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Materials, Technology, Reproductions and Defining the Vintage Print

Clara von Waldthausen

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Introduction

I would like to discuss the term vintage print. The reason for this is that as a photograph conservator working for the various museums in the Netherlands in the past 15 years, I have seen many variations in how the color photograph is dealt with in comparison to how black and white photographs are collected, exhibited and looked upon. Instead of accepting deterioration to the chromogenic photograph, if faded or mechanically damaged, it may be reproduced, -- usually with the aid of the artist and often replacing the first or if you will, “vintage” photograph. Since this is not usual with black and white photography, it has led me to question the notion of the vintage print as I understood it. And in 2015 while residing as scholar at the Getty Museum, I started research into this topic. In doing so I was somewhat surprised that not a single academic paper has been dedicated to defining the “vintage photograph”.

Origin

Sources in which the term vintage is used are generally limited to collecting photography, although in modern preservation literature (Baas and Lavedrine and others) the term can also be found. This may be due to the fact that it has become a recognized term with an implied definition. The term seems to be coined in the 1970s, a time when photography’s value in the marketplace became recognized.

The idea of the original in photography was established well before the 1960’s and 70’s as can be seen in a letter from Stieglitz to James Thrall Soby, curator of the MOMA, dating to January 19, 1941. Stieglitz writes in response to being asked to send a print that may later have to be reprinted due to possible damage:

I could not possibly send you a print of mine as I have spent my life in fighting for the recognition of photography as an additional medium of expression ranking with the other media of expression such as painting, etching, lithography drawing etc. You seem to assume that a photograph is one of a dozen or a hundred or maybe a million prints, all prints from one negative necessarily being alike and so replaceable.

…If what I feel about life is not in a print of mine, then I might just as well say that any machine can take a picture, and turn out a print mechanically. You might get wonderful pictures as result, but they would not contain that something called love or passion, both of which are the essentials needed to bring forth a living print- or any other living creative expression. A print lacking these elements is simply an illustration.
He furthermore distinguishes in his letter between reproductions and originals, saying that originals have spirit that reproductions do not.

The vintage print is a term that evidently is tied to numbers, time but also to the photograph as material object. In Stieglitz’s letter to the MOMA he argues that the mounting and format prescribed by the MOMA is disrespectful to the print, illustrating that to him the photograph is a material object.

Douglas Crimp, critical theorist suggests that in the 1970’s photography had taken up residence in the museum and gallery on par with the visual arts’ traditional mediums and according to the same art-historical tenants:

[...] New principles of photographic connoisseurship were devised; the canon of master photographers was vastly expanded; prices on the photography market skyrocketed. Counterposed against this reevaluation were two coincident developments: a materialist history of photography and dissident photographic practices (Crimp 1995:2).

And Liz Wells writes that:

[the] New American art (Cindy Sherman / Barbara Kruger), community arts, performing art and ‘happenings’ signified a broadening of art practices and this widening of the definition of what constituted art, contributed to photography breaching the art gallery in the late 60s and 70s.

In 1979 the Association of International Photography Art Dealers (AIPAD) was founded.

In an article, “Going, Going Up”, that appeared in Camera Arts in 1980, Howard Chapnick, President of the Black Star Agency and a commentator on the business of photography, alludes to the rising prices of photographs and notes that “Dealers are providing continuity in the market.” Although photographs were first auctioned at Swann’s in Feb 14, 1952, auction houses Christie’s, Sotheby’s and Phillips for the first time, held numerous auctions in the 1970’s. Christie’s, Sotheby’s & Phillips sold 1.75 million US $ in the spring of 1980 (vs. 147.9 million in paintings).

**Meaning**
The term vintage or original infers to there being more than one, and this is intrinsic to the nature of photography where mechanical reproduction is possible due to the negative.

According to Lee Witkin who established Witkin Gallery in 1969 in NYC, - one of the first galleries for fine-art photography - the idea of limiting the number of prints made from a negative became standardized with the adoption of photography into the auction and gallery world of the 70s.

[...] most photographers up to now have not set specific limits on the numbers they will eventually make from a negative. However – due to the work required and the lack of a big enough market to justify great numbers of prints, the output up until now has been very limited.
He continues by saying, The price is not solely related to scarcity [...] Nor will abundant supply necessarily limit demand. Ansel Adams has made perhaps nine hundred prints of his great image Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico [...] but it still keeps bringing the highest price of any of his many images [...].

Multiple prints of a negative were made prior to the 70’s and editions of portfolios such by Edward Weston were printed but this was not a standardized or defined practice. Usually printing was done when ordered. According to Witkin, Weston’s Pepper N0. 30, perhaps Weston’s most famous and valuable print, was printed by Weston only 12 times.

