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Cross-Disciplinary Care for the Preservation of Photograph Albums

INTRODUCTION

Photographs are held throughout museum, library, and archive collections in numerous formats, from early cased objects to loose photographic prints, to matted artworks, to those in bound volumes. Photograph *albums* have distinct preservation needs, and their care must be approached cross-disciplinarily, often by both a photograph conservator and a book conservator, and always with the goal of minimal treatment intervention (fig. 1). Caring for bound photographic collections requires a holistic preservation approach that balances research, communication, and *sometimes* conservation treatment. This article highlights the hybrid nature of albums and the ways that their preservation issues may be exacerbated by their materials and construction. A basic overview of the variety of structures of photograph albums is provided, followed by a discussion of the aspects of albums that may fall outside of the traditional condition issues addressed by book and photograph conservators. These include handling and environmental considerations of photographs for book conservators, and a review of the structural and material aspects of bound volumes that may complicate photograph conservation practice. The article also includes a brief review of storage, mounting, and exhibition recommendations for these complex objects.

PHOTOGRAPH ALBUMS AS HYBRID OBJECTS

Cultural institutions may employ book conservators and/or photograph conservators, although these professionals rarely work in the same conservation lab, and many smaller institutions and libraries employ neither. In recent decades, there has been a rise in the curatorial and art historical interest in photograph albums, helping to flesh out our collective understanding of the private and more intimate

settings in our shared cultural pasts than are commonly seen in museum exhibitions. Constructed to house some combination of images, manuscript notations, and printed text, albums serve as protective enclosures, as mechanisms to keep photographs flat, as carrying cases, curatorial stories, and display devices. As more attention is paid to photograph albums, the preservation needs of these complicated objects are coming into further focus as well. Research undertaken to address these needs is not new. The postprints from the 1999 AIC Annual Conference (AIC 2000), as well as a number of articles covering Victorian album structures, collection surveys, and individual treatment case studies are invaluable resources. With this article, the author aims to continue these collaborative conversations.

All codex format volumes rely on numerous areas of movement to function. Understandably, at the time of manufacture, the structure and the materials employed in a book's construction work as one and the volume opens well, with the movement of inner and outer joints, the paper, and the sewing or other spine structure allowing access to the contents. Critical, of course, is the continued mechanical endurance of these materials. Yet over time, the leather, adhesives, threads, and papers may inherently degrade on their own and suffer from external conditions—each component deteriorating at a different rate. These structural breakdowns inhibit the function of the object, sometimes completely. And photographs, although historically made using very high-quality materials and developed on strong paper supports, remain variously sensitive to light and to the chemistry of their immediate environments. Their surfaces are easily marked and must remain protected from any direct contact. In comparing the handling concerns of these two art disciplines, their needs seem in opposition with one another: the volume only functions well while its movement is uncompromised, with the pages manipulatable by hand; the photograph is safest when kept still and stable, untouched. Likewise, the book conservator must keep the bound object moving, whereas the photograph conservator must keep the photographic object still. The *photograph album*, of course, combines the two art forms.

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Fig. 1. Owen Angel, *Follett Family Album of Children Costumed for a Fancy Dress Ball*, ca. 1880. Cabinet card photograph album, 28.6 × 22.9 × 4.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Joseph M. Cohen, William Talbott Hillman Foundation, Robert and Joyce Menschel Family Foundation, Robert D. and Virginia R. Joffe, Paula and Ira M. Resnick, and Maureen and Noel Testa Gifts, 2007 (2007.284). Courtesy of Aleya Lehmann.

