

The Art of Preserving Photographs

By Dana Hemmenway

- Do not exhibit photographs in direct sunlight, as damage from light is irreversible. When possible use UV-filtered glazing and rotate works on display.
- Monitor ambient conditions and strive to keep the temperature from 68 to 72 degrees Fahrenheit with a relative humidity of 40 to 50 percent.
- Handle photographs with clean or gloved hands to avoid leaving residues such as oils and salts that can permanently disfigure the work.
- Individually sleeve photographs to increase protection from abrasion, dust, dirt, and harmful gases in the air, utilizing products that have passed the Photographic Activity Test (P.A.T.).

Preserving Photographs

Photographs seem familiar, everyday objects. Yet, few know much about their structure and material composition. In general, photographs are laminate constructions consisting of a support layer (typically paper), an image-forming substance (usually metallic silver) suspended in a binder (frequently gelatin). However, there are many variants. The image material could be color dyes or pigments and the support could be metal or glass. Each material in this composite has its own preservation needs or ideal condition, and this poses complex issues for their collective preservation.

The Basics

Whether caring for fine art photographs or a treasured family collection, you can take significant steps to increase the life of a photograph. Temperature and relative humidity have perhaps the most influence on the stability of photographic materials. It is important to monitor ambient conditions and strive to keep the temperature from 68 to 72 degrees Fahrenheit with a relative humidity of 40 to 50 percent. It is equally important to avoid frequent or extreme fluctuations as this can mechanically stress the photographs. Place a collection in an interior room, and avoid the attic, basement or garage where extremes of climate and season will be felt most acutely. Handle photographs with clean or gloved hands to avoid leaving residues such as oils and salts that can permanently disfigure a photograph.

Ideally, photographs will be individually sleeved or housed to increase protection from handling damage, abrasion, dust, dirt, and harmful



Gustave Le Gray, *Beech Tree, Forest of Fontainebleau*, ca.1855–1857, Albumen print from a collodion negative. Courtesy Hans P. Kraus Jr., Inc.

Why is freeze-drying good for photographs, and when should you do so?

Freeze-drying is a method to salvage photographs and other materials that have been involved in a water disaster such as a flood. This strategy is typically employed when time and space preclude careful rinsing and separation of each object for air-drying. Freeze-drying will stabilize photographs until a conservator can be retained. It will prevent the growth of mold, prevent excessive swelling, and mitigate staining or fading of inks or dyes. However, freeze-drying is not recommended for all circumstances.

(oxidative) gases in the air. Choose chemically inert enclosure materials and if possible utilize products that have passed the Photographic Activity Test (P.A.T.). Commercial suppliers should provide this information. The test identifies enclosure materials that may themselves promote deterioration of photographic materials.

If your photograph is to be exhibited, use a window mat and attach the print to the back board using photo corners. Avoid attaching anything directly to the photograph, if possible. Leave ample separation between the photograph and the glazing, and seal the back of the frame. Do not exhibit photographs in direct sunlight, as damage from light is cumulative and irreversible. When possible use UV-filtered glazing and rotate works on display to prolong their exhibition life.

When to Call a Conservator

Beyond resolving issues such as storage or housing or assessing condition prior to a purchase, conservators are consulted when a photograph requires treatment or stabilization. Common problems are: creases or tears, damage from mold or insects, surface dirt, instability or loss of material, binder flaking, and stains from pressure-sensitive tape or discolored adhesives. A conservator will give you an examination report that can include a proposal for treatment or stabilization.

Do 19th century photographs require more care?

In general yes, however it is individual materials and their condition that prompt specialized care. For instance, printed-out silver photographs (mostly produced in the 19th century) contain image particles that are less robust than their developed-out counterparts (more typically found in the 20th century). They are more subject to fading and deterioration and thus require more care. On the other hand, many color photographs regardless of the date of manufacture suffer from fading of the image dye. Photographs in poor condition regardless of their process type or date of manufacture require extra care and special handling.

For the name of a conservator in your area, contact the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) online at www.conservation-us.org or in Washington, D.C. at 202-452-9545.

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