

Collection And Preservation Of Oversized Photographs

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Overview

The past twenty-five years has seen a marked increase in oversized contemporary photographs of both traditional and digital processes. “Oversized,” in this case, refers to prints larger than the traditional “large” size of twenty-by-twenty-four inches. With digital technology, moreover, it is no longer unusual for prints to be six feet or larger in one or both dimensions. This technical bulletin is an overview of some of the many challenges presented by these works regarding use, access, and storage. Oversized photographs demand those involved with their care to adjust expectations for what is necessary and possible, with an understanding that these large prints are extremely delicate. Once damage has occurred it often cannot be remediated. All staff members involved in collections care, including curators, registrars, art handlers, and others, need to understand that, with oversized works, everything is likely to take longer and be more expensive than traditional photographic holdings.

It is not unique to photographs that the larger size means larger problems. It is also widely understood that contemporary digital prints can be even more sensitive to damage from light, humidity, and chemical contaminants than traditional photographic processes. Oversized photographs, however, have the additional challenge of extreme physical delicacy, especially if they have not been mounted to a firm support. The layers of paper, gelatin, plastic and other materials in their composition are extremely vulnerable to handling dents and other small but significant damages. This is a problem for photographs of any size, but especially so when the print is large and difficult to handle without uncontrolled flexing of the print. To compound the problem further, the aesthetics of contemporary art tend to demand a pristine surface, without blemish and kept extremely smooth. More and more frequently, that ideal becomes impossible to meet.

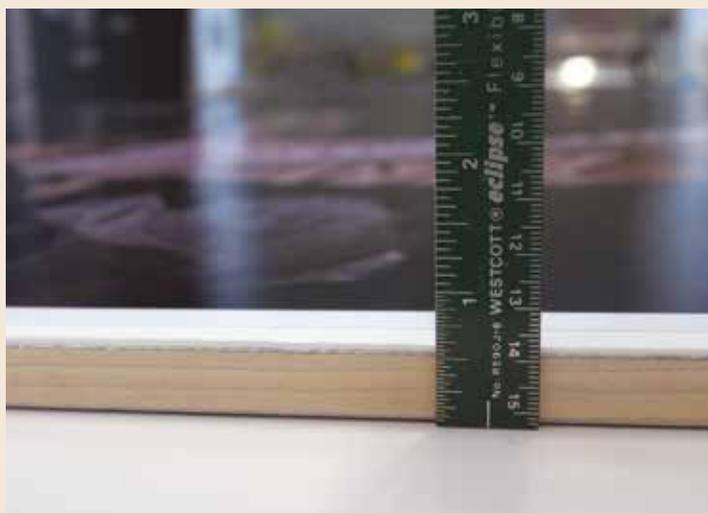
Along with the larger size of these photographs comes greater weight: larger prints need larger mats, larger frames, larger glazing, etc. More people are needed to move the framed artwork, more space is needed in the storage room, extra time is required to do the simplest of chores such as moving the piece into a print study room for a viewing, and extra attention devoted to wrapping for shipment if the work goes out on loan. Naturally, there is also greater expense and difficulty in shipping such works.

Challenges of new materials

The conservator setting out to treat oversized contemporary photographs—or even just to hinge one for an exhibition—has several additional challenges related to the sensitivity and vulnerability of some of the new materials. Time-tested aqueous adhesives such as gelatin, methylcellulose, or wheat starch paste simply will not adhere to the glossy resin-coated papers used in most color processes, including many digital prints. Non-aqueous methods usually involve either heat or solvents, both of which can present problems for the prints. Meanwhile, some of the limited-moisture acrylic emulsions that are used elsewhere in conservation have been found not to pass the Photographic Activity Test.¹ They may still be

useful for inkjet prints, which do not involve photographic chemistry.

