Preserving UA Photographs for Ages to Come

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Remember the old days, when you pulled out a photo album to relish in fond memories past, only to find pages stuck together and your favorite shots yellowed and wrinkly? Time takes its toll, and what seems like an inevitable fact of life to most of us is not an option in the realm of art and the museums that are responsible for safeguarding it for future generations, if not a sizable chunk of eternity.

Although it's not her official job title, "professional time fighter" is essentially what Dana Hemmenway is. She recently joined the University of Arizona Center for Creative Photography as the Arthur J. Bell Senior Photograph Conservator. Her mission: guard the center's priceless collection of photographs from the unrelenting onslaught of deterioration and decay.

"All the materials that make up a black-and-white photograph - the paper support, the gelatin binder and the silver image material - all those materials need safeguarding," Hemmenway says. "And we have a responsibility to ensure their environment is as benign as possible."

Known by many for its unparalleled collection of Ansel Adams photographs, the center, in a sense, serves as a time capsule providing a safe haven for more than 5 million archival objects in its collection, including negatives, work prints, contact sheets, albums, scrapbooks, correspondence, writings, audiovisual materials and memorabilia. All the while, the CCP is still acquiring photographs of contemporary artists, and currently holds more than 90,000 works by 2,200-plus photographers.

"High humidity and temperature are our main enemies," Hemmenway says. "The steadier we can keep them, the better. But in a museum, you have to maintain a balance between keeping the exhibits and the visitors comfortable."

When an item is taken from its climate-controlled storage facility and put on display in an exhibition hall or made available to a researcher for study, it is exposed to "stressors," as conservators say. Stressors include light and the changing levels of humidity and temperature that come with the ebb and flow of visitors. To keep exposure to such stressors to a minimum, curators work closely with conservators like Hemmenway when they select the pieces they would like to exhibit.

"The curator will decide on a theme for the exhibit, and then pick the items that are most relevant to that theme," Hemmenway says. "We look at items together and I look at each of them with preservation in mind. If the curator picked a very delicate item, I may say, 'Let's drop the light levels for this one, or pick a different one that we can display instead.'"

Similar considerations apply when a piece is being requested by another institution.

"In those cases, I may say, 'Let's not loan this one out,' or, 'Let me first give it a stabilizing
treatment to ensure it will return to us in the same condition," Hemmenway explains.

Her profession is as much art as science, says Hemmenway, who came to the UA from the Library of Congress, where she was senior photograph conservator.

Because "the material dictates the profession," as she puts it, conservators specialize in certain art disciplines. "You have to understand the different materials that an object is made of, how they deteriorate, and what their unique vulnerabilities are," she says. "At home, you may fix a broken pot with Krazy Glue. But if you have an archeological object in front of you, you may want to choose a different adhesive."

During her training at the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation, one of only four such programs in the country, Hemmenway learned to work with all materials found in museums and in need of care.

Initially, she wanted to work with three-dimensional objects like sculptures. But during the block of her training that dealt with photographic conservation, something clicked.

"I learned photography from my dad, the old-fashioned way in a darkroom," she says. "Watching an image appear out of nothing is magic, but there is chemistry and science behind it. That combination is what drew me in."

Indeed, Hemmenway’s work environment could be mistaken for a science lab. Fume hoods snake across the room, cabinets are stocked with chemicals, and expansive workbenches house various tools, including a microscope.

In addition to protecting artworks and documents from suffering the effects of time, Hemmenway performs experiments using "accelerated aging" to study how certain materials or environmental conditions will affect an object over many decades.

"The goal of these studies is to see how an object will fare under a certain conservation treatment and protect it from unintended consequences," Hemmenway explains. "For example, a photograph may look great on certain paper, but after a long time, that paper may have changed color and the photograph would not look so great anymore."

Using this aging and re-aging technique on comparable pieces acquired as study material, conservators can simulate the passing of time and evaluate a treatment before applying it to the actual object.

"As our profession has developed, people have become more and more conscious about how treatments affect the objects they are trying to preserve," Hemmenway says.

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