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# THE STORY BETWEEN TWO COVERS: THE TREATMENT HISTORY OF P. H. EMERSON'S CUBA ALBUM

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## **Abstract**

The Cuba Album at the George Eastman House contains 48 platinum prints by Peter Henry Emerson. This article will document the preservation of this album at the Eastman House, focusing on the early 1980's treatment by Alice Swan. As the treatment results are presented, an attempt will be made to evaluate the success of the treatment through an examination of the treatment's purpose, plan, proficiency, and product.

## **Introduction**

This article tells a story, the story of a book - an album known at the George Eastman House as the *Cuba Album*. Of course any good story involves interesting people - mine includes a couple of the founders of our profession, Jose Orraca and Alice Swan, as well as a couple of the giants in the history of photography, Peter Henry Emerson and Beaumont Newhall. In addition to characters, a good story needs a few exotic locations - ours include Havana, Cuba, the broads in England, and the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY. This story even has a detective and several useful life applications.

The *Cuba Album* contains photographs taken by Peter Henry Emerson, mostly in the 1880's. It consists of 48 platinum prints, including views of Cuba, the broads of England, and other English settings. The album was initially loaned to the George Eastman House on October 30, 1951, by Dr. William C. Emerson, nephew of P. H. Emerson. Dr. Emerson resided in Rome, NY, about 130 miles east of Rochester, near Utica. Not quite two years later, on May 10, 1953, Dr. Emerson decided to present this album to the Eastman House as a gift.

## **Emerson and Naturalistic Photography**

To appreciate this album, one has to know something about the photographer. P. H. Emerson was born in Cuba in 1856. He was raised in the United States, but at the age of 13 went to school in England. He distinguished himself at Cambridge, studying medicine and natural science. In 1882, after purchasing his first camera, he experimented in photography with the thoroughness typical of everything he undertook. In 1885, Emerson burst onto the photographic scene, winning an incredible number of exhibition prizes. He became a proficient writer and lecturer, and an outspoken critic of the "high art" of H. P. Robinson and O. G. Rejlander. Such work he considered to be artificial and sentimental. Instead he advocated "naturalistic photography" with its emphasis on natural settings, spontaneous poses, and differential focusing. Emerson's influence is hard for us to imagine. He cleared the air for new approaches to photography. As Nancy Newhall states, "Modern photography may be said to date from... the 1889 publication of his book NATURALISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY" (Nancy Newhall, *Image*, March 1953, p. 10).

The characteristics of “naturalistic photography” can be demonstrated with photographs from this album. Emerson was a strong proponent of differential focus. He believed that photography should imitate ocular vision, that the focus should be “as sharp as the eye sees it and no sharper” (Emerson, *Naturalistic Photographer*, 1889). In practice, this meant that the main subject would be in focus but the other parts of the picture would be slightly out of focus. Also, Emerson often used a high horizon line, would make architectonic arrangements of linear objects (such as masts or poles), and would use foreground elements (such as reeds, river reflections, and mooring lines) to calligraphic effect

Emerson did not believe in enlarging his plates, so he produced negatives of appropriate size for his images. In general, his plates were undoctored with the exception of clouds, which he might burn in or print from another negative.

### **The Album’s Early History at the Eastman House**

The original loan was for the purpose of exhibition. However, there was a problem – most of the images were not in exhibitable condition. It didn’t take Beaumont Newhall long to attempt to remedy this situation. The loan receipt at the Eastman House is dated October 30, 1951. By the next day, October 31<sup>st</sup> Beaumont had a letter in the mail. This letter is a classic in the history of photograph conservation.

October 31, 1951

William C. Emerson, M.D.  
316 N. Washington Street  
Rome, New York

Dear Doctor Emerson:

I want to thank you for your kindness in lending us the important material about your uncle. I showed the album of platinum prints to Dr. Mees who is the President of the George Eastman House and Vice President in charge of Research at Kodak. He tells me that the pictures can be restored to their original brilliance by a special treatment. It would be splendid if we could bring back some of them to their original condition for exhibition here. In order to do this it would be necessary to remove them from the pages of the album. This could be done without difficulty and the restored prints could be put in cut out mats which would greatly enhance their beauty. I am writing to ask if you would like to have us do this. We of course would want to try out one first. It would make a much more interesting exhibition if we showed originals instead of copies.

I hope to be able to find an extra copy of the magazine with Mrs. Newhall’s article. If not, I will have this one copied. Please remember me to Mrs. Emerson.

