



Versión en INGLÉS 

## Care and conservation of personal photographic archives

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In personal archives, it is common to find photographs of our relatives and ancestors printed in color or black and white on paper or plastic, sometimes on special supports such as metal, glass, fabric, or even ceramics. These are often stored in photographic albums, in paper envelopes, with a special mounting from the photographic studios, and exhibited in picture frames, among others. We are so used to them that we forget how fragile they can be, so here are some recommendations for their preservation.

Photography as a technical process has been changing over time, and the materials that it is composed of giving us an account of these changes. The variety of layers and aggregates that have been used make its conservation complex. In general, many of these materials are vulnerable to environmental conditions (humidity and temperature), the presence of air pollutants, and even some photographic processes have very delicate surfaces that are easily scratched or abraded. Other elements related are applying color, protective layers such as varnishes, the addition of other objects such as paper cutouts or photographs (figure 1), and photographic studio mounts, among others, whose conservation should also be considered. All these aspects make the identification and conservation of the different photographic processes complex, however, conservators specialized in photography know how to recognize them and propose the necessary conservation measures to lengthen a photograph's lifespan.

Conservation requirements in museums, libraries, and archives are very specific, depending on the photographic process and its temporality, and require a large investment in infrastructure because often, to guarantee the long-term preservation of certain photographic processes, temperatures below zero degrees Celsius must be maintained. Even though meeting such standards requires a large investment of human and financial resources, some simple procedures can be followed at home to preserve family photographs.





Figure 1. Example of a photograph with adhered photo cutouts. Image: ©Tania Estrada, 2021.

## Recommendations

### Handling

- Avoid touching the image, because in case of not wearing gloves the fingerprints of the hands may be marked. They should be preferably handled with both hands and by the edges (figure 2).

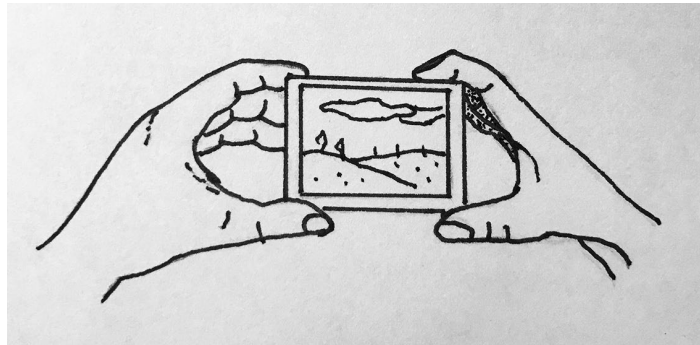


Figure 2. Recommendation on how to handle the photographs with both hands and by the edges. Image: ©Tania Estrada, 2021.

- Make sure your hands are clean and dry before handling the photographs, it is suggested to wear gloves. In archives and libraries, the standard requires the use of gloves. If gloves are purchased for handling family photos, make sure they are made of cotton or nitrile, and verify they are cleaned or changed frequently.



- It is not recommended to mark the photographs, even on the reverse, as this may cause indented lines and distort the image.
- Do not use metal clips or fasteners, as well rubber bands to organize the photographs as they may create marks or folds.
- Avoid gluing photographs with commercial adhesives or adhesive tapes to albums or for display, as these eventually age, oxidate, and cause stains, as well as other deterioration that is difficult to repair (figure 3). For the same reason, do not place any type of tape or post-it notes over the image of the photographs.



**Figure 3.** Photograph with yellow stains in the corners caused by adhesive tapes.  
*Image: ©Tania Estrada, 2021.*

### *Storage*

- It is recommended to keep the photographic archive in a ventilated, relatively dry place, preferably somewhere stable, i.e., avoiding strong temperature fluctuations.<sup>1</sup>
- The place where the photographic archive is kept should be cleaned with dry wipes or with a vacuum cleaner, and try to keep it that way or, at least, clean it more than once a year.
- It is also important to avoid cleaning the surface of the photographs with liquid solutions, wipes, or rubbers, as this can permanently damage them. It is preferable to use an air puffer or a very fine, soft-haired brush for cleaning (figure 4).
- Avoid placing the archive near light bulbs or windows, as direct light may cause damage.

<sup>1</sup> If more specific or exhaustive storage is required, please consult a conservator specialized in photography.



Figure 4. Example of a fine-haired brush and an air puffer. *Image: ©Tania Estrada, 2021.*

### *Housing*

- Photographs can be stored in paper envelopes, preferably made of 100% cotton paper, lignin and acid-free, pH neutral, white or light-colored, avoid those with added dyes or pigments. These papers are usually available in large stationery stores, art supplies stores or stores specialized in conservation.
- Paper envelopes protect photographs from dust and light. It is suggested to place them in cardboard boxes to provide rigid support to contain them, facilitate their handling or movement, as well as to promote the organization of the envelopes, and act as a barrier against environmental fluctuations.
- They can also be placed in albums with plastic envelopes, such as specifically for conservation polyester, polyethylene, and polypropylene. This option helps to easily view the photographs, protects them from external factors and direct contact with the hands, and provides support. However, avoid using them if you live in coastal or hot and humid areas, as the plastic causes the growth of microorganisms, and the photographs may adhere to the plastic. Avoid purchasing self adhesive albums (ie. magnetic albums/sticky albums), as they will damage your photos (figure 5).
- There are albums as old as the photographs of your grandparents or great-grandparents, these are also information sources, so keep them and take care of them as well as your photographs.
- If there are slides, it is recommended to store them vertically in their original boxes.
- It is important to avoid storing photographs with glass, nitrate, or acetate-based negative supports in plastic





**Figure 5.** Example of an album with self-adhesive glue. *Image: ©Tania Estrada, 2021.*

### *Display*

- At home there are always photographs displayed in picture frames, however, it is important to limit the time of exhibition and avoid permanent display, as they fade and discolor over time (figure 6).
- It is also important to avoid prolonged exposure to intense light sources such as windows or lamps.
- Sometimes old photographs were delivered mounted by the studios, so it is important to keep the mounts as they provide valuable information about the studios (figure 7).
- It is recommended to mount photographs with archival quality materials, such as double-sided 100% cotton cardboard and Plexiglas with ultraviolet filters to protect them from light. Since that option is a bit expensive, it is also suggested to scan the photographs you wish to exhibit and create digital printing, so that what is on display is the digital reproduction while your original photograph is safeguarded.

### **When to seek the advice of a specialist conservator?**

If your family photographs show any changes, damage, or if you have any doubts about their preservation, you can contact a conservator specialized in photography or the Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural (CNCPC)<sup>2</sup> of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH),<sup>3</sup> which has developed the National Program for the Documentary Heritage Conservation which provides courses, talks, and advice to improve the conditions of archives and libraries in Mexico, as well as carry out conservation projects.

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<sup>2</sup> National Agency for Cultural Heritage Conservation (note from the translator).

<sup>3</sup> National Institute of Anthropology and History (note from the translator).





Figure 6. Example of photograph with discoloration from the permanent display. Image: ©Tania Estrada, 2021.



Figure 7. Photograph mounted by a studio with information about the photographer. Image: ©Tania Estrada, 2021.



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