

CHALLENGES OF THE PHOTOGRAPHY CONSERVATION AT THE MUNICIPAL MUSEUM OF BUCHAREST

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This presentation aims to show some of the demands and answers I can offer, concerning the photography conservation, starting from my experience during the last 15 years in our museum.

The challenges consist of the premises themselves.

The first one consists of the dimensions of the photographic collection itself, which, only in the Department of History of the City, exceed 60000 items. The other collections, from the Memorial Houses and the Ancient Art Collection, preserve also an important number of old photographs.

Another premise was the fact that, for a long time, I was the only Paper Conservator in our museum, thus I cannot ignore the photographs conservation problems.

Avoiding a ponderous long story, I'll present here the most significant facts.

The first important demand (in 1992) was hidden in a group of prints, drawings and watercolours, signed by Theodor Aman, one of the most influential artist from the XIX-th century. Here, three portraits, apparently in the same artistic technique: watercolour on paper, are looking very uneven from the stylistic point of view, and this arose some questions about the real problems of the items. The portrait of the Old Lady (the artist's mother) was a clear and doubtless watercolour, using the minute touches in the specific technique of the miniature-portrait of the Biedermeier Style. This portrait was very helpful for comparison with the other two, the men's portraits.

So, the Self-portrait, seems to be a photo, but at that moment I had never seen something like this before, because the common photographic layer to which we are so used today, was missing, and the image was staying in some untouchable way, directly on paper. Only in 1995⁵⁵¹, when I got the Bertrand Lavedrine's book: "LA CONSERVATION DES PHOTOGRAPHIES"⁵⁵², I had the possibility to see the images from the book and to understand that I have to deal with a Salted Paper Photography.

551 In 1993 we received an international group of Paper and Book Conservators under the EACT organization, in a summer workshop for professional exchange. At that moment I beg some of the colleagues to send me any information about photographs conservation. I received some copies from some articles from Bob Proctor, to whom I send again my thanks, remaining always grateful.

552 Especially the Moor's articles, see the bibliographic list.

The other portrait, representing the painter's brother Alexandru, looks even stranger. The colours and the use of the paintbrush contrast with those employed for the Lady's portrait, and this happens not only because the subject but also because there was another way to deal with a problem. Also, there was no evidence of an emerging image directly from the paper, as in the Self-portrait happens. Thus I suppose that it would be another painted photo, but without evident photographic traces.

Only a scientific investigation, with the analytical method of X-ray Fluorescence proved the presence of silver in the two strange men's portraits. So, only after this step I dared to proceed to the so called conservation work. For this purpose, two photos I had to remove first the papers from the backsides of each-one and to preserve in the same time the face-side with the image, painted in the water sensitive colours. To accomplish all this I used a piece of Gore-tex sheet and distilled water allowing enough time and care to succeed this complex backing-removal. The information I gained by studying the available bibliography⁵⁵³ taught me not to use any neutralization agent but only pure water. For filling of losses and mending I used similar paper and wheat starch. Flattening, some in-paintings, and the mounting in neutral cardboard, were the final operations.

The next demand was much easier to understand. The items were obvious photos, in cabinet-card shape, bearing glossy-brownish photographic layer on thin paper, stuck on the face-side of the boards, and having no over-paintings.

The main problem of these six Albumen Prints was that they were broken by an accidental pressure applied on the top of the vault, caused by excessive dryness. So, with one exception, the other five were made in two pieces, with severe distortions of the broken sides. Here I combined my Paper Conservator experience with the recommendation I learnt from the available bibliography⁵⁵⁴.

Using again pure water I dismantled the cabinet-cards, and then I used the method of "*montage sur fond tendu*" for re-assembling them. Also, I used again wheat starch and pure water, and I added different kind of Japanese paper to consolidate tears and the broken areas.

Another notable work consist of some oversized photos. The first of this was a modern photography of an important historical map of Bucharest, so called Plan Young. The whole was made by assembling, on a piece of wooden panel, of eight big photographic papers, which reproduced fragments of the plan. The difficulty of the work consist in the colour indications, painted with water-sensitive watercolours. So, I had to remove the panel with a dry method, carving it from the backside. Unfortunately the sensitiveness of the colours frustrate a good surface cleaning, absolutely necessary. The pieces are waiting now for a digital registration, in order to be more accessible to the museum specialists and the public.

The next large photographs I had to work with, were two modern gelatin copies of original negatives signed by another valuable artist, Carol Popp de Szathmary, representing panoramic images of the old Bucharest. The photos were rolled face-inside, dirty and with little marginal tears and losses. The main problems here were the flattening, the mounting and framing methods. Now they are still in the mounting and frames in which there were

553 Especially the Moor's articles, see the bibliographic list.

554 Especially the book of B. Lavedrine and the articles concerning Albumen Prints signed by I. and A. Moor.

exposed, because we consider this is, for the moment, the best way to protect them.

All these were the most significant steps I have done. The next other steps were much easier, because I had already some solutions, learning important ways to avoid dangerous interventions.

Further I'll only give a short recount of the other works I have done until these recent days.

For an exhibition in Venice I restored eighteen Painted Albumen Prints, by dry and wet local cleaning and little corner consolidations.

For a section of our Permanent Exhibition I had to fix around fifty different photos, but also with no big difficulties.

A greater number of conservation demands, concerning the photographs, were focused on the mounting and framing methods, which give a better appearance both to the items and to the whole exhibition.

Of course, my work does not exceed the physical task, even if I observed some chemical degrading of the images. But I did not dare to deal with this kind of problems, considering this is absolutely over my tiny competence.

Now only I hope to be able to learn more, to combine the experience I gain with the new information, and, if this will be possible, to share all this with a large number of Paper Conservators who have to deal with this valuable cultural heritage.

This presentation contains only the text. The Power Point version will be composed by the both kind of information, text and images

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