

Questions Log webinar on April 23, 2013

Dear All,

I enjoyed speaking with you during our webinar on April 23rd. Your questions were excellent and I have attempted to answer some below while flying to LA from Philadelphia. Let's hope my battery holds out! See my brief notes below. Best, Debbie

Q: So, with those instant photos from the 1970s that spit out of the camera and we had to coat with something on a wand, was that an example of a binder?

I believe you are referring to Polaroid photography. Their binder is gelatin. The material applied by the "wand" was a polymeric coating that protected the silver image from degradation.

Q: Modern inkjet printer companies make claims of longevity regarding their inkjet prints - I recall 100+ years for HP Premium papers & inks. Are these true? Is this a way of preserving old prints (scan and re-print on inkjet)?

Please refer to Henry Wilhelm's website for information on the predicted longevity of inkjet prints. Scanning older photographs is a method to ensure access but you should still preserve your original prints by housing them in good-quality enclosures and protective environments.

Q: What is salted paper?

This refers to a very early photographic printing process introduced by William Henry Fox Talbot in the UK in the early 1840s.

Q: Wasn't Mathew Brady a very famous photographer?

Yes, very much so. There are wonderful examples of his work in many major museum across the country.

Q: where does "sepia" fit in?

Sepia-toned silver gelatin photographs were popular around the 1920s. The black-and-white silver image is toned with sulfur to produce a brownish or sepia color. These images are very permanent as the final image material is silver sulfide. These prints will typically not be faded or deteriorated.

Q: What does "developed-out" mean?

A good question! Developed-out refers to the way a photographic print or negative may be produced – using a chemical developer in a darkroom as compared with placing a light-sensitive paper in contact with a negative and out in the sun. These images are printed-out.

Q: what type of pen should be used for making notes on photographs?

Better to use graphite pencil – a soft pencil and be sure the photograph is supported face down on a mat board to protect the surface. Do not apply too much pressure as you do not want to emboss the photograph's surface.

Q: Why do you cut silver gelatin off at 1960?

These are just dates of popularity but not end dates.

Q: I believe my great grandfather was taking and developing his own photographs in the late 1800s. Was that common? And do you know what process he would have been using? They look like they might be albumen.

There were a variety of photographic print materials available to photographers in the late 1880s. See the IPI Graphics Atlas. This could be albumen as this process dominated the 19th century, but if your grandfather was an amateur photographer these photographs are more likely silver gelatin printing-out or developing –out prints.

Q: What do you think about copying or digitization for preservation?

A good solution to allow greater access and reduce handling.

Q: Are slides the same as photographs or negatives?

Yes – color slides are on a plastic support of type with a gelatin binder layer and image comprised of organic dyes – cyan, magenta, and yellow.

Q: Do you recommend writing on the photos to identify the people or the event? I can only assume that there are photos that should not be written on.

For family photographs this can be useful. Only with a soft pencil as noted above.

Q: Hi - what is baryta?

Barium sulphate and gelatin coated on a paper support to improve reflectance and gloss. Introduced in the 1880s or so.

Q: should old family photos be displayed? or just kept in proper albums?

You should minimize light exposure as these images may deteriorate over time. Best to display copies if possible. If you do display the original, then be sure that photograph is properly matted and framed ideally with ultra-violet light filtering glazing. Do not hang in the bright light and chose an interior wall, if possible.

Q: How do we preserve color slides?

These images fade in the light and dark. They require cool storage for long-term preservation but this is difficult in family homes. Protect them from high relative humidity levels and high temperatures. House in good-quality sleeves or boxes available from the suppliers I listed and others.

Q: Debbie, You mentioned recording information about the people and places in a photograph. Where and how do you recommend doing this?

You can do this on sheets of acid-free paper stored with the photograph, if possible. Minimal writing on the back is also an option. The most important issue is to retain information about your family photographs so they can be treasured by future generations.

Q: The more modern pictures have a more glossy finish, is this due to the dyes also?

This is due to the finishing of the gelatin binder layer, the presence of a gelatin super coat of some kind, or the fact that many are on resin-coated papers that display greater gloss. The dyes do not contribute to surface character.

Q: How do you prevent scratching negatives?

Negative surfaces are fragile. Handle these materials with cotton gloves.

Q: When given the choice on printing photos, from a preservation standpoint, would it be better to select matte or glossy prints?

The surface will not affect stability, so select the paper surfaces that you prefer. (One could argue the

glossy prints are more easily scratched.)

Q: I have negatives that are curled tight like a cigarette. Is there a way to uncurl them?

These can be carefully humidified to relax their surface and then flattened between polyester web and blotters and under weight. This can be a difficult process and I would recommend you contact a trained photograph conservator via the American Institute for Conservation website featured in the webinar.

Q: What about interleaving albums?

Albums can be interleaved with good-quality papers (Ideally a smooth-surfaced paper that passes the Photographic Activity Test.) Be careful the introduction of these papers does not damage the binding in anyway.

Q: if you have an old album in which the pictures have been glued into the album.

It is best to leave albums in tact as they tell a story in their arrangement and information that may be present on each page. While glues can cause silver images to fade and mirror over time, many photographs in albums are in very good condition as they have been protected from fluctuating temperature and relative humidity levels.