These hybrid characteristics influence the long-term preservation of albums as well. Industrialization of production methods across all sectors during the 19th century changed the way businesses produced goods, and the shift toward mechanizing paper manufacture in particular revolutionized print and publication runs, from newspapers to novels to art. As demand for all printed matter increased, wood pulp was sourced as the main ingredient in paper slurries, replacing the less available linen, cotton, and flax, and bleaching was introduced to brighten papers, offsetting the darker tone of wood pulp-based products. Photograph album structures across the 19th and 20th centuries were designed by innovative bookbinders to accommodate the various and changing processes that were being developed by photographers, but despite the creative solutions devised to pair the photograph with the book, industrially produced binding materials resulted in the reduced long-term quality of many products, including the adhesives, cloths, threads, and leathers used in production bookbinding, as well as the papers chosen for the text blocks. Proper preservation care of these comparatively delicate objects can be built on

cross-disciplinary communication and understanding the mechanics and the materials of this subset of bound volumes, including how the development of album structures followed the growth of the photographic industry, from the first photographs up through the present.

ALBUM STRUCTURES

Photographs on paper were introduced to the world in 1839, and almost immediately artists mounted them into books and albums. Across the decades, bookbinders devised countless album structures to accommodate photographic images, but very broadly they can be differentiated between sewn structures, guarded leaf structures, and albums with exclusively mechanical leaf joins.

Albums with sections sewn through the folds or with side-sewn single sheets are commonly found across collections. The traditionally bound *Emma Charlotte Dillwyn Llewelyn's Album* from the 1850s (figs. 2, 3), with its text block of wove paper made into sections and sewn through the folds, is covered in half red leather with marbled paper sides. It contains

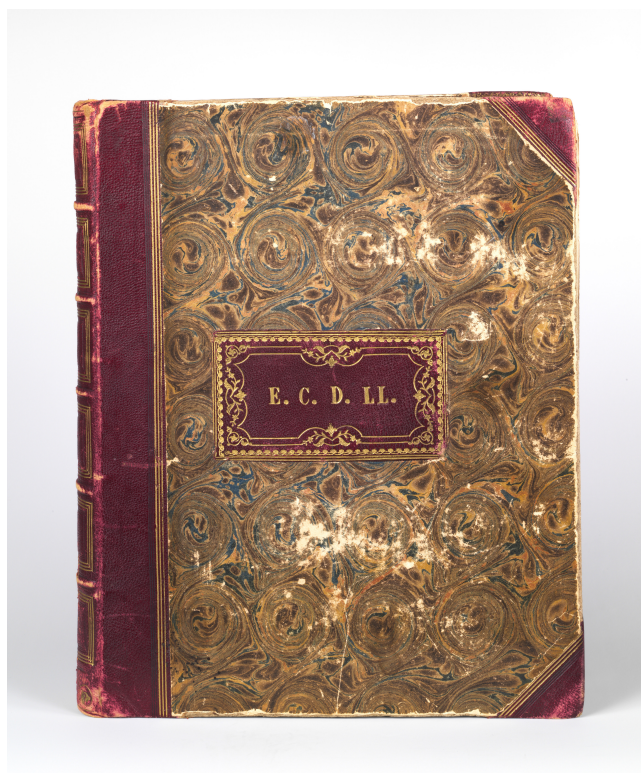


Fig. 2. John Dillwyn Llewelyn, *Emma Charlotte Dillwyn Llewelyn's Album*, 1853–1856. Album with salted paper and albumen silver prints, 28.8 × 22.3 × 3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gilman Collection, Gift of the Howard Gilman Foundation, 2005 (2005.100.382 (1–85)).

128 salted paper prints and albumen silver prints made from paper and glass negatives, and the majority of the very thin photographs are attached to the album pages with adhesive around just their four edges. The opening action of this bound volume, with its sewing structure and flexible leaves, is typical for the style of binding, and its continued use relies upon the sewing threads, the linings of the spine, and the drape of the paper that makes up the text block. As move the leaves, so follow the delicate photographs, and in this example, the actions that allow the book to function smoothly may themselves pose a risk to the thin edge-mounted artworks, both causing their planar deformation and increased risk of tearing when the pages are turned, and placing strain on the adhesives that hold the photographs in place.

