



Article: Cataloging Is Preservation: An Emerging Consideration in Photograph Conservation Programs

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Cataloging Is Preservation: An Emerging Consideration in Photograph Conservation Programs

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Abstract

In the past, most conservators and preservation specialists involved in the care of historical photograph collections in libraries and archives rarely, if ever, addressed issues related to cataloging and access. But with increasing awareness of the importance of preventive conservation and institutions developing a more comprehensive view of collections care, cataloging is an emerging consideration in photograph conservation programs.

This way of thinking evolved from a preservation survey of photographs at Harvard University and the establishment of a Photograph Conservation Program at Harvard Library's Weissman Preservation Center, both funded by grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Conducted in 2002 by photograph conservator Paul Messier and Weissman Curatorial Associate Melissa Banta using a new methodology, the Harvard survey revealed a strong correlation between condition and intellectual control. It showed photograph collections with some level of description or cataloging were more accessible to researchers and in better condition. Recognizing the significance of this, the Photograph Conservation Program, established in 2005 under the direction of Senior Photograph Conservator Brenda Bernier, offered an innovative approach to photograph preservation by coordinating conservation activities with cataloging and digital imaging.

By integrating conservation treatment with preventive conservation measures and actions that include cataloging and digital imaging, Weissman's Photograph Conservation Program represents a new development in photograph preservation. Over the last four years, the Hermitage Photograph Conservation Initiative has used this model to help establish the first photograph conservation program in Russia at the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, and other institutions are now considering a similar approach. This paper looks at the reasons why cataloging should be considered an important part of photograph preservation and access.

Introduction

Studying preservation in graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh I was very fortunate to have Sally Buchanan as my teacher and mentor. Before coming to Pittsburgh, Sally was head of conservation at Stanford University Libraries and widely respected for her work with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), where she taught professionals in developing countries how to prevent and recover from disasters involving cultural collections.

Early in my program of study, she strongly encouraged me to take some courses on cataloging. When I questioned this, she stressed that “Cataloging *is* preservation.” Sally was very progressive in her thinking. I didn’t realize it at the time, but this concept would have a significant impact on my work and how I now view the practice of preservation and conservation.

Fifteen years ago, I think most conservators and preservation specialists involved in the care of historical photograph collections in libraries and archives rarely, if ever, addressed issues related to cataloging and access. Photographs in institutional collections were a low priority for preservation because they were an inefficient resource, hard to catalog and expensive to store. (Reilly 2010)

Visual information is different from textual information. It takes more time and effort to catalog a photograph than a published book, for instance. Allowing time to handle a photograph properly, record basic information, assign subject headings, and proofread the record, the Prints & Photographs Division of the Library of Congress estimated it takes an hour to produce a minimal-level catalog record that can be included in its main catalog. (Arms 1999) Also, many institutions have found the sheer number of photographs to be overwhelming. When he was at the George Eastman House, I once heard photograph conservator Grant Romer observe, “The fundamental problem of photographs is that there are too many to care for.” Because of these difficulties, many photographs have remained in shoeboxes, moving cartons, filing cabinets, broom closets, and basements – out of sight, out of mind, uncataloged, and uncared for.

But in the last 15 years, advances in digital imaging technology and data management have greatly enabled access to historical photographs. This, in turn, has inspired more scholarly interest in 19th and early 20th century photography and generated a wealth of new research. With this growing awareness and appreciation, along with an increased emphasis on preventive conservation, many institutions are now developing a more comprehensive view of collections care and management. Preservation of historical photograph collections has become a higher priority, and for institutions developing photograph preservation programs, cataloging is becoming an important consideration.

To elaborate on this trend and the notion that cataloging is preservation, I would like to give some background on how it evolved at Harvard and an overview of photograph cataloging, before looking at some of the ways in which cataloging contributes to preservation and should be considered an integral part of preventive conservation.

Photograph Preservation Survey and Program at Harvard

In 2001, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded the Weissman Preservation Center at Harvard Library a grant to assess the preservation needs of Harvard University’s photograph collections. The following year, Boston photograph conservator Paul Messier and Weissman curatorial associate Melissa Banta conducted a preservation survey of more than eight million photographs in over 50 repositories. They used a new methodology developed by Messier in collaboration with collection managers at Harvard, which would later serve as a model for

surveys of large photograph collections held in multiple repositories at the Hermitage Museum, the Library of Congress, Yale University, and the New York Public Library.

