

Preservation Practices



by Hugh Phibbs

Preservation Problem Solving: Two Photographic Examples

Having looked at the issues involved in evaluating preservation problems, one must ask how this knowledge can be put to use in actual problem-solving. The first fact to be addressed is the degree to which each item must be viewed as unique. While some printed and photographic materials may be encountered in multiple examples, they are generally not problematic. Items that present problems tend to be those that are handmade, antique, in degraded condition, poorly constructed, or irregular in shape. It is the handling and housing of these objects that distinguish preservation framing from that which is done in mass production operations.

One example that the average framer can be expected to encounter is the homemade photographic panorama—produced when a tourist finds that the beauty of a setting can only be portrayed with a series of photographs taken as the camera is rotated across the horizon and overlapping views are photographed. These prints may come in taped together by the photographer, or with a request that the framer align and attach them.

Since negatives usually exist for such photos (allowing them to be reproduced), and since they will be much more meaningful to the photographer than they would to those in the future, they are

ideal for framing. The main issue that confronts the framer is how the photos can be held in place with a minimum of change. Since the photos can be replaced, one might contemplate dry mounting them; however there are drawbacks to this approach. The heat of the press will degrade the photos and maintaining their alignment without removing the tape used to attach them can be quite difficult. If the tape is left in place, the bonding process will become unpredictable.

Hinging the photos together is a safer option. However, most photos produced today are on plastic-backed paper, and starch paste will not bond to the polyethylene on the back of the photo. Dextrin, the adhesive found on linen tape, will; yet the stiffness and thickness of the linen tape are likely to lead to cockling of the photo.

The adhesive on the tape can be removed with a bristle brush that has been dipped in warm water. It can then be brushed onto strips of Japanese tissue and they can be used to secure the photos to one another. To maintain the orientation of the photos relative to one another, one can remove some of the tape along each seam (since the back of the photos is plastic, the tape can be safely pulled off) and set some of the dextrin-coated tissue along that seam.

Once that has dried, the rest of the tape can be removed and can be replaced with the tissue. The same combination of tissue and dextrin can be used to make hinges that will hold the combination of photos in place in the window mat.

In choosing linen tape that is to serve as a source of dextrin, it is wise to select the most expensive tape that can be found. There are tapes on the market of differing grades, and lower-grade tapes will have darker, more brown adhesive that is harder to hydrate. While it can serve to make spines for window mats, it may not be adhesive enough to make hinges of this type. This adhesive can only safely be used on plastic-backed photos. It is far too aggressive to be used on any work on paper.

Old photographs with cockled

margins present another preservation problem. When a photograph absorbs moisture from its outer edges, they can expand and cockle there because the dimensions of the photo have grown more at its edges and less across the center of the photo. If the photo dries in this condition, matting it becomes a problem. Hinging can be difficult because there may not be enough space between the cockles to allow a hinge to be placed on the edge of the photo at a low point that will be in contact with the surface of the back mat. If tabs of polyester or polyester corners were used to hold the photo, they may press down the edges of the photo and cause cracking in the emulsion. A window mat that pressed down on the edges of the photo could lead to the same sort of damage.

The first thing needed for housing such a photo is a shim mat. This is a window mat whose edges cover the margins of the photo but will not press down on them because the back side of the window mat includes a build up that is set back from the edges of the photo.

The second helpful technique, here, is the use of edge strips that cover a liberal portion of the front of the photo. This will allow the strips to enclose the cockled edges without crushing them. Even though the edge strips are held open by the cockled margins of the photo, they can still hold the photo firmly in place without crushing the edges. (*For more information on using edge strips, see the April 2001 Preservation Supplement, and for more on shim mats, see the February 1997 Preservation Supplement.*)

In each of these cases, materials or techniques have been adapted to address problems that the framed items present. The panorama required re-examination of adhesives. Dextrin, which is ordinarily only useful in mat construction, can be pressed into service when some plastics must be secured. Edge strips, which normally are designed to be kept flat onto the surface of the paper being secured, can be used to hold sheets that have very cockled edges. The strips, being wider than usual can function in a more open mode than normal when used in combination with window mats that provide extra space.

Next month we will continue with this exploration of preservation problem solving. ■