

Conserve This! The Story of a Drawing Becoming a Photograph

ABSTRACT

The Library of Congress contains a vast collection of original comic drawings, political cartoons, and caricatures spanning three centuries of work from America and Europe. One of the highlights of this collection is a drawing by Joseph Keppler discussed in this paper. Keppler, a nineteenth-century cartoon and caricature artist, was a founding member of the influential satirical political magazine named *Puck*. The importance of the drawing from 1878 lies in the subject matter. The drawing features the editorial board at a time when the popularity of the magazine peaked and was a visual celebration of its ten-year anniversary.

In preparation of an upcoming exhibition the drawing was examined and found to consist of four separate pieces of paper, mainly added as correction pieces or to adjust the overall composition of the drawing. The papers had discolored to various degrees depending on the type of paper used. The overall unity of the drawing, which was clearly meant to be viewed as one image, was affected by differences in tonal values. As a result, the decision was made to separate, wash, and, if necessary, light-bleach the four pieces.

After disassembling the drawing and washing the four individual pieces, one paper remained darker in color than the other three. It was the paper that contained the main portion of the drawing. This paper was light-bleached for 60 minutes, after which the discoloration did not seem to have diminished. A solution of 3% hydrogen peroxide was added for another 60 minutes. At this point discoloration started to appear in areas that initially showed no color. The drawing was removed from the bath immediately but the newly developed color remained in the paper. Further

washing or bleaching did not diminish the new colorant. Hydrogen peroxide had no effect on the brown color and sodium borohydride increased the intensity of the color where it was applied.

Some of the color showed up in larger size tonalities such as you would find in watercolor drawing (washes). Other areas, such as the now visible wood paneling on the back wall and the ceiling, showed photographic detail. It was this last observation that gave an indication about the nature of the colorant, which was discovered to be silver.

This paper explored the historic photographic reproduction techniques at the disposal of illustrators at the turn of the century. Illustrators would reproduce drawings or photographs temporarily, aiding in the creation of their art work. These reproduction techniques included silver reduction to make the photographic image, over which the new image had drawn, disappear. It was one of these silver reduction techniques, the so-called "Farmers Silver Reducing Agent," that was successfully tested on the Keppler drawing to remove the newly developed silver.

ELMER EUSMAN
Senior Paper Conservator
Library of Congress
Washington, D. C.
eeus@loc.gov

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