

Photographs vary greatly in appearance and format, from the earliest daguerreotypes to glass, film and paper-based materials, and today, digitally printed photographs. Follow the guidelines below to help preserve your photographic materials in hard copy formats.

Handling

Photographic surfaces are particularly susceptible to damage from handling – oils and dirt from hands can etch surfaces permanently.

- Always handle photographs with clean, dry hands and on clean surfaces.
- Try to avoid touching the surface of a print or negative; always hold them by the edges.
- Nitrile or latex gloves provide better protection for a photograph than cotton gloves, which allow skin oils to seep through to the surface.
- When carrying photographic material, use a support such as a box or sleeve for extra protection.
- Extreme care should be taken when handling glass plates, as these become even more fragile over time.
- Do not attempt to dismantle cases that hold photographic images, such as daguerreotypes or ambrotypes. This can cause irreparable damage.

Labelling

Avoid writing on the surface of the photograph. If you must label it, use a soft lead pencil like HB or 2B, or a black 'chinagraph' pencil (made for writing on porcelain) on the back of the photograph. Write along the edges, rather than in the centre of the print. Place the photograph on a clean hard surface, and press lightly to avoid indenting the surface.

Storing

Preventative measures are the best and often the only way we can preserve our valuable photographs. Ideal conditions are difficult to achieve in the home environment, but minimal exposure to light, dust, heat and damp will help preserve your images.

- Damp conditions cause mould growth. Avoid using sheds, garages, roof spaces, basements and similar damp areas for storage.
- Excessive dryness can cause photographic materials to become brittle and susceptible to physical damage and cracking. For this reason, avoid storing photographs against external walls or windows, or above fireplaces or heaters.
- It is prudent to store photographs in rooms towards the centre of the house, where the temperature and humidity tends to be stable throughout the day.

Materials for storing photographs

When selecting storage materials, use acid-free materials with a neutral pH. A variety of boxes, albums and storage sleeves are available from conservation suppliers, made from either acid-free cardboard and papers or from inert plastic materials such as polypropylene, polyethylene and polyester.

- Plastic sleeves are a good way to store photographs because the photograph can be viewed yet protected during handling.
- Choose albums where photographs can slip into pockets, or albums that use archival photo corners to hold photographs in place.
- Avoid using adhesives on photographs. Even stable adhesives can cause changes to the surface of the image.
- Carefully remove any metal paperclips or pins to avoid rust stains and surface damage. Plastic paperclips are less damaging than metal ones, but may crease surfaces or cause 'ferrotyping' (where the surface becomes shiny).
- Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastics should be avoided, as should self-stick plastic-covered 'magnetic' albums. These materials can cause staining and photographs may stick to the plastic surface, causing irreparable damage.
- Similarly, do not laminate precious or valuable photographs, as this process irreversibly embeds the photograph in plastic and adhesive.

Mounting and framing

Use only good-quality materials for mounting and specify to the framer that you would like 'museum quality', 'conservation style' or 100 per cent, pH-neutral rag board. Ask that the front window mount and the separate backboard be joined with cloth tape. For preservation mounting choose photo corners or the traditional method of hinging works with Japanese tissue and wheat starch paste. Dry mounting and the use of heat set tissue is not a preservation mounting technique and should be avoided.

When framing a valuable photograph, always use a window mount or a spacer between the photograph and the glazing. This will prevent the surface of the photograph from touching the glass and becoming stuck to it.

When displaying framed photographs on walls, do not allow direct or excessive sunlight to hit the photograph. Consider displaying copy prints instead, so that you can keep the original safe in storage. Framed items should not be hung on exterior walls, as they tend to get damp, or above fireplaces, where it can be excessively dry and dirty.

Treating and repairing

It is best not to attempt to repair photographs yourself. Photographic surfaces vary enormously and the wrong choice of cleaning solution, adhesive or repair tissue can permanently damage the emulsion layer. Pressure-sensitive or self-adhesive tapes and glues are often found on old photographs and may have caused staining and irreversible damage. Consult a trained conservator for advice.

Further information

Visit the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials website for more information about commissioning a conservator.

For advice, please get in touch with our Ask a librarian service at www.slv.vic.gov.au/visit/ask-librarian.

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