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Article: The Education of Photograph Conservators in Mexico

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# THE EDUCATION OF PHOTOGRAPH CONSERVATORS IN MÉXICO

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*Presented at the 2003 PMG Winter Meeting, San Juan, Puerto Rico*

## ***Introduction***

Although México's rich and diverse photographic legacy clearly deserves professional and specialized care, this has not become a reality despite the achievements of a few individuals and the significant advancement in collection management promoted by the National Institute of History and Anthropology<sup>1</sup> through an organization called the National System of Photographic Archives<sup>2</sup>.

The development of a formal education in photograph conservation in México has followed an intricate path owing to the traditional ties of the conservation profession with archaeology, architecture, and monument preservation, specialties that are only distantly related to the care and conservation of archival materials and fine art photographs. Despite the vastness of the Mexican photographic legacy, which includes examples by world-renowned photographers, and the preeminent role of photography in documenting the country's crucial historical events, little attention has been paid to protect the integrity of photographic negatives and prints in their original format and material condition.

Efforts to preserve photographic collections have been scattered and have been undertaken, for the most part, by individuals rather than institutions or education organizations. The creation of the National System of Photographic Archives within the National Institute of History and Anthropology was a significant step towards the organization, management, and protection of the Mexican photographic heritage, which has been preserved in 150 public institutions. However, this was a recent occurrence, and it has neither involved the creation of positions for photograph conservators in institutions with important holdings nor promoted the professionalization of photo conservation through formal academic training.

The introduction of a photograph conservation specialty in the curriculum of the program offered by the National School for Conservation<sup>3</sup> in México City has been a slow and not yet formalized process, which has depended on the interest and commitment of just a few individuals. The extensive five-year program in conservation of cultural heritage is already quite saturated, with seven other conservation specialties and their corresponding practical and theoretical courses. Therefore, there is little opportunity to deliver the basic courses that would provide the students with a minimum level of specialization in the conservation of photographic materials.

The proposal for creating a two-year post-degree program in photograph conservation open to graduates of the five-year program has not received serious consideration, let

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<sup>1</sup> Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH)

<sup>2</sup> Sistema Nacional de Fototecas (SINAFO)

<sup>3</sup> Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía *Manuel del Castillo Negrete*

alone evolved into a concrete plan. Furthermore, even if this idea comes to fruition, under the present circumstances there may not be enough applicants willing to commit to two more years of fulltime study without financial aid. Especially considering the fact that the five-year program in conservation of cultural heritage requires a thesis dissertation, which usually represents two additional years of research work. Therefore, the success of a specialization program in photograph conservation will depend largely on the kind and extent of modifications the School of Conservation is willing to make to its current curriculum and/or thesis requirements in order to encourage the enrollment of graduate students in the post-degree program.

Despite the adversities posed by the current situation, the growing interest among students has resulted in several thesis dissertations on topics related to photograph conservation during the past eight years. A small group of graduate conservators committed to photograph preservation has emerged from the School for Conservation, and is actively working to make curators and archivists aware of the need to improve preservation conditions for the Mexican photographic heritage.

Creating a photograph conservation specialization program at the National School for Conservation would provide a solid means for training future photograph conservators and would make possible the beginning of an active professional field in México. The program could also serve as a resource for the organization of continuing education activities, such as seminars, workshops, and conferences. If necessary, it could be sponsored by several private or governmental cultural institutions, that would be willing to get involved in the educational process and hire the specialists coming out of the program. Candidates entering the program could also be graduates from the new School for Conservation in Guadalajara<sup>4</sup> or from programs in other countries.

### *Conservation in México*

As in other countries, the art conservation profession started in México in the late 1960's, after the introduction of a formal training program. However, this was not the first effort to study and protect the Mexican cultural heritage in a methodic and informed manner. Created in 1939, the National Institute of History and Anthropology<sup>5</sup> was already the authority that regulated and protected archeological finds and other types of historic artifacts. In 1946, another government organization, the National Institute of Fine Arts<sup>6</sup>, was created for the purpose of protecting and promoting twentieth century art and cultural legacy. A conservation laboratory was installed within this institution in 1955. Soon, the laboratory became a training center with the intention of offering a formal interdisciplinary education in art conservation. The program did not last more than two years due to the lack of funding.

