Mastering Mounting

Photos with an Attitude... a.k.a. Problem Photos

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It's not that being a photograph is a problem, it's more the reactions of the photograph to surrounding environmental conditions during the developing process that makes them more difficult to understand and deal with when framing. There continue to be traditional RC photos; tightly curled photos from years of rolled storage; wavy black-and-white fiber-base prints; damaged or dirty emulsions; and digital photos. So it appears the photo image must first be identified, overviewed for problems; then decided upon how to handle.

Not Just A Print Anymore

Photographers have always referred to photo images as prints. In the picture framing industry we have elected to call them photographs rather than prints in an attempt to clear up potential confusion over photo prints versus lithographic prints. And then came digitals. Digital photographs are printed ink

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images of one sort or another—real prints.

During the last Print Committee meeting of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), it was decided in the standards updates that photographs needed to be specifically referred to as *photographic prints*—no longer simply prints. This is aimed at helping to clarify the confusion of the type of image being discussed. This is a direct reflection of the influx of digital photos and printed images (whether inkjet or dye sublimation) into the photo world. Though traditional photographs will no doubt always exist, as traditional oil paintings do, the new digitals on the block will alter the way of looking at photos and must be recognized as here to stay, like acrylic painting was many years ago.

While riding in a shuttle at a recent trade show, I overheard two gentlemen from the photo industry discussing the

development of wedding photography. It seems many wedding photographers are shifting to digital photographs which enables the photographer to set up production and printout at the reception. They are now able to photograph, allow for guest viewing, then print out ordered images to distribute to the guests for them to take home. Yes, these are all digital prints (images) on photographic papers suitable for framing.

Welcome to the 21st century. Is this a photo *problem*? No, just a detail we need to address. Items must first be correctly identified so they may best be enhanced and protected during framing. This is why continuing education is so vital to our industry.

Uncurling and Flattening Brittle Old Photos

Once a traditional photo (RC or fibre-base*) has been identified, an ongoing problem in framing is getting them to lie flat. Wavy, rippled, and curled prints may be the result of either the original drying process, or years of being rolled in storage. Extreme care must be taken when attempting to flatten any photo.

There are both wet and dry methods for flattening photos, including humidifying, wet and dry techniques as discussed in the following sections. Serious consideration of the substrate composition and emulsion or ink (RC, fibre-base, digital) of the photo
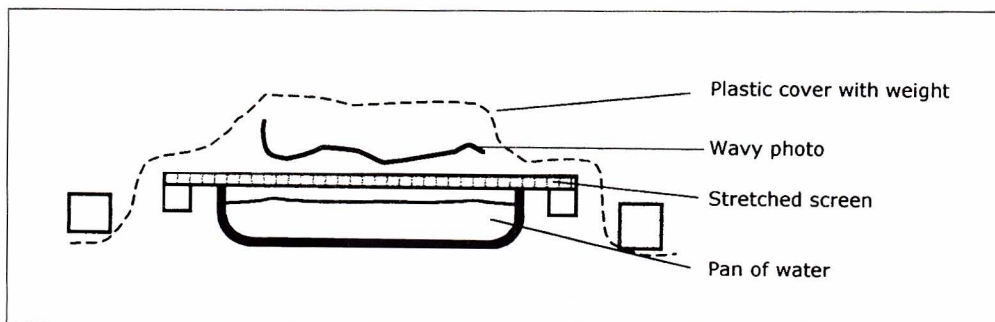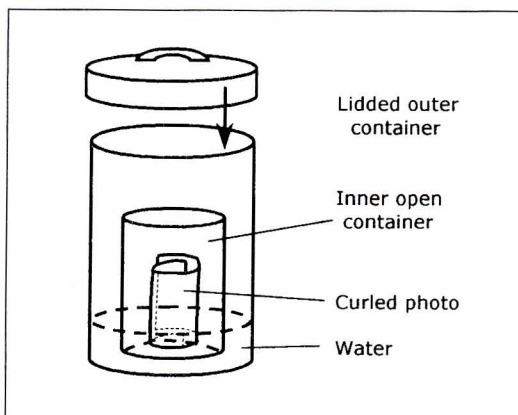

Diagram 1: Horizontal Humidifier

Plastic cover with weight
Wavy photo
Stretched screen
Pan of water

Diagram 2: Vertical Humidifier

Lidded outer container
Inner open container
Curled photo
Water

prior to selecting the flattening technique must be taken. Most of the following descriptions are best utilized with fibre-base images and may not work with RC at all.

Humidifiers

Brittle, aged emulsions can easily crack when tightly rolled images are forced flat without humidifying them first. Using a humidifier will begin to relax the base paper, allowing for gentle waves to be flattened. Homemade humidifiers may be created for single piece flattening or for frequent use. Following are two non-commercial versions which can be put together as needed for small occasional projects.