Side-sewn albums that join together loose single sheets rely on the fiber strength of the text block material and the continued fold endurance of the paper and the cloth spine covering, the materials responsible for supporting the opening action. The leaves of the *Album from the Archive of the French Medium Henri Matthouillot*, 1920–1938 (figs. 4, 5) are bound with a cord laced through two holes that extend through the cover and the text block. The album contains gelatin silver prints mounted overall onto recto and verso throughout, adjacent to lengthy manuscript ink notations written on slips



Fig. 3. John Dillwyn Llewelyn, *Emma Charlotte Dillwyn Llewelyn's Album*. Image of “Theresa,” edge discoloration from attachment adhesive around the edges of the print (2005.100.382 (32)).

of paper. The photographs in the album are quite stable, but they are mounted side by side with their descriptions, and when the volume is closed, the adhesives and the inks rest in contact with the conjugate photographs' surfaces. Loosely side sewn, the structure offers limited planar stability for the album, and the user must be careful to avoid allowing the delicate and glossy surfaces of the photographs to rub against one another or the mounted annotations. With prints adhered almost to the fore edges of each opening verso, the user risks touching the faces of the photographs in turning the leaves unless aware of the layout before handling, which makes this album a good example of one for which to include handling instructions on the label of the protective enclosure.

Binders accommodated the addition of photographs into the pages of sewn volumes in various ways and at times altered the structures to account for the thickness of the new contents in manners similar to those utilized to bind volumes with intaglio or woodblock prints. For example, leaves were removed



Fig. 4. Unknown, *Album from the Archive of the French Medium Henri Matthouillot*, 1920–1938. Side-sewn album with gelatin silver prints and manuscript descriptions, 11 × 7.9 × 1.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gilman Collection, Gift of the Howard Gilman Foundation, 2005 (2005.100.383.2).



Fig. 5. Unknown, *Album from the Archive of the French Medium Henri Matthouillot*. Detail of mounted photograph adjacent to manuscript ink inscription (2005.100.383.2).



Fig. 6. Traditionally sewn album with leaves removed to accommodate the addition of photographs to text block.

(fig. 6), folios were back hooked for sewing, or sections were sewn with compensation paper guards, the guards approximating the thickness of the anticipated additional materials.

From the very outset of photography, practitioners advanced their methods, and by the mid- to late 1850s the albumen silver print was the most widely used photographic process. Made using very thin paper, these photographs tended to curl dramatically if left unrestrained, and in an effort to counter this effect, they were mounted onto secondary supports, either into the leaves of an album or, with growing popularity, onto individual rigid cardboard supports, as with the *carte de visite* (100 × 64 mm), and later the larger *cabinet card* (165 × 108 mm). Stiff, individually mounted albumen images could not successfully be mounted into flexible-leaved bindings, which led to the development of stiff-board guarded leaf albums to house and display the CdVs as well as tintypes and cabinet cards. Rather than being sewn, the text block leaves were guarded together, and the cartes de visite or cabinet cards were inserted into the board-weight rigid leaves instead of being pasted into the pages of a traditionally or side-sewn album. Consisting of an albumen silver print adhered overall to a thick paper card, the *carte de visite* was introduced and patented in Paris in 1854 by André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri. The introduction of these cartes, smaller in format and more affordable to produce and purchase, helped democratize photography by allowing a broader demographic to have their images taken, to own their own cartes and albums, and to curate them for private enjoyment. *Carte de visite* albums and, beginning in the 1860s, the larger-format cabinet card albums are found in great numbers across both institution and personal collections.

