

Guidelines for the Evaluation, Retention, and Deaccessioning of 35mm Slide Collections in Educational and Cultural Institutions

Prepared by the Visual Resources Association's Slide and Transitional Media Task Force,
September 2014

I. Introduction

Our purpose here is to raise awareness of the issues associated with reducing the size of a 35mm teaching collection, and to provide general guidelines for evaluating and weeding. Guidelines for possible re-uses, and for finding new homes for 35mm slides, will be outlined in another associated document.

Weeding and deaccessioning, or retaining, teaching collections of 35mm slides can seem a daunting challenge. Often such collections have been built over decades and they are a direct reflection of evolving curricula and the teaching choices of the home institution. Unlike traditionally published material, slides were often acquired directly from individual artists or scholars; museums, galleries, or related institutions and agencies; or, small- and large-scale vendors.¹ Donations from "... traveling scholars, curators, faculty members, or photographers – professional or otherwise – skilled in the use of a 35mm camera" are not uncommon.² In addition, slides were often created through in-house copy work—photographing directly from publications—whether readily available or hard-to-locate material.³ No matter the source, the collected materials represent a significant investment of institutional funds and staff time, and should be deaccessioned only in the most considered and deliberate manner.⁴

Many institutions are pressed for building space and see the digitization and ultimate discard of local hard-copy photographic collections as a possible source of new floor space. Administrators not fully involved in the development and use of 35mm collections may be unaware of their ultimate value as: 1) the film that was in the photographer's camera when out in the field, 2) the difficult-to-find didactic images that were photographed out of a book to explain the context of a work of art or the design processes of architectural monuments, 3) the reflection of the institution's curricular choices over time, or 4) a record of a campus' or region's history.

II. Issues to Consider

In 2009, the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence released the "Florence Declaration - Recommendations for the Preservation of Analog Photo Archives."⁵ With over 820 individual and institutional signatories to date, it is one of the more widely circulated and influential documents created in the last decade attempting to grapple with the value of analog cultural documents held in trust in institutional collections. More specifically, it is a plea for developing a better understanding of the distinctive nature of analog photographs in relation to their digital reproductions or surrogates (both terms are misleading, but we have yet to land on a more apt descriptive term). This distinctive nature is based on the following two

considerations: 1) that “technologies not only condition the methods of transmission, conservation and enjoyment of the documents, but they also shape its content”⁶ and 2) “photographs are not simply images independent from their mount, but rather objects endowed with materiality that exist in time and space.”⁷ Considering our analog resources in this light, as technological and cultural ‘texts’ in and of themselves, with their own narrative histories, their continued relevance and value as educational resources comes more clearly into focus. These considerations should be kept in mind throughout the image collection weeding process as a conceptual framework within which particular and specific value judgments are made.

Of primary concern in the weeding workflow is the ultimate source of the slide. A 35mm slide that was purchased from a commercial vendor, or that is original photography, should be considered with more deliberation than one that was photographed from a book. Especially important are images that represent either the history of the home institution or the history of the represented work of art. For example, many architectural sites in the Middle East have been subjected to damage through multiple wars. Any photographs made of those sites before or after armed conflict may be valuable records of historical damage showing buildings or works of art before or after any destruction. Vendor-purchased slides are a special case—vendor contracts should be reviewed and in some cases may be re-negotiated if digitization of purchased materials is under discussion. Relevant sections of copyright law that address ‘obsolete’ formats should also be consulted.

A second issue is the condition of the individual slides. Discolored, scratched, rippled, faded, dirty, moldy, out-of-focus, or otherwise poor quality materials have probably outlived their usefulness. Electronic resuscitation might be possible, but is likely not plausible, given local constraints on time and funding. A subset of the condition of the individual slides, is the condition of the overall collection: Is the collection still in use? If so, in what ways? Materials still needed for teaching purposes should be kept, regardless of original source.

Finally, consider how retained materials will be put to use. Will they be digitized? Will they be used as archival materials? Will they be used as historic records, or for research? Will they be used for teaching? The answers to these questions might determine the kinds of materials to be kept, or whether the collection is to be deaccessioned as a whole.

Primary stakeholders, especially the faculty and student image users, should be included in the process and consulted as a collection is weeded. Faculty and students may have differing (sometimes passionate) opinions about the value of materials and their retention. They can also assist with the development of collection-specific weeding criteria.

