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Facts and Fictions of Pink Prints

Jennifer McGlinchey Sexton and Paul Messier

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Distinctive pink discoloration of image silver is an increasingly common form of deterioration of silver gelatin prints made from circa 1960 to circa 1980. More than 50 cases have been brought to the attention of Paul Messier LLC conservators since 2003. Seemingly linked to the oxidation of image silver, pink staining is often accompanied by bleaching of highlights. This staining can be drastic and sudden, posing significant challenges for collections and conservators. Why do these prints turn pink, instead of the more typical signs of deterioration like silver mirroring, yellowing and fading? The root causes are unknown, but most agree that typical environmental catalysts (exposure to light, water vapor, and pollutants) are a factor. Further speculation centers on additional factors that may impact the stability of these prints including processing variables and changing manufacturing practices. The effective and complete clearing of hypo (sodium thiosulfate based fixer) dominates much of the 19th and 20th century literature on print permanence, but concerns about over washing are fairly new. Review of manufacturer recommended washing recommendations, particularly the use of hypo eliminators and washing aids, shows a circumstantial relationship between “aggressive” washing recommendations and the time period associated with pink prints. This review has specific emphasis on recommendations provided directly to photographers, not texts related to preservation or analysis of photographs. These decades are also notable for historically high silver prices and environmental protection imperatives. Using X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy, a survey of historic samples of photographic papers made from 1950 to 1990 is being conducted to determine if silver and heavy metal content vary during this period. This work involves unfixed and fixed samples in order to determine inorganic materials present before and after processing. Combined, historical context and data on inorganic content will provide steps toward understanding the facts and fictions of pink prints. This work will provide a platform for future research, including possible screening for undamaged but vulnerable prints, environmental recommendations, and treatment protocols.

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