



SAVING YOUR Treasures

A Website about what you can do to protect and preserve the things of importance in your life



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CARING FOR YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS

Preserving the future of your family's paper-based collections is no small task. Photographs are among the most valued family treasures but even the most well-intentioned care can cause damage to your photos. How you handle the photographs and the materials used to house them is key. Here are some guidelines to follow when caring for and preserving your photos so that future your generations may enjoy them.

Composition of Photographs:

The composition of photographs can be divided into three different parts or materials: a support base, a binder, and image material. The support of a photographs or negative may be of glass, a plastic film, metal, paper, or a resin-coated paper. Some plastic film bases are inherently unstable and will have a negative effect on the life of the image (see "Care of Nitrate and Acetate Films.") The emulsion or binder layer holds the final image material to the support and is most commonly gelatin but may also be albumen or collodion. The final part of a photograph is the image material of silver, color dyes, or pigment particles suspended in the emulsion layer.

Handling Photographs:

The major source of damage to most objects, even photographs, is improper handling and carelessness. When handling photographs and negatives, be sure that hands are freshly washed, or wear clean, lint-free cotton gloves. This will prevent fingerprints and scratches on the photograph's surface. If a photograph must be moved a short distance or turned over during examination, use a secondary support (such as a piece of Plexiglas, 2- or 4-ply rag board, or folder stock) to protect the item from damage caused by bending and flexing.

Storage of Photographs:

The best way to protect your photographs is to avoid certain storage methods. For example, if your photographs are stored in a magnetic photo album, they should be removed immediately. Over time, the adhesive used on the pages of magnetic photo albums breaks down and damages your photos. The adhesive becomes permanent and rigid over time making it impossible to remove your photo. The adhesive also discolored and soaks into the things in the album, disfiguring and damaging them. As the clear pages are pulled back, it may take the surface of your photograph with it. In addition to magnetic photo albums, other older and less expensive photo albums contain paper that over time becomes highly acidic. Putting your photographs in this type of album is eventually going to damage them. Black dyed pages of these old or inexpensive albums is particularly acidic.

Keeping your photographs in a box, even in an archival-safe box, is risky. These jumbled photos can get bent and scratched. If you want to store your photos in a photo storage box, you will need to place each photo in a proper paper or plastic housing. You may also safely store your photographs in a photo album with an expanding back binding so there's plenty of room. Inside use polypropylene sleeves.

Another type of photo album has large plastic sleeves with removable acid-free, lignin-free paper backing pages. Do not glue your photographs to the paper pages. Use photographic corners with adhesive backing to hold items in the album. Once your pictures are in the album, there is no adhesive touching your photographs and the plastic sleeves protect the front of the photos. These are archival-safe and will not deteriorate.

Some albums even have a space for writing notes about the photos on the sleeve or the adjacent page. You should never write on photos but if you must, use a soft #2 pencil and write lightly on the back.

All materials used to store photographs should be able to pass the Photographic Activity Test (PAT). PAT is an internationally recognized standardized test for the safety photographic storage materials (ISO Standard 18916). To learn more about PAT follow visit: http://www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/shtml_sub/srv_pat.asp.

Cleaning Photographs:

The cleaning of photographic images of any kind in a collection is not to be undertaken lightly. There are many serious factors to consider. A conservator and curator should be consulted in order to assess all the issues relating to the care of the object in question. These procedures should not be used on any objects that have:

- pastel or charcoal media (like crayon portraits),
- loose or flaking gelatin or baryta layers,
- mold (even if dry and not active),
- extensive repairs, or
- been rolled and will not stay flat without assistance.

Objects exhibiting these conditions should only be cleaned by a conservator. **If you are unable to positively identify the photographic process by which the object was made, do not attempt to clean it.** Even light surface brushing can remove silver image particles from a degraded salted paper print.

If the following cleaning methods have been determined to be appropriate for your specific object, they should be followed using the utmost care and sensitivity. Extreme care is needed to avoid doing more harm than good. The materials and techniques listed below have been tested and found to be safe and effective when used in a careful and sensitive manner.

A clean, well-ventilated work area should be provided for the cleaning process, including a large, smooth-surfaced, hard worktable with adequate light. It is recommended that clean gloves be worn when handling photographic prints and negatives to avoid transferring fingerprints to the objects.

Materials:

- clean, acid-free blotter, clean cotton gloves
- clean, small, **very soft**, natural bristle brushes (such as a Japanese Haké brush)
- vinyl eraser
- small, clean kitchen hand grater

Procedure:

1. Prepare an extremely clean, dry work area and cover the work surface with a clean piece of acid-free blotter.
2. Place the photographic object on the work surface. If the object is a "cased object", such as a daguerreotype, Ambrotype, or tintype, leave it **closed**, and clean the exterior surfaces with a soft brush. **Do not dismantle these items or touch the photographic surface.** If the object is framed or otherwise behind glass, the frame and glass can be dusted with a soft brush, but neither should be cleaned with any liquids. Liquids will seep beneath the glass and cause serious staining of the object possibly contributing to mold growth inside the object's housing.
3. To clean the surface of a photographic **print**, hold the print face up against the blotter with one gloved hand and brush dust away from the center towards the edges of the object with a soft brush. A very light touch is most effective. If there are any signs of loose media or support stop the cleaning immediately and contact a conservator for further instructions.
4. To clean the **border** of a photographic **mount**, the space around the perimeter of the backing board, vinyl eraser crumbs may be used. Grate your own vinyl eraser crumbs with a small, clean kitchen grater and a vinyl eraser, such as Staedtler Mars Plastic®. Do not use Scum-X® or other eraser crumbs as they may contain sulfur and other materials, which may cause deterioration of your photographic images.

Rub the vinyl eraser crumbs lightly on the surface of the mount with the fingertips of a gloved hand or with the larger piece of vinyl eraser. Remove the crumbs by brushing away from the photograph with a soft brush. **Do not rub directly with an eraser** as it may cause a great deal of damage and uneven cleaning. **Do not ever clean the surface of the print with eraser crumbs.**

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