Yours, sincerely,  
Beaumont Newhall, Curator

We don't know if these treatments were carried out. Neither do we know when these images were first exhibited. However, we do get a hint of what was occurring in a 1968 presentation given by Tom Barrow, assistant director of the George Eastman House. At the SPE meeting in Washington, DC, he gave a talk entitled, "Care and Restoration in a Print Collection." During that lecture he mentions difficulties with mount removals (suggesting the need to find proper solvents). In particular, he mentions the unsuccessful removal of an Emerson platinum print ("We do not know what to do," he says.). While this print does not appear to be from the Cuba Album, it certainly belies Mr. Newhall's original assessment of the ease of their treatment.

Our next written evidence relating to the Cuba Album comes from Alice Swan's 1984 treatment report. Alice was a trained photographer. In 1974 she received her Master of Arts from San Francisco State College. Also that year, she studied paper conservation with Ingle-Lise Eckman in the Museology Laboratory at the University of California. She came to the George Eastman House in the fall of 1975 to study with Jose Orraca. The only problem was that Jose had accepted a teaching position in the Conservation Program at Cooperstown, NY, and had already departed from Rochester. Alice stayed on at the Eastman House anyway and became its Conservator of Photographs until March of 1978. At that time she left the Eastman House and she set up a private conservation studio in Davis, California. She continued to practice conservation until sometime in the late 1980's, at which time she left the field to focus on other pursuits. During her conservation career, she published ground breaking research into the conservation of gelatin prints and daguerreotypes. Several of her publications were required reading for many of us during our graduate school years.

In 1983, Alice was asked to treat the Cuba Album as part of an NEA grant. Alice's initial description of the album was follows.

The gray toned platinum prints came from an album, the pages and prints of which had sustained remarkable deterioration, brown discoloration and brittleness... Because of the obviously wretched condition, an undocumented and naïve attempt at conservation treatment had been tried. At the time I first came to the Eastman House (September, 1975), the prints were being stored in the conservation lab cabinet of material too fragile to handle. The pages had been removed from the album cover and binding, and most of the smaller and some of the larger prints had been removed from the pages. Unfortunately, the removal, which must have been done with considerable dexterity but no judgment, was accomplished dry, with spatulas and scalpels, and the affected prints had many cuts, thinned spots, breaks, tears and losses... Losses considered large enough to be "worth saving" were taped into position with pieces of "scotch"-type, pressure tape; the adhesive has penetrated the paper noticeably by now.

As you can hear, Alice had a unique way with words. Her style is easily recognizable.

Jose, who was conservator at the George Eastman House from 1974 to 1975, has verified Alice's documentation. He, too, remembers Emerson prints separated from their bindings and mounts. He may even have treated two or three of these prints, but would not have attempted dry removal from mounts as this was a technique he was unaware of at that point in his career. He remembers being introduced to mechanical mount removal while teaching in Cooperstown. Any

treatment he performed on Emerson prints would have involved wet removal of the prints from the mounts (if he removed any at all) followed by bleaching with chloramine-T without the use of an anti-chlor. According to Jose, treatments on museum photographs were performed by staff and some volunteers before and during his short tenure at the Eastman House. No written or photographic records exist for such treatments, but evidence of treatment is easy enough to find. Apparently, the Cuba Album was one of those items treated. Beaumont Newhall's proposal to unmount the prints and prepare them for exhibition had obviously been started, but not completed. Treatment had proven to be more difficult than originally anticipated.

### **Treatment of the Album by Alice Swan**

In the early 1980's, the Eastman House decided to complete the treatment of the album. Alice was chosen as the conservator. In late 1983 she received the first 16 prints in her California studio. A couple years later, she treated the remaining 32 images. After her initial assessment, she continued by broadly describing the album's condition and then provided a detailed report for each photograph. Her general comments included the following.

- The pages and prints had sustained remarkable deterioration, brown discoloration and embrittlement.
- Sixteen prints were completely or at least partially on their original mounts. Thirty-two prints had been unmounted using mechanical methods.
- The mounts were "spectacularly discolored, extremely brittle, rigid boards."
- Prints were severely discolored; all highlights of most are yellow-stained to a dramatic degree.
- Prints were badly disfigured by small orange and brown spots which frequently have centers and are not filamentary. (Alice concludes these were caused by residual iron left in the paper after processing.)
- Foxing stains were also present, but were frequently difficult to see over the badly yellowed background.
- Prints showed much rubbing, scratching, puncturing and general abrasion.
- Prints were moderately dirty, with a certain amount of dirt deeply embedded in abrasions and rubbed, scuffed areas.
- pH readings were between 3.2 and 3.8.

