Archiving, conserving and interpreting photographs

Kylie Rees  B App Sc (Information Studies), AALIA.

SUMMARY: This paper discusses various issues associated with photographs. The physical aspects of photographs and the implications in terms of storage and archival treatment are outlined. Digital images and the various programs and research currently being undertaken to resolve the long-term storage and usefulness of such images are discussed. The intellectual issues involved with photographs such as basic techniques for the identification of images, locations of existing collections and an outline of recent changes to copyright rules (due to the Free Trade Agreement) and a guide to the moral rights for photographers are also included.

1. INTRODUCTION
It should be noted that today I will be talking about 4 basic areas related to photographs: care, identification, collections and copyright. I would like to point out, due to time constraints, that I can only briefly touch on these subjects and that each topic could take up an entire day of discussion on their own. My intent today is to give you a brief overview, with pointers to show you where to go next.

2. TYPES OF PHOTOGRAPHIC MEDIA
Photography was first developed in 1839. The different types of photographic media (and the approximate dates of use are as follows:

- Daguerreotype: 1839–c1860
- Ambrotypes: 1851–c1880s
- Tintype, ferrotype, melainotype: 1854–c1930s
- Opaltypes: c1890s
- Salted paper prints: mainly used 1860–c1890
- Platinotypes: 1880–c1930
- Cyanotypes: used c1885–c1910
- Albumen printing-out papers: 1850–c1890
- Collodion printing-out papers: 1880–c1910
- Gelatine developing-out papers: 1880–present

The Australian Museums & Galleries Online website hosts an on-line version of reCollections - a guide to looking after different types of heritage collections. Descriptions of each type of photographic media are given as well as the best means of conserving them.

3. CARE
Regardless of the method by which photographs were taken and manufactured there are some common techniques that apply to all of them in regards to their care. The following steps are suitable for most image collections. Damaged and delicate items should always be referred to a photographic curator for specialist treatment.

3.1. Maintain a clean working environment
Ensure that the work area is large enough to lay the photographs out flat. Make sure the surface is free of dirt and moisture. Do not handle any photographic material with bare hands. Wear either cotton or latex gloves. This ensures that the oils and fats present on your skin will not transfer to the images. Do not eat or drink near the collection being working on.

3.2. Maintain the original image order
Preserve the context and the provenance. Most photographs will come into your possession either in a packet or in an album. The physical arrangement of the photographs on an album page can provide just as much information as what you may find on the reverse of the image. This information is useful for identification and interpretation of the images.

3.3. Mark the reverse of the image
Never mark the front of an image. If you wish to allocate a sequential number or identify places, people or events, only do so with a photograph pencil such as a Chinagraph. These pencils have a high wax content and write easily on the back of photographs without scratching the paper or damaging the emulsion. Never use pens to mark the back of a photograph.

3.4. Record the information
Before you put the photograph away, record all the information you can about it. The sort of information could include the following: size, type of media, date, subject matter, photographer, provenance, collection name, any inscriptions on the reverse of the image, index terms, whether it is an original or a copy, whether there is a negative, etc.

3.5. Storage
There are a number of different storage options depending on the size of the image. Loose photographs of A3 size or smaller can be put into archival sleeves and housed inside an archival album. Albox Australia P/L manufactures archival sleeves and albums from polypropylene which is chemically inert and contain no metal fasteners. Archival albums come in A4 and A3 sizes with a variety of different sized pockets to suit most types of photographs. There are also sheets for 35mm slides and negatives and well as larger aperture negatives. You can fit two photographs back to back in each pocket, ensuring that you interleave them with a
piece of acid-free archival paper cut to size. The sleeves also come with identification tabs if needed.

When you find old-fashioned albums (ie the type that use photo corners), do not remove the photos from the pages. Interleave the pages with unbuffered archival tissue or the acid-free archival paper. Unbuffered tissue is thinner than the archival paper and should be used in larger, thicker albums. Do not use unbuffered archival tissue with photographs - the buffering agent in the tissue can react with the animal proteins in the emulsion layer of the photographs and cause them to degrade.

Do not ever use the sticky magnetic albums. The paper of which they are made is highly acidic as is the glue used on the pages. If a collection of photographs comes to you in these albums make sure you record the arrangement of each page before you remove the photographs. If you are lucky the glue on the pages may have perished enough and the image can be removed easily. Images that are well-adhered should be copied and left as is.