Prior to 1970, when magazine articles and books on photography use the term vintage print they use the term in a historic sense to talk about the 19th century, just as the term is used to talk about vintage automobiles. Alfred Stieglitz used the term exhibition print in 1899 when he was describing prints that were fit to be shown.

This gradual transition in the term “vintage” can be seen in the publications by Susan Sontag writer, filmmaker and teacher, John Szarkowski director of photography at the MOMA from 1962 to 199, Lee Witkins and others.

Sontag defines the original print as: prints made from the original negative at the time (that is, at the same moment in the technological evolution of photography) that the picture was taken – and subsequent generations of the same photograph. [...] the originals, which one is likely to see only in a museum or a gallery[...]

Lee Witkins defines the vintage print in 1979 as: a print made a number of years ago, at around the same time as its negative. This in contrast to a “modern print” which is made more recently, much later than its negative (64).

Laura Noble, author of The Art of Collecting Photography, published in 2006, defines the variations in prints further. She makes 4 distinctions

- **Vintage**: printed at the time the image was taken. There is some debate over the accepted time period during which the images must be taken and printed for it be vintage, but vintage prints are commonly printed within 1 year of the photograph being taken, although “contemporary vintage” prints are often categorised as such if they are made within 5 years.

- **Period print**: produced 5-10 years after the image was taken. This term, period print, is also used in conservation literature (Lavedrine, Baas).

- **Modern print**: one that has been recently made from an earlier negative.
• **Posthumous:** A print produced from the original negatives. The guardian has sole authority on the number of prints produced. Posthumous prints have a lesser value but control over the numbers produced ensures their relative value.

The editioning of prints started in the 1970s; most prints preceding 1980 are not editioned.

**Case Study: Ed van der Elsken**

I would like to now take some time and illustrate some of these types of prints using four images made from the same negative by Ed van der Elsken, one of Holland’s most important photographers who photographed from the 1950s to 1990.

![Fig. 1. Hong Kong, printed in 1962, sized 18 x 24 cm (7 x 9.5”).](image1)

![Fig. 2. Hong Kong as printed in the 1966 book Sweet Life.](image2)

![Fig. 3. Hong Kong printed in 1979, sized 30.5 x 40.5 cm (12 x 16”).](image3)

![Fig. 4. Exhibition print made for the Stedelijk Museum in 1987, sized 39.0 x 59.0 cm (15.5 x 23.25”).](image4)

Van der Elsken went to art school (the predecessor of the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam) to study sculpture. Encounters with pictures from the war and during the war inspired him to become a photographer. He moved to Paris and was employed in the darkrooms of the Magnum photography agency printing for Henri Cartier Bresson, Robert Capa and others. He went on to travel the world and produced more than 14 books and 20 films assisted by Anneke Hilhorst, his third wife who preserves his archives. Hilhorst and the curators and conservators of the Stedelijk were kind enough to allow me to review the following prints.
In 1966 van der Elsken published this image (fig. 2) in his book *Sweet Life*. Just four years earlier this same negative was printed with a much higher contrast and thick black borders on only the left and right edges (fig. 1).

In 1979 Ed van der Elsken revisited his *Hong Kong* harbour negative once more (fig. 3). The once dark borders make way for white margins, the signature and title are printed on the recto instead of the verso, the print is much larger and although printed on fiber-based paper, van der Elsken chose a completely matte paper surface.

A fourth example is this print was made for the Stedelijk Museum in 1987 as an exhibition print (fig. 4). Now part of the museum’s collection, the photograph was printed 3 years before van der Elsken passed away and 27 years after he took the picture during his time in Hong Kong. It is even larger than the 1979 printing, printed on a more pearl or satin paper and is adhered overall to a secondary support.

Comparison of paper surfaces highlights the differences in surface gloss, retouching or masking decisions (figs. 5-7), indicating that much work went into printing.

Edward Weston believed that “The trademark of photography lies in the precision of definition, the fine detail that can be recorded, in the continuity of tonal gradings, and in the qualities of the surface of the paper used for the print.”

Damage, paper gloss and texture, the mounting and way that it is mounting and even the physical attributes of the paper such as undulation, contribute to the photograph as material and unique object.

**Questionnaire to Photo-Historians**

The current definition of “vintage print” remains essentially unchanged, as was learned after reading the results of questions posed to curators, gallerists and art historians in the Netherlands.
on the definition of a vintage print in black and white photography. There still seems to be a
discussion of about how long after the negative was made can the term **vintage print** still be
used. As the names of the museums are not central to this research and the survey still on-going
only the answers provided will be discussed and not specific institutions.

Questions posed to photo-historians in the Netherlands:

- How important is the material that the black and white photograph is printed on and
  finished with? (Type of photographic process, photo paper, gloss, texture, framing, etc).

- How important is the material that the color photograph is printed on and finished with?
  (Type of photographic process, photo paper, gloss, texture, framing, etc).

