

Preventive Conservation Program of the Heritage of the Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya in San Luis Potosí. The Case of its Photographic Collection

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ABSTRACT

The experience and reflection presented in this ACADEMIC REPORT summarize the importance of planning guided by preventive conservation methodologies that use work instruments such as free software and strategic collaboration among private institutions, universities and research centers that are in charge of managing documents and archives. Given the undeniable budget austerity these repositories undergo, the proposals presented can make a positive impact on the conservation, access, and dissemination of bibliographic and documentary collections of high heritage value, such as the one of the Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya (BRBA) in the city of San Luis Potosí.

KEYWORDS

album, preventive conservation, digitization, photography, documentary repository, San Luis Potosí

INTRODUCTION

The Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya (BRBA, Library Ricardo B. Anaya, in English) is a bibliographic and documentary repository with an important heritage value located in the Catholic Action building, at 425 Madero Street, downtown in the city of San Luis Potosí, Mexico. Its collection comprises a wide gamma of printed documents and manuscripts, among which stand out books, leaflets, periodical publications, photographs, and others.

The cultural assets safeguarded at the BRBA date from the 16th to the 21st centuries. Most of the bibliographic collection and documentary funds was part of the personal library of presbyter doctor Ricardo B. Anaya (1893-1962).

The BRBA is unique in various ways since, although being sheltered in a property owned by the Archdiocese of San Luis Potosí, it is administered by the Círculo Cultural Ricardo B. Anaya, which is in full charge of its functioning. Regarding its finance, it relies on the donations of benefactors that every month make modest contributions for its maintenance (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Facade of the property of Catholic Action, in the city of San Luis Potosí (Photograph: Amaranta González, 2021; courtesy: Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya, San Luis Potosí, Mexico).



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In 2020, an academic research group was formed by three professors-researchers attached to the bachelor's degree in Conservation and Restoration of Movable Cultural Property of the Facultad del Hábitat of the Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí (UASLP, Mexico), in which some subject professors, appointed to the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH, Mexico) and students of said bachelor's degree also collaborate.

Motivated by contributing to the endeavors that ensure the preservation of such important cultural heritage safeguarded by the BRBA and maximize the impact and dissemination of the collection, this group decided to work on a collaborative project, for which a preventive conservation plan was developed that would allow the material stabilization of the assets under its supervision, as well as the digitization of the archives and the modernization of the processes run by the institution.

This project, called *Programa de Conservación Preventiva del Patrimonio de la Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya* (PCPP-BRBA) (Preventive Conservation Program of the Heritage of the *Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya Editorial Translation*), has four phases: 1. Cataloging; 2. Conservation; 3. Digitization, and 4. Consultation and dissemination.

While the implementation of these actions has been considered for the entire heritage under the protection of the library in the medium term, at a pilot stage these actions have been implemented in the collection of photographic materials, bearing in mind it is necessary to analyze the scope and make the adjustments that the conservation program may require.

PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

The first stage of the PCPP-BRBA consisted on stabilizing the photographic collection. The majority of the heterogeneous photographic corpus comprising the collection was compiled in 31 albums that display a wide thematic range. These, as asserted by Gustavo Lozano, in essence served a double role: to exhibit and conserve for the future a record of an individual or group's daily life, and to be a recreational and educational activity for the compiler. The polarity of these cultural assets thus becomes evident; the album is in turn a medium and an end bound to the moment when it was produced. Hence, these assets

are valued not by the places or portraits they show, but by the memories they evoke to relive through the photographs they are composed of, promoting the oral transfer of stories and

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anecdotes that reinforce the personal bonds and cohesion of a group (Lozano, 2012, p. 125).¹

The bindings of the collection have different dimensions, covers and methods to hold the images; the photographic prints they contain also have different formats and technical nature, although most of them are printed images in black and white. In these albums, the photographs are associated with other raw materials, among which there are manuscript folios, drawn diagrams, printed documents, textiles, stamps, leather, celluloid, stylized papers, and various adhesive materials (Figure 2).



