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Topics in Photographic Preservation, Volume 18

Page(s): 142-150

Compiler: Marie-Lou Beauchamp

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Topics in Photographic Preservation is published biannually by the Photographic Materials Group (PMG) of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC). A membership benefit of the Photographic Materials Group, *Topics in Photographic Preservation* is primarily comprised of papers presented at PMG meetings and is intended to inform and educate conservation-related disciplines.

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Two case studies of the treatment of photographic albums: between emic and etic approaches

Barbara Cattaneo

Presented at the 2019 ICOM-CC PMWG & PMG joint meeting in New York, New York.

Abstract

The present paper describes choices, solutions and treatments discussed and performed on two photographic albums belonging to the National Archeology Museum of Florence (Doro Levi – First Archeology Campaign in Mesopotamia) and Villa I Tatti – The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence (Inventory of Furniture and Small Objects of a Florentine Antiquarian), carried out at the Conservation Laboratory of the National Central Library of Florence and at the Paper and Prints Department of the *Opificio delle Pietre Dure* in Florence. A strict workflow had to be put into action due to the large number of photographs involved. In both cases, physical gels (AgarArt®, Gellan Gum) or chemical gels (Nanorestore®, Peggy 6®) were used and their use proved to be fundamental to the success of the treatment.

Introduction

Photographic albums are complex objects and sometimes major treatment must be considered in order to fulfil the institutional owner's needs and assure their preservation in the long-term. Since albums bear a double nature—they display both the author's narrative and later attributed documental value—the decision-making process can be prolonged and delicate.

When we think of photographic albums, we have to consider them as socially salient objects, extending Elizabeth Edward's definition of ethnographic photographs to the album form. Their context of production, whenever we have the chance to investigate it, can unveil private stories, and maybe sometimes also a hidden negative, as you can see here, in this album (fig. 1). But the main point is that they display the world and a collective imagery that we can look at from different angles.



Fig. 1 A family album, with negatives stored underneath the contact prints

We find albums at home as well as in Institutions. Their physical structure, their book form, is mostly intrinsically imperfect. Materials used for covers often turn out to be inadequate, the heavy and poor quality supports are often mounted on hinges that are too thin; the sewing tends to loosen quite rapidly, due to the weight of the pages or the excess of adhesive on the back. Moreover, the spatial arrangement of photographs on the pages may also represent a risk. For example, when we find pages sliding due to an unstable sewing and facing emulsions rubbing together.

When we think of large, monumental albums, revealing their important material form, we immediately think about how to improve their safe handling. But, In conclusion, every format bears an intrinsic weakness which is due to its semi-industrial nature (fig 2).



Fig. 2 Albums held at the Alinari Foundation

Doro Levi –First Archeology Campaign in Mesopotamia

The first album, damaged by the Florence flood in 1966, consisted of 231 contact prints on Lupex Agfa and Kodak Velox, dating from 1925 and 1935. Some of the prints were loose while others still adhered to the thick black pages typical of albums from the 1930s and 1940s. The photographs were in very bad condition: many showed heavy losses to the image layer; prints were often stuck together, emulsion against emulsion; and white and black pencil marks were found both on the pages and on the back of the loose photographs, leading us to believe that notes could be present on the back of the glued images too. Removal, surface cleaning, separating the images, consolidating the layers, mending tears, loss compensation and finally a new mounting solution were then necessary to save the album's form and help to retrace the history of Doro Levi's journey to Mesopotamia (fig. 3a,b). The conservation project is synthetized in Table 1