In addition to assessing physical condition, storage, and environmental needs, the Harvard survey revealed a strong correlation between preservation and cataloging. It firmly established that photographs made accessible through some type of catalog record or archival finding aid were better managed and in better condition. It also showed that 90 percent of Harvard's repositories rated photographs as very important to their overall mission and a prominent concern was the need for enhanced access and control of photographs through cataloging and digital imaging. Many collection managers expressed frustration over insufficient intellectual control, and because of this, they were often afraid to allow any photographs to go off site for exhibition or treatment. (Weissman Preservation Center 2003)

In 2005, the Weissman Preservation Center established a Photograph Conservation Program under the direction of Senior Photograph Conservator Brenda Bernier. Recognizing the significance of the Harvard survey, the program was designed to integrate conservation treatment with a wide range of preventive conservation measures, including cataloging and digital imaging.

This represented an innovative development in photograph preservation, and in 2010, a four-year project was initiated to establish a photograph conservation program at the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. Also funded by the Mellon Foundation under the administration of the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation and co-directed by Paul Messier, the Hermitage Photograph Conservation Initiative was modeled after the Weissman program. It provided training not only in conservation treatment, education, and scientific research but also cataloging and digital imaging. Now, other institutions are considering this approach.

Conservation treatment and preventive conservation measures are not only intended to stabilize and preserve photographs but to also provide access. Why bother to assess the condition of a photograph, treat it, re-house it, and provide safe storage if you're not going to allow anyone to see it or use it? What's the point? As Patricia Battin, first president of the United States Commission on Preservation and Access, said in 1993, "Access is preservation, and preservation is access" (Battin 1993) – meaning, in this context, that access to photograph collections without preserving them would be disastrous, and preserving photograph collections without providing access to them would be pointless.

What Is Cataloging

Cataloging provides access. It is the process of creating a descriptive record in a prescribed format to represent a photograph or collection of photographs, and then organizing the records under controlled headings. Photographs, in particular, benefit from this type of description because it provides information that is frequently lacking or not readily accessible (Zinkham 2006). The information provided in a catalog record enables you and other researchers to search for and find whatever is relevant to your needs.

A good catalog record provides as much information as possible and attempts to answer the questions who, what, when, where, why, and how. It not only includes descriptive information, but also information related to administrative control and preservation.

But photograph cataloging is different from general cataloging in that it's more challenging and requires additional skills. In describing a book or other publication, a cataloger can transcribe information from various parts of the item, such as the title page or table of contents. Photographs are usually not so self-identifying and it's often necessary to conduct research and analysis of both the image and secondary sources. Photograph cataloging requires well-developed visual literacy skills, good writing skills, knowing how to safely handle fragile items, and an ability to identify photographic processes and forms of deterioration.

Photograph cataloging is not a precise practice, but good cataloging is based on standards. Just as the Photographic Activity Test (PAT) is an international standard test for evaluating photograph storage and display products, there are data content, format, and value standards for cataloging. The use of standards promotes consistency and facilitates the exchange of information between institutions (Zinkham 2006).

A photograph catalog record contains elements of information, such as: the names, context, and roles of individuals, corporations, or government agencies responsible for the material being described; title and date of creation; physical description; access points for subject matter, format, and photographic process; and terms governing use and reproduction. A data content standard provides formal rules for how and where to enter information in the elements. The most widely used content standards for cataloging photographs include:

- *Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (Graphics)* (DCRMG). Washington, DC: Cataloging Distribution Service, Library of Congress, 2013.
- *Describing Archives: A Content Standard, Second Edition* (DACS). Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013.
- *Rules for Archival Description* (RAD). Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1990- .
- *Cataloging Cultural Objects: A Guide to Describing Cultural Works and Their Images* (CCO). Chicago: American Library Association, 2006.

Also, while it is not an officially recognized standard, a number of institutions in Europe use *SEPIADES: Recommendations for Cataloguing Photographic Collections*. Amsterdam: European Commission on Preservation and Access, 2003.