- In your opinion, is this definition also applicable to analog color (chromogenic)
  photography in art collections from the 70s and 80s? If not, how does it differ when it
  comes to chromogenic photographs?

- Can we speak of a vintage print if it is a reprinted photograph (reprinted by the artist and
  replacing the photograph that is faded) made in the same process or in a different process
  (chromogenic or ink jet, for example)?

- In your opinion, how does the fading (color shift to magenta or green) of chromogenic
  photographs of the 70s and 80s in art collections affect their meaning and value
  (aesthetic, historic, financial, etc.)?

- Are faded chromogenic photographs in fine art collections exhibitable?

One institute of Contemporary Art mentioned that she could not answer the questions regarding
vintage as her institution has no vintage prints.

Interestingly the definition of the vintage print in color photography is not as straightforward.
Most answers stated that the same definition for vintage print applies to color photography and
that a faded print despite the fact that it is faded, is the truest representation of how the
photographer thought about that print at the time that he made it. Most agreed that new prints,
when made, should be called something other than vintage even if the photographer himself
printed it. Terms such as **reprint reproduction** or **copy** were mentioned.

Most felt that the fading does not influence the meaning but that it influences the value of the
print. This all generally overlaps with what is written about the vintage print in black and white
photography, however when asked if faded prints are exhibitable in a fine art setting, the answers
were less straightforward.

Two quotes give the general trend of the answers:

   “Under certain conditions, and with the right context, certainly, yes.”
“If it is an exhibition that has as goal to show the greatest works of somebody’s career, then it may be more interesting to reprint the images to show them in the best light.”

Artist Interview: Stephen Shore

Stephen Shore is a self-taught photographer who is known for using color in a time when color photography in the fine arts was unconventional. His color photographs were among the first to enter fine art collections in the 1970s. Shore is most well-known for his cross-country trips, making "on the road" photographs of American and Canadian landscapes. Shore has been the director of the photography department at Bard College since 1982.

This print (fig. 8) is in the collection of the Stedelijk museum Amsterdam. The other two prints (figs. 9 and 10) are taken from Phillips auction website. They may not be entirely representative of the photograph but they are sufficiently different from each other, and this print. Also, the auction house also probably aims to provide digital images that represent the actual photograph as accurately as possible the images can be used to show the differences in Shore’s interpretation of the same negative.

“A dealer, who makes a secondary market in my vintage prints, once told me that ‘vintage prints are the truest representation of artist’s intention at the time the picture was
made’. That might be true of a black & white print, but how can one possibly think that a faded color print is in any way an indication of the photographer's intention?

There is no way that a faded print represents my original intention. This same dealer charges more for a print that doesn’t show signs of fading than he does for a faded print. In other words, the less the patina, the more he values it. He even approached me recently asking me to make a reprint of a faded print he bought at auction. (I, of course, said no). Likewise, at auction, my faded prints sell for much less than pristine prints. The highest auction price for my 1970s work was paid for a contemporary print, not a vintage print. The market is placing greater value on lack of fading.”

I always chose to make chromogenic prints instead of dye transfers, because I don’t like the way the dye sits on the surface of a dye transfer print. [Interestingly Shore has recently been known to print in inkjet.]

I guess I just don’t really care if a print demonstrates my original intentions. When Fuji issues its Krystal Archive paper, which is 5 times as stable as previous papers, I want to take advantage of it. When Durst invents the Lamda, which makes digital Chromogenic prints possible, and allows for finer color and contrast control than ever before possible, I want to use it. Whether the result shows my original intentions is not something I think

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 9. Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21. 1975. Color coupler print, printed later. 43.5 x 54.6 cm (17 1/8 x 21 1/2 in). Signed, titled, dated and numbered 4/8 in ink on the verso. Image courtesy of Phillips
much about. And I’m not sure most artists would care. It may be more of a concern of dealers, curators, and conservators.

I basically don’t reprint. I have on occasion made exceptions. I’ve made reprints for MoMA and SFMoMA at the time that they both made major acquisitions of my work. I’ve done it for some close friends and relatives. That’s about it.”

Fig. 10. Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, CA. 1975. Color coupler print. 50.2 x 60.3 cm (19 3/4 x 23 3/4 in). Signed, titled, dated and numbered 1/8 in ink the verso. Image courtesy of Phillips.

These excerpts from written communication with Shore illustrates quite nicely that the artist doesn’t always have the same intentions as those that are confronting with preserving the artist’s work in the time that it was made. I have talked and will talk more with Dutch artist photographers such as Rinkeke Dijkstra, who is currently reprinting her early work using her negatives that she scanned and reworked.

This project is on-going and will involve the following components: interviews with artists, galleries, printers, frames, and art/photo historians; evaluating the interviews; defining criteria for making reproductions; comparing artist’s intentions with what they are actually doing in practice.
References


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Topics in Photographic Preservation, Volume Seventeen (2017) 98