

# Another Look: Reprocessing Photograph Collections

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## Introduction

This research report is about the photograph reprocessing project that George Mason University Special Collections and Archives staff completed on two collections during a one-year grant-funded project in 2010 and 2011. This report will highlight the successes and the challenges, and it will examine how the project relates to past efforts to manage photograph collections.

## Challenges of processing photograph collections

By the 1980s, technology and staff resources often did not match the challenges faced by repositories with regards to large collections of 20th century photograph collections. For years, archivists and librarians in charge of photograph collections lacked standards for cataloging unpublished photograph and image collections. This changed with the publication of *AACR2* in 1978 and *Graphic Materials: Rules for Describing Original Items and Historical Collections* in 1982. The wider use of the MARC format to include unpublished archives and manuscripts appeared promising for photograph collections, but questions and concerns surrounding the non-textual nature of the format continued.

## What makes photograph collections different?

Photographs record information<sup>1</sup>, and without archival control, a significant body of knowledge remains unavailable, hidden.<sup>2</sup> There is somewhat of a conflict with the handling of photograph collections. They are in a sense no different from the other unique materials that reside in repositories, but there are definite characteristics that make them distinct.<sup>3</sup> For instance, photographs lack textual clues, and it is often difficult to determine their potential use. Objective intellectual analysis can be further complicated by the meaning the image in the photograph conveys.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Greenberg, "Intellectual Control of Visual Archives: A Comparison Between the Art and Architecture Thesaurus and The Library of Congress Thesaurus for Graphic Materials,"

*Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 16 (1993): 87.

<sup>2</sup> Greenberg, "Intellectual Control," 88.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Orbach, "So That Others May See: Tools for Cataloging Still Images," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 11 (1990): 164.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, "Intellectual Control," 88.



## Cataloging photograph collections

Although guidance found in the archival literature in the past included processing photograph collections at the group level<sup>5</sup>, that is not necessarily what archivists practiced, particularly with photographs found within collections. One technique for gaining control over photographs was separation into vertical filing cabinets. The vertical file storage system resulted in photographs being removed from original collections for storage in file cabinets, which made description less onerous and provided a way to establish local headings. This presented obvious problems with regards to provenance.<sup>6</sup> Provenance is especially important with photograph collections because creators of the images have unique insight into the subject and meaning of the photographs.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1980s, networked and desktop computers spurred different approaches to describing photograph collections. Computer cataloging not only opened up collections for researchers, but also presented opportunities for repositories to make better acquisition, cataloging, and preservation decisions based on the holdings of other institutions. One problematic aspect of photographs is the fact that it is not uncommon for different repositories to hold the exact same images.<sup>8</sup> The ability to share information about photograph collection holdings improved with changes to MARC. In 1984, changes approved for the MARC format allowed for cataloging visual materials, known as format integration. These changes included adding the 655 Genre/Form field.<sup>9</sup>

### How can collection-level records adequately describe the information contained in the photographs?

Cataloging photographs presented troubling issues when trying to bring these non-book items under bibliographic control. Assigning titles did not make the images any more discoverable by researchers. Even using collection-level description to gain control over a large body of material can result in a group title that obscures items within the collection that do not match the collection title.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of the potential for the collection-level title to be a deceptive descriptor, there were many efforts to describe at the item-level using MARC records. By the early 1990s, the availability of the internet, scanners, and database programs opened up new avenues for description of photograph collections. These projects did not completely start from scratch, however. For example, the California Historical Society's 1994 retrospective project adapted existing records with a wide variety of schemes and different classification systems. The online retrospective conversion project to standardize and

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<sup>5</sup> Anne L. Foster, "Minimum Standards Processing and Photograph Collections," *Archival Issues* 30 (2006): 107-108.

<sup>6</sup> Foster, "Minimum Standards," 109.

<sup>7</sup> Orbach, "So That Others May See," 166.

<sup>8</sup> Orbach, "So That Others May See," 166-67.

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen Bales, "The USMARC Formats and Visual Materials," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 8 (1989): 183.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Orbach, "Integrating Concepts: Corporate Main Entry and Graphic Materials," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 8 (1988): 75.

automate the collections resulted in 18,000 new records.<sup>11</sup> The Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division used automation in the early 1990s to combine group and item-level records into a single retrieval system to replace a legacy description system of non-uniform card catalogs.<sup>12</sup>

The greater use of online retrieval and access systems in the 1990s was complemented by the greater use of the *Art and Architecture Thesaurus* and the *Thesaurus for Graphic Materials* to provide more robust subject and genre description for photographs.<sup>13</sup> With the demonstrated usefulness of images on videodiscs and the automation of archival records, the importance of gaining intellectual control over photograph collections was quickly becoming recognized in the library and archives world.<sup>14</sup> Unlike textual collections, image collections expanded the potential for visual searching on the internet. The search possibilities pushed librarians and archivists to address that reality, instead of focusing so much time on the perfect photograph filing system, since researchers no longer just searched through binders full of finding aids in the reading room.<sup>15</sup>

