

SEIZING THE LIGHT: THE APPRAISAL OF PHOTOGRAPHS

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Appraisal of photographs is a relatively new process that is difficult to apply because of the inherent and unique nature of the medium. It is essential that the same intellectual rigour that is applied to other records be adopted. The Australian Archives has developed specific criteria for photographic appraisal which need to be considered alongside the basic appraisal criteria. The specific criteria include: research value, costs, quality, identification and quantity. This article is based on the guideline produced in the Australian Archives Disposal Manual.

“I have seized the light, I have arrested its flight.”¹ These words were written by L. J. M. Daguerre in 1839 when he succeeded in capturing a photographic image on a silver-coated copper plate. The appraiser of photographs today faces the same challenge as Daguerre in the nineteenth century: can he/she use the light of appraisal knowledge to arrest the flight of photographs.

The first instinct of many is to save as many photographs as possible. While this may be a sound practice in relation to those taken before the Second World War, increasingly the enormous quantity of twentieth century photography (due mainly to the development of the 35 mm camera) has forced the archivist to confront the necessity of appraisal.

Appraisal is a sensitive aspect of archives administration. Decisions have to be made even though the policies on which they are based are seldom precise or unequivocal. The uneasiness with which archivists approach the appraisal of traditional government paper records is intensified when the archivist is faced with photographic records. The inherent subjectivity of appraisal is exacerbated by the emotional, impulsive qualities of photographs. Therefore, while it is difficult to develop an appraisal policy of photographs, it is essential that broad guidelines are developed that will encourage greater consistency, and

ensure rationalisation and accountability. Equally important, the guidelines should be flexible enough to accommodate changing definitions of historical value. This article describes the major criteria used by the Australian Archives in appraising photographs.

A photograph is an invaluable source for reconstructing our past but its inherent nature must be recognised. A photograph is not a literal rendering of reality (a reproduction) but is an interpretation — a construction. To treat a photograph as a literal reflection is to mystify history. Photographs are not messages without meaning but are socially coded. The viewer interprets the photograph at a complex cognitive level that is culturally based. The aim is to recognise the original intention of the photograph — its particular cultural use by particular people. This is rarely given within the picture but is developed in its function or context. The application of archival theory can assist in the interpretation of photographs. In order to be able to “read” a photograph it is essential to understand the provenance or context of a group of pictures. The loss of provenance decreases their archival value.

Few take photographic evidence seriously enough to ask questions they automatically raise with other records. What was the purpose for the record being created, when, by whom, in what context? Photographs cannot be meaningfully employed unless its original purpose, its creator and context are understood. Visual literacy requires the same critical analysis as verbal literacy. Familiarity with the changing conventions of photography is essential to reveal the full meaning of historical images. Every photograph is altered in some manner by the bias of the creator (intentionally or unintentionally), nature of the apparatus, the film processing and printing and the unique interpretation of the photograph by each viewer. Photographic evidence of a particular event or location is often inaccurate or misleading because it is incomplete.

If possible it is important to locate the original negative because it provides the truest record of the information and the source from which the best copies are made. The credibility of prints is inherently more suspect than negatives. Alterations can usually be detected on a negative.

The appraisal criteria developed by the Australian Archives are to a degree determined by the *Archives Act 1983*. This Act states that it is a function of the Australian Archives to conserve and preserve the archival resources of the Commonwealth and to promote efficient and economical recordkeeping. Therefore it is within these parameters that we acquire and appraise records.

Schellenberg divided records into two broad groups of value: records that were evidential and provided information on function and

structure of a government organisation or administrative entity; or informational, records that provided information about people, places, conditions, and events in the society in which the service organisation or entity functioned. To a limited degree photographs provide evidential value but generally they are valued for their informational content. In the previous issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* the "new" appraisal criteria of the Australian Archives were summarised. These criteria, in particular administrative and legal value, are also relevant to photographs but special consideration needs to be given to factors such as research value, duplication, quality and cost.

The importance and relevance of specific appraisal criteria discussed below will vary from project to project. They apply to groups or series of photographs. Photographs that are part of other records, for example photographs of a house on a housing file, should be appraised with the file and not separately.

Research value

Research value is a difficult criterion to address because it is necessary to make a number of subjective judgements.

The research value will probably depend upon the subject of the record. The photographic records most likely to be of long-term value are those where the subject:

- is essential to the interpretation or understanding of related records which have been appraised as having long-term value; or
- has a high intrinsic value.

One of the unique strengths of photography is its ability to document the mundane, the trivial, the everyday aspects of life. Subjects with a high intrinsic value could include:

People

Photographs should reflect the full gambit of society; the prominent, the wealthy, the poor, those in the unusual situations and members of minority groups. Photographs taken in context can be potentially of more value than a studio portrait because they often provide more information.

Work and social activities

While it is important to have a representative example of the spectacular and interesting events these are often over-represented and repetitious. Spontaneous, informal and routine events are less numerous but equally important.

Inanimate objects

It is important to retain photographs of such things as aircrafts, ships, prominent buildings, etc. It would be useful to have photographs covering the whole life cycle of the subject (from construction or delivery through to destruction) rather than concentrating on just one stage in its life.