A data format standard specifies the elements in which the content or information is organized and displayed. It allows the content of a catalog record to appear in a consistent and predictable order. Common data format standards include:

- MARC 21 Format for Bibliographic Data. Maintained by the Library of Congress.

- Encoded Archival Description (EAD). Maintained by the Society of American Archivists.
- Dublin Core Metadata Element Set (ISO Standard 15836-2009). Maintained by the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative.
- Visual Resources Association (VRA) Core. Maintained by the VRA Core Oversight Committee.

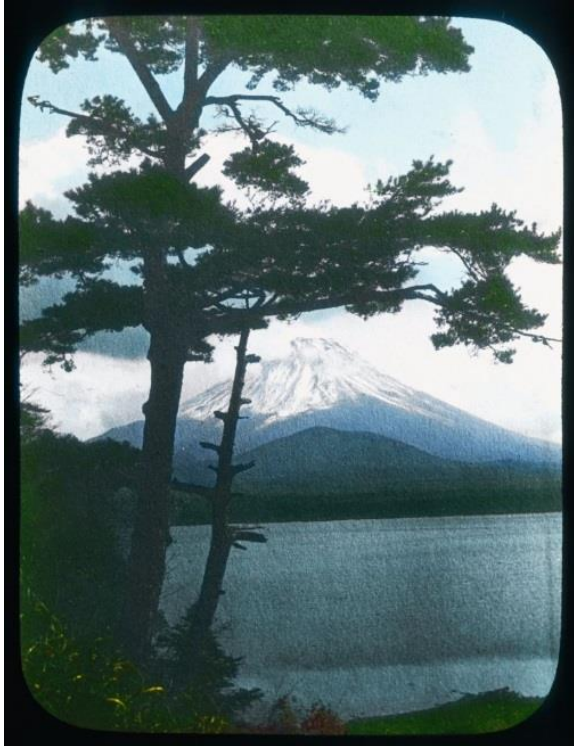


Fig. 1. T. Enami (Japanese, 1859-1929), *Mt. Fuji*, ca. 1894, hand-colored lantern slide, 10.2 x 8.3 cm, Etz-Trudell Collection of Hand-Colored Lantern Slides. Courtesy of Harvard Fine Arts Library, Special Collections.

The type of institution, its needs, and the digital asset management system it uses will determine the choice of data format and content standards, with different types of institutions tending to favor different sets of these standards. In the United States, special collections libraries often use DCRM(G) with MARC 21, archives use DACS with EAD, and many museums use CCO with VRA Core. Unlike general cataloging in libraries and archives, there has not been a long tradition of cooperation between institutions in developing standards for cataloging photographs, so approaches have been diverse. Consequently, no one approach works best for every institution.

A data value standard is an established list of preferred terms or names that provide the headings, or access points, used for organizing and searching records in a catalog. These controlled headings direct the researcher to various features of a photograph. For example, providing access points for Mount Fuji, the lantern slide format, and the name of the Japanese photographer T. Enami would enable a researcher to look for and retrieve all catalog records for lantern slide images of Mt. Fuji by Enami (fig. 1).

Data value standards include controlled vocabularies that list terms for topical subjects and photographic processes and formats, such as the Library of Congress's *Thesaurus of Graphic Materials* (TGM) and the Getty's *Art and Architecture Thesaurus* (AAT). They also include name authority files, such as the *Library of Congress Name Authority File*, with authority records that ensure consistency in the spelling and form of personal, corporate, and geographic names. Most institutions in the United States use data value standards created by either the Library of Congress or the Getty Research Institute.

Cataloging in Preventive Conservation

According to a resolution adopted by the International Council of Museums Conservation Committee in 2008, preventive conservation includes “all measures and actions aimed at avoiding and minimizing future deterioration or loss.” (ICOM 2008)

Standards-based cataloging must certainly fall under this definition. It is part of good collection management and is necessary to the success of any preventive conservation initiative. It enables an institution to have intellectual and administrative control of its collections and helps to establish priorities. It also enables other preventive conservation actions.

In my role as photograph cataloger, I’m often the first person to fully examine a collection. I usually begin by assessing the content and arrangement, and during this process, I’m able to perform many basic preservation related activities. These include removing paper clips and staples, re-housing into appropriate enclosures, and pulling damaged materials for conservation treatment.

