

A Model for a Cross-Repository Survey of Photograph Collections

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Over the past 25 years, a number of emerging trends, technologies, and attitudes have steadily transformed the way we perceive and care for historic photograph collections. In the 1980s, as the 150th anniversary of photography was approaching, values for photography in the art market rose significantly. Curators and collection managers began to take an increasingly broader, multi-disciplinary view of the medium and to recognize their photographic holdings as primary source materials offering unique perspectives in the sciences and humanities. At the same time, the development of a host of new tools—including digital imaging technology, electronic cataloging, and online access—offered the possibility of providing access to hundreds of thousands of images.

This new-found appreciation of photography has resulted in increased use of historical photograph collections around the world. With it has come a growing awareness of the inherent fragility of these materials and the preservation challenges in caring for them. Published in December 2005, the Heritage Health Index (HHI) was the first comprehensive survey to assess⁴ the condition of photograph collections across the spectrum of cultural heritage institutions in the United States. The HHI survey revealed that, of the 727 million photographic materials in our nation’s archives, libraries, museums, and historical societies, 42 percent (or more than 305 million photographs) remain in unknown condition.

As large, decentralized institutions began to uncover a wealth of photographic material within their holdings, it became evident that creating a system for the identification and the care of these vast collections presented its own set of unique challenges. In the early 2000s, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation began to provide support for large-scale institutions to develop a methodology for inventorying and assessing the condition of photograph collections across multiple repositories. The first of these projects, undertaken in 2002 by the Weissman Preservation Center in the Harvard University Library, included a general condition survey of over 7.5 million photographs housed in 50 repositories throughout Harvard. Three years later, conservators built on the Survey to create a project management tool for Harvard’s newly established photograph preservation program.

In 2006, the Library of Congress adopted the Survey Model used at Harvard to assess its own collections totaling over 14 million images. In 2008, the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia followed, using the Model to assess over 30 photograph collections located throughout the institution. The New York Public Library and Yale University are presently engaged in large-scale projects using the Survey. To date, the Model has proved to be a versatile methodology enabling organizations to identify collections across multiple repositories and to establish preservation priorities for their institutions as a whole.

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