Although there are numerous variations in their structural details, the primary hinge album and the secondary hinge album with board stubs are two of the most commonly seen

formats of the guarded leaf album. Comprising the text block, the leaves of guarded leaf albums each consist of a board from which has been excised a recess just larger than the object to be inserted. Facing papers are adhered to both sides of the board, each of which serves as a device to frame the image beneath and as an overmat to keep the *carte de visite* or cabinet card in position. Photographs on their rigid supports are eased into position in the board-weight leaves either from the tail or through a slit in the page front, sliding underneath a section of unadhered facing paper, to sit back to back in the recess cut from the board, each object's recto then matted for the viewer. In albums with primary hinges, the leaves are joined one to the next with cloth or paper guards, adhered underneath the facing papers of the conjugate pages at each opening (fig. 7). In albums with secondary hinges, the board or folded cloth stubs are sewn or adhered together at the spine edge, with the board leaf then guarded to the stub (fig. 8). The guarded leaf structure of the *Carte-de-Visite Album of Central Park Views* from the 1860s was formed with folded compensation stubs made from cloth over paper, with the extensions of cloth serving to attach the stiff leaves of the book block at the secondary hinges (fig. 9). In both primary and secondary hinge guarded leaf albums, the opening action relies on the continued fold endurance of the guards that hold the text block together rather than on the thread, spine liners, paper drape, adhesives, or other traditional methods of opening support utilized by bookbinders over the centuries.

Numerous preservation challenges lurk in the pages of guarded leaf albums. The aforementioned concerns about later 19th-century papers, leathers, and adhesives must be considered, as the degradation patterns of these materials put handling and the binding function at risk. The design of these albums allows for relatively straightforward insertion



Fig. 7. Primary hinge guarded leaf structure, from tail. Osborn's Gallery, Charleston, SC, *The Evacuation of Fort Sumter*, 1861, 12.6 × 9.4 × 2.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gilman Collection, Museum Purchase, 2005 (2005.100.1174.1–.16).



Fig. 8. Secondary hinge guarded leaf structure, from tail. Ambrose Jackson, Stacy's Photographic Carte de Visite, Publisher, *Carte-de-Visite Album of Central Park Views*, 1860s, 15.4 × 13.4 × 3.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Herbert Mitchell, 2008 (2015.400.199).