Horizontal

A developing tray much larger than the photo to be flattened should be filled with warm water and covered with a sheet of clean fiberglass screening across the top. The screen may either be stretched to a strainer or weighted to hold the edges down if temporary. Lay the print on top of the screen, cover with a sheet of plastic, and weight the edges to seal in the moisture (see Diagram 1). After the moisture has been allowed to penetrate the photo paper, place between blotters and weight to dry for 24 hours. Drying time will vary with moisture content and size of the photo.

Vertical

Tightly rolled prints require more time to absorb and relax the paper base. Place a small, open top, plastic container or wastebasket into the bottom of a larger plastic container with two to three inches of warm water in the bottom. Place the rolled photo into the smaller dry container, close the outer lid, and let the photo paper absorb moisture a couple of days (see Diagram 2). When soft and limp enough, unroll, flatten, and dry between blotters under an even, flat weight.

Once relaxed or de-stressed, cylinders in graduated sizes may

be inserted to help encourage the photo to relax to the ultimate and desirable flattened format. Non-sticky barrier papers such as Pelon are suggested to keep the emulsion from sticking, but images can also pick up varying textures. Whether a mechanical dry mount press is used to add weight and warmth to the flattening photo will depend upon the age and photo itself. *Be careful.* Heat the press to regular mounting temperature then turn it off. Place the photo in a closed, but not locked, press with appropriate release materials and let it cool down overnight.

Pressing Variations

There are two basic pressing variations—cold and hot. Moistening and placing under warm weight in a mechanical press to cool flat is a familiar and commonly attempted technique often successful with paper images, but must be avoided with water-based wide format digitals and digital photos. The following techniques are suggested alternatives for attempting to flatten traditional fibre-base, black-and-white photos. The previously mentioned humidifiers are the more conservation approaches to flattening.

Cold/Wet Pressing

Cold pressing is an aggressive version of flattening an image. This process should only be attempted when the photo is strong, in good condition, and shows no deterioration. (This process will not work with RC photos.) Test the back of the photo with a drop of water to check for staining before wetting.

- Lightly dampen the back of the photo by misting or with a sponge.

- When limp, lay face down on Pelon over blotter paper.

- Cover with second sheet of Pelon and blotter paper; add weight to dry.

- Prints may be stacked for flattening with the same blotter sandwiches between.

- Change to dry blotters as needed.

Hot/Dry Pressing

When flattening in a dry mount press use either blotter papers or 4-ply rag board, and release paper to protect the artwork or fibre-base photo.

- Preheat press to maximum of 200°F for photographs and pre-dry all materials.

- Sandwich from top to bottom: release paper; optional cover sheet (overlay foil); photo (face up); blotter paper or 4-ply board; release paper.

- Close and lock press for one minute; cool immediately under a weight.

This process will not ensure a flattened image. Badly rippled photos may crease during this process of flattening, which can also occur during dry mounting, which makes a hinging recommended process. Do not attempt to heat press images that are easily damaged by heat. This includes Ilfochrome Classics, some RC and

most digital images.

When attempting to flatten heat tolerant, high gloss photos, be careful of textured papers, blotters, ColorMount Cover Sheets, and release materials that might damage the photo surface. Overlay Foil-Acetate Film should be used to protect the surface of the photo even when only attempting to flatten prior to mounting. The silicone from the release paper, paper fibers from Kraft paper, and texture from cover sheets can all damage the surface.

Cold pressing is an aggressive version of flattening an image, and should only be attempted when the photo is in good condition.

Think before attempting any corrective technique. Consult a conservator any time the possibilities might be beyond the technical skills of the framer. Damage is often irreparable. Knowing when to consult another professional *is* being a professional.

Wavy Fibre-Base Photos

Wavy fibre-base photos are the result of hang-drying rather than

using a print drier during developing. They are meant to be dried under a weight so they end up flat. If placed in a dry mount press without first flattening, permanent creases are inevitable. Advising the photographer who may be bringing them to you about flattening techniques may sound presumptuous, but will support your knowledge of how to handle their artwork.

My contact in the fibre-base black-and-white division of Kodak has given me the following pointers when attempting to flatten these photos during original drying.

- Dry the prints face-down on blotters.

- Dry the prints face-up but weighted or taped around the edges.

- Dry the prints in a hot drum (ferrotyper) but put the emulsion against the cloth belt, not the glossy drum.

- Dry the prints face-down. Then dry mist the back with distilled water and flatten in a warm, mechanical, dry mount press between two clean, 100% cotton ragboards.

It is cautioned that if there are any residual chemicals remaining in the photos due to poor washing they may be transferred to the cotton boards, which in turn may contaminate future prints being press dried. This means that a poorly processed photo from one photographer could ruin hundreds of properly processed prints later. The framer will not be able to tell ahead of time, or when a board has been contaminated, but the customer will down the road a few years when yellow stains begin to appear on the print.

