

Fundamentals of the Conservation of Photographs



What is a Photograph?

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TECHNICAL NOTE

In the early 1970's the conservation of photographs began to define itself within the conservation profession as a distinctly separate specialty. The pioneers of the field argued then, that the unifying and essential nature of true photographs was a common origin in chemical response to radiant energy, no matter how varied in materials or structure, nor how much they might resemble other forms of graphic imagery. Further, they made the case that it was the photograph as object, not just as image, that required a special conservation approach beyond what the photographic industry and paper conservation practice was offering. The new professional specialty established itself by being able to clearly define the photograph. Today, as if struck with a confusion of tongues, the many conservation specialists who speak for the photograph do not agree upon a common answer to "What is a photograph?" For some, this is no problem at all. For others, it indicates a grave confusion in the craft, which threatens the very definition and effectiveness of the specialty profession. Indeed, some begin to question, "What is photograph conservation?" Without a clear definition of "photograph", commonly held by the profession, can it be possible to establish the domain of the photograph conservator?

The stretching and blurring of the definition of "photograph" is a direct result of the evolution of electronic imaging, which has profoundly disrupted the established photographic industry. Daily, the convergence of information and imaging technology is establishing a new industry and culture, spawning new words and altering old definitions.

The more than one hundred and fifty year dominance of silver-halide technology is rapidly diminishing. An analogous, but essentially different technology, increasingly serves in the stead of



traditional chemical imaging systems: digital cameras replace cameras that use film; for some uses, scanners replace cameras; printers replace darkrooms; bathrooms that had been converted to darkrooms are now being converted back into bathrooms. The truly marvelous new technologies are seen by most who embrace them as the natural evolutionary progress of photography. Some, however, see it as something entirely different. For those who express unease or regret at change, advocates of "Progress" point out that photographic technology has always been transforming since its commercial introduction in 1839. One process has yielded to another, over and over again. What we are experiencing now, they say, is just "the closing of another chapter in the history of photography." But, it is worth considering that it may be the last chapter in the book.

"Photography", meaning "writing with light" was perhaps never a sufficient neologism to describe the totality of the technology. A consultation of multiple dictionaries will reveal a disturbing variance of definitions for such a profoundly present and influential technology. In common usage "photography" and "photograph" are used as synonyms, called "Photography Conservation," "Photographic Conservation" and "Photograph Conservation." Recently, the sufficiently vague "Photo Conservation" gains popularity, but implies if one reasons, "the conservation of light." The most careful practitioners avoid the problem by referring to "Photographic Materials" as their professional conservation purview.

Language has evolved in response to the disruptive changes in technology. It is now most correct to use "Imaging" where once "Photography" sufficed. People increasingly say they take or make "pictures", instead of photographs. An industry that based itself on silver-halide chemistry now thinks in ink. In the past photomechanical reproductions were not considered true photographs. Today, ink on paper prints, never having been sensitive to light during the course of their making, are treated as such.

The lessons of photographic history teach that there is an astonishingly rapid loss of knowledge and skill attending the commercial ascendance of one system of photography over another. Much research effort in photograph conservation has been, is, and will continue to be devoted to rediscovering and exploring past methods of making photographs. Historic process re-creation is a fundament of photograph conservation education. Today, it is appropriate to view silver-halide based photography as an historic process, even though it is still with us. The loss of knowledge of the craft of what is now



being called "Traditional Photography" is ongoing. The experience of developing the latent image in wet chemistry, which was, in the 20th century, the alchemical essence of the photographic magic, will soon be unknown to most who use a camera. The ambiguity of the current definition of photography contributes to the obliteration of the past.

Those who make a profession of conserving photographs must now be very clear to themselves and others about the definition of "photograph". It is a professional requisite. Outside the profession it has been recognized that the word "photograph" cannot be infinitely stretched to describe the new technology. As the bounds of the technology dissolve, so does the existing profession of photograph conservation. "Info-Imaging" has been proposed as the name appropriate for the new industry now in formation. Is it thus possible that someday there will be Info-Imaging Conservation? Whatever its name will be, a new profession is evolving because of revolutionary changes in technology. But it cannot, anymore, continue to be properly called Photograph Conservation.

The legacy of 19th and 20th century photography is vast, valuable and vulnerable. There is a pressing need to understand that the photography of the present and future is and will be significantly different, rather than substantially the same, as the photography of the past. It will increasingly be the role of the Photograph Conservator to make that difference clear. For the Photograph Conservation field to avoid establishing a common definition of what constitutes a photograph is to contribute to the forces that destroy photographs.

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