FIGURE 2. Sample of the diversity of photographic albums of the BRBA (Photograph: Amaranta González, 2021; courtesy: Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya, San Luis Potosí, Mexico).

¹ Editorial translation from the original Spanish version of Lozano.

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The photographic materials comprising the collection range from 1868 to the 1960s and were grouped into five categories: photographs that belonged to father Anaya and his family; those given to him by his friends and acquaintances; photographs of the various Catholic Action projects; photographs, clippings and post-cards from multiple places around the world; and finally, a section with Christmas and participations cards, among which there are examples elaborated by San Luis Potosí's acclaimed artist Zita Basich Leija (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. Example of engravings and participations among the miscellaneous of albums of the BRBA (Photograph: Amaranta González, 2021; courtesy: Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya, San Luis Potosí, Mexico).



While it could be said that this collection responds to interests merely linked to the Catholic Church, this extensive collection has in fact a wide variety of photographs that portray all kinds of characters from political and cultural life and, in general, from San Luis Potosí's society and old places and buildings from different cities in San Luis Potosí, Mexico.

METHODOLOGICAL PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION PROPOSAL

For the implementation of the PCPP-BRBA, *preventive conservation* has been understood as the adoption of measures that serve to protect a collection fully and are the result of studies on the actions to prevent deterioration of the objects without the need of intervening in each of them in particular, but are implemented in general on the collection to which they belong (Van der Burg, 2010, p. 23).

In the national context, this concept entails a wide range of measures, exposed in the *Normas básicas para la conservación preventiva de los bienes culturales en museos (Basic Norms for Preventive Conservation of Cultural Assets in Museums*. Editorial translation), a free-access document created by the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (Conaculta) and the Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural (CNCPC) of the INAH (Ramos et al., n. d.).

For such purposes, in adherence to the *Lineamientos institucionales generales en materia de conservación y restauración del patrimonio cultural (General Institutional Guidelines in Cultural Heritage Conservation and Restoration*. Editorial translation) established by the CNCPC-INAH (2014), we designed the following proposal, divided into parallel implementation phases, with which we intend to ensure a proper preservation of the BRBA's heritage assets.

Phases of the PCPP-BRBA

a) Cataloging of the collection

The preparation of the inventory and catalog of the heritage assets of the BRBA is a priority activity in order to recognize the elements that comprise this repository of materials of cultural interest, as stated in the guidelines of conservation and restoration since, by means of a series of measures, the quantification of the collection's cultural assets is substantiated and it is known what the objects being protected look like.

To carry out this phase, we based on the *ICOMOS Principles for the Recording of Monuments, Groups of Buildings and Sites* (1996), which highlights that recording "is one of the principal ways available to give meaning, understanding, definition and recognition of the values of the cultural heritage" (1996, p. 1).

To accomplish the stated goals and optimize the human resources available to the PCPP-BRBA, the cataloging process of this vast collection requires defining short-term and medium-term scopes. During the first stage, the existing inventory was reviewed and, through the implementation of an Integrated Library Management System, the library's physical catalog update is underway.

In this sense and given the technical and budgetary limitations of the library, we decided to implement the TinyCat system by [®]LibraryThing, which allows building a catalog for free and the possibility of making it publicly available through an interface that is

