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Plush portrait albums, with leather or velvet covers, were common in the Victorian parlor. Now they need proper care and storage to survive the effects of adhesives, acidic paper, and photographic chemicals. Note the following tips.

## Tips on Displaying Historical Photographs in Albums and Frames

by Mary Bennett

### Photograph Albums

ALBUMS offer a window to the past, giving us insights about our family's heritage. In preserving vivid memories, the compilers unknowingly transmit cultural values as well. Those of us who have inherited these keepsakes need to explore ways of stabilizing and protecting the albums so future generations can enjoy the stories they tell.

Photo albums have been popular since the 1860s. Fancy velvet or leather portrait albums were showcased on tables in Victorian parlors. After the turn of the century, the snapshot album took the place of formal portrait albums. The compiler of a snapshot album no longer relied on professionally made portraits. As a new form of self-expression, the snapshot album

opened up vistas to settings and activities never photographed before.

Resist the impulse or pressure to dismantle an album and to distribute photographs to branches of the family. Albums record the significant moments in a family's life, from birth to high school graduation, through courtship, weddings, and anniversaries. By studying photos laid out progressively, the viewer can discover changes in styles of dress or home decorating. A narrative emerges as you leaf through pages, tracing a family's history or the photographer's life. Heed the following tips as you care for albums or framed photos.

1. Nineteenth-century portrait albums had

pre-cut slots or pockets to slide the photos into, surrounded by decorative borders. Even though the album pages and covers may be acidic and potentially damaging to the photos, the album itself is an artifact. Before dismantling or rearranging the album, consider whether it is worth destroying the original integrity of the album. Be aware that the brittle paper or cardboard will tear easily if you try to force the photos out of their slots or pockets.

2. By the turn of the century, most family photographers had adopted the snapshot album to store and display their keepsake images. The black or colored pages of snapshot albums are made of poor-quality paper that deteriorates images by releasing oxidant gases. Often, photos are adhered to both sides of the brittle paper. Removing one photo might ruin the photo on the reverse side. If the images are attached with black photo corners, try slipping the photos out of the corners. Then create a facsimile or replica album by duplicating the arrangement of the original photos (or reproductions) on archival-quality album pages.

3. Avoid modern albums that encase photos in cheap plastic. The plastic emits fumes that will attack the images. Though commonly used, the worst albums have so-called "magnetic" pages. The cover sheet picks up adhesive from the bottom page before the photos are added.



A startling example of why albums should be interleaved with sheets of non-acidic paper. Here, chemicals from the photo (left) interacted with acidic album paper opposite it and "copied" the image. Luckily the opposite pocket was empty, or the ghost image would have ruined another photo. Sheets of rag paper inserted between pages act as buffers and add no further damage.

Thus, adhesives will be transferred to both the front and the back of the photo. Today's polyvinyl chloride plastics cause irreversible damage to prints, and the adhesives can make it impossible to remove the images safely. The cheap cardboard backing gives off peroxides that cause yellow staining in both black and white and color prints.

4. Often the original photos simply cannot be rescued without risking further damage. Yet the acids and other chemicals from the paper or photographs can leave an imprint on the opposite page. To prevent the surface of the images from touching the opposite page when the album is closed, interleaf the pages with



In the 1860s people collected carte-de-visite portraits of relatives, friends, and celebrities, and displayed them in photograph albums (left). When cabinet cards were introduced in the 1880s, album size and format changed to accommodate the larger size (right). Today, the acidic pages, with pre-cut slots, may be brittle and tear easily.

archival-quality paper, which is acid-neutral or 100 percent rag.

5. When possible, substitute archival-quality pages (or sleeves) made of triacetate, polyester, polyethylene, or polypropylene. Unfortunately, the material used is not always listed. Look for trade names such as "PRINT FILE" or "MYLAR," purchase from reputable dealers or catalogs, and expect archival-quality material to cost more than cheap plastics or acidic cardboards.

6. Never attach photos with tape, rubber cement, or other damaging adhesives that eat

away at the image and make later removal difficult. Use archival-quality photo corners, or slip the photos in the various sized pockets of archival-quality pages. Ideally, the entire album should be constructed of archival materials.

7. Store the album in a clean, safe environment. A temperature range of 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit with a relative humidity of 40 to 50 percent is acceptable.

8. Family historians also preserved news clippings, locks of hair, scraps of fabric, pressed flowers, and documents in photo albums. Unfortunately, these materials can be detri-

Consider the snapshot albums as a form of autobiography as well as family or local history. People compiled such albums as accounts of their lives. Think carefully before dismantling and distributing such a collection.



PHOTO BY CHUCK GREINER

mental to the photographs. Use some discretion, however, in removing these items. Record what you separate from the album, noting description and placement, and keep one copy of the record with the album and one with the removed items.

9. Wrap the album in paper to keep light and dust away. Special slipcovers or album cases can be made to store albums and support weak or broken spines.

*Two sources for archival supplies: Light Impressions (439 Monroe Avenue, Rochester, NY 14607) and Hollinger Corporation (PO Box 6185, Arlington, VA 22206).*



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Custom-fit boxes of archival materials will safely house fragile albums. Store them in a cool, dry environment.

## Framed Photographs

Another common concern for the family photo archivist is how to handle framed photographs. Except for occasional need, most photographs should be unframed for conservation and easy storage.

1. Frames can trap moisture, fungus, and other harmful contaminants. The wood backing of older frames can ruin and discolor the photo in a short time. The original frame, however, is an artifact that conveys certain information about popular tastes and the significance of the photo to the individual who displayed it. If you decide to use the original frame, use a window matte cut from museum board (100 percent rag or acid-free) to separate the surface of the print from the glass and frame edge. Seal the back of the frame with foam core instead of the original wood.

2. Select new frames with care. Wooden frames may have damaging solvents and glues; metal frames may have harmful lacquers.

3. Hang any original photographs in areas that do not receive direct sunlight, such as hallways.

4. To prolong the life of the photograph, frame

a reproduction and retire the original photo to a safer storage place away from light, which can cause fading.



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The edge of this portrait was stained by the acidic materials surrounding it — an oval wood frame and cardboard. Acidic paper discolors and becomes brittle.