However, the rise of conservation as a profession only occurred after 1967 when the UNESCO created the Latin American Center for Conservation<sup>7</sup>, which became a training center for Mexican and foreign conservators. This was the beginning of a formal

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<sup>4</sup> Escuela de Conservación y Restauración de Oriente

<sup>5</sup> Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

<sup>6</sup> Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes

<sup>7</sup> Centro Regional Latinoamericano de Estudios para la Conservación y Restauración de Bienes Culturales

education and a well-structured conservation discipline in México. Solid concepts in conservation were introduced by the many international guest speakers that were invited to teach in the program. The Center and School for Conservation created by UNESCO were left in the hands of Mexican institutions in 1977. A marked tendency towards the conservation of a broad range of cultural materials, with an emphasis on archeological materials and colonial art, defined the education of Mexican conservators and remains the core of the program today.

### ***Education in Conservation***

The five-year program in conservation of cultural heritage, offered by the National School for Conservation, has been modified over the past two decades to include recent advances in the field of conservation and provide a solid education in materials science. Today, the program requires seven different conservation laboratories<sup>8</sup> and an elective specialty<sup>9</sup>, with corresponding theory courses, to be completed in five years. A one-to-two-year research project, presented in written form, is required as a thesis dissertation to obtain a degree in conservation. Photograph conservation is offered as an elective specialty to students entering the last semester of the program. Only fifteen to twenty students are accepted each year, and the admission process is very competitive. The current program is about to be shortened to four and a half years and in addition to reorganizing the content of the courses, more conservation specialties will be included.

The National School for Conservation also offers Master in Museology and Master in Architecture Conservation degrees. Approximately ninety teachers including conservators, historians, scientists, artists, photographers, architects, and museologists, are currently involved in the organization and delivery of the programs.

Another program in conservation of cultural heritage was opened in 2000 in Guadalajara at the new School for Conservation, following the same structure, courses, and graduation requirements as those of the National School for Conservation.

### ***History of Photograph Conservation in México***

The preservation of photographic materials in an organized and systematic manner started at the National Photo Archive<sup>10</sup>, which is part of the National Institute of History and Anthropology. Created after the purchase of the Casasola photographic archive, the National Photo Archive grew in size and relevance and, since 1982, evolved into an integral center for preservation, documentation, duplication, and dissemination of Mexican photographic collections.

During the 1980's and 1990's, the director of the National Photo Archive and other leading professionals organized several international seminars on preservation and duplication of photographs. These had a great impact on the general care of photographic materials and raised awareness of their place in the Mexican cultural heritage. These workshops and seminars involved the participation of American, European, and Brazilian

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<sup>8</sup> Ceramic materials, mural painting, canvas painting, polychrome sculpture, paper documents, metal objects, and archeological materials.

<sup>9</sup> Textiles, bookbinding, or photographic materials.

<sup>10</sup> Fototeca Nacional

guest speakers and were organized through a professional association called the CODOLMAG<sup>11</sup>, which was very active at that time.

In recent years, the National Photo Archive has become the headquarters for the National System of Photographic Archives, an organization created by the National Institute for History and Anthropology for the purpose of coordinating the documentation, preservation, and cataloging of the photographic collections under its supervision. In a similar manner, other photographic archives in the country, such as the National Archives<sup>12</sup>, the Archive of the National University of México<sup>13</sup>, the National Film Archive<sup>14</sup>, the Alvarez Bravo collection at *Casa Lam*, and the Archivo Pedro Guerra, and others, have already hired conservation consultants and started large preservation projects involving the monitoring and control of the collections' storage environments.

### ***Education in Photograph Conservation***

Topics in photograph conservation were first introduced in the course syllabus of the National School for Conservation paper conservation laboratory in 1992. At that time, the students spent one full day per week learning to identify common photographic processes and basic concepts of the nature, structure, and behavior of photographic materials. By 1996, photograph conservation was already an option among the elective specialties offered to the students entering the last semester of the program. As an elective laboratory, the course offered more opportunities to experiment with treatment options and storage designs, and recreate historic processes to obtain a more in-depth knowledge of the history of photography. Still, the specialty did not have a formal program and was in an early stage of trial, feedback, and constant improvement.

In 1997, a team of conservators (graduates of the School for Conservation seeking to specialize in photographic materials) lead by Fernando Osorio, started delivering a standard set of courses to students of the photo conservation elective lab. Among these courses were the history of photography, identification of photographic processes, conservation assessment of photo collections, and mounting and storage techniques. By 2000, a course on basic photochemistry and another on minor treatment procedures were added to the original set of classes. The recreation of several historic photographic processes was already an important part of this conservation laboratory. Also, in the past few years, students have had the opportunity to participate in surveys and large-scale conservation projects implemented in institutions with important photographic holdings.