III. General Guidelines

A. Keep anything that is not available someplace else. This may very well include copy photography, since collateral material made via copy work may simply not be available in any of the general teaching image databases. Obtaining such materials again could prove exceptionally difficult since accessing the necessary sources may be prohibitive due to cost, labor, or availability. Images may have been sourced from personal libraries, interlibrary loan, now-destroyed originals, or from materials no longer available. Maps and plans of cities, monuments or areas of the world that are under siege or poorly documented, images of local history or particular to faculty research are especially important to keep.

B. Discard materials easily found elsewhere, or already digitized locally, if the 35mm slide simply replicates that material, as in duplicate and printed slides of art works in well-known and well-documented institutional collections.⁸ Be cognizant, however, of images of works of art before and after conservation, of architectural sites under construction or renovation, and of archaeological sites during excavation. These sites or objects may be well-known, but a local collection may hold unique images of them.

IV. Specific Guidelines

For every 35mm image, consider the following elements⁹:

COLLECTION DONOR

(Is there a donor? Who donated it? Is there a donor agreement?)

PHOTOGRAPHER

(Who photographed it? Was that person under contract, or important for other reasons? Did they teach at your institution? For example, if your collection includes original Ansel Adams materials, keeping them is prudent.)

COPYRIGHT

(Can it be digitized? This is especially important to consider for vendor-purchased materials. Vendor contracts need to be reviewed, and possibly renegotiated.)

SOURCES

(Is the 35mm slide original photography or copy work?)

CONTENT

(What type of media or built work is represented? Does the material still fit the institution's mission and curriculum?)

PLACE REPRESENTED

(Is there any geographical significance?)

TIME PERIOD

(Is there any temporal significance?)

DATE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

(Consider older images of some monuments that have changed or disappeared. Unstable film was used in the past; check for fading or discoloration, especially if an image has been heavily used.)

FILM TYPES

(How have materials been stored? 35mm film stability is dependent on the temperature and humidity of the storage area and the maintenance of consistent environmental conditions.)

TECHNICAL QUALITY

(Is the image in focus? Well-composed?)

CONDITION

(Is the image scratched, warped, discolored, faded, moldy, torn, or otherwise in poor condition?)

DOCUMENTATION

(Is there any descriptive metadata? Is there enough descriptive information to properly identify the image, and where it came from?)

OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE

(Try a rubric from 1 lowest to 5 highest, based on local needs and curricular criteria.)

CURRENT AND FUTURE REPOSITORIES OF SIMILAR IMAGES

(Who else might have this type of material in analog and/or digital form? Can those sources be used for local purposes? (i.e., Is access available via database subscription, and is ongoing cost therefore a factor?)

V. Conclusion

No image should be discarded out-of-hand, simply because it is copy work, or because negotiation with a commercial vendor might be necessary for the image to continue its useful life. Consider how easy it is to lose digital information and how difficult it is to preserve digital files for the long term, as technology changes and data must be migrated. Analog originals provide useful hard-copy back-ups in the case of digital losses and might help speed up the resumption of business after natural disasters.

In the last hundred years, photographs, lantern slides, and 35mm slides have been portable, collectable, sharable, durable formats providing useful imagery for a variety of educational purposes. Just because analog media are considered to be technologically obsolete does not mean that these formats are no longer useful or valuable.

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Appendix

Three samples of institutional guidelines are provided below (posted with the permission of their authors).

Institute of Fine Arts – New York University

(N.B.: 35mm evaluation is done by IFA graduate students with specific field expertise, and vetted by either faculty or the department manager.)

HOW TO TELL IF A SLIDE SHOULD BE DISCARDED

Ask yourself:

- 1) IS IT PINK? Discard immediately, regardless of source, UNLESS the image is unique.
- 2) IS IT WARPED? Discard immediately, UNLESS the image is unique.
- 3) IS IT A DUPLICATE? Discard immediately.
- 4) WHAT'S THE SOURCE?
 - A) If it is a PURCHASED slide, KEEP IT.
 - B) If it is a GIFT slide, KEEP IT.
 - C) If it is a slide made by FACULTY, KEEP IT.

UNLESS: the purchased, donated, or faculty slide is a duplicate, deteriorated beyond its useful life, or of such a common object that it can easily be found on the Internet.

Discarded slides are set aside in catalog number order for faculty review, separated by drawer number. Records of how many slides are kept and marked for discard are maintained on the collection reduction worksheet. Sign off on a drawer only when you have gone through it completely.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The teaching collection at MIT was made up of approximately one-third visual arts slides and two-thirds built environment slides. Separate guidelines were followed for each section of the collection.

