

Impact of authenticity scandals on the field of photograph conservation

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Coming in close succession, major authenticity scandals in 1997 and 1999 involving photographs attributed to Man Ray and Lewis Hine sent a shudder of uncertainty across the collecting community. The realization that those at the top of the marketplace, including museums, private collectors, dealers, and auction houses, were vulnerable to fraud brought a heightened awareness that the value of a fine art photograph, in all respects, is based on a subtle and complex material history. Knowing a photograph means knowing this material history. As the objective understanding of a work of art became of pressing concern, the conservator's materials-based knowledge grew in relevance. Not by accident, the Hine scandal - the largest of its kind in the history of the fine art photography market - was revealed through the work of art conservators.

A decade ago, exposing the fraudulent Hine prints hinged on the discovery of three elements that should not have been present in photographic papers made prior to 1950. Identification of these materials-based anachronisms broke new ground in authentication methodology and simultaneously illuminated significant gaps in the understanding of 20th century photographic papers. Seemingly simple questions, involving the chronology of manufacturer markings, use of certain fluorescent dyes, and various papermaking fibers, took months to establish and even then remained open to question and challenge. With sudden clarity, the assembly of reference collections of photographic paper became an urgent need. Responding to a growing imperative to establish the material history of the medium, individual conservators and some institutions began amassing and cataloguing manufacturer sample books and packages of unprocessed paper. These collections were also a response to a growing realization that silver-based, chemical photography was nearing its end as a commercially viable medium and that the materials of the 20th century photographer were rapidly disappearing.

Concurrent with the development of reference collections, innovative methods to characterize the physical and chemical composition of photographic papers were initiated by conservators and conservation scientists. New characterization techniques were needed not only to assist in determining the date of manufacture for a particular print but also to provide insight into more subtle issues informing a photographer's choice of paper by manufacturer, brand, surface finish, and other materials-based characteristics. The vital need to develop new characterization methodologies was further substantiated in a convening of leading conservators and conservation scientists hosted by the Getty Conservation Institute in 2000. This meeting was soon followed by a conference held by the Association of International Photographic Art Dealers in 2001 which was geared toward making the technical information generated by the Lewis Hine research and related investigations accessible to curators, private collectors, and dealers. Since that time, existing tools have been refined and new ones developed, including applications for paper fiber identification, spectrographic assessments of organic and inorganic constituents, and protocols to assess and describe surface texture. Advancements to these techniques, as well as the development of new methods, continue to be actively investigated by institutional and private conservators.

As new characterization methods prove viable, the emphasis in the field is gradually shifting toward more fully-realized, practical applications. For example, a project developed by the recently founded and informally organized Photographic Materials Research Group is intended to demonstrate the impact and significance of newly developed characterization techniques by undertaking research into lifetime and posthumous prints of Lewis Hine's *Powerhouse Mechanic* (1920). A range of novel approaches were deployed to help determine the origins and stylistic evolution of prints made of this iconic image.

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Results of this effort, derived from eleven Powerhouse Mechanic prints in the George Eastman House collection, are presented on its website, *Notes on Photographs*. The success and limitations of this work raises the necessity to employ characterization methods to reference collections of known origin, constructing libraries of paper fibers, surface textures, inorganic constituents and resins. Likewise, the application of these techniques is gradually being focused on the documentation of materials-based characteristics of prints from individual master photographers. Aggregated in databases, such knowledge could clarify crucial questions about authenticity and provenance, and provide tremendous insight into how a print represents the artistic intent of a photographer.

The field of photograph conservation would have been propelled toward undertaking a characterization agenda even without the authenticity scandals of the late 1990's. The rising market values of fine art prints combined with increasingly refined art historical scholarship made an understanding of the materials of the photographer an increasing priority. With a decade of retrospect it is also clear that the Lewis Hine controversy, in particular, provided a catalytic sense of urgency. With much at stake, the fine art photography market was quick to embrace the tools generated by the Hine research, spurring an ever increasing number of privately commissioned authentication studies. While these projects advance the field by challenging the conservators involved and supporting additional research and the acquisition of reference material, the necessity to guarantee confidentiality for private work inhibits a wider understanding and the involvement of mainstream collecting institutions. Gradually, however, institutions have begun the process of incorporating many of these emergent techniques into their ongoing research agendas. For the Museum of Modern Art, this integration has already resulted in a more definitive and nuanced understanding of the origin of key prints in its collection.

As this research becomes more conventional within collecting institutions, an important benefit is the ability to disseminate the methodologies and results through publications, conferences, and discussions within all ranks of the collecting community. Going forward, the impact of this dialogue should garner the support required for more comprehensive and more evolved research programs. With a solid grounding in materials, the catalogue raisonné, so critical for scholarship in other artistic media, will be meaningfully retooled for the medium of photography. As the relevance of characterization research to all aspects of the collecting community becomes clear, its growth is assured. With origins in the 1999 Lewis Hine authenticity scandal, this growth will build on a solid decade of commitment and work by a small group of art conservators.