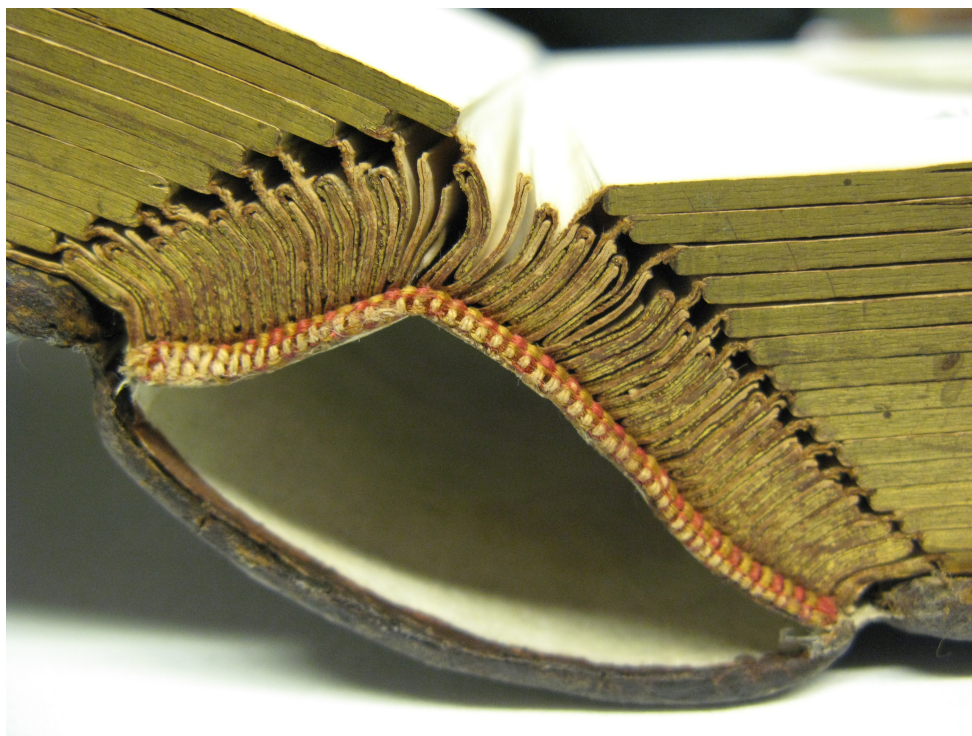


Fig. 9. Detail of compensation stub in secondary hinge guarded leaf album. Ambrose Jackson, Stacy's Photographic Carte de Visite, Publisher, *Carte-de-Visite Album of Central Park Views* (2015.400.199).

of a photograph, but they are not conducive to changing the order of prints by removing and reinserting the cartes, which often results in damage to both the delicate images as they are slid in and out, and to the facing papers. Cloth guards and facing papers can lift away from the boards as adhesives fail (fig. 10). The text blocks, made of matboard, adhesives, paper, cloth guards, and photographs, are heavy for their size, and larger albums, when stored vertically, can succumb to gravity, pulling their own text blocks forward out of their squares, as they often lack the rounding and backing at the spine to help support themselves on the bookshelf.

MECHANICAL JOINS AND LATER STRUCTURES

Albums with purely mechanical leaf joins are less common, but the examples here include an accordion structure held with metal pins that fits a series of miniature albumen prints into a tiny locket album (fig. 11), a metal cabinet hinge album with leaves that swing nonadhesively on opposing tabs over metal rods (fig. 12), and a dramatic metal secondary hinge in the patented Metal Back Album (fig. 13). These mechanical joins continue to function well despite the deterioration of some of the surrounding binding materials.

Numerous later structures were employed throughout the 20th century by not only the photographic industry but also

for business administration, including post bindings, ring binders, and spiral and plastic comb bindings. Although not covered in depth here, these too suffer various similar preservation issues based on the quality of the materials used in their construction. The proprietary ingredients in their material production make their degradation patterns difficult to address, and this category of later album structures warrants further study to determine the most effective long-term preservation strategies.

These many examples provide just a glimpse into the variety of album styles, and each discussed here presents its own set of challenges. The inclusion of the physically and chemically sensitive photographs adds a nuanced layer to their preservation. When adhered just around their edges, thin and potentially light sensitive salted paper and albumen prints are put at risk by the action of turning the pages, as well as by their proximity to 19th-century papers and adhesives. Side-sewn albums without spine support may not provide the planar stability necessary to prevent conjugately mounted photographs from rubbing against one another. The removal and reinsertion of cartes de visite into aging albums increases the risk of handling damage to both the photographs and the album pages. Developing an understanding of photochemistry and the basics of these bound structures provides book and photograph conservators, respectively, more tools with



Fig. 10. Lifting facing paper, in carte de visite album. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Photograph Conservation Study Collection, N.A.



Fig. 11. Mathew Brady, *Miniature Wedding Album of General Tom Thumb and Lavinia Warren*, 1863, 2.7 × 2.0 × 1.0 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Joyce F. Menschel Photography Library Fund, 1999 (1999.89).



Fig. 12. Cabinet hinge album. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Photograph Conservation Study Collection, N.A.

which to address album care, and the author recommends a photograph identification course for book and archive conservators and a basic bookbinding course for photograph conservators to further interdisciplinary communication.

HANDLING AND PHOTOGRAPH ATTACHMENTS

As with any bound volume that is regularly accessed in a study room or selected for exhibition, the dynamic nature of a photograph album leaves it vulnerable, as necessarily it is manipulated at each use. Balancing an album's condition with what is being expected of it is of particular importance. If, for example, an album that has not been seen or studied for decades is proposed for exhibition, at first glance it may appear quite robust in its box in the vault. Yet, in the process of shepherding the album through the exhibition process, from selecting an image through treatment and catalog

photography, cradling, conditioning checking, and mounting at one or more institutions, by the time the album has returned safely to storage, it has been opened and closed upward of 30 times. Therefore, understanding what is being expected of these hybrid objects before permitting exhibition plays an essential part in their preservation planning. Even without being slated for exhibition, the photographs mounted in albums, subject to movement, handling, and the environment, have much more expected of them physically than those that are safely matted and behind glazing.