From Alice's description you get the sense the photographs were in pretty rough shape. They were, but maybe not quite as bad as she makes them seem. They were dramatically discolored and quite brittle, but tears and losses, while prevalent, were not as disfiguring as might have been expected. Whoever had removed the photographs from the mounts had done amazingly well with the techniques at their disposal. But I will admit, if I had been in Alice's shoes, I too would have been upset at the unnecessary damage.

Treatment of the album consisted of the following steps. I'll quote from Alice's report.

Treatment began with the gentlest possible surface cleaning of light areas only, using vinyl eraser. Flyspecks were removed with a needle. All of this work was done under a microscope illuminated with raking light in order to minimize further damage to the images.

The tape was removed dry as possible, followed by treatment with petroleum solvents. Sixteen prints were removed from mounts by immersing and soaking in calcium-replaced deionized water. The first baths were in cool water; later baths were slightly warm water. The remaining 32 images were washed in the same way. During washing, residual mount materials were removed.

Washing also removed most of the adhesive (a brown gelatin), but a hard yellow residue remained. This was removed in a bath of protease in calcium-replaced deionized water.

After more washing, the prints were air-dried.

All prints were bleached in chlorine dioxide solution, followed by thorough washing and deacidification with a calcium hydroxide bath. Some staining remained, but further bleaching was considered to be too dangerous for the already deteriorated paper.

Tears and thinned areas were mended with Japanese paper and wheat starch paste.

Small losses were filled with rag paper pulp. Inserts of similar paper stock were made for larger losses. In some cases, small edge losses were inserted with another platinum paper.

After mending and filling, the prints were resized with deionized gelatin to provide a more solid, dirt resistant surface.

After drying under weights, losses were sized with wheat starch paste and toned with watercolors and graphite.

The prints were packaged on 4-ply ragboard with Mylar sleeves.

Currently the prints are stored loose on thin archival board inside Kodak triacetate sleeves.

### **Evaluation of Alice Swan's Treatment**

As one can see, Alice's treatment was fairly standard. For the most part she used conventional paper treatment techniques; the same procedures a majority of us would have employed then and would still use today. As part of her treatment she provided a detailed conservation report, supported by invaluable slide documentation. The following is her description for a photograph titled, "Baitsbite" (82.2532.7).

Removal of this print was particularly disastrous--it is patched with five large pieces of cellophane tape at the verso. Three losses are present on the top edge (described from recto): 0.5 x 1.0, 13 cm from right edge; 0.3 x 0.4, 6.6 cm. from right edge; 0.3 x 0.4, 3.6 cm from right edge. Two edge tears are on left edge, 0.4 cm long, 5.5 cm from bottom; 0.7 cm long, 4.2 cm from bottom.

Alice continues on for another two paragraphs, but you get the idea. These reports tell you everything you could ever want to know about these prints - maybe even more than is necessary. But, without these reports and their details, much of the treatment history of this album would have been lost.

As stated previously, most of her treatment was fairly conventional. Mount removal may have been questionable, but I believe it was necessary in this case. Of course we strive to maintain albums and mounts whenever we can, but these pages were so discolored and brittle that their removal was needed in order to protect the images from breakage, and to lessen the discoloration so the images could be aesthetically appreciated again. The surface cleaning and washing were

both implemented with great care. Images were successfully surface cleaned. Washing reduced some of the discoloration in the prints, and also aided in the removal of the mount and adhesives. The use of enzymes proved to be effective as well.

Probably the most controversial aspect of this treatment was the use of chlorine dioxide bleach. Today, most of us would try some form of sun-bleaching first. Chlorine dioxide is one of those bleaches many consider to be too aggressive, one which can make the object too white or may damage the paper fibers. But, I believe Alice made a good choice. One of my guiding treatment principles is the need to look beyond the norm. What we consider to be the less aggressive treatment procedure may, in fact, be the more damaging alternative. The techniques which are accepted as less aggressive are not always the best choice. On occasion these “less aggressive” treatments can be more damaging than a supposedly more aggressive option. For example, most conservators choose to apply solvents locally rather than subject a print to overall immersion. This can lead to trouble. Local solvent application can cause staining, introduce tide lines, or maybe even cause local invisible changes in the paper which will reveal themselves in some way 30 or 40 years from now. Since overall immersion would avoid these problems, in many cases it may be the better option.