It is extremely difficult to find out what will be harmful to these new processes and what will not. Useful testing data is scarce, and what tests have been done tend to have been commissioned by the



At top, the author prepares lining strips of synthetic fabric for edge mounting. Above, an oversized photograph and lightweight honeycomb panel. The panel has an aluminum skin, sealed poplar frame, and aluminum honeycomb core.

companies that manufacture the materials and are not published. Furthermore, there is a high level of variability within the new materials. Some are so sensitive to humidity that applying any moisture may cause fading. Others may react to a component in the adhesive, or may fade simply because they were printed on the wrong kind of paper. Meanwhile, because most types of color prints are known to fade with light exposure, and because contemporary photographers often want to avoid glazing the work so that it is more immediate to the viewer, sometimes they have been faced with UV-absorbing films or laminates. Unfortunately such laminates do not always adhere well to the photographic surface, producing hazy “bubbles” or air pockets that are visually distracting from the work as a whole.

For any of these problems it is usually virtually impossible to test a treatment option locally because any poor results will show. Even if you are fortunate enough to have an “study” print that is ostensibly of the same materials, testing on these may be inaccurate since the mock-up probably comes from a different batch of paper or is a different age or has simply aged under different conditions. The conservator has very little information to work with and tends, with reason, to provide for the worst. Sometimes, however, one must proceed toward some action even when there seem to be no good solutions. Conservators are still looking for the best avenues to recommend in dealing with these contemporary prints.

In short, conservators and owners alike must adjust to the needs of the works. For example, both the conservation ideal of reversibility and strictures against overall mounting seem impractical when brought up against the challenges of oversized photographs. When these prints are left unmounted, they quickly begin to show handling dents and other superficial

imperfections that become glaringly obvious when a pristine surface is expected. Furthermore, it is very difficult to hinge these works flat to a mountboard—inevitably, one ends up with a rippled surface. With this in mind, photograph conservators, including here at WACC, have resorted to attaching strips of inert synthetic fabric along the entire perimeter of the photograph and wrapping them around the back of a solid support such as a paper-faced aluminum honeycomb panel. Even this solution poses problems, in that it is difficult to adjust the tension so that the print is truly flat. Of course, the materials will continue to change dimension through fluctuations in relative humidity, which can cause transient ripples or even an overall “pillowing” effect. It is also possible that adhesives used in the process may not stand up to the test of time.

Techniques of mounting photographs

Photographers have mounted their photographs throughout history, often using inappropriate materials. A remarkable number of these mounted photographs have survived, often in better condition than their unmounted counterparts. Ansel Adams, in fact, insisted on mounting his prints

as the best way of preserving them; his method of choice was dry-mounting to museum-quality mat board or, for oversized works, wet-mounting to heavy, oversized paperboard or fiber wallboard such as Homosote, which is hardly archival material. His largest works have suffered somewhat, due to their size and the lack of quality mounting materials available; nevertheless with good care and museum environmental conditions they can be expected to last for decades to come.

Contemporary photographers also recognize that their work is easier to handle and better preserved when it is mounted overall, though some have heeded conservators' strictures against overall mounting. As a group, these photographers have searched for alternatives to mat board as a mounting surface. For one thing, the ability to print on large scale paper has outpaced the largest available mat board dimensions; for another, even the smoothest paperboard produces a subtly dimpled or eggshell appearance that does not suit the pristine aesthetic typical of contemporary works.

Richard Avedon was a pioneer in this regard; he mounted the life-size and larger prints for his 1985 In the American West exhibition on sheets of aluminum. Metal is a much smoother surface than mat board, but considerably heavier, and can prove prohibitively expensive for many. More recently, photographers have turned to plastic products such as Sintra (polyvinyl chloride sheet), but concerns about the long-term stability of such materials have prompted a shift to cold-mounting on DiBond (aluminum skin laminated to a polyethylene core), currently the mounting system of choice.