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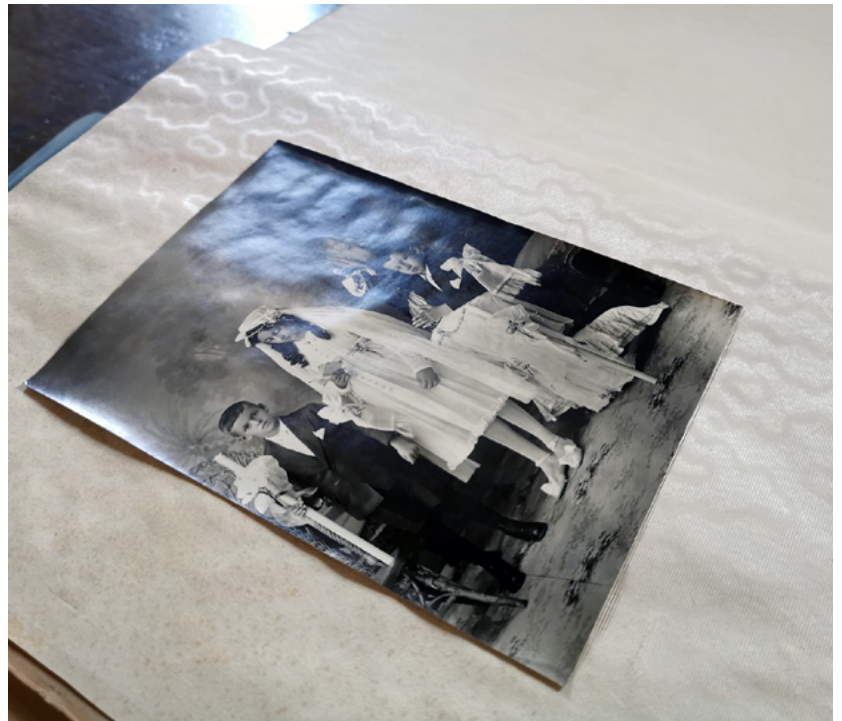
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very similar to that of a professional electronic catalog. The great advantage of this system is that it does not require installing on a server, paying for web hosting or programming skills by the librarian, as it is highly intuitive and the cost for non-profit institutions ranges between 3 and 15 dollars a month.

b) Conservation

Basic direct conservation activities have been performed and have positively impacted the preservation of cultural assets and the manifestation of their cultural and heritage value. As a background, an initial recording of the collection's conservation state was proposed and, from the results of this record keeping, basic strategies were developed to address its conservation (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4.
Deformation of a photographic print in the album, as a result of the differential work among the constituent materials of the volume (Photograph: Amaranta González, 2021; courtesy: Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya, San Luis Potosí, Mexico).



Thus, we have prioritized the general processes that guarantee the preservation of the whole by stabilizing the conditions of the space. Focused on temperature and relative humidity control of the rooms at the BRBA, a continual recording of the environmental conditions has been made in Excel®, and has been collected with a digital termohygrometer, which has led to programming concrete action lines for risk management proposed by Stovel in 2003, such as ventilation of the space by opening the windows or placing humidity traps with calcium chloride pearls.

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Together with the above, and as instructed by restorer Rosa Martha Ramírez Fernández, attached to the Centro INAH San Luis Potosí, a series of periodical fumigations (every six months) has begun aiming to prevent the appearance of possible points of infection of xylophagous insects.

As an additional work methodology and precise intervention of the photographic albums, we considered the proposal stated in José Vergara's publication (2002, pp. 139-40), where he sets down strategic steps to work with this type of materials: counting all the images, identifying the photographic processes and the assessment of the state of conservation of the pieces.

Based on the above, we analyzed what materials of the collection had poor condition or required urgent treatment to conduct an evaluation and avoid any direct treatment, at least not at this stage of the project, as we considered that photographic image restoration demands mastering a series of specific knowledge.

Thus, the work developed in the albums has been limited to a general process of mechanical cleaning and the preparation of temporary housings with stable and appropriate materials for conservation, focusing on the bindings, which needed it with greater urgency. (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5. Preventive conservation activities, supervised by restorer Rosa Martha Ramírez Fernández del Castillo (Photograph: José Antonio Motilla Chávez, 2021; courtesy: Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya, San Luis Potosí, Mexico).



c) Digitization

The assessment of the collection revealed the importance of starting the digital reproduction of the materials and, as a result, minimize their handling. Digitization is a current trend that brings to the table the responsibility of the institutions that protect documentary heritage (Figure 6).