Fig. 3a Front cover



Fig. 3b Page n. 22verso, before treatment

Treatments	Material/Technique
Visual examination, tests	Visual Microscopy, spot tests
Consolidation of the emulsion	Gelatin (Rousselot P. G.)- Ethanol
Dry and gel cleaning	Cotton swabs, Microfiber cloth; Nanorestore gel, Kelcogel, Agarart, Tylose
Removal from supports	Tylose, Kelcogel, Gore-tex, Spatula, dental floss,
Washing of supports	Water
separating the images	Teflon spatula, PET foil, dental floss
mending of tears and loss compensation	various Washi, Hanji, Tylose, Klucel G in ethanol
Flattening	Humidication Chamber
Final consolidation of emulsion	Gelatin (Rousselot P. G.)- Ethanol
New mounting solution	PET supports, PE corners
Binding, rehousing	India ink stained linen thread, Buckram, EVA, Canson Carton Plume, Millboard

Table 1

Doro Levi's album was rediscovered in recent years, in a box, at the National Archeology Museum of Florence. One might think: photographs almost without image, can they still be considered as photographs? Are they just mere documents now? We discussed this and also talked about the strong evocative power of these lost images. So the treatment we decided aimed to stabilize the emulsions and recover Doro Levi's handwriting on the verso of the photographs in order to retrace his journey through Mesopotamia.

A consolidation methodology had to be found and had to be applied on the lifting emulsion before removing the photographs from the pages. We then used ethanol locally sprayed or brushed, followed by a photographic gelatin solution (from 0.8 to 1,5% in deionized water). Cleaning was successful thanks to a range of chemical and physical gels, such as agar and gellan gum, which is transparent and easy to shape. Gels were also used locally on the verso of the pages in order to remove the photographs from the album leaves. After mending the tears and losses, flattening and final consolidation with gelatin was then done (fig. 4a, b, c).



Fig. 4a Agar application



Fig. 4b Cleaning in progress



Fig. 4c Shaping gellan gum

The supports were selectively cleaned and washed. Mud was removed, but traces of baryta were left in place to preserve the traces of damaged or missing photographs.

Mylar antistatic supports and two PET corners were used to mount the photographs, while a new sewing inspired by coptic single leaf style binding was devised (fig. 5a)

Here following, you can see the tailored loose cover, and a drop-down spine box, which includes a book cradle and the instructions for a safe handling (fig. 5b).



Fig 5a Photographs are mounted on PET supports, overlapping the original pages

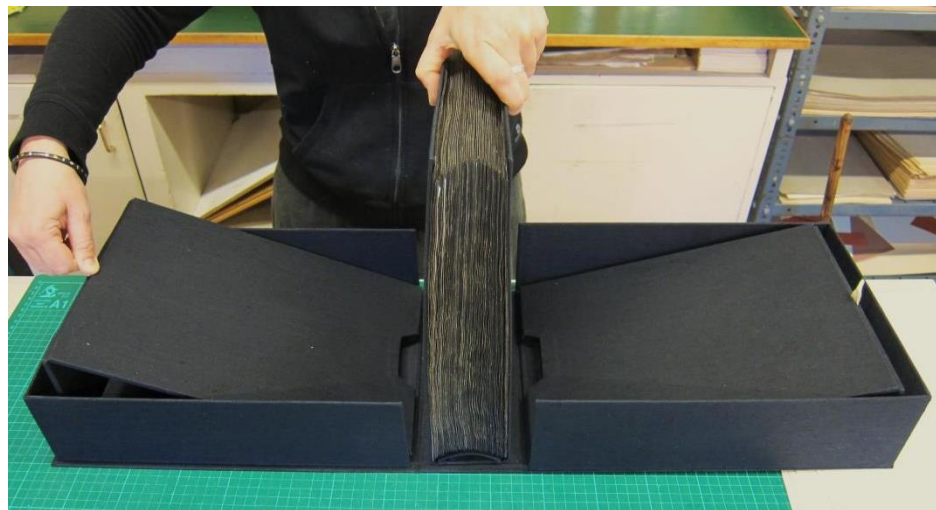


Fig. 5b Self mounting book cradle and long term storage box

The first Inventory of furniture and small objects of a Florentine antiquarian

This album belongs to the The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence and is part of a series of 13 catalogues of objects to sell, paintings, furniture, hold by an antiquarian who was active in Florence between the 1890s and the 1930s.

