

Let There Be Light

American Photojournalism and the Working Print

By Allison Pappas

Each academic year, the Judith M. Lenett Memorial Fellowship is awarded to a second-year student in the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art. The fellowship, which is jointly administered by Williams College, the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, and the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, allows recipients to explore issues of conservation in the field of American art. Working closely with WACC conservators, each fellow spends two semesters conserving and researching an American art object. This year's Lenett Fellow, Allison Pappas, focused on three twentieth-century gelatin-silver photographs from the Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Mass. Under the guidance of Leslie Paisley, Chief Paper Conservator, and Jennifer McGlinchey, Assistant Paper and Photograph Conservator, the project culminated in a public lecture at the Clark. Ms. Pappas will spend the next year as the graduate intern in the photography department at the J. Paul Getty Museum. The article below is excerpted from Ms. Pappas's Lenett lecture.

Photojournalism took many forms across the different eras and political tides of the American twentieth century. As the Williamstown Art Conservation Center's Judith M. Lenett Fellow, I had the opportunity to work on three photographic prints from the collection of the Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, that delineate some of the most significant shifts in journalistic practice. From January through March I treated these photographs, a process that included cleaning, filling losses, mending cracks, and addressing damage sustained from handling and housing. I examined the scars that accrued on the surfaces of the photos, marks that speak to their lived histories as working prints. The photographs—Lewis Hine's *Lunch Time* (1908), Robert Capa's *Allied Entry Into Paris* (1944), and Eliot Elisofon's *Marcel*

Duchamp Descends a Staircase (1952)—today hang on museum walls, but not so long ago, they were part of a different history. Their stories—their use in different moments of our history, as different models of the photojournalistic purpose—can still be read today.

In this article, I describe the historic background and treatment procedure for one of the three prints, Elisofon's *Marcel Duchamp Descends a Staircase*.

DUCHAMP DESCENDS STAIRCASE himself for a repetitive flash-picture and thereby makes a modern photograph as Dadaist as his 40-year-old Nude painting.¹

As its caption from the April 28, 1952 issue of *LIFE* magazine explains, Eliot Elisofon's striking photograph was made through the careful manipulation of light. The photo shows a ghostly Marcel Duchamp descending a staircase in the manner of his famous 1912 painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Elisofon captured Duchamp's motion on a single frame of film by leaving the shutter of his lens open while he set off multiple flashes, each burst of light capturing one position of the body as it moved down the stairs. Although Elisofon and Robert Capa were contemporaries, this photograph represents a different kind of photojournalism than Capa's war reportage. Elisofon's image presages the prevalent coverage at *LIFE* that is credited with the magazine's decline in the 1960s and '70s, when a trend away from the political and towards softer feature stories did not reconcile with American readers' interest in social revolution and the

war in Vietnam. Elisofon's work ranged from war to glamour photography. He was also a watercolorist and African art aficionado, and this interest meant that Elisofon often ended up with arts and culture assignments.

The print arrived from the Mead in a distressed state. A plethora of cracks and distortions on the surface and a

barrage of marks on the back spoke to its long history of use. The stamps and marks can be decoded to give a sense of not only how the image was used at *LIFE*, but subsequently as well: "36144" in the upper left corner is the set or project number *LIFE* assigned to record and file the story, negatives, contact sheet, and print. It does not list the number of the negative, which is unusual. When *LIFE* stopped weekly circulation and fell under the control of Time, Inc., the archiving system became more complex. At some point the barcode sticker, called a Merlin ID, was added to the print so that it could be scanned and identified in the digital database. The blue check marks scattered throughout mean that the negatives were in their proper location during various inventories of the collection. The caption information was typed directly onto the print, which is somewhat unusual, more often being typed onto a label affixed to the back. If you look carefully on the front you can actually see the impression of the letters! The orange rectangle also shows through to the front, and indicates the cropping of the photograph used in the original *LIFE* article.

The red "Used in *LIFE* April 28, 1952 P100," records the image's original date of use and page number. The other date, "April 15 1952," in black, might refer to the date the picture was filed or when it ran in an international issue of *LIFE*. Elisofon's stamp falls towards the bottom of the page, identifying him as the photographer. "110 picas" refers to the width of the published photograph; a pica is a typographic unit

of measurement used in publishing that corresponds to 1/6 of an inch. "1st and 2nd print matte" means that two prints were originally requested, both on matte paper. In addition to this information about its use at *LIFE*, two labels speak to later uses of the print. The first, a red stamp "USED RAYFIELD PHOTOG BOOK p. 26" refers to an unknown book project.

