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institute for
conservation

**Preserving Cultural
Heritage**

How Do I...

Care for Photographs

Introduction

Photograph collections can include everything from daguerreotypes made in the 1840s on a metal support, ambrotypes made on glass, to black and white photographs on paper, and modern color photographs printed on plastic supports. Different types of photographs require different kinds of care. Preventing damage and deterioration is crucial, as much of it cannot be reversed. Proper storage and environmental conditions are essential to reduce risks from display and handling for the long-term preservation of photographic materials.

Handling

Small photographic prints can be handled with clean, dry hands along the edges and by supporting the back. Avoid touching the image surface directly.

- › When handling photographs that may be especially prone to fingerprint damage, such as high-gloss materials, metal supports (e.g. daguerreotypes), or plastic supports (e.g. negatives or slides), use nitrile gloves. Cotton gloves can reduce dexterity and should be avoided.
- › When moving photographs, support them with a rigid material (such as a matboard) for transport and to provide protection from surfaces. When turning a photograph over, sandwich it between two rigid supports before flipping. Larger photographs should be handled by more than one person.
- › Handle glass-based materials with extreme care. Vibration and sudden environmental changes can worsen previously unnoticed cracks.
- › Labeling photographs is ideally done on a storage enclosure, not the photograph itself. If not possible, use a soft pencil, writing on the back while the photograph is face down on a rigid surface to prevent creating indentations.
- › Digitization can allow for safe access of images without any need for handling photographs, but is not a replacement for the original.

Storage Conditions and Environment

Photographs are made of layers, which react differently to changing environmental conditions, making it very important to maintain a stable and constant environment for photographs.

- › Store photographic materials in a dry, cool, low-light, clean environment. Photographs should be kept at temperatures below 75°F/24°C and in areas that aren't overly humid.
- › Avoid storing or displaying photographic materials near or in the direct pathway of heat or cold air sources, like doorways and air vents, or in rarely accessed areas where problems or damage may go unnoticed, such as attics or basements.
- › A preferable storage space for photographs is an interior closet because it generally has a more stable temperature and relative humidity than other household locations.
- › Photographs can be properly housed in paper envelopes or clear plastic (polyester or polypropylene) sleeves that are then stored in either boxes or albums. There are pros and cons to each option. Remember to look for the Photographic Activity Test (PAT label) that certifies that materials have been tested and are safe to stay in contact with photographs for a long period of time without negative interaction.



Ideal storage enclosures. Courtesy Jim Schneck and Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library



Mold damage on photographs. Courtesy Chloé Lucas



Deteriorating acetate negatives. Courtesy Nora Kennedy



Photographs in magnetic album, private collection.
Courtesy Debbie Hess Norris/ Amber Kehoe

- › Proper housing can help protect photographs from light damage, changes in temperature and relative humidity, pest damage, and dust.
- › Color photographs are more sensitive to environmental conditions than black and white photographs and ideally should be stored at lower temperatures.

Display

Displaying photographs is not without risk; proper storage is the best way to preserve photographs. Use plastic or paper corners to attach photographs to an album or frame and avoid applying any adhesives directly on photographs.

Display photographs in sealed frames, using acrylic (plexiglass) or glass, preferably with ultraviolet-filtering. Acrylic is more durable but provides less of a humidity barrier than glass.

Frame photographs with edge spacers or window mats to prevent direct contact with the surface of a photograph, as photographs can become irreversibly stuck. Some earlier photographs from the 19th or early 20th century and most color materials are extremely light sensitive and should not be permanently displayed. In these cases, displaying duplicates while preserving the original in storage may be a good alternative. Conservators and certain framers might have additional options to help modulate environmental humidity fluctuations.

Remember

- › Handle photographs gently along the edges with washed, thoroughly dry hands.
- › Avoid exposing photographs to extreme environmental conditions, such as direct heat and light sources, food, and liquids.
- › Regularly inspect photographs for any signs of deterioration, such as onset of mold, rapid changes in environment, visual change in materials.

Common Concerns and Solutions

- › Use storage materials that are the right size for your photographs. Storage containers that are too big or too small can both cause problems.
- › Regularly monitor storage and display areas for any pests such as rats, insects, or mold onset. For larger collections, consider contacting pest management professionals.
- › Avoid exposure to excessive light, such as on a wall facing a window or in the path of direct sunlight. For long-term storage of framed items, consider light blocking drapes or dark spaces, like interior closets.

Cleaning and Maintenance

- › Don't use any cleaning liquid directly on photographs. Dust can be reduced with an air bulb, a soft microfiber lens cleaning cloth, or soft brushes. Apply a water or alcohol-water mixture to a clean cloth and use the dampened cloth to clean the exterior of framed photographs. Cleaning solutions can drip and soak into the bottom of framing materials if sprayed directly onto the frame.
- › Avoid cleaning chemicals when cleaning areas where your photos are stored. (For example, chlorine and ammonia-based cleaners can damage certain photographs.) Use methods such as vacuuming and dusting, and use plain water for cleaning floors and windows.
- › Affordable devices that measure temperature and relative humidity can help monitor the environment in your storage area. Adjust conditions as needed, using humidifiers or dehumidifiers, or adjusting temperature. (Note: adjusting temperature will also affect relative humidity).

Emergency Response and Disasters

- › Create a simple emergency plan for your most important photographs. Store the most important photographs in a plastic container, with a lid, that is easily accessible and labeled clearly.
- › Following an emergency, immediately retrieve photographs that may have been affected by water exposure and remove housing materials (albums, frames, boxes). Quickly rinse in clean water and air dry flat with the image side up, avoiding touching the surface. Do not stack one on top of the other, as they may stick. Plastic negatives and slides can be hung to dry on a clothesline. If the previous steps are not immediately possible, freeze photographs inside food-grade sealed plastic bags to prevent mold growth, and thaw later when it's safe to do so.
- › If the water exposure is noted only days or weeks after the incident, contact a conservator for advice.

When and How to Contact a Conservator

Contact a conservator in case of water or fire damage; tearing or breaking of glass elements; delamination and flaking; rapid visible change; cellulose nitrate negatives or deteriorating cellulose acetate (associated with a vinegar smell); pest or mold outbreak. Use AIC's "Find a Professional" tool to locate a conservator in your area, using the specialty "Photographic Materials" to identify the right conservator for the job. Read our Guide to Hiring a Conservator to learn more.

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