



Article: Preliminary Investigation Into the Preservation of Backlit Works of Art
(Abstract)

Author(s): Kate Jennings and Sylvie Pénichon

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Compilers: Camille Moore and Jessica Keister

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PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION INTO THE PRESERVATION OF BACKLIT WORKS OF ART

KATE JENNINGS AND SYLVIE PÉNICHON

Presented at the 2011 PMG Winter Meeting in Ottawa, Canada

Photographic images displayed on light boxes (also known as backlit art) are complex assemblages which require knowledge not only of photographic materials but also sources of illumination and electricity. The physical construction of light boxes, often composed of acrylic and metal, must anticipate the challenging issues of display, storage, and transportation. To this day, backlit works of art have received little attention from the field of conservation, and further research is required. They have been extensively used for commercial advertising, with the first notable example being the Kodak Coloramas which decorated the east balcony of Grand Central Train Station in New York City between 1950 and 1990. In the realm of fine art Canadian photographer Jeff Wall is probably the most well known for this technique which he has used almost exclusively since 1977.

When making a light box the artist can choose from a number of commercially available resources. Printing materials can be divided into two broad categories: silver halide photographic films and inkjet print films. Silver halide display films include chromogenic materials such as Kodak's Endura Transparency Display Film, and silver dye bleach materials such as Ilfochrome's Classic Clear CC.F7. Inkjet print films can be printed with water-based or UV-curing inks. The majority of backlit works in museum collections have so far been made with traditional silver halide display films. Once the image material has been selected the artist must then decide how to mount the transparency; common methods include edge mounting to acrylic, or rear/face mounting to acrylic. Finally the light box design and its light source must be determined. Long established users of light boxes Jeff Wall and Catherine Yass favor fluorescent tubes, but younger artists such as Adolphus Opara are now using LED light sources. The latter option allows for a much slimmer box as the small LEDs are sunk into the edges of a diffusing sheet of white acrylic.

Typical conservation issues with these works encompass the fading of the color transparency and physical problems associated with their mounting, aging of the light source and its electrical components, and handling. The latter is of particular concern for large works which must be constructed each time they are installed. In order to best care for such complex assemblages installation manuals and well designed packing crates are required. This paper presented an overview of the current state of the authors' knowledge, covering in detail the common forms of light box construction used by artists, electrical systems and the history of the photographic materials. Practical considerations for the exhibition and preservation of these objects, with particular reference to works by Jeff Wall, were covered. In conclusion topics for future research were outlined.

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