
Examine, then Exhibit: Studying and Displaying Paper Negatives at the Rijksmuseum

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Résumé

As rare items that offer us a glimpse into the earliest days of photography, paper negatives always hold a special place in photographic collections. While heritage professionals are dedicated to preserving them for the future, they also need to make them accessible to the public in reading rooms and in exhibitions so that their history and technology can be better understood. As a result, curators and conservators often spend more time and resources in the conservation of paper negatives than they might for other collection materials.

Despite their age, paper negatives are often found to be in surprisingly good condition. They tend to be both very stable and very fragile at the same time. The developed-out silver image is usually chemically intact, and it rests within a sheet of high quality paper. Should this paper be waxed, the image is isolated from humidity, oxygen and pollutants in the surrounding air, and it therefore does not tend to fade. However, the thin paper, chosen by the photographer for precisely this application, can be quite fragile and often has a history of extensive handling. This may give rise to losses, tears and creases, the latter of which are most visible in waxed negatives as localized whitish haze. In addition, retouching paint applied to the negative can lift and fall off the surface. Since this physical damage is a direct result of improper handling, the negatives at the Rijksmuseum have been mounted in specially designed protective mats, so that they can be both safely taken to the reading room for study and also be shown in the galleries.

During recent years, the Rijksmuseum exhibited paper negatives in the context of two separate shows. Discussions in advance between the curators and the conservators were useful to understand the priorities of each side. In effect, the decision was taken not to restore the wax creases in the negatives, since they form a part of the history of the objects and do not greatly interfere with the perception of the images. In addition, they do not seem to pose a threat to the long-term preservation of the paper negatives. However, the Rijksmuseum did not have a standard technique to back-light the negatives for exhibition, in order to show them as a photographer would have looked at them: held up against the light. At that time, a student from the conservation program of the Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences (Technical University of Cologne) was looking for research projects for both his Bachelor's and his subsequent Master's degree. Matthias Kühlenkötter's enthusiasm for paper negatives turned out to be very helpful for our work at the museum: he first prepared mockups using nine different historical recipes, then he experimented with restoration techniques and performed accelerated ageing on his samples with intense LED light exposure.

Given Matthias' experimental results, the Rijksmuseum decided to go ahead with its exhibition plans. This talk will first give details on the production of the mockups and the

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research performed during the study, then it will describe the two exhibitions that followed. The choice of light source for illuminating the negatives from the back was the key to finding a safe and beautiful form of exhibition. In the first show we encountered a number of problems, but we learned from this experience and changed our approach for the second show. It is hoped that Matthias' research and our experience in the exhibition galleries will be useful to other institutions that hold paper negatives.