Databases in the 1990s proved to be of assistance so that more time could be focused on description rather than arrangement, but the temptation to use databases on time-consuming, item-level work meant a potential growth in the backlog due to the acceptance of large donations, for instance congressional collections with large photographic components.<sup>16</sup> In the late 1990s, Encoded Archival Description (EAD) provided a way to describe photograph collections at multiple levels and link directly to digital content. As with textual collections, EAD expanded the options to make photograph collections available online and connect them through collaborative EAD consortia. By using common subject indexing within EAD, this could leverage the power of searching through many finding aids in a common system<sup>17</sup>, such as when used in conjunction with MARC collection-level records and the 852 field.<sup>18</sup> EAD provides a way to give broad description of photograph collections as well, particularly large journalism collections that already have subjects terms provided through caption sheets or other creator-supplied information.<sup>19</sup>

EAD, though, brings up one of the same problems with using MARC and databases, and that is the impulse to describe at the item-level. Even though the adoption of new digital tools enables archivists to describe photograph collections to the item-level, this practice remains impractical in many cases.<sup>20</sup> Instead, we should look at current arrangement and decide what would be descriptive enough for researcher use rather than processing everything at the item-level. For instance, did the creator of the

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<sup>11</sup> Cataloging images in MARC at the California Historical Society, p161.

<sup>12</sup> Harriet W. Harrison, "Cataloging Visual Images: The View from LC," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 15 (1996): 13.

<sup>13</sup> Greenberg, "Intellectual Control," 89.

<sup>14</sup> Greenberg, "Intellectual Control," 97.

<sup>15</sup> Eileen Fry, "Image Access and Cyber Searching: The Philadelphia Experiment," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 17 (1998): 52.

<sup>16</sup> Foster, "Minimum Standards," 109.

<sup>17</sup> Mary W. Elings, "Pictorial Archives and EAD: Indexing Collections for Online Access," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 19 (2000): 10.

<sup>18</sup> "Pictorial Archives," 11.

<sup>19</sup> Elings, "Pictorial Archives," 12.

<sup>20</sup> Elings, "Pictorial Archives," 13-14.

photographs provide enough detail?<sup>21</sup> This approach of processing photograph collections favors the in-depth researcher rather than the specific researcher. Digitization plans in the future can support the specific researcher, not only through item-level description but also because s/he can browse the actual images, and the initial processing can help speed up description, especially if there are a lot of similar items.<sup>22</sup>

## GMU Project

The Oliver Atkins Photograph Collection and the Arthur Scott Photograph Collection both contain images of significant people and events in Washington, D.C., the United States, and abroad in the 20th century. Special Collections & Archives (SC&A) staff created detailed typewritten and handwritten inventories in the 1980s, but they never updated those inventories using newer description standards and schemes including EAD and DACS. Thus, most of the contents remained hidden from researchers; and staff could not easily locate images to meet reference requests. As a result, the collections of two photographers became the focus of researchers' attention largely because of the significance of their photojournalism careers. Atkins worked as the Saturday Evening Post Washington, D.C., correspondent in the 1960s and as the Chief White House photographer in the Richard Nixon White House. The Atkins collection is the largest non-university archives photograph collection in Special Collections & Archives and is often used for reference requests, exhibits, and class instruction. Scott worked for multiple Washington, D.C., news bureaus from the 1930s to the 1950s, and then as photographer for the Republican Senate Committee, and finally as the first U.S. Senate photo-historian. The Arthur E. Scott collection contains subject matter that complements the Atkins collection, particularly scenes of Washington, D.C., people and events in the 20th century.

The photojournalism field developed rapidly after World War II, with the increase in the publication of newsmagazines and newspapers that made heavy use of photographs to illustrate stories, and the availability of high-speed camera technology. The photographers often produced many images while photographing even brief events in order to produce just one or two for publication.<sup>23</sup> The Atkins and Scott collections are important reflections of this evolution in photography, and they provide valuable documentation of major events as well as multiple posed shots of "grip-and-grins."

The collections were stored in a variety of ways, including in filing cabinets, acidic boxes and folders, and plastic sleeves. The assortment of storage methods and descriptive schemes resulted in an inefficient and confusing system for both staff and researchers to locate materials.