Larger photographs that will not fit in standard sized albums should be wrapped in a polypropylene sleeve and then housed inside an acid-free flat box. The polypropylene sleeves do come in a size larger than A3 if needed. Make sure that you do not overfill the box - too many images on top of each other can cause compression.

3.6. Environmental conditions
Photographs are more sensitive to fluctuations in temperature than other paper-based materials. The ideal temperature for storage of photographic material is 18ºC ± 4ºC, with a relative humidity of 30-50% RH. Never store photographic material where it will come in contact with bright light. Make copies if you want to have photographs on display - never use original images for display purposes.

4. DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY
The use of digital cameras for everyday photography has led to new problems with the preservation of photographic images. Digital images face the same problems with preservation of any digital file: technological obsolescence (both hardware and software) and exposure to viral infection. There are also the problems of guaranteeing 'true colour', as the image you see on the screen does not always print out the same way on your home printer.

The National Archive of Australia, along with many of the other institutions around the world, such as the Image Permanence Institute, is still researching this problem. The general consensus is that the storage of datafiles for long term storage should be in pdf format and that photographic files should be stored as jpegs. Burn a copy of your files onto a CD and store offsite. Do not use rewritable CDs. Remember to check these backups at regular intervals, especially after you have upgraded either your software or hardware. Burn a fresh copy of your files after every migration. Look after your CDs properly - do not store in direct sunlight or leave them out of their protective cases when not in use. Failure to do so will significantly reduce the lifespan of the CD.

My current recommendation, however, is still that if you want to guarantee the long term life of your images you should have hard copies printed onto photographic paper. If you choose to do this at home, make sure you use the paper and ink specified by the printer manufacturer.

5. IDENTIFICATION
Identification of photographs is always easier when the photographs are still held in their original context but this is the exception rather than the rule. So what to do? There are a few things to look for:

Check the back of the photograph. Sometimes the paper on which the photograph is printed can provide clues to the age of the print. You may find notations indicating that the image was used in a publication. Photographers often stamped their contact details onto the reverse of the image - this information can be used to identify locations and time frames.

Get out the magnifying glass. Any signage that can be seen may provide clues to a location. If the location is known but you want to give an approximate date then this same signage, when used together with a published local history, or any directories such as Sands Directory, can be used to pinpoint an approximate year.

The clothing that is worn by people in the image can be used to date it. Other objects such as motor vehicles and advertising can also be used. Published company histories and other publications such as annual reports are often a good source of dates for advertising. Motor vehicles are easy to date from published sources.

There are a number of publications available which can provide further information on dating photographs. The Mechanical Eye in Australia by Alan Davies and Peter Stanbury is an important work that provides information on how to identify the different photographic media and identifies all the professional and amateur photographers working in Australia up to 1900.

If in any further doubt, then show the image to someone you know who has some experience with identifying images, or who has some background knowledge of the area of which the image is taken. The Royal Australian Historical Society has often published images it has been unable to identify in its serial
Publication *History*, or places copies on the noticeboard. This technique usually results in the images being correctly identified.

6. IMAGE COLLECTIONS
The internet is a rich source of photographic material. A recent simple Google search on the phrase ‘engineering photographs’ resulted in 89,000 hits in Australia alone - with over 4 million hits for the whole world. The most useful source, however, for engineering and related fields would probably be government archives, universities and local studies collections.

Government archives such as State Records of NSW or the National Archives of Australia often have image collections. The National Archives of Australia has a collection of approximately 400,000 images which can be accessed through PhotoSearch, and you can find images like the Commonwealth railways, lighthouses and post offices.

Government libraries such as the State Library of NSW and the National Library of Australia have image collections accessible via their web-sites. The State Library of NSW collections are accessed through Picman and also includes their manuscript collections. The National Library of Australia administers PictureAustralia, which captures images not just from their collections, but also provides links to collections held by other institutions.

Tertiary education collections such as universities that offer degrees in engineering, architecture or the built environment also hold image collections. An example of this the University of Queensland image collection which is called Digilib

Local government libraries and local historical societies often have historical photographs and many are working towards getting their collections online eg Hay Historical Society has a link to ‘Coaching in the NSW Riverina’ which provides images of coach drivers, vehicles, and buildings along coaching routes.

