

## **Understanding 20<sup>th</sup> Century Photographs: Techniques for Materials-based Research and Authentication**

Paul Messier<sup>1</sup>

Knowing when a photographic print was produced has value. For the conservator, print date may carry implications for treatment, display and storage. In the marketplace, print date is probably the largest single variable affecting the price for a photograph. For the collector and curator, establishing a chronology of prints is a key toward understanding the course of a photographer's aesthetic development and the history of the medium. When provenance is lacking, incomplete or disputed, specialists from many spheres are often able to make judgments based on criteria such as state of preservation, markings and paper type. Dating prints in this manner can often be quite accurate though it is highly dependent on the expert interpretation of often subjective criteria. In cases where sufficient expertise is lacking, opinions conflict or when authenticity is questioned such analysis may not be sufficient.

Until recently, however, there were no widely accepted techniques for objectively determining the manufacture date of 20th century photographic papers. Beginning in the late 1990's photograph conservators and conservation scientists gained significant ground with the potential of more developments in the near future.

The presentation will present an overview of the most promising techniques and resources for dating fiber-based, gelatin silver photographic paper. This review will encompass some well known practices based on the establishment and cataloging of a photographic paper reference collection, optical brightening agents, manufacturer back printing, and paper fiber identification as well as techniques currently being developed such as the XRF analysis of the baryta layer and identifying paper fiber species and ratios. As these emergent tools are expected only to compliment, but not replace, existing modes of connoisseurship the will be a more pressing need for additional forums where conservators, curators, collectors and dealers can meet to exchange information will be felt more acutely.

---

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