Inside this homemade catalogues there are often multiple copies and different photographic processes can be found, mainly albumen print and Aristotypes (both gelatin and collodion chloride prints) (fig. 6a, b)



Fig. 6a “Object to sell”



Fig. 6b Multiple copies

The antiquarian was also a skilled photographer. He photographed the objects himself, he numbered the plates, and compiled an inventory. He shot in various formats and left, luckily for us, all his negatives. His first catalogue looks very different from the others as it was probably intended for personal use, as suggested by the presence of drawings, sketches, notation, measures, smeared adhesives, inks, colours (fig. 7a, b).



Fig 7a Album cloth cover



Fig 7b Page 39recto before treatment

This first catalogue consisted of more than 200 prints pasted—sometimes overlappingly—on acidic mechanical pulp cardboard. These were mainly albumen prints, but the album also contained a few DOP silver gelatin prints, collodion and gelatin POP prints, one platinum print and iron gall ink drawings on transparent papers. Many of the photographs were affected by folds, wrinkles, cracks, skinning of the primary supports, and heavy oxidation. Four different types of adhesives were identified, and twelve different inks and pencils had been used to write notes and numbers both on the photographs and on the cardboard supports. An overall cleaning, the removal of the photographs, and deacidification of secondary supports with Calcium nanoparticles needed to be carried out, while a new mounting technique needed to be implemented, as assessed in table 2.

Treatments	Material/Technique
Visual examination, tests, diagnostic	Visual, Stereo Microscopy, UV, false color, spot tests, FTIR, XRF
Dry and gel cleaning	Cotton swabs, Microfiber cloth, Nanorestore gel, Kelcogel, Agarart
Removal from supports	Kelcogel, Teflon spatula
Temporary fixation of soluble inks	Cyclododecane , Cyclomethicone D5
Deacidification of supports	Nanorestore dispersion in Propanol
Cleaning of supports	Agarart, Kelocogel
Cleaning of photographs	Kelcogel, Water/Ethanol
mending of tears and loss compensation	various Washi, Hanji, Tylose, Klucel, Culminal
Hinges or lamination	various Washi and Hanji - Klucel G
Flattening	After gel application, Goretex, Humidification Chamber
New mounting solution	Canson Papier barrière (Klucel G), PET supports (Plextol B500), PE corners on Washi with Tylose on original supports
Binding , rehousing	Work in Progress

Table 2

The variety of deterioration phenomena and the poor physical condition of the photographs mounted on wood pulp boards led to the conclusion that removal from the support after a diagnostic investigation was the best choice.

Dry cleaning and a rigorous workflow planning was necessary before starting to test the solubility of adhesives, the stability of colors, inks, and the resistance of the photographic supports. Hydrogels were selected and tested. AgarArt® (3% in water) was not elastic enough and didn't adhere uniformly to the surfaces. Moreover, it tended to discharge water too rapidly. Nanorestore® Extra Dry was good, but too rigid, while Max Dry showed a too low water content for our purpose. Peggy 6® was very efficient for cleaning and stain reduction, but since it is sold in small size foils, it was not selected for releasing the photographs from their supports, although tests were promising. Gellan gum proved to be cost and time effective. So we chose to separate the photographs from their supports. Under the photographs we found traces of older mountings, handwritten notes and numbers. In one case another photograph was found. The primary supports were often skinned and showed oxidation, depending on the dextrin, casein or gum based adhesive used. Albumen prints were dried very slowly, face down, between Bondina and Gore-tex felt, in order to avoid further cracking of the binder.

The cardboard supports were then deacidified with Calcium hydroxide nanoparticles. A new mounting solution was necessary to guarantee the planarity of the photographs, especially of the albumen prints. So, PET supports were applied through a false margin system when notes on the verso were present, otherwise a 80gr/m², buffered paper was chosen.

PET corners mounted on Japanese paper and then pasted on the supports with methylcellulose, secured the prints back in place (fig. 9a, b).