The other, a paper label adhered to the back, shows that the print was borrowed in April 2000 by V. Porges. Vivette Porges had been a photo editor at *LIFE*, and used the image for a 2002 book project she worked on with Peter Jennings, *In Search of America*. At the bottom right corner, "2004.14" is the Mead's accession number for cataloguing the print into its collection.

Such extensive use of the print, and all the filing and sending around that it entailed, dictated our conservation treatment plan. In addition to basic consolidation and cleaning, the print was so creased and distorted it needed serious overall flattening. I began by removing the three labels from the back, so they

would not press through to the emulsion layer on the front at any point during the treatment. To this same end, I filled a number of shallow skinned losses and deeper divots in the back of the print to even out the surface, using, as the case dictated, either a mixture of cotton paper fiber and Aquazol, a stable adhesive, or thin Japanese paper. After surface cleaning the print verso and recto, I tested the various inks and pencil marks on the back to see how they would hold up in response to both moisture and heat.

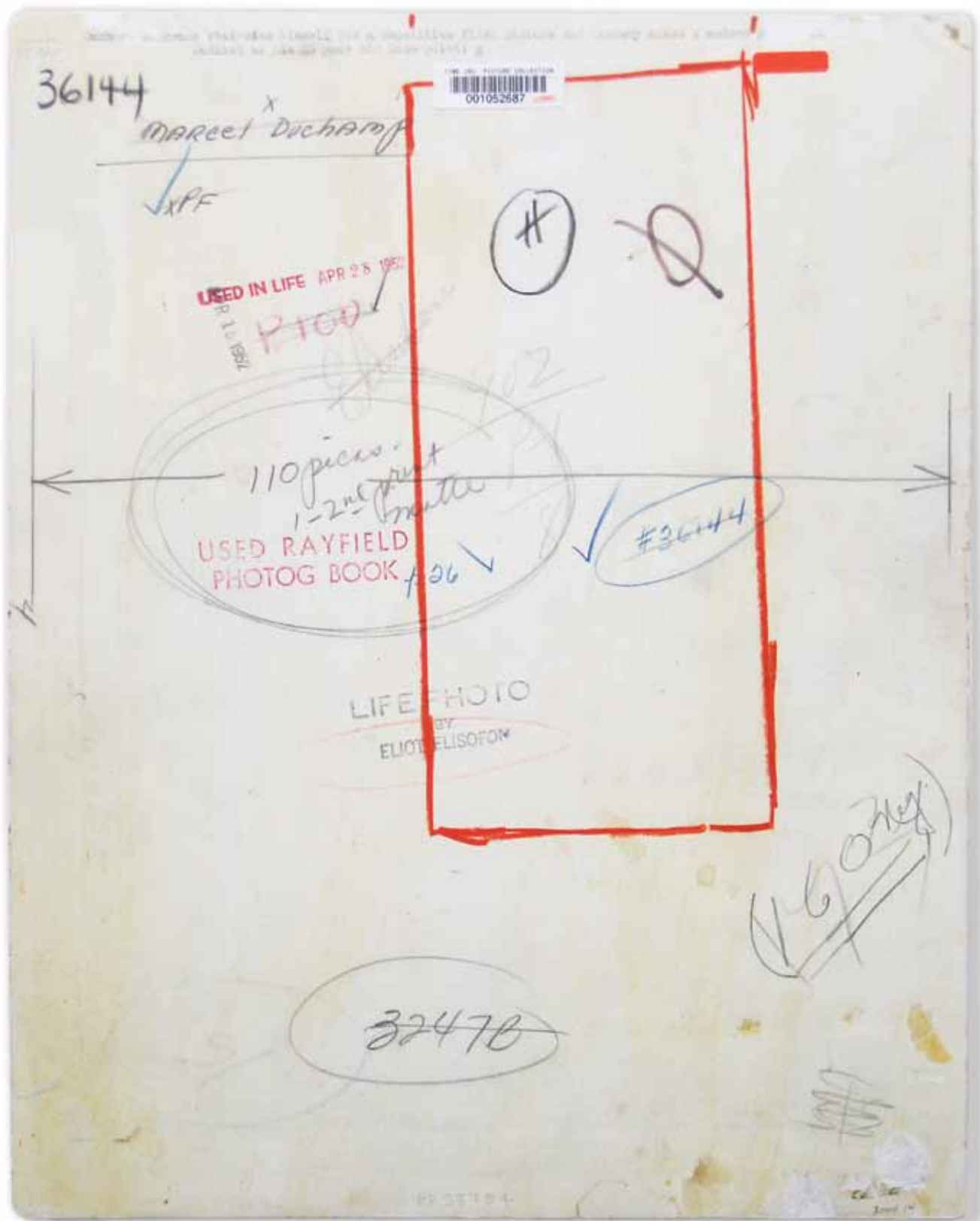
The results were encouraging, so we were able to use a dry mount press to flatten the print. Both the removal of the labels and leveling of the back surface had been in preparation for this outcome. I also consolidated all of the cracks in the surface of the print, applying an additional layer of gelatin that spread into the cracks, forming a bandage of sorts with the