If you do not catalog your photograph collections, then you always have to browse through them to find what a user needs. This is time consuming and results in excessive and frequently inappropriate handling, which is the most common cause of damage. Cataloging, especially when done in conjunction with digital imaging, greatly minimizes the need to handle photographs. Also, collection managers are much more likely to address storage and environmental needs if photographs have been cataloged. For example, with little or no cataloging, placing photographs in cold storage is typically not feasible.

Without cataloging, it is difficult to keep track of collections, making it easy to steal or misfile photographs. In recent years, several books have been written about high profile thefts involving rare maps worth millions of dollars. Michael Blanding noted in his 2014 book *The Map Thief* that most of the libraries the thief, E. Forbes Smiley, “dealt with [had not] comprehensively cataloged their map holdings [and therefore, could not] know what they were missing.” Given the growing international market for collecting photographs, institutions that do not catalog their collections will make tempting targets for someone like E. Forbes Smiley.

Comprehensive cataloging also allows an institution to more accurately assess the informational and fiscal value of its collections. In 1943, a Harvard University faculty member donated an original albumen print to the Fine Arts Library that showed the Ka’ba in Mecca (fig. 2). A minimal-level entry was added to the shelflist and the print became part of the Fine Art Library’s study collection, along with nearly 400,000 other photographs. Seventy years later, a research request led a longtime staff member with a good memory to find this photograph. In turn, efforts to provide a full-level catalog record and access to a digital copy of the image led to the discovery that it was one the earliest known photographs of Mecca, taken by the pioneering Arab photographer Muhammad Sadiq Bey. In 1998, a set of 18 of his photographs, including this view of the Ka’ba, were sold at Sotheby’s in London for 2.3 million dollars.