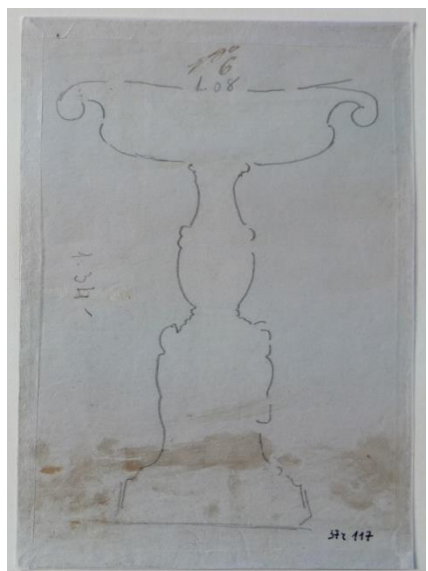


Fig. 9a PET on a verso



Fig. 9b Photographs secured with PET corners

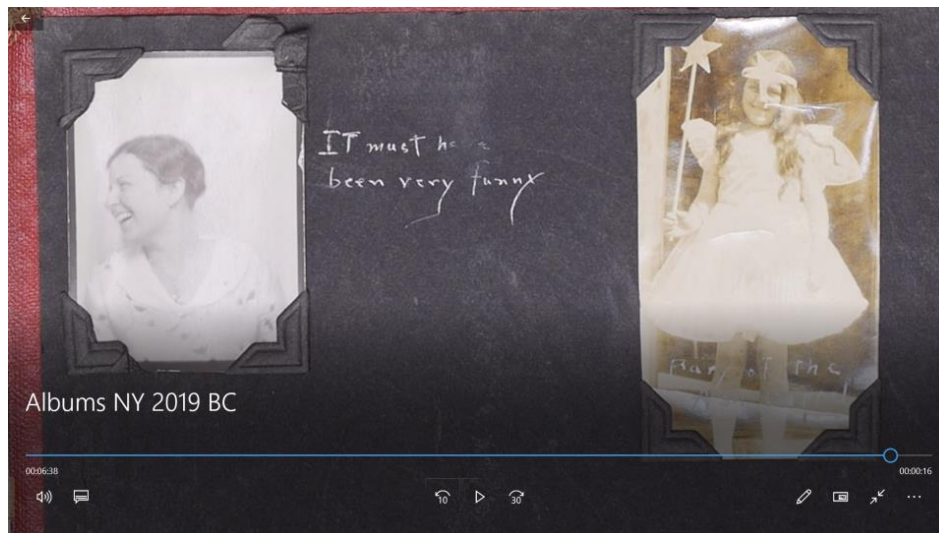
Conclusion

The treatment of the two albums has been challenging but finally rewarding. The decision making process was long and delicate, in constant dialogue with the Institutions involved.

New mounting solutions were required to ensure the safe handling and storage of the albums, in line with the expectations of the Institutional owners and respecting the albums' original forms. While restoring, new narratives could also be learned. The conservation treatment aimed to be respectful of the materiality, and concerned of the emic and etic frames of reference within which photographic albums exist in archives.

Aknowledgements

The author wish to thank Marco Ciatti, Cecilia Frosinini, Letizia Montalbano (OPD - Firenze), Mario Iozzo (National Archeology Museum – Firenze), Stefano Anastasio (BAP Firenze), Gisella Guasti, Alessandro Sidoti (BNCF), Ilaria della Monica, Giovanni Pagliarulo (Villa I Tatti - Firenze), Giulia Fraticelli and Serena Galetti (Indipendent conservators, ex OPD Interns) & Angela Barbetti, Andrea De Polo (Alinari Foundation), Silvia Sellitto (videomaker and lovely friend)



The 7 min. video presented at the 2019 ICOM-CC PMWG & PMG joint meeting in New York, will be available on the YouTube Channel of the *Opificio delle Pietre Dure*.

A selected bibliography is available at request

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Papers presented in *Topics in Photographic Preservation, Volume Eighteen* have not undergone a formal process of peer review.