The same reasoning applies to bleaching. When bleaching an extremely discolored paper which is already brittle, sun-bleaching or the use of a mild chemical bleach often requires repeated drying and wetting of the print or repeated application of the bleach. This, coupled with the often necessary longer treatment times, can cause serious degradation of the paper fibers, resulting in tears, bubbles, or severe weakening of the paper support. With such cases, bleach such as chlorine dioxide is a more aggressive, and much faster alternative. As a result, the print is subjected to less wash time and less physical stress to the support. Therefore, chlorine dioxide bleaching may well result in less damage to the object.

Overall, I must compliment Alice and her skill as a conservator. Her mending, filling, and retouching were the work of a master, beautifully accomplished. But, there were a few questions raised by this treatment which I was not able to properly answer.

- Why wasn't an antichlor used after bleaching? I believe this was standard practice at the time. In fact, I remember being taught to use an antichlor by Anne Clapp in 1975. Alice may have had good reasons for this decision, but none were provided.
- Was gelatin sizing appropriate? Reasons for sizing were provided (to yield a more solid dirt resistant surface), but did resizing change the surface appearance? Did it change the image contrast or tone? Was it really needed? The paper was very weak. Possibly the sizing strengthened the paper support. Alice did not address these particular issues, but I suspect you considered them. Everything considered, resizing was a good decision.
- Were other housing options considered? The prints are still very brittle and could use additional support. I wonder if options such as mounting or in-lays were considered. I suspect they were, but were not chosen as the funding for such options was not available.

## Conclusions

What can we learn from this treatment? The most important lesson should be the necessity of a good report. This entire discussion accentuates the importance of treatment reports and reveals some of their potential weaknesses. Minute details may not be necessary, but choose carefully when and what you generalize. The more important the object the more important it is to record detail. Also, the more complex the treatment, the more important it is to record the reasoning behind the decisions. This is especially true if the procedures chosen are out of the mainstream. In the case of the Cuba Album, I would have appreciated more information on which petroleum solvents were used to remove the tape, why no antichlor was used, and how the conservator knew the adhesive was gelatin.

The next point is closely related to the last one. Whenever I write a report, I assume I will be the conservator reading it 15 years hence. I ask myself, what information would I want to find? What would I be looking for? I make sure to include this material. Finally, please date your reports. Alice did not, and as a result I had to spend a couple hours tracking down dates. But Alice's isn't the only undated report I've ever seen. Dates are important.

So, how should we evaluate the 1980's treatment of the Cuba Album? When evaluating a treatment, I use four criteria: purpose, plan, proficiency, and product.

1. Purpose: Were the goals of the treatment appropriate? Was the treatment "responsive and appropriate to the condition and needs of the specific cultural property, and to the cultural property in its context" (AIC Code of Ethics, Commentaries to the Guidelines, Commentary 21A)?
2. Plan: Did the treatment adequately address the structural instability of the object? Have immediate and long-term consequences of the treatment been considered? Were potential risks weighed against anticipated benefits? Was the plan within the available resources, including facilities, equipment, and funds? Was the treatment within the conservator's level of competence? Were the proposed procedures within currently accepted practice in the field?
3. Proficiency: Was the treatment skillfully and efficiently carried out?
4. Product: Were the treatment objectives met? Was there personal learning or improvement? Was there proper documentation? Did the treatment result in any innovations for the field?

For this particular album, the answer to most of the above questions has to be, "Yes."

- Did treatment increase the physical stability of the photographs? Yes.
- Did treatment increase the aesthetic enjoyment of the images? Again, yes.
- Were the techniques used appropriate? More of the reasons behind the treatment would have been appreciated, but in general the answer is yes.
- What was the level of skill involved? Extremely high.
- How have the photographs fared since their treatment? They are still brittle; their pH is between 5.1 and 5.6 (compared to before treatment readings of 3.2 to 3.8). There appears to be no stain reversion, and they still look good.

After 20 years, this treatment can still be considered a success. I hope the evaluation of my treatments 20 years from now will be just as positive.

### **Acknowledgements**

At the beginning of this presentation I mentioned this story had a detective. He was the one who tracked down the reports, the before and after treatment slides, and followed up on multiple leads. I owe him my sincere thanks. Thank you, Pau Maynes. I also would like to thank Jose Orraca, my mentor, for his memories of the Cuba Album during his time at the Eastman House.

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