The elective laboratory in photograph conservation has been improved every year as the teachers are better prepared, and have more experience and a clearer perspective of the field in other countries. However, the content of the courses has not been defined and has depended on the individuals who have been available to teach them. Improvisation, the lack of a proper lab space, and the different degrees of specialization of the teachers involved, has lead to inconsistencies in the preparation of the students coming out of the program. Furthermore, even after reorganizing some of the courses to include more

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<sup>11</sup> Comité para la Conservación de Documentos, Libros, Manuscritos y Obras Gráficas.

<sup>12</sup> Archivo General de la Nación

<sup>13</sup> Centro de Estudios sobre la Universidad

<sup>14</sup> Cineteca Nacional

detailed and sophisticated information, the short time available (only one semester, shared with other courses unrelated to photo conservation) have limited the possibility of providing a more complete education to the students. Also, there has been a lack of coordination between this program and the National Photo Archive of the National System of Photographic Archives. This has been detrimental for both the students learning the specialty and the photographic collections that could benefit from their work.

Despite the irregularities in the content and the delivery of the courses, the elective photograph conservation laboratory of the National School for Conservation has become the starting point for an emerging group of photograph conservators in México. While the five-year program in conservation of cultural heritage demands that an enormous amount of time be spent in different conservation specialties, this extensive training provides the students with a solid background to start a career in photograph conservation. Due to the familiarity with other types of materials, the students are open to experiment with new treatment possibilities and propose interesting solutions for the conservation of photographs.

Of the approximately 40 students who have taken the elective laboratory or any of the early courses over the past ten years, nine are now photograph conservators working with photographic collections and fully committed to the growth of the field in México. Several thesis dissertations on topics related to photograph preservation have already been presented. The following list gives an idea of the type of research papers completed by former students of the National School for Conservation:<sup>15</sup>

*A Comparative Study of Papers used as Enclosure Material for Photographs.* Mariana Planck 2003.

*Design and Construction of Cold Storage Rooms for Photographic Materials.* Cecilia Salgado, 2003.

*The Effect of Aqueous Treatment on B/W Gelatin Prints.* Cecilia Díaz and Paula Argomedo, 2000.

*Study of a Group of Mexican Daguerreotypes – Conservation Assessment and Treatment Proposal.* Kimie Suzuki, 1998.

*Conservation of Albumen Prints – Drying Techniques to Minimize the Cracking of the Binder Caused by Aqueous Treatment.* Sofia Vera, 1997.

*Proposal for the Removal of Hypo Residues from B/W Fiber-based Photographic Prints.* Sandra Peña, 1996.

*Methods for Evaluating the Deterioration of Cellulose Nitrate Motion Picture Film.* Fernanda Valverde, 1996.

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<sup>15</sup> These thesis papers are available at the library of the National School for Conservation, México.

Ideally, there should be other educational opportunities for photo conservators to further their specialization after attending the elective laboratory offered by the School for Conservation. A curriculum for a two-year program in photograph conservation has already been designed and presented to the chair of the School for Conservation. This program would include a series of courses in each of the areas related to photograph conservation, such as treatment practicum; science and photochemistry; photography; history of photographic technology; history and aesthetics of photography; and preservation and collection management. Because the National School for Conservation is modifying the curriculum of the five-year program and is moving into a new building, the creation of a post-degree specialty in photograph conservation is not a priority at this time.

The idea of the two-year program should not be forgotten or postponed indefinitely, however. The program is absolutely necessary for the standardization and growth of a formal discipline in photograph conservation in México. It would also facilitate the organization of courses and workshops in continuing education with the participation of international guest speakers. Through their contact with the field in other countries, Mexican photo conservators would be able to maintain high ethical and technical standards and become recognized in museums and archives.

### ***Future Perspectives***

While seeking to provide a standardized education in photograph conservation similar to that offered in some North American and European programs, the Mexican program should address problems that are particular to the institutions in the country and emphasize preservation strategies that are viable and realistic in this context. It might be necessary, for example, to include concepts and practices of preservation administration, since providing basic protection to large photographic collections will be the first challenge for emerging photo conservators. They will need to expand their professional horizons and engage in interdisciplinary efforts with archivists and museum directors to raise the level of protection for photographic collections. Working in isolation would lead to the rapid dissolution of this emerging field.

Photograph conservation is not an established discipline in México as there is no standardized curriculum, methodology, or philosophy to guide the work of practitioners. However, the accomplishments of the existing photo conservators and the growing interest in photographic collections heralds a promising start for the field of photograph conservation in this country.

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