Article: The Preservation Challenges of Historic Scientific Photographs (Abstract)
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Topics in Photographic Preservation, Volume 15.
Pages: 114
Compiler: Jessica Keister

Topics in Photographic Preservation is published biannually by the Photographic Materials Group (PMG) of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC). A membership benefit of the Photographic Materials Group, *Topics in Photographic Preservation* is primarily comprised of papers presented at PMG meetings and is intended to inform and educate conservation-related disciplines.

Abstract: The Preservation Challenges of Historic Scientific Photographs

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Presented at the 2013 AIC & ICOM-CC Photographs Conservation Joint Meeting in Wellington, New Zealand.

Since the dawn of photography, scientists have used photographs to document the natural world and human behavior and culture. As a research institution, Harvard University has embraced photographic technology from the start, generating and collecting massive quantities of scientific photographs in the fields of geology, botany, astronomy, engineering, physics, medicine, archaeology, and ethnology. Often the use of a collection may differ significantly from the original purpose for which it was created, by advancing increasingly refined scientific theories, supporting research in unrelated fields, or being appreciated for purely aesthetic reasons.

Collections of scientific photographs can pose numerous preservation challenges. These photographs were often extensively handled when first produced, then as scientific needs changed, were left untouched for decades, frequently in poor environments. Some types of photographs, such as solar spectra, astronomical plates and seismograms, depend on image accuracy to a degree that makes digitization complicated. Annotations on crumbling enclosures can sometimes provide the only meaningful context to the image. Collections are often large, containing tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of photographs generated for scientific analyses, and timetables allotted for the preservation of these materials often become compressed, as contemporary researchers clamor for access.

This paper will present an overview of historic scientific photographs at Harvard and ways in which their changing use over time has generated increased interest, as well as new preservation challenges. Three collections will be emphasized: the Gardner Collection landscapes that recorded geological data (Cabot Science Library), 17,000 glass plate negatives of patients taken for Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot, the father of modern neurology (Countway Library of Medicine), and three decades of seismograms that had suffered rodent infestation (Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences). The highlighted case studies will illustrate how unusual treatment, rehousing, digitization, and project management challenges were tackled.

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