

DIGITAL ARCHIVING AND PHOTO CONSERVATION: A MUSEUM VIEW

Everyone is doing it – or trying to do it – that is, they are digitizing their collections. Why? Even as more museums are making their collections available online, digital records also help institutions and collectors keep track of the condition of the objects in their collections and provide easier initial, visual access by their staff and interested scholars (which may mean the works are handled less), as well as recording information for insurance purposes. Whether this effort includes high-resolution scans for publication, or special, high quality scans for condition assessment, most museums realize that safekeeping and recording their collections digitally is not the wave of the future. It is now.

Within the photography departments of the museum world, the range of objects, needs, and resources varies greatly, depending on the museum and its mission. For example, the Metropolitan Museum and The Museum of Modern Art are interested in the history of photography, so their collection may contain photographs which range from vernacular snapshots to fine art photography, while an historical museum, like the New-York Historical Society, collects photographs not only as fine art, but also as documentary artifacts of history itself. The NYHS might therefore have objects whose archival stability may be very questionable, but whose potential value to scholars of the history of New York outweighs longevity concerns. Museum staff at The Metropolitan Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, and the New-York Historical Society were interviewed for this article, and it will be these institutions that will be referred to here.

With a little care, daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, silver prints and platinum prints, pigment prints (such as gum dichromate and carbon transfer), and pigmented inkjet prints (printed within the last 3 years) are quite stable. Still, the range of experimentation in the past (and still to come!) and the drive to find new ways to produce color photographs or giant prints have created some notably fugitive forms in the photographic field. Many important works of art have been created in these less stable formats, such as Polaroid® and chromogenic prints (popularly known as c-prints), from both analogue and digital sources. In the world of museums, curators and conservators alike are loathe to dictate any archival requirements to artists which might limit how they create their work (although, if asked, they are happy to make suggestions). While the very nature of making art challenges artists to push the boundaries, both conceptually and technically, it does create challenges for an institution once a work of art enters their collection.

When a Photograph Enters the Collection

All institutions that collect photographs are concerned about the preservation of the objects in their care. Their approaches differ according to their resources and the nature of their collections.

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) began to collect photographs soon after the institution was founded in 1929 and created the Department of Photography about 10 years later. They were one of the first institutions to champion photography as a fine art, yet their collection includes photographs made by artists, journalists, scientists, and unknown amateurs. The oldest works in their collection date from the 1840s and the newest ones are chromogenic color and pigmented inkjet prints made within the last year. When a print is being considered for acquisition, a condition assessment is made. One of the criteria for any object entering the collection is how closely it resembles what the artist intended it to be. With this measure in mind, vintage color photographs from the 70s are often a problem. MoMA's policy is to acquire duplicate prints for the most fugitive color work (e.g. prints made with dye-based inks), but they do not seek duplicates for silver dye bleach (Cibachrome or Ilfachrome), or pigmented inkjet prints. At the time of acquisition, they make a digital snapshot and when a higher quality image is required (for instance, for publication), the print goes to the Imaging Studio.

The earliest work in the Metropolitan Museum's photography collection is a botanical print, formerly thought to be by William Fox Talbot (ca. 1835), now possibly by Henry Bright and dating from the 1790s. The newest one is an inkjet print by Trish Donnelly made in 2007. Because of its fugitive nature, the Met tries to get a duplicate print when they acquire chromogenic prints. When a new acquisition comes in, there is a conservation exam and report. What happens to the item, i.e., how it is stored and displayed, is a collaborative decision between the conservators, curators, and the technician, who handles not only matting and framing of photographic objects, but creates special housings for unusual objects. Like MoMA, the Met has their Photograph Studio, a full-fledged, formal photography studio, which produces high resolution, high quality digital images of objects in the Met's collection. The Photograph Studio deals with objects that are framed or unframed, sometimes fragile, and sometimes light-sensitive. These images go into a system called MediaBin, which is a repository for all digital assets of the Met.

The New-York Historical Society (NYHS) has nearly every photographic form in their collection, from cartes de visites and paper wax negatives to historical and family photographs and multimedia pieces. All of these images come to them with various histories of storage and handling. The NYHS collects aesthetically and they also collect in a very documentary way. Marilyn Kushner is the Curator and Head of the Department of Prints, Photographs and Architectural Collections at the New-York Historical Society and she has 1.5 million objects under her care – as compared to MoMA with approximately 60,000 prints in their Museum and Departmental (Study) Collections. When an object enters the collection, Ms. Kushner takes a picture of it with her own camera for the department's records and for TMS, a collection database system used by many museums. However, not all items go into this system, although a Finding Aid is created for all objects. The Finding Aid categorizes an object or a group of objects in a way that makes sense for the collection. If the object is needed for publication, then it goes to the photography studio.