For all categories, discard:

- Poor quality slides, including discolored, faded, out of focus, moldy, etc.
- Duplicate/similar images, unless they show change in a site over time
- Copy work already digitized
- Vendor slides that cannot be digitized

For the Visual Arts, keep:

- Original photography;
- High quality gift slides, even if they are copy work, and copy work images that are valuable/relevant to our curriculum, if they would be difficult to obtain again or are unlikely to be found in comparable collections
- Images related to MIT history

For the Built environment, keep:

- Plans and drawings
- Original photography
- High quality gift slides, even if they are copy work, if they would be difficult to obtain again
- High-quality copy work for monuments/areas of the world that are poorly documented
- Maps & plans of cities
- Aerial views
- All images related to cities/areas important to the curriculum, used actively by our faculty, or that document areas of great change: Massachusetts, New York, Italy, Rust Belt cities, etc.
- Student work

History of Art Visual Resources Collections, University of Michigan

Our slides fall into one of three categories:

- 1) Slides used for teaching and research, cataloged using the Fogg classification system
- 2) Distribution slides – these are slide sets, primarily of Asian art, that UM created and sold from 1978-2006)
- 3) Donated collections and miscellaneous

The retention process varies for each of the categories listed above

Teaching Collection slides

Weed:

- copy photography from books available within the UM Library system
- vendor slides that cannot be digitized

Distribution slides

We are keeping two complete copies of each distribution project. Additional duplicates can be discarded.

Donated collections and miscellaneous

These vary on a case-by-case basis. Anything photographed by faculty stays. Anything that appears to be rare or unique stays. Pink slides, copy work, duplicates, and images easily found elsewhere are typically discarded.

¹ There are two publications, which record the various historical sources of 35mm slides. The Visual Resources Association sponsored numerous editions of the *Slide Buyers' Guide*, which evolved into the *Image Buyers' Guide*. See Sandra C. Walker, Donald W. Beetham, and Norine D. Cashman, eds., *The Image Buyers' Guide: An International Directory of Sources for Slides and Digital Images for Art and Architecture* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999). The University Art Association of Canada sponsored a similar publication. See H  l  ne Boivin and Nancy Kirkpatrick, eds., *Sources for Slides of Canadian Art* (Downsview, Ontario: University Art Association of Canada, 1980). As a benefit of membership, the Visual Resources Association provides access to a spreadsheet in Memberclicks, in which the most current contact information for our commercial partners can be found. Christine Fritsch-Hammes at the University of California Santa Barbara maintains the list and can be reached at christinef-h@hfa.ucsb.edu.

² Christine L Sundt, *Conservation Practices for Slide and Photograph Collections* (Visual Resources Association Special Bulletin, No.3, 1989), 1. The first section of this publication is entitled "When to Conserve: A Guide to Slides Deserving Special Care" and it provides some good background information about the types of materials

that can be found in typical 35mm slide collections. There is also a great deal of useful information on the proper care and handling of 35mm slides.

³ Gretchen Wagner and Visual Resources Association's Intellectual Property Rights Committee, "Statement on the Fair Use of Images for Teaching, Research, and Study," Visual Resources Association 2013, http://vraweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/VRA_FairUse_Statement_Pages_Links.pdf (accessed September 1, 2014). This publication provides information about the fair use practices employed in visual resources collections.

⁴ Visual Resources Association White Paper Task Force, "Advocating for Visual Resources Management in Educational and Cultural Institutions," Visual Resources Association 2009, http://www.vrawebor.ipower.com/resources/general/vra_white_paper.pdf (accessed September 1, 2014). Section I on "The Importance of Visual Resources to Teaching, Learning, and Institutional Identity" might be especially useful for better understanding the value of 35mm slide collections and their more current digital counterparts.

⁵ Costanza Caraffa, "The Florence Declaration: Recommendations for the Preservation of Analogue Photo Archives," Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz 2009, http://www.khi.fi.it/pdf/florence_declaration_en.pdf (accessed September 1, 2014).

⁶ Caraffa, "The Florence Declaration," 1.

⁷ Caraffa, "The Florence Declaration," 1.

⁸ Although regional recycling policies vary, in many cases, only the aluminum parts of a slide mount tend to be recyclable. The Visual Resources Association's Slide and Transitional Media Task Force is working on a companion document that discusses the dispersal, reuse, and disposal of 35mm slide collections.

⁹ The basic elements listed here have been used for appraisals of slide collections and were developed and honed by Maureen Burns, Leigh Gates, and Margaret Webster of the Image Consulting Cooperative, <https://sites.google.com/site/iminteg/> (accessed September 1, 2014).