60 years. He established studios from 1916 to the early 1970s in Morelia, Michoacan and in the historic district of Mexico City. The highlights of his photographic career include being a war photographer on the Mexican Revolution and the Cristeros Revolt in 1930 and a Health and Sanitary Photographer for the City of Mexico. He also documented the daily life of Mexico City for more than 60 years. Juan Cachu served as a professional teacher in school theatre and as an amateur theatre director and actor. He was also a specialist calligrapher and dactylographic expert at the National Lottery.

The collection that was donated in 2005 to the National School of Conservation Restoration and Museography consists of:

--4600 negatives on glass plates and on flexible organic plastic supports

--1123 glass plates and nitrate base negatives that are under the custody of the University of Puebla

--3500 glass, nitrate and acetate negatives that are under the successor's custody

The negative formats range from 4x5 inch and 5x7 inch negatives to diverse postcard formats. There also exists darkroom and studio items ranging from 5x7 and 8x10 view cameras to photo button machines and printing frames. Some of the items are on display at the re-creation photo studio at the Interactive Museum of Economy in Mexico City.

Imaging Workshops

The fundamental approach to the imaging workshops consisted of two tracks: an analog track and a digital track. The basic concept and practice of creating and understanding translation of photographic negative to vintage photographic print process was explored in the analog track. The digital track encompassed the concepts of translation from analog film material to a sustainable digital surrogate. This bridge between the two imaging platforms that today coexist in conservation is valuable in the preservation of historic photographs. Concepts of densitometry, latitude density readings and negative response analysis were also addressed to assist participants with a better understanding of the analog materials and their translations.

A selection of negatives was made from the Juan Cachu Ramirez collection in which students produced vintage media prints in albumen and gelatine-chloride printing out paper to illustrate the capabilities of the early negatives. The digital track consisted of scanning a significant sample of negatives on different film bases from the collection and through this exercise, introduce participants not only to the differences and similarities of each film base, but also to guidelines for digital access, such as the National Archives and Records Administration's "*Technical Guidelines for Digitizing Archival Materials for the Electronic Access: Creation of Production Master Files – Raster Images (January 1998 and June 2004)*". Ideas of interpreting density in a digital environment were introduced and such topics as establishing parameters for a digital project were discussed. The hope was to provide a basic understanding of the digitization process and considerations for achieving a sustainable digital surrogate.

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