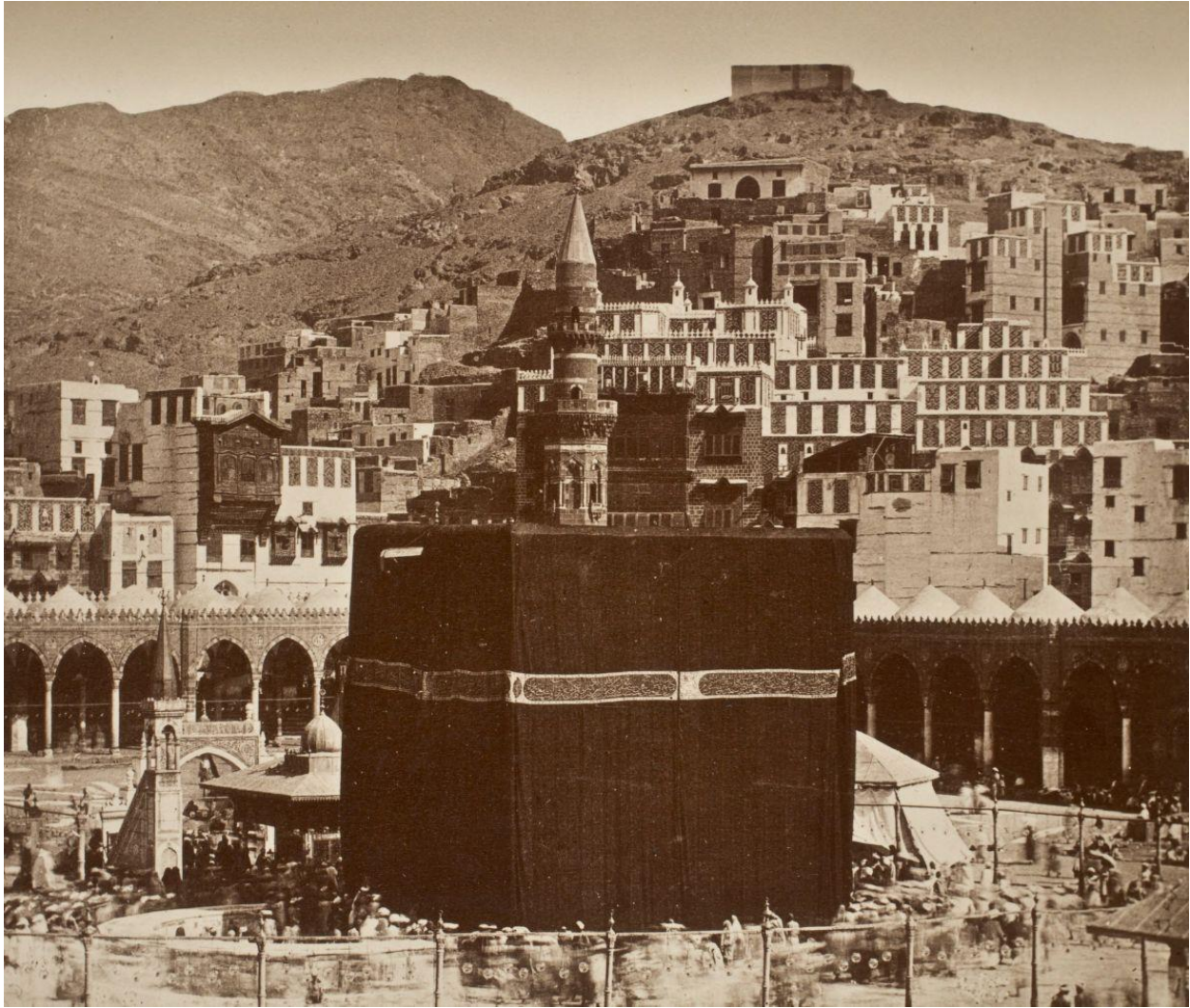


Fig. 2. Muhammad Sadiq Bey (Egyptian, 1822 or 1823-1902 or 1903), [*Mecca. View of the Ka'ba and the Sacred Enclosure (hijr) and its surroundings*], 1880 or 1881, albumen print on cardboard mount, print 18 x 21 cm. Courtesy of Harvard Fine Arts Library, Special Collections.

Cataloging is not only important to the preservation of photographs as objects. It also preserves information. In every institution, staff members come and go, and relying on someone's memory rather than a written record inevitably results in loss of information. (Zinkham 2006) In the consulting work I do, I have often encountered this problem, and it is frustrating to learn that the person who knew the most about a photograph collection is no longer around.

We need information about photographs, not just to find them, but also to understand their content, context, and function. Scholars use information from a catalog record to formulate their research questions and to collect the kinds of evidence they need to explore and answer those questions. If I wanted to research Yokohama *shashin* – Japanese tourist photography of the Meiji era – I would find it much harder without catalog records for the photographs, books, and other materials that would be relevant to my needs.

Cataloging can open doors to all kinds of research and make learning more inclusive. Because of this, people care about the photographs and other materials that are cataloged in libraries, archives, and museums. And because they care, the photographs and other materials are preserved and made accessible.

Conclusion

There is no question that cataloging is expensive. It is time consuming and labor intensive. But without it, working with photographs would involve much more costly activities. Just like conservation treatment and environmental control, cataloging is about asset management, cost efficiency, and risk prevention.

In the future, digital cameras will provide much of the essential data for cataloging. Information such as when and where a photograph was taken is already being recorded, and apps like SpeakingPhoto allow photographers to record information about the photographs they take. Eventually, cameras will have some built-in means of identifying who is looking through the viewfinder to take a picture. Technology is advancing so rapidly I now believe image recognition software will radically change the way we search for pictures. In fact, a new Google research project is under way to automatically caption complex images. All of this will likely reduce the cost of cataloging. But still, there are millions of photographs around the world that remain hidden and inaccessible – that need to be cataloged.

When I became part of Harvard Library's Photograph Conservation Program, Jan Merrill-Oldham, the founder and head of Weissman Preservation Center, welcomed me and invited me into her office for a talk. In the course of our conversation, I discovered she and Sally Buchanan were friends and had known each other for many years. Jan also believed that cataloging is preservation, and she was very hopeful that Weissman's program would serve as a model for other institutions to follow.

I now feel compelled to carry the word of Sally Buchanan and Jan Merrill-Oldham. To say that cataloging is as much a part of preservation as conservation treatment, re-housing, storage, and other preventive conservation measures. And I encourage anyone involved in the care of photographs to think in this way – that "Cataloging *is* preservation."

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