Natural phenomena

Photographs of unusual or spectacular events including the event itself and the aftermath.

Photographer

In unusual cases, the photographic records being appraised may have been made by a prominent photographer. Since archival institutions collect photographs as historical documents rather than creative works, the identity of the photographer is less important than knowing the organisational origin. A collection should never be disqualified because the photographer is unknown or not highly regarded. However, attribution to an important photographer predictably enhances the research potential, hence the archival value of any collection.

Costs

Familiarity with the development of physical processes serves primarily to alert the appraiser to serious potential problems. It is necessary to balance research value against the possible costs of preservation. Without sufficient resources to preserve them or make them accessible to researchers, photographs make no contribution to research.

Apart from the normal costs considered in the appraisal process, such as storage, transfer, retrieval and access, the following unique issues should be considered for particular formats.

Colour prints and negatives

Colour dyes are unstable under normal conditions. The rate of deterioration can be virtually stopped by cold storage. But the purchase of a refrigerator could be an added cost to be considered alongside identified values.

Cellulose nitrate film

Cellulose nitrate film was in common use from c.1890 to c.1950. It is an unstable medium. If it is in poor condition it must be converted to a safety film and the original destroyed. The original should not be

destroyed if it is in good condition. The same is applicable to cellulose diacetate film.

Costs are increasingly important as the volume of photographs expands. With the development of the 35 mm camera the distinction between amateur and professional photography became blurred. The camera allowed the production of high quality photographs in quantity, and with great convenience. The voluminous output of 35 mm photographs should be appraised very rigorously, with particular attention to their quality, quantity, accessibility and identification.

Quality

In order to fulfil their historical research potential, photographs should have proper focus to render detail, exposure that preserves the full range of tonal contrast, clarity, satisfactory composition and be in good physical condition. Satisfactory technical quality is also important because some of the photographs will be reproduced by researchers. Distinguishing satisfactory from unsatisfactory can be developed by experience in looking at pictures and using them.

Identification

A picture is rarely worth a thousand words. Without some identification of the who, what, where and when of a collection of photographs, their value is severely limited. Identification is necessary to establish the credibility of photos and to furnish historians with the information needed to compensate for the bias, distortion or incompleteness in the representation of reality. Photographs are a creative expression and they need to be questioned in the same way as traditional archival records.

Useful features to identify include subject, date, location, names of persons in the picture and photographer. There are a variety of methods that can supplement inadequate or false information. Careful examination of the photos themselves will reveal clues about subject, date and place, as will comparison with similar identified images. Information relating to their provenance frequently provides important identification as well as crucial data to evaluate their intended purpose.

Scarcity of photographs of unusual objects

Where an event occurred unexpectedly, quickly or the subject no longer exists the photographs will be of value. For example, if the Sydney Harbour Bridge collapsed due to digging the Sydney Harbour tunnel, any photograph that caught part of the collapse would be considered scarce.

Scarcity of format

Some formats of photographs are scarce and are of much interest to researchers of the history of photography. In most cases the need to preserve pre-1940 colour photographic records should alone weigh in favour of permanent retention.

Quantities/repetition/duplication

Photographic records may be voluminous, repetitive, or contain duplicates. Whether there are too many or not is relative to the research value of the photographs and other criteria and should be decided on a case-by-case basis. The accumulation of a detailed, voluminous pictorial record over an extended period of time often increases the usefulness of photographs. Such redundancy permits the skilled researcher to make valid comparative judgements. One hundred portraits of a prominent community leader, over a course of a lifetime, have much greater value than one hundred portraits of the same individual during a single year.

Culling is one way of dealing with voluminous photographic collections that are deemed to be of permanent value. Large collections can be reduced by purging the files of duplicates, poor quality photos, etc. The selection which is retained should reflect the range of photographs originally taken.

Culling will result in a core of photographs which, as a body, is of a higher quality than the group they came from. This will aid the researcher because smaller sized and "high quality" collections are easier and more profitable to use than larger collections padded out by poor quality photographs. Culling will also reduce the need for preservation work and storage space.

In some cases, the culling process can become as complex as an appraisal exercise. In these cases it should be carried out by someone familiar with the activities of the agency, and who has an appreciation of Australian history and researchers' needs.

However, since culling amounts to laborious item-by-item selection, many institutions avoid it, unless the expected benefits in space-saving, preservation costs and more efficient reference service are substantial. In some cases the collection may already have been culled as a normal administrative practice by the agency photographer.

Finally, the disposal action determined for original negatives should be applied to any related original prints and vice versa.

Few archivists would dispute the value of photographs. They have a unique capacity to reconstruct the past and to provide detailed and clear visual images. Their emotional impact and accessibility ensures wide user appeal. However, it is essential that photographs be

appraised in the same intellectually rigorous manner as to other records. While the basic appraisal criteria remains the same, the application can be different and specific aspects relating to the medium need also to be considered. To assist appraisers of photographs, the Australian Archives has set broad directional guidelines. As more experience of photographic appraisal is gained these guidelines and criteria will be revised and expanded.

REFERENCE

1. Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *The History of Photography from the Camera Obscura to the Beginning of the Modern Era*, New York, 1962, p. 22.