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Author(s): Janka Krizanova and Nora W. Kennedy  
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# Characterization of Photographic Papers in the Work of Diane Arbus

Janka Krizanova and Nora W. Kennedy

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*Presented at the PMG session of the 2015 AIC Annual Meeting in Miami, Florida*

Diane Arbus (1923–1971) is a renowned American photographer who was active from the 1940s until her death. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1963, with a renewal in 1966. Her first and only major exhibition during her lifetime was *New Documents*, curated by John Szarkowski at The Museum of Modern Art in 1967 and featuring also the work of Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander. The Museum of Modern Art presented a posthumous monographic exhibition of her work in 1972, which travelled to numerous venues through 1975. Another major retrospective, *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, was presented in 2003, organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art with the artist's estate and presented at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2005. In December 2007, The Met acquired by gift and promised gift the Diane Arbus Archive which includes the artist's photographs, work prints, all of her negatives, contact sheets, personal library, photographic equipment, and ephemera.

The goal of this research is the characterization of the photographic papers used by Arbus. Previous projects toward the characterization of photographic papers in general include the recently published *Object: Photo* at the Museum of Modern Art as well as the extensive work undertaken by Juan-Juan Chen, Lene Grinde, Art Kaplan, Paul Messier, Patrick Ravines, Jennifer McGlinchey Sexton, Dusan Stulik, Ralph Wiegandt, and many others. These projects serve both as inspiration and as valuable resources for research at The Met. The Arbus study is unique in its focus on the entire body of work of a single artist.

The project commenced with an overview survey of all the photographs in the Diane Arbus Archive as well as all photographs by Arbus in the collection of The Met's Department of Photographs. The overview survey resulted in the selection of twenty-six photographs representing a range of physical characteristics in terms of their outer dimensions, thickness, back printing, surface texture, surface gloss, and image color as determined with the naked eye. Although this selection illustrates the variety of Arbus papers in the Met's collection, most of the papers have smoother surfaces. Thus, despite the fact that the differences among these twenty-six prints are visible with the naked eye, they are quite subtle and warrant scientific characterization. The addition to this study of known photographic paper samples to compare with the Arbus photographs facilitated testing of the methodologies used and provided a point for comparison.

The Archive includes fifty-six empty photographic paper boxes from manufacturers Agfa-Gevaert, Du Pont/Defender and Kodak, all of which were cataloged during the survey portion of the project. These paper boxes do not necessarily represent photographic papers Arbus used and may instead originate from Allan Arbus or assistants in earlier years. The boxes came to The Met after being used by Diane Arbus to store prints or negatives. The key, however, is to determine whether *any* of the papers represented by the boxes can be associated with Arbus prints in the Archive and collection, thereby aiding in identification of these papers. The *Diane Arbus:*

*Revelations* exhibition catalog states that after 1963 the majority of final prints Arbus made were on Agfa Portruga Rapid paper.

To expand our understanding of manufacturers' codes and terminology, a number of photographic paper catalogs were purchased or borrowed and added to the study. Historic papers from the relevant time period were also sought out and purchased online to be included in the technical characterization for comparison with Arbus' prints. Additional historic paper samples were generously donated by contemporary artist, Alison Rossiter, from her extensive collection. From this large selection of papers, five were identified as corresponding most closely with Arbus' papers based on the date of expiration and the specific paper type. Pure white and pure black samples were created in the darkroom by processing either unexposed or fully exposed sheets respectively.

The twenty-six Arbus photographs and the five test samples comprise the thirty-one papers used in the technical study to date. The characterization methods for this study include: sheet dimension and paper thickness measurements, documentation of back printing and surface topography, X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF) analysis, color measurements, gloss measurements, and paper fiber analysis. It is hoped that characterization will aid comparison of the samples and Arbus' prints and provide us with some matches. To date, data has been collected and recorded on paper dimensions and thickness, and back printing and surface topography have been documented. The characterization completed thus far has already broadened our understanding of Arbus' photographic papers, but work is ongoing. In addition to a more automated approach to the classification of surface textures, XRF analysis and color measurements will be carried out on the twenty-six prints and five paper samples. Paper fiber analysis will be carried out on a selection of prints and samples. The final results will be reported, and protocols for all characterization methods will be made accessible to scholars and the public. The final report also will include an evaluation of the efficacy of each characterization method used in this study. For example, surface characteristics vary considerably depending on the specific drying method used to create samples. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be helpful to other institutions and colleagues embarking on similar projects.

**Janka Krizanova**

Research Scholar in Photograph Conservation  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

**Nora W. Kennedy**

Sherman Fairchild Conservator in Charge, Department of Photograph Conservation, The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Adjunct Faculty, New York University Institute of Fine Arts Conservation Center

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