

THE FRENCH SITUATION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC PRESERVATION.

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Abstract:

This paper is focused on the attitude toward the new discipline of photographic conservation in France. It places photographic conservation in the context of the other fields of conservation with particular reference to the City of Paris' collections.

Keywords:

PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINTS - NEGATIVES - PRESERVATION - CONSERVATION
RESTORATION - DISPLAY - HANGING.

The photographic collections of the city of Paris

The aim of these collections, starting at the beginning of the 1840's, was to keep a documentation of the History of the city with a particular attention to the architecture, the urban life, and the inhabitants and personalities of the city. The acquisitions were at first made by commissions to photographers, such as Marville or Atget, or by donation. They are now also made by individual purchases from contemporary photographers or owners. There were three mayor types of institutions which formed photographic collections: museums, libraries and archives. Each type using the collections in different manners, leading to different types of conservation problems. Museums usually specialized in one subject area, often around a single personality such as Victor Hugo, Balzac, Bourdelle etc. Photographs were generally kept and used in "Print Rooms" with relative care and supervision. Libraries formed collections of both positives and negatives (many un-printed) These materials were often actively used by the public and given only basic care. Archives gathered photographs mixed with other types of documents, often without creating specific inventories of the photographic materials. Inadequate "restoration" treatments that have affected the structure of the images have been done during the first half of the century by photographers, collectors and book binders.

The evolution of the 1970's:

In the 1970's, resulting from the development of the field of the history of photography, a strong reaction against those destructions led to another situation. A new interest in the medium gave it a cultural dimension. The market of photography, first in the United States and later in Europe grew tremendously. Historical photographs in good condition becoming rare and expensive, new solutions had to be found for their conservation. Since the introduction of the Month of photography in Paris in 1980, the number of exhibitions, conferences and seminars grew in the same proportion. Photography became a curator's specialization in Historical or Art Museum's Departments. Thanks to this acknowledgement of the specificity of photography within the graphic Arts, the field of photographic conservation has been able to develop itself in France as it is shown by the following examples:

Le Centre de Recherche sur la Conservation des Documents Graphiques additionally involved with the research in paper conservation started in the late 1970's to work on the analysis of photographic materials.

The cultural Affairs of the City of Paris created l'Atelier de Restauration des Photographies in 1983. It is a centralised treatment laboratory involved in the conservation of photographic collections of the city.

The Photographic Archives of the Minister of Culture moved in a new location at the Fort de St. Cyr in 1983. This led to a preventative conservation program for the transportation of their collection of negatives. Occasional courses in photographic conservation started at the University of Paris I and in 1984 at the National School of Photography in Arles.

L'institut Français de Restauration des Oeuvres d'Art which depends on the Minister of Culture, started a specific program on photographic materials in 1989. The students are studying real treatment cases in the context of public collections.

Conservation activities

All conservation works begins with a general survey period which is followed by four main types of procedures:

Preventative conservation :

These treatments involve the entire collection and lead to mass treatments to stop further deterioration of the prints or negatives.

They deal with the control of the environment effects on photographs and consist either in checking the storage conditions (temperature, relative humidity, light, atmospheric pollutants and dust) and the storage facilities, or in programs for the future organisation of storage rooms like for la Maison Européenne de la Photographie which will open in 1993.

The protection of the objects during display or the control (visually and with a densitometer) of the prints condition before and after an exhibition can also be done. The protection against handling is provided by recommendations to the curators or archivists. The use of duplicates may also provide a display alternative to the use of vulnerable originals.

Conservation treatments:

These interventions are made directly on the photographs. They consist in the prevention of further deterioration such as the disinfection of prints and negatives, the cleaning and flattening of curled prints. The protection against handling is also provided according to the priorities of need. For example the Atget collection of the Bibliotheque Historique is cleaned, mounted with modern matting. The cartes de visite collection of the Musée Carnavalet has been cleaned and is protected by polyester sleeves and placed in archival boxes. They can also consist in the stabilisation of broken glass plates negatives or in the cleaning, reproduction and temporary storage of nitrate film.

Restoration of individual items:

These interventions are done after a specific analysis of the object, of its structure, materials and alterations which leads to an individual treatment proposal. This information is kept in a record file and documented visually. A more detailed technical research is sometimes requested by a curator in relation with an exhibition project. Nearly 80% of the treatments required are physical and derive from traditional restoration techniques adapted to the specific needs and structure of the material considered. They often deal with cleaning problems, flattening, physical consolidations of supports and emulsions and finally aesthetic treatments like in painting or re-coating the prints. Many common problems which have been solved for other materials have yet to be evolved for photographs. For example the problems of safely cleaning the dust accretions from many types of photographs or flattening procedures for albumen or baryta layered prints have still to be solved. The many chemical treatments that were introduced by photographers or by manufacturers are not used on public collections because even if often cosmetically spectacular,

They do not allow any control and can sometimes be in contradiction with the conservation rules of ethics on the reversibility and long term stability of the treatments. A realistic conservation program makes no contradiction between the individual treatment and a preventative conservation policy which demand the monitoring of the long term effects of treatment.

Teaching activities:

Since photographic conservation is a new field in our country it is a duty to exchange informations and experiences with all the professionals who will come to work in the field. On the other end, scientific cooperation must be sought from every possible connected discipline.

This realisation led to a cooperation between our laboratory and the teaching programs in France as well as the participation to specialised seminars in Europe.

The very complex structure of photographic materials as well as the great number of items kept in very different types of collections oblige to acknowledge that photography is always a peculiar type of artefact. Its specific problems of conservation are bound to its particular functions and utilisations within each collection. This is why no general and universal recipes can be adequately given to the public. This is also why each solution to all cases must be adapted to the special need of the item as well as of the considered collection.

If these realities are kept in mind the development of photographic conservation will be able to make considerable progress not only in its theoretical aspects but in its practical experiences. The very important steps made these last fifteen years in France allow us to be quite optimistic in that prospect.

Zusammenfassung,

Diese Abhandlung betrifft Probleme, welche sich darbieten bei der Wiederherstellung von Wandtapeten und das Verwende von geeigneten Techniken.

Die Wiederherstellung von Wandtapeten ist eine ziemlich neue Spezialität der Papierrestaurierung.

Der vorgang bei dieser Wiederherstellung verlangt sehr spezielle eigene Anpassungen, und auch eine sehr eigene Behandlung.

Der Autor bevorzugt es, die Tapezierung in situ zu bearbeiten.