Atkins was particularly problematic. The photographic prints, negatives, contact sheets, and large format prints were arranged and described in hundreds of pages of typewritten and handwritten inventories. As an attempt to highlight part of the collection, SC&A staff created an EAD guide for four folders of the 1972 Nixon election, scanned the photographs, and uploaded the digital objects into the library's DSpace repository. However, the digitized photographs were not linked to the finding aid. Staff also uploaded a small sample of images of presidents and events in Washington, D.C., to a page on the SC&A website, but these images lacked significant description. The Scott collection received some processing work, but

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<sup>21</sup> Foster, "Minimum Standards," 110.

<sup>22</sup> Foster, "Minimum Standards," 113.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, et al., *Photographs*, 12-14.

there was no attempt at description beyond handwritten inventories from the 1980s. In fact the reference statistics only referred to scrapbooks that were donated many years after the photograph collection, which were also not inventoried.

In 2010, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) awarded the George Mason University Libraries a Detailed Processing Grant to reprocess the Atkins and Scott photograph collections. The grant provided partial funding for SC&A staff to reprocess the two collections according to current archival standards, while also using previous description efforts where appropriate. By creating a finding aid with specific naming conventions, the NHPRC grant project team hoped to provide fast searching across both collections to aid in completing reference requests and reproduction orders in a more timely fashion. For many years, SC&A had relied on one or two staff members who were intimately familiar with the collections for service.

Fortunately, a new resource, *Photographs: Archival Care and Management*, was published in 2006, and this aided in preparing the grant application as well as arrangement and description plans. The authors' recommendations for description include creating finding aids and summaries in order to successfully manage large quantities of unpublished photographs, while at the same time allowing for item-level work when necessary, such as in the case of photographs with high research value.<sup>24</sup> More description may also be called for when there are preservation issues and the archives wants to minimize browsing.<sup>25</sup> Item-level work can also be done selectively to provide an idea of what kind of information is contained in other photographs in that folder or series. When photographs in a folder or series contain much of the same information, such as a photo assignment file with multiple shots of the same speech, then item-level work is not necessary. If there is a digital image with more specific item-level information, then a link to that from the finding aid can serve as the item-level description.<sup>26</sup>

The project team completed surveys of the collections and chose sections with descriptions already available, although the descriptions largely lacked consistent, controlled vocabulary. The project team used a Google Docs spreadsheet to manage controlled vocabulary terms for both subject and genre access; the spreadsheet also assisted with creating name and subject headings for EAD finding aids, MARC records, and selected digital images. The arrangement of the Atkins collection changed over the course of the project from one based on Atkins' career to one based on format, then by career. This arrangement maximized the preservation and storage. The emphasis in the Scott collection on particular groups of people in Washington, D.C., made a subject arrangement preferable.

Some Atkins folders presented a bigger problem than initially anticipated from the collection survey. For instance the typewritten finding aid did not always correspond to the contents of the file cabinets. Some of the folder titles could not be directly transposed to the new description scheme and required updating or rewriting. The Scott glass negatives required extensive work because they were housed in boxes either too tightly or too loosely. However, an existing handwritten inventory for the glass negatives assisted with identification. For the Scott Collection, many of the 4x5" negatives had corresponding handwritten inventories that were largely accurate.

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<sup>24</sup> Ritzenthaler, et al., *Photographs*, 167.

<sup>25</sup> Ritzenthaler, et al., *Photographs*, 184.

<sup>26</sup> Ritzenthaler, et al., *Photographs*, 187.

One innovative aspect of the Atkins finding aid is that it combines the new arrangement and some of the old by linking to a PDF of one of the typewritten legacy finding aids. This also reflects the attempt to retain some of the characteristics of the old arrangement since images from the collection have been published. Although the box and folder numbers are different, the titles and dates are consistent with the old arrangement, and this is the reason that the old finding aid can be used to identify images at the item level. As with other visual collections, providing researchers with as much information as possible about the images themselves is crucial to providing access.

The NHPRC grant allowed SC&A staff to process/reprocess the two collections according to current archival standards, while building on previous description efforts where appropriate. The result is that both of the collections are far more accessible to the research community, both inside and outside the university, than they have ever been before. By standardizing subject and genre terms, we improved the project workflow and devised procedures for processing photographs and other graphic material collections. Since the project also included digitization of images with known copyright restrictions, we made some progress on contacting copyright holders and determining what they will and will not allow.

The project at GMU attempted to describe photograph collections by straddling the line between item-level and collection-level, while building on previous descriptive efforts, and creating digital access copies for researchers. Future efforts will include using the physical location function of LUNA, the digital asset management software, to link from finding aids to the item-level records.

Although many more avenues opened for photograph description in the 1980s and 1990s, many institutions continued to rely on hard copy finding aids that were only available in reading rooms. The complexity and scale of legacy finding aids prevented some repositories from implementing EAD, and only piecemeal efforts at exposing the collections on the internet were taken. Other collections existed without any guides at all, completely hidden. The status of hidden archival collections is a topic that deserves more research.

## **Resources**

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