

The Andrew W. Mellon series of Collaborative Workshops in Photograph Conservation: Characterization of Gelatin Silver Prints, New York Public Library, New York, New York, USA, September 30 – October 1, 2010

## **A Brief History of Silver Gelatin Papers**

Paul Messier<sup>1</sup>

Ubiquitous and ordinary, the “black and white” photograph represents one of the most significant, widespread and accessible imaging technologies in history. This success is owed to the rare combination of attributes possessed by silver gelatin developing-out papers. Well processed, and properly stored, a silver gelatin print has outstanding permanence especially as compared to almost any other photographic printing process. Silver gelatin papers have reliable handling properties in the darkroom, allowing quick and large-scale production by amateurs and professionals alike. Capable of subtle manipulations and available in great variety, the paper is a versatile medium for artistic expression, bearing masterworks of modern and contemporary art.

With darkrooms shutting down, photographers, curators, collectors and conservators are being challenged to mark the historic transition away from chemical photography and interpret the gains and losses. Part of this accounting is the growing realization that any understanding of a photographic print must include a comprehension of the historical development, expressive potential and stylistic qualities of photographic paper. This presentation covers the history of silver gelatin developing-out papers from their inception in the late 19th century to present day.

## **Updates on Optical Brighteners**

Paul Messier<sup>1</sup>

The detection of optical brighteners provides a key tool in dating photographic prints. In the decade since this initial finding, the visual impact and permanence of fluorescence produced by optical brighteners is more clearly understood. Other significant strides are the ability to routinely and repeatedly document fluorescence and new insights into the treatment of optically brightened photographic paper.

---

<sup>1</sup> Conservator of Photographs, Paul Messier LLC, Boston, MA 02135, USA, 617 782 7110, pm@paulmessier.com