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FIGURE 6. Example of an alteration due to album handling.

In the image, a variety of formats and location of the images inside the binding can be appreciated (Photograph: Amaranta González, 2021; courtesy: Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya, San Luis Potosí, Mexico).



In the case of Mexico, there are some highly relevant projects, among them the Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México (HNDM), from the Biblioteca Nacional de México (BNM) of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). Nevertheless, the high costs of specialized equipment in digitization processes are one of the limiting factors to install technology and cutting edge processes in documentary repositories, which continue working fully analogically.

With the purpose of avoiding such a hindrance towards digitizing the BRBA's collection, we designed a strategy that allows us to digitize the various funds and collections more quickly and efficiently, based on the open data culture, the spirit of free access to information and the manufacturing of tools and workflows of the Do It Yourself movement (DIY).

There are several manuals and procedures to digitize old collections, but for the purposes of this project, we have used the *Digital Imaging Tutorial* of the Cornell University Library, United States of America (2003). In addition, our digital reproduction process is based on the workflow proposed by [Proyecto Humboldt Digital](#) (2020), an important initiative, promoted by multiple institutions, whose objective is to rescue, preserve and digitize Cuba's written cultural heritage, consisting of preparation; digitization; post-processing; metadata creation; backup and storage, and digital publication (Rojas, 2020).

Regarding the equipment to digitally reproduce the images, we have followed two methods. In the first place, the use of an iPhone

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13 Pro,² allows us to reproduce images in high resolution, which are stored and digitally processed on a computer. The method, recently implemented, is to use scanner CZUR ET24 Pro, which offers an integral high-resolution and processing digitization system.

Once the images have been obtained, a low-resolution version is stored, organized and described using [Tropy](#) software, developed by the [Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media](#) (RRCHNM, United States); the high-resolution images are stored on a backup hard drive.

d) Consultation and dissemination

As a result of this first stage, which will conclude in the second semester of 2022, all the images will be digitized to then begin with the documentary description of each of them in order for the collection to be available for consultation and dissemination through a digital repository.

For this purpose, the [Omeka](#) system, developed by the RRCHNM, has been used. It is a free open code system, designed for libraries, archives and institutions or individuals that intend to disseminate their digital collections online. One of the most robust attributes of this system is that it works with protocol [Dublin Core™](#),³ which is one of the most comprehensive and complete digital object description standards.⁴

CONCLUSIONS

The protection of such a diverse and valuable collection has compelled us to contrast our opinions, professional knowledge, ingenuity and will to provide the *Programa de Conservación Preventiva del Patrimonio de la Biblioteca Ricardo B. Anaya* with sense and functionality.

Although the proposal for intervention of the materials maintains a sequence shared with the methodologies proposed in documents such as those of the Coremans Project, which intend to reach a shared vision in the intervention of movable assets, our proposal represents an attempt to protect this heritage with the human and material resources generated by the efforts of specialists and students.

² To see the characteristics of the recording with this device, please go to [Apple's](#) website.

³ The links that refer to the software and equipment specified by the authors are just for information access, not for commercial purposes.

⁴ A remarkable example of the use of Dublin Core™ for projects such as the one presented in this document is Velasco et al. (2021, pp. 258-280).

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So far, the collection of albums already has its own classification scheme. In the section about conservation, a mechanical cleaning of all the volumes has been carried out, and a total of 15 housings have been manufactured, accounting for 48% of the pieces in the photographic fund.

As for digitization, the aforementioned tools have allowed us to obtain high quality images through a method that substantially reduces the need of handling the materials. Progress of this process is around 60%.

Lastly, consultation and dissemination is the section that has seen the least progress as it requires managing and building the website, a process that will begin once the previous phases have concluded.

We hope that the actions presented and their gradual strategic implementation will allow, in a near future, accomplishing the purposes of this initiative and that the dissemination and recognition of this collection will be of good use to society.

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