Together with understanding the quality of the materials used at manufacture and that which is being asked of an album in its function as an artwork, the conservator must be mindful of the method of attachment of the photographs within the text block. Each image is held in its location in a particular way: adhered overall, dabbed at the corners, hinged in with Japanese paper, slid into a preprepared recess in the leaf, edge mounted, corners tucked through one or two slits in the support, held by paper or plastic photo corners, tipped in with a line of adhesive, guarded into place, even left intentionally loose and inserted into the text block. Some newer album structures were designed with lines of slightly tacky adhesive and liftable plastic overlays, transparent plastic sleeves, or photo corners ready to receive images. All of these methods of attachment may inadvertently cause harm to the photographs or supports, or may fail as materials deteriorate and adhesives desiccate, and the handling or treatment of the object as a whole must be undertaken with the photographic attachment method in mind.

CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION

Conserving photograph albums involves making decisions about how best to keep these dynamic objects functioning while bearing in mind the particular preservation concerns discussed earlier. Maintaining the various moving parts of an album may require stabilizing the existing material or replacing an original aspect of an album, and, invariably, ethical questions arise in each treatment plan. Should a leather outer joint be replaced with new leather that will, based on its inherently acidic nature, break down over time? Is it appropriate to introduce a different material to the structure, despite being a departure from the original design? If the sewing threads are broken in one part of a volume, should the entire book be re sewn even though the treatment is more invasive? If photographs have detached from the pages, should the conservator use a different, but more reliable, method of reattachment? How can manuscript captioning below a photograph be preserved if the paper on which it is written is inherently so weak that the photograph is separating from the page? How does the conservator wrestle with the pervasive issue of photographs made with stable materials that are kept in proximity to poorer-quality papers and adhesives while striving to retain



Fig. 13. Patented Metal Back Album. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Photograph Conservation Study Collection, N.A.

the integrity of the album as a singular object? These are among the various ethical considerations that enter into the treatment plans for albums.

In weighing possible treatment options, one must consider the most vulnerable aspect of the album, whether it be the covering materials, the adhesives used for attachment, the photographic process, or the light sensitivity of the mounted images. With in situ treatment of the photographs in a particularly delicate structure, book and photograph conservators work together to cradle the volume in a supported manner to allow for safe conservation treatment. Determining whether to retain, remove, or replace interleaving papers and the decisions about treatment adhesives and housing materials are taken with the delicacy of the photographic material in mind. Cross-disciplinary communication encourages both book and photograph conservators to consider artwork sensitivities outside of their main disciplines, and, invariably, more communication up front results in better longer-term preservation of the objects.

Examining albums from a book conservator's vantage point involves recognizing numerous photograph-specific considerations. Identifying the photographic process or

processes in the volume, noting what the surface of a photograph is in contact with on the conjugate page, and being mindful of the potential physical wear to which the action of the book may be subjecting the photographs are essential first steps. Conversely, for photograph conservators, the complicated structural elements of bound volumes and the sometimes disconcerting condition of the binding materials may be daunting. Learning to handle albums, to set up cradling structures that allow safe in situ treatments, and building a baseline understanding of the mechanics of the book will help allay some of these fears. Treatments to ensure that the images are well attached at their locations will help mitigate physical damage, as lifting or loose photographs are at risk of damage or being dissociated from the object. When possible, the author strives to keep the albums together as integral units, both for historical and archival reasons and because most of these objects have been designated as single artworks. It can be difficult to determine how best to preserve photograph albums while recognizing their inherent vices, and at times the most appropriate decision is to be certain that the exhibition or storage environment, the housing materials, and the handling practices are of the highest quality rather

than to introduce a deeply interventive conservation treatment. These are just some of the many hybrid considerations that both book and photograph conservators need to keep front of mind as they find themselves responsible for these composite art objects.