7. COPYRIGHT AND MORAL RIGHTS
Since the introduction of the *Copyright Act* in 1969 there have been a number of amendments that specifically target photographs and the rights of photographers and publishers. The Australian Copyright Council produces a number of publications and information sheets and regularly updates them when amendments to the *Copyright Act* are enacted.

The following is a very basic guide to photographs and copyright.

7.1. Copyright - general rules
Since the signing of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States of America, which took effect on the 1st January 2005, the standard time frame for copyright was extended from 50 years to 70 years. This date is not retrospective - all images taken before the 1st of January 1955 are now out of copyright. Photographs taken from the 1st January 1955 will remain in copyright until the 1st January 2025.

All photographs taken from 1st May 1969 (the day of the enactment of the *Copyright Act*) onwards are protected for 70 years from the end of the year of first publication (ie when copies are first made available to the public.)

All photographs taken between 1st January 1955 and 30th April 1969 are protected for 70 years from the end of the year they are taken.

7.2. Commissioned photographs - special rules!
Commissioned photographs include those taken of sporting teams, school classes, weddings, advertising campaigns etc, by a professional photographer. Written agreements should always be made between hired photographers and the client whereby ownership of images and any possible future use is clearly outlined.

For commissioned photographs taken before 1st May 1969, the client (or person who pays for them to be taken) owns copyright (unless agreed otherwise).

For commissioned photographs taken between 1st May 1969 and 30 July 1998, the client owns copyright (unless agreed otherwise).

For commissioned photographs taken from 31st July 1998, if the photographs are taken for ‘private or domestic purposes’ eg wedding photos, then the client is first owner (unless agreed otherwise). If the photographs have been commissioned for any other purpose such as advertising then the photographer is the owner of copyright (unless agreed otherwise).

In general the client (or person who pays the photographer) owns the copyright to the photograph, however there may be limits on the use of the images. The photographer may have the right to limit the use of the photographs and be able to negotiate other payments for uses that were not foreseen at time of creation.

7.3. Photographs and moral rights
The moral rights amendments to the Copyright Act came into effect on 21st December 2000 and so only affect photographs taken from this date. Essentially this means that the photographer, regardless of professional or amateur status, has the right to be identified as the photographer of a particular image and to have a say in how that image is treated in publication.

Moral rights can only be held by an individual, not an organisation, and cannot be sold (unlike copyright).
Moral rights are more a means of allowing the photographers to protect their professional reputation and promote their professional skills.

The obligations of clients are to ensure that all photographers taking photographs on their behalf are correctly acknowledged. This enables future researchers to correctly identify images and ensures the collection integrity.

7.4. Payment and acknowledgement of sources
Consider the costs of maintaining image collections - conservation costs, printing costs, cataloguing, housing, maintenance, data migration

Even though an image may be out of copyright, it is still the property of someone and they have the right to expect some form of reimbursement for the time, money and effort required in providing you with access to those images.

It is generally standard practice for the photograph owners to be given copies of the publications in which their images are going to be reproduced. This enables them to gain an understanding of how their collection is used, interpreted and valued by the wider community. This also adds to their knowledge base of their collection, and provides them with the evidence by which they can fight for further funding for its ongoing maintenance.

When you have obtained copies of photographs for your own reference collection, always remember to record where you have got it from. The Royal Australian Historical Society has a collection of over 20,000 images, of which approximately 50% are copies from other institutions. Unfortunately there is often no documentation to show this and it provides a very large headache to the custodian of the collection. When using the image in a publication, always ask permission from the custodian of the collection, and always acknowledge where you got it from. This enables future researchers to follow your research and you are a good scholar.

Favourable experiences foster further favourable experiences. Remember - it only takes one person to create problems for image custodians, which could cause them to make the decision to restrict access for future researchers. Remember they are doing you the favour!

8. CONCLUSION
This paper has only skimmed the surface of the various issues involved with photographs indeed, each one of the topics mentioned merits a day-long discussion. Photographs, regardless of their age, condition or media, require money, space and effort. Careful handling and storage will maintain their useful life, while fair dealing with the custodians of image collections will enable others to benefit from your experience.

9. REFERENCES
Albox Australia P/L - www.albox.com.au

Australian Copyright Council - www.copyright.org.au


National Archives of Australia - www.naa.gov.au

PictureAustralia - www.pictureaustralia.org

Royal Australian Historical Society - www.rahs.org.au

State Library of NSW - www.sl.nsw.gov.au

University of Queensland - Digilib - digilib.library.uq.edu.au/pubsearch.phtml