

Caring for photographic collections

Most photographic materials are made of several layers, including a support layer (glass, plastic, metal or paper) and an emulsion layer.

Each layer has its own particular deterioration characteristics which may determine the specific storage requirements.

Common causes of deterioration

- Physical damage including tears (paper), breakages (glass), abrasion, scratching and creases
- Insect and mould attack
- Fading
- Yellowing
- Silver mirroring
- Staining

Quick tips for preventing damage

- Hold prints and negatives at the edges and make sure hands are clean and dry
- Don't attempt to open cased photographs such as daguerreotypes
- Avoid writing on the surface of a photograph
- When labelling photographs, use a soft lead pencil like a 2B, and write on the back of the photograph at the edges
- Never use metal pins, paper clips, staples or rubber bands on photographs
- Never use sticky tape, adhesive labels or post-it notes on photographs
- Use good quality facsimiles for display to protect originals from light damage.

- Facsimiles can be generated digitally with relative ease but save the digital file in high resolution to ensure that subsequent copies can be made. Seek advice for the appropriate scanning technique if your photo is damaged, cracked or fragile.
- Store photographs in clean, cool, dry, dark spaces such as a closed cupboard. Position these cupboards in the interior or coolest part of the premises out of direct light and sun.
- Avoid storing photographs in damp spaces like garages, basements, sheds and cupboards next to bathrooms.
- Choose coated metal shelving rather than wooden shelves which can off-gas and cause deterioration.
- Select acid-free materials with a neutral pH for storing photographs. Mylar sleeves and acid free envelopes are available from most conservation suppliers.
- Avoid eating or drinking near photographs