Cumulative light damage is of great concern across the PMG and BPG specialty groups, and the better one's understanding of a photographic process and album materials (or the ability to determine them), the more confidently one is able to recommend storage and exhibition parameters. For example, a mounted albumen silver print may well be more light sensitive than its text block secondary support, and thus an open album will be kept at 4 footcandles (40 lux) during exhibition. Yet, although a gelatin silver photograph can be safely exhibited for a short exhibition at 8 footcandles (80 lux), the author would recommend only 5 footcandles (50 lux) for the object while on display in concern for the text block paper.

Providing protective enclosures made from Heritage (fig. 14) or other similarly tested board rather than housing albums in cloth-covered drop spine boxes, ensuring that storage and exhibition materials have passed the Oddy and Photographic Activity Tests, and maintaining a stable environment during storage, research, and display will result in

the most effective long-term preservation of photograph-based artworks.

Preservation efforts may be enhanced through well-placed education and advocacy, including hosting handling sessions for new staff and fellows, advocating for cold storage facilities, and reaching out to registrars and curatorial teams to review preservation protocols. Welcoming visitors to the lab, whether students or potential donors, regularly results in excitement about what the field entails and the practices involved in the long-term care of art collections. Following is a list of housing and storage recommendations, handling guidelines, and the names of a small number of materials and vendors that supply them, with the hope that these will be useful in furthering the collaborative work undertaken by the book and photograph conservation communities.

Housing and Storage Recommendations

Most photographs should be stored at cooler or colder temperatures.

Most albums are stored at 60°F/40%RH.

Photographs and bookbinding materials are light-sensitive.

Environmental conditions in galleries are 70°F/50%RH.

Housing materials should pass the Oddy Test (test each new batch).



Fig. 14. Heritage board protective enclosures for volumes containing photographs.

Housing materials should pass the Photographic Activity Test (P.A.T.).

Use enclosures of Heritage board or other conservation-quality material.

Micro-climate housings will slow down temperature and RH fluctuations.

House and store heavy or unstable albums flat on folio shelving.

Label housings with any handling instructions and/or warnings.

Include maximum safe opening angle instructions on housings.

Provide handling instructions for more complicated housing designs.

Handling Guidelines

Handle albums with gloves until familiar with the object.

If a volume is housed vertically on a shelf, do not remove it by pulling the headcap.

Be mindful of the condition of covering materials.

Lift an album, do not slide it, and place it in a new location.

Open the album slowly to avoid drawing and lifting the endpapers.

Use book supports or angled cradles to support open albums.

Adjust the cradling support and opening angle to accommodate various openings.

Avoid flexing photographs with the movement of the album pages.

Handle only the outer margins of the text block leaves.

Be aware of interleaving and any loose or detaching photographs.

Allow no photos or interleaving to slip into the gutter or become creased.

Mounting Recommendations

Examine the album with photograph and book conservators.

Albums may appear robust even when in poor condition.

Build a cradle specific to the opening page spread and support the squares during exhibition.

Mounting and case materials should pass the Oddy Test (test each new batch).

Mounting and case materials should pass the Photographic Activity Test (P.A.T.).

Strap leaves gently with polyethylene to keep them open during exhibition.

Consider exhibiting facsimiles if albums absolutely may not be exhibited.

Before permitting exhibition, understand an album's limitations.

Housing Materials

Heritage Archival Corrugated Board

Mylar polyester

Polyethylene strap

Four flap enclosures

Photo-Tex paper

Tyvek

Suppliers

Talas

Archival Products

University Products

Creation Baumann

MasterPak

Benchmark

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