



Photographic material needs particular care

This sheet will describe:

- suitable storage;
- common problems;
- appropriate handling;
- recommended packaging;
- sources of more information.



“Photographic material” refers to physical, image-based items such as negatives, prints, glass plates and film. Various processes, chemical components, supports and formats may be represented within an archive; therefore understanding the preservation needs of specific types of photographs is a specialist area. However there are a number of preservation recommendations that apply to most photographic items.

Storage

Photographic material should be stored in a clean, cool, dark, stable and dry place, preferably even cooler and drier than other archives. Photographs may even be kept in refrigerated or frozen storage with the correct packaging and acclimatisation regime. Low temperatures and humidity help slow down the deterioration of less stable chemical components such as silver.

Typical problems

Fading: photographs are sensitive to light and may fade, discolour or “silver”. Keep in the dark or low light.

Brittleness: mounts or supports may become brittle and discoloured if poor quality; handle and store with care.

Flaking surface: the emulsion on a photograph may fracture or peel. Do not store in polyester sleeves, use acid-free tissue. Make a preservation copy by taking a photograph.

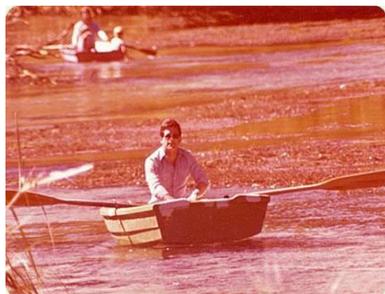
Mould: damp conditions can lead to mould damage which will disfigure the photograph. In a frame, condensation or damp can cause the photograph to stick to the glass. Do not attempt to remove, take a copy through the glass.

Good practice

Labelling: use a soft pencil on the back, don't press hard or the image will be marked.

Handling: hold at the edges only and don't touch the surface. Nitrile gloves are recommended if you are sorting through many photographs. Archival transparent sleeves will help protect the photograph surface; you can also support a photograph on a sheet of paper while handling. Always keep the image or emulsion layer uppermost.

Cleaning: *only* if the surface is unaffected for example by flaking layers, use a very soft, mop-head brush (such as a make up brush) and dust over the surface gently. Don't do this if the photograph is mouldy.



Things to avoid

- Paper clips which will mark and scratch a photograph's surface;
- Post-its which will peel off and may stain the surface;
- Self-adhesive albums - but don't try to take out photographs already in them;
- Clip frames or framing in contact with glass where the photograph may cockle or stick;
- Displaying in direct light, especially colour images;
- Repairs - this should be done by a professional conservator only. Don't attempt any repairs yourself such as with Sellotape. Packaging will prevent further damage and it is possible to digitally "repair" an image for a reproduction.

Packaging

Folded paper is best for flaking or friable photos, while transparent, pure, polypropylene or polyester is suitable for stable photos. Acid-free boxes are ideal for groups of individually wrapped photos or albums.

The best materials for packaging photographs have passed the Photograph Activity Test. These are acid free; sulphur free and "unbuffered" (other archival storage materials are usually chemically "buffered" to resist acidity). Use the purest material you can next to the item and robust packaging for general protection. Usually, some packaging is better than nothing.

Further information

There are many resources on-line, the Institute for Conservation and the British Library have useful downloadable leaflets available. Information is also available on The National Archives' web site. The Media Museum in Bradford has a permanent display on the history of photography, and hosts resources online about different photographic processes.