Proper Handling

It has been touted for ages to wear white gloves anytime handling a photo or any artwork, but how a photo is lifted can be just as important. Curled and wavy photographs are only part of the damage that can be created by poor care. When carelessly picking up a photo from the sides, a serious dimple or crease may result if it is picked up and tried to be kept flat while elevated. The correct way to lift and carry a photo is by the corner, with a gloved hand. If the photo is too large to safely pick up by only one corner than grasp it by two, or gently cup or contour it between two hands when moving it.
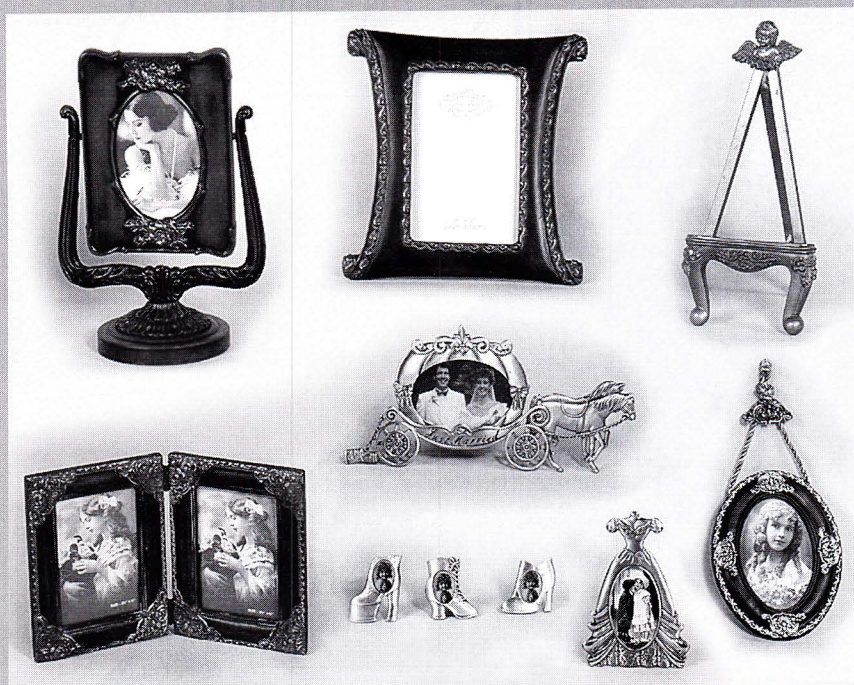
Surface Cleaning

Many solvents will remove bits of adhesive and marks from the emulsion of a traditional photo, such as UnSeal and un-du, but they should be used with care. Photo Emulsion Cleaner also known as PEC-12 is available at photo developing stores and specialty sources. It will remove ballpoint ink and markers from photo surfaces, but may also remove top coatings or retouch lacquer, so beware.

Apply solvents using only very soft cloths and a light touch, as aggressive application or using a rough cloth may scratch the emulsion during cleaning. Before applying any solvent to a photo surface be sure to identify the photo and its origin. Any solvent, including PEC-12, will damage the inks of a water-based digital photograph.

Photograph Print Originals

Many years ago I was taught the negative was the *original* and the photo print was simply a *print* or *copy of the negative*. At a recent ANSI meeting I asked the current standing on which is the original, and was told the printed image is considered the original. The negative is considered the source or as Ansel Adams put it, "the negative is the score, the print the performance." All prints can vary due to developing technique, chemical mix, paper, and touch up, not to mention digital computer manipulation. This makes potentially every printed image uniquely an original like a monoprint. That said, photo conservators are still divided on mounting versus hing-

ing or preservation non-invasive mounting.

The Closing Attitude

So, what's the story on photos? Whether we call them photographs, photographic prints, or photographic images they are still very much in need of white glove treatment and special attention. They are not problems, but simply need a little more attention and gentle care. Identifying their origin prior to framing is one of the most important parts and the major trend in handling them today. Some are heat sensitive, some moisture sensitive, some solvent sensitive, and some are all three.

There are conservators and photo specialists out there who can give advice and assistance when required, and the best advice is to always realize your limitations. We don't need to know everything, we only need to know when it's time to call in another expert.

I hope you had a Happy Labor Day... how can it be September already? ■

* Correct and accepted ANSI/ISO international spelling and tense for paper-backed photos is "fibre-base," not "fiber-based."

Segments of this article have been printed from the new "Mounting And Laminating Handbook, Second Edition" to be released this month. A special thank you to Dave Valvo for his advice on flattening fibre-base photos and the ANSI Photographic Prints Committee for its assistance on photo identification and the definition of an original photo.