In addition to the processes described above, when a photograph by a living artist enters the collection of MoMA and the Met, the artist fills out a questionnaire about his or her work. Several representatives from The Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum, including Sarah Meister (MoMA) and Nora Kennedy (the Met), are part of a committee to establish an international standard for an artist questionnaire. This will be especially useful for early digital prints whose products were on the market for only a few years. Questions will include the type of paper the photograph was printed on, the type of ink used, and who printed it. The international committee consists of conservators and curators who are working to weed out repetition and refine the questions. The goal is to have this form available on the websites of national and international conservation organizations as well as other outlets so that it can be available to museum professionals as well as artists, galleries, and private collectors.

Exhibition

Photographs are generally, but not always, works on paper. They also exist as prints made on fabric, metal, or plastic (e.g., Cibachrome/Ilfochrome and many contemporary color photographs). Every present form of photography is sensitive to light, whether it is a platinum print, a salted paper print, or a pigmented inkjet print made with the latest Epson inks. The difference is the component that is the “weak link”. With a platinum print, the image should be stable, but the paper support is organic and will be affected by excessive light exposure. With contemporary color, the dyes making up the image are the most

susceptible component. Much care needs to be taken when they are exposed to light, including daylight, filtered halogens in an exhibition situation, scanning the photographic object to make digital files for print or collection records, or even for purposes of condition analysis. Environmental conditions must also be controlled in exhibition spaces as higher temperatures and higher relative humidity will encourage light-induced deterioration.

Museums try to strike a balance between making fugitive work available to the public and preserving that work for future generations to enjoy. By limiting the amount of time a fugitive work is on view, and carefully controlling the light levels, even work that is sensitive to light can be exhibited. With regard to exhibition, Ms. Kennedy says,

The conservator's role is about enabling that to happen ... higher light levels can be traded for less time on view. This may mean the exhibition period is shortened or that the works are shown with less frequency. Because of the large dimension of the color works, the latter seems to happen more frequently—i.e. slightly higher footcandle levels, slightly longer exhibition periods, but much longer time periods between exhibitions.

At the New-York Historical Society, as at the Met and MoMA, the conservation department checks items going on exhibition and it is they who recommend whether or not an item can be exhibited and for how long. If an item is very brittle or delicate, it might go into a protective housing such as a vitrine.

MoMA, the Met, and the NYHS all keep records of how long each photographic item has been exhibited.

Storage and the Long Term

Of the three institutions I talked to, MoMA had the most delineated storage facilities. There are two tiers of cold storage: regular storage at 50°F with 40% relative humidity and colder storage at just above freezing for the most fugitive of their unmounted prints. At the Met, there is cool storage for the Photograph Studio. At NYHS, everything is in the dark and in archival sheets, but there is no cold storage except for nitrate film – the sole exception. Even when objects are not in cold storage, they are in climate-controlled environments; that is, environments with controlled temperature and humidity. None of the institutions I talked to have below freezing storage (i.e., 32° F), although tests in this

area are currently being conducted by Henry Wilhelm, a prominent expert and prolific source of public information on photographic longevity.

All three museums, as are most museums with photographic collections, are constantly reassessing their methods as new information and new technology becomes available, but they must also balance this with the other needs of their institutions as well as budget and staff considerations.

Digital Print Files: A Contemporary Photographer's Estate

Given the limited stability of photographic prints, particularly chromogenic color prints, there may be a time in the future when photographic artists may donate or will their digital print files to museums. This has not yet happened at the Met or MoMA, but when asked this question, Ms. Meister said that this might be a conversation for the future. Generally, MoMA collects prints, not negatives, since the artist's intention is often only fully realized as the printed object. The same would go the difference between a digital file and the printed object, but with technological advances and an agreement with the artist, this may change, so that photographic prints may continue to be viewed in the future in the form that the artist intended.

This article is based on interviews with museum staff from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and the New-York Historical Society, all based in New York City. I would especially like to thank Nora Kennedy, the Sherman Fairchild Conservator of Photographs, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Sarah Meister, Associate Curator, Department of Photography, MoMA; and Marilyn Kushner, Curator and Head, Department of Prints, Photographs and Architectural Collections, New-York Historical Society, for their time and patience in answering questions and reviewing this article for accuracy.