Revealing Affinities across Collections through the Language of the Photographic Print

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ABSTRACT

Texture, gloss, highlight color, and sheet thickness—the defining characteristics of photographic paper—each contribute to the visual impact of a print. Paper manufacturers manipulated these key characteristics, singly and in combination, to differentiate their products and to satisfy a wide range of market demands. By the early 1920s, these features were routinely described in marketing materials, sample books and, most importantly for the working darkroom photographer, directly on paper packages. This specialized vocabulary became increasingly essential in the 1920s and 1930s as photographers sought to navigate an unprecedented diversity of silver gelatin papers.

Combined, the principle components of texture, gloss, highlight color, and sheet thickness can be used to create "expressive" papers on one end of the spectrum and "functional" papers on the other. An expressive paper—rough, matte, warm-toned, and thick—signals interpretive subjectivity. A functional paper—smooth, glossy, white, and thin—projects objective reality through an implied conveyance of documentary fact. Throughout the twentieth century, black-and-white printers explored these two poles and the nearly infinite terrain in between.

Using this language, an experiment was conducted involving ten pairs of photographs selected from the Thomas Walther Collection at The Museum of Modern Art and the photography collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Across the two collections, each pair of photographs is attributed to the same photographer and shows the same or a very similar image. However the selected images have differences in cropping, dimensions, and color between most pairs. These distinctions, along with variations in titles and dates in the two museum catalogues, provide ample reason to question whether or not the paired prints share the same or a substantially different material history.

For each print, texture, gloss, base color, and paper thickness were measured. To avoid subjective bias, measurements were made separately at each institution, and the prints were never examined together side by side. Measured values were then compared to determine whether the paired prints were on the same or different paper. Results indicate that these straightforward techniques show promise for providing a basis to identify paper matches and mismatches. Further, analysis of these data present an opportunity for automating comparisons of papers across collections as well as suggesting new ways to visualize and compare the expressive and functional properties of a photographic print. Networked at a meaningful scale that crosses multiple collections, the identification of patterns, sets and subsets among prints and among photographers could open the door to new modes of research for conservators, curators, collectors and related scholars. This experiment also demonstrates that collection and analysis of basic-level characteristics familiar to every photographer brings new relevance to, and thus can help preserve, the language of medium.