What follows are general guidelines for proceeding with the collection and preservation of oversized contemporary photographic materials:

Storage

- Keep oversized works framed if possible. Heavy though the frame may be, the photograph is safer during handling if in a frame. Watch out for unintended light exposure in the storage room.
- If a work can't be kept framed, try to keep it flat. Oversized flat files are available; it is also possible to sandwich large prints between layers of oversized mat board, corrugated cardboard, or Coroplast. The layer closest to the artwork should be as smooth as possible, made of paper that passes the Photographic Activity Test. The folder should be stiff enough to prevent creasing.
- If it won't fit in flat storage, it must be rolled. Use a large-diameter, archival-quality tube that is longer than the width of the photograph to avoid crumpling the edges. Interleave with a smooth, high-quality paper, wider than the photograph, preferably in one continuous sheet. If the photograph already has a tendency to curl, roll in that direction rather than against it. Store the roll suspended at the ends so that the portion of the photograph at the bottom is not placed under the weight of the whole roll.
- Try to use Optium Museum Acrylic™. This anti-static, non-reflective glazing is the best product we've seen to protect the vulnerable surface of oversized photographs (and other artwork), while giving an effect of immediacy comparable to viewing the artwork unglazed.
- Loose prints can't be made perfectly flat. If it isn't mounted overall, expect some distortions.

Handling

- Use as many people as you need. This almost always means two or more; sometimes as many as four.
- Try to keep the print as flat as possible. Avoid creases and dents!
- Sandwich the print between stiffer material to turn it over. Even a stiff folder can do, but usually mat board or clean cardboard is better.
- Make sure your workspace is big enough to handle the print safely. For very large works you may need to use the gallery on a day when it is closed to the public.

General

- Know what you have. Get as much information from the artist as you can about the materials used, including details about what type of substrate or paper (manufacturer, model, batch number if possible) and what type of printing.
- Use the Photographic Information Record. This is a free pdf available in several languages on the website of the Photographic Materials Group of the American Institute for Conservation (<http://tinyurl.com/bhoaz6l>). Quoting from the website, “The Photograph Information Record (PIR) represents the effort by many colleagues to create an ‘international standard’ for an artist’s questionnaire form.”
- Try to establish the artist’s intent for mounting and presentation. We have heard of several museums that are taking an active role, during the process of acquiring new contemporary work, by requesting that galleries and/or photographers provide their prints already mounted. If for some reason the photographer prefers not to mount the work, s/he must then specify the preferred alternative for storage and presentation. Often artists in this situation have worked out specific ways to care for their work that may also be the best solution within the museum. In other cases, the institution may find that adjustments can be made to the recommended care in order to better preserve the work within the museum environment.
- Establish a policy/protocol for mounting accessioned works. Some institutions will prefer not to be responsible for mounting contemporary photographs at all, and with good reason. We suggest that collections staff should at least discuss the question and have a policy about whether or not it can be done. If the institution may sometimes choose to mount a photograph overall, there should be a written protocol outlining the circumstances in which this may be done. The artist’s intent must be taken into consideration. Only recently made and recently acquired prints should be considered for mounting (but how recent is an open question); and liability for mounting problems should be established in case there is an accident and the print is damaged during the process.

1. The Photographic Activity Test, or PAT, is an international standard test (ISO18916) for evaluating photo-storage and display products. Developed by the Image Permanence Institute, a nonprofit, university-based laboratory devoted to preservation research, this test explores interactions between photographic images and the enclosures in which they are stored. The PAT is routinely used to test papers, adhesives, inks, glass and framing components, sleeving materials, labels, photo albums, scrapbooking supplies and embellishments, as well as other materials upon request.



Laura Downey Staneff graduated from the Art Conservation Department at the State University College at Buffalo in 1994, majoring in paper conservation, after completing her third-year internship at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. She worked for three years as Assistant Paper Conservator at the Balboa Art Conservation Center, a regional art conservation center in San Diego. Laura participated in the Mellon Collaborative Workshops in Photograph Conservation and earned a second master’s degree in Art History (History of Photography) at the University of Arizona, where she served as Ansel Adams Intern at the Center for Creative Photography. She was a Mellon Fellow in the first cycle of the Advanced Residency Program in Photograph Conservation at the George Eastman House.