Eliot Elisofon, *Marcel Duchamp Descends a Staircase*, 1952: the working print, after treatment.



Lenett Fellow Allison Pappas at work in the WACC paper lab.



Verso of the Elisofon working print, containing caption, cropping, filing and identification marks.

dry mount press. The treatment used the heat and the high pressure of the press to relax the cracks and allow the new gelatin to penetrate and reinforce the emulsion. Since this is an aggressive treatment, it is only used for photographs with severe cracks that compromise the structural integrity of the surface. The treatment must be done with extreme care because it manipulates moisture and heat—two of the most dangerous elements for photographs—to force the paper to reset. After quick pressing, the photograph is left to dry and rest under heavy weights to continue the flattening. The exposure to heat is limited and performed in a carefully controlled environment, but unsettling nonetheless.

We chose this option because yet another set of scars embedded in the print—along with museum records to back them up—showed that it had had prior conservation treatment. The image was relatively clean when I began treatment, and close inspection revealed a large area of inpainting in the middle of the print. Someone had been here before! As I surface cleaned, the careful concealing of a large white scar came off along with a significant amount of ink from surprising areas that had not seemed to have inpainting on first inspection. This ink, called Spotone, covered dust spots and other flaws in the negative, and probably dated back to *LIFE* editors when the print was in use. Furthermore, the Mead's files included conservation records that listed prior, less aggressive attempts to flatten the picture for better image visibility. Ultimately, the dry-mount-press flattening treatment was successful and improved the appearance and stability of the print.

This nerve-racking step over, I had to revisit the labored process of inpainting small spots as well as a relatively large loss in Duchamp's pants. It took me a very long time to get it right. Inpainting is quite challenging; it is easy to go too dark too fast and be forced to start over entirely. Slowly building up thin layer upon layer of pigment, barely touching the tip of my brush to the paper, I finally succeeded in making the areas

of loss unobtrusive. I reattached the labels on the back with wheat starch paste. Looking back at my work, I could see subtle changes—old adhesive replaced by easily removable wheat starch paste; new watercolor inpainting in place of Spotone and older inpainting; and a print that now lay flat. I had left my own marks embedded in the surfaces of these photographs.

Future scholars and conservators looking closely or reading the records will be able to see these as reflections of this phase of the print's history. This photograph, and the others I treated, are no longer working photojournalistic prints; they are museum pieces and they work in new ways, garnering the marks of new circumstances.

This, finally, speaks to the last phase of my project. In addition to treating the problems and deterioration of the past, conservation also incorporates preventive methods to protect for the future. For all three of the prints, the greatest problems were related to handling and housing conditions. The prints were folded, creased, torn, and seemingly waved around before



Oblique spectral photograph of the print surface, used to detect cracks and distortions.

being bent and stuffed into tight photo-mounting corners. It was necessary to rethink the housing for the prints. Since becoming museum artifacts, they had been mounted between mat boards to support them from the back while protecting their surfaces. But not all matting methods are created equal. Photo corners can be damaging if they are too small, and even delicate Japanese paper hinges can put undue stress on already-weak prints. Size, strength, and flexibility of individual prints need to be matched to their proper mounting format.

For the Capa and Elisofon, both relatively large prints with bad histories of cracking, we decided that Z-fold mounting would be the safest choice. Z-folds are made by folding strips of paper into slings that fit around all four sides of the photograph and are taped down to the backing board.³ The print is held securely in place and no adhesive is used on the photograph.

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