Q: Wouldn't the album advice depend on the acidity of the paper and condition of the pages?

To some degree but acidity does not always adversely affect photographic prints. Albums in poor condition must be handled carefully. Perhaps they can be digitized or copied in some way to prevent handling-related problems?

Q: Buffered or unbuffered paper for enclosures? Or does it matter?

I would say it really does not matter. Just be sure that these papers have passed the photographic activity test. Cyanotypes should not be housed in buffered enclosures.

Q: If we keep albums together, besides a box, should we interleave alkaline paper between the pages? Yes, if possible. See response above.

Q: can you put more than one photo in a sleeve?

If necessary, yes. Just be sure that they can be removed safely. Use good quality sleeves and plastics that are considered safe for photographs. Review online referenced in webinar. These may include polyester, polypropylene or polyethylene plastics.

Q: How do you know what plastic sleeves are safe?

There has been considerable research on this topic. See resources in webinar.

Q: Don't plastic sleeves trap moisture/dust?

Plastic enclosures can trap moisture and dust - some prefer not to use these materials in very high relative humidity environments but I think that they are generally very safe.

Q: Should you use desiccants?

Yes, where possible but not in contact with the photograph, perhaps in a box.

Q: can you store old pictures in zip lock bags?

That is possible – just be certain the bag is made from one of the plastics recommended.

Q: will placing photographs in filing cabinets do further harm?

No. this can be protective.

Q: What's a desiccant?

A desiccant absorbs moisture in the air.

Q: Can I store photos in acid free folders?

Yes, this should be fine. They can be housed upright but do not let the folder slump in the box or the photographs may warp or distort.

Q: what about dust on slides?

Dust can be carefully brushed away with a soft brush.

Q: I have a set of great photos under oval glass. Is it okay to hang those and how do I store them. photos are over 18 inches

These are likely hand-colored as well? They may be enlargements of some kind and the image may be convex in shape. So do be careful in handling them and keep them framed as the glass is protective and will prevent the photograph from cracking – a common occurrence. These can be displayed in your home but protect them from direct light as the paper may yellow and time colorants, if present, may fade over time.

Q: Should you scan all of your photographs digitally to save them from degradation?

Note that the scanned version is not a preservation copy. You should save your original photographs.

Q: do you have suggestions on to control fluctuating relative humidity in a room with windows?

A dehumidifier can be most helpful. For storage, keep photographs in acid-free boxes.

Q: If you put images into a printed book vis shutterfly, how long would those pictures last versus regular photo prints in a photo album?

Please confer with those who have digital expertise – but the photograph album may last longer.

Q: can anything be done about Polaroids that have stuck together?

We discussed this a bit during the webinar. This is a common problem. These should be brought to a photograph conservator for examination. Sometimes they can be separated by immersion in water but this can be dangerous too as the gelatin emulsions will swell and the dyes may bleed.

Q: I hope it is OK to ask ahead, how we stop our photos from curling, or flatten them once they have curled.

If they are only slightly curled, they can be placed between mat board or blotters and underweight and they should gradually flatten. If they are severely curled, they must be humidified so they do crack during the flattening process. This should be done under the supervision of a conservator as excess humidification may cause inks to bleed or emulsions to become tacky.

Q: Is it harmful to stack older photos on top of each other in the bases?

It is better to place them into individual enclosures to prevent them from sticking one to another. But stacking is not a terrible alternative. Limit handling and do all you can to control the environment!

Q: Your opinion on the storage of plastic enclosures in binders?

Good quality plastic enclosures can be housed in binders. Most binders are generally safe. Acid-free boxes are better, but binders may be ideal for access.

Q: What kind of photo preservation problems do you anticipate in the future with the continued changes in technology?

Digital materials must be preserved and they have the own set of challenges. We must not forget to focus on analog systems as well and continue to do all we can to promote the importance of photographic preservation globally.

Q: How can you tell the difference between some of these types of photos i.e. daguerreotypes vs. tintypes; albumen vs. salted paper vs. silver gelatin?

We addressed this during the webinar. Please see many of the references. Dating will help as some processes were only available during specific time periods. Look for surface qualities and deterioration characteristics too.

Q: is it ok to scan old photos on home scanners, or does the light harm them?

If scanners are used carefully, this should be fine. Be careful handling your photographs so not to crease or damage their fragile surfaces.

Q: Does today's color print (made with a professional ink print) have a shorter life span than chromogenic color print? Any advice for preserving them?

See future webinars on digital prints technologies. Also see the Image Permanence Institute website as they have an entire section on digital technology and permanence that is most informative.

Q: the original photo you showed had brown spots. you didn't mention anything about that - what causes brown spots and what should you do to prevent further deterioration?

Many photographs are spotted or stained. Small spots may be foxing caused by localized mold growth and caused by exposure to high relative humidity conditions.

Q: You didn't mention ambrotypes among the 19th century processes. Is the ambrotype made with a positive process or is it a negative on glass?

The ambrotype was introduced in the early 1850s and is a negative image on glass. It is backed with black lacquer or asphaltum and it appears as a positive image. This can be confused with daguerreotypes but they are not as reflective or mirror-like and they have a three-dimensional quality.