

WELCOME

This leaflet explains how to clean, store and handle your photographs at home.



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The full series

- #1 Caring for loose documents at home
- #2 Caring for books at home
- #3 Displaying prints and drawings at home
- #4 Caring for photographs at home
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- #6 Caring for newspapers and offcuts at home
- #7 Pest monitoring at home

Visit LMA online

www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/history-and-heritage/london-metropolitan-archives

Suggested reading and websites

Institute of Conservation

www.icon.org.uk

Looking for archival packaging?

www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/history-and-heritage/london-metropolitan-archives/about-lma/archive-box-making

CARING FOR YOUR
COLLECTION AT HOME

PHOTOGRAPHS

4/7

Formats

Photographs come in a wide variety of formats. Many of the earliest photographs were created using the photographer's own recipes, and it took a while for standard commercial formats to appear. They are generally made up of an image layer and a support layer.

The main support layers for photographic images are glass, plastic, paper and metal, although it is possible to paint the light sensitive layer on a variety of materials. The most common types of image layers we find in historical black and white paper prints are silver in either gelatine or albumen emulsions.



Cleaning



For most processes, only light cleaning with a soft brush is recommended. If you suspect there is mould, consult a professional conservator. Some processes have a very fragile image layer where even a light brushing may damage the image.

Problems

- Glass items are susceptible to breaking.
- Metals, especially ferrotypes, can rust if damp.
- Early plastics (e.g. cellulose nitrate and cellulose acetate) will degrade if not stored in stable conditions.
- Albumen and gelatine prints can fade if exposed to too much light and dark areas can turn silver (aka mirroring) on exposure to pollutants. Gelatine is also susceptible to mould and is a food source for pests. Heat and/or damp will lead to a break-up of the image layer for most processes.



Storage

- For all formats, it is important to keep them away from direct sunlight, heat, damp conditions and pollutants.
- Storing them in boxes as they offer protection for all the issues mentioned earlier; boxes should be purchased from a specialist supplier to ensure the materials of which they are made of will not damage the photographs.
- Glass plate negatives are best stored in a four-flap paper enclosure and stored upright rather than stacked on top of each other (if you have more than one) to reduce the risk of physical damage.

Handling

- Never touch the surfaces of any photographic material with bare hands, as the oils in your fingers can damage the image.
- Handle photographs with latex or nitrile gloves if possible, if not make sure you only touch the edges of the support.
- The safest way to look at glass plate negatives is by placing them on a sturdy, flat, clean, dry surface. If they are in four flap enclosures, you can simply open out all four of the flaps and you will be able to see the image without having to pick up the plate.
- Consider taking a digital copy of your photograph if you want to display it for a long period of time instead of using the original.

