

The Selection of Photographs¹

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RÉSUMÉ Cet article aborde la problématique du tri des archives photographiques sous un angle qui se veut résolument archivistique. L'auteur y expose une démarche fondée sur les valeurs archivistiques et les critères d'évaluation appliqués aux photographies. L'article comprend aussi une réflexion sur la prise en considération des intentions des intervenants dans la création des photographies et sur le rôle que peuvent jouer les créateurs dans le tri des documents. Finalement, il présente quelques études de cas qui aident le lecteur à s'approprier la démarche proposée.

ABSTRACT This article addresses the issue of the selection of photographs from a firmly archival perspective. The author outlines a procedure based on archival values and appraisal criteria applied to photographs. The article also includes consideration of the intentions of the various participants in the creation of photographs and the role that creators can play in the selection of documents. Finally, a number of case studies are offered with the aim of assisting in the application of the procedure outlined in the article.

A few years ago, we had the opportunity to note the unease felt by the majority of our colleagues when it came time to appraise photographs for

1 This article is the translation of a chapter entitled "Tri" published in Normand Charbonneau and Mario Robert, eds., *La gestion des archives photographiques* (Montréal, 2001), pp. 99–122. This chapter is a revised and expanded version of an article entitled "Le tri des photographies" published in *Archives*, 30, no. 2 (1998–1999), pp. 29–42, first identified by the editors of *Archivaria*. The chapter is entitled "selection" instead of "appraisal" in order to illustrate the fact that appraisal is an archival function that cuts across many archival operations. The identification of archival values, the establishment of criteria, and the development of appraisal tools are activities which occur throughout the management of archives. It seems to us that the majority of the activities that mark the management of archives can be divided in two categories. A first, called appraisal (or, for certain archival functions, analysis) is intellectual and allows archivists to make choices based on their theoretical background and with the help of suitable tools. The second category is operational. It is the acquisition which follows the appraisal, it is the arrangement based on analysis, it is the selection which completes the appraisal, it is the description and indexing which give form to the analysis, etc.

selection.² Photographs are distinct from textual documents in that their most important value is informational. This means that archivists cannot resort to their traditional methods when beginning an appraisal for the selection of photographs; that is to say the assessment of the evidential value of the documents which reflects their bond with the creator of the fonds. Furthermore, archivists, like their fellow-citizens, feel a more profound attachment (sometimes close to irrational) for photographs than for other information media since they evoke memories through images of people, events, and objects.

In defence of archivists, it should be noted that the majority of the tools they develop and use (acquisition policy, appraisal criteria and frameworks, etc.) apply particularly to acquisition and to the higher level archival units (fonds and series). These tools are often complex and thus unlikely to provide the help needed for the selection of photographs, particularly as photographs are often processed in small batches at the file or item level.³

If the acquisition policy of an archival repository clearly states that all records and all records-creators are not of equal interest to an archives, selection allows the identification of records with the highest informational or evidential value. This article makes no attempt to offer answers to all problems facing archivists in the selection of photographs; rather, it tries to propose ways and means that may help to alleviate fears archivists may have in this regard.

But first, let us remember that archives generally do not have an acquisition policy for the institutional records received from their host organization. But even in the absence of a formal acquisition policy, there is a *de facto* policy in the mandate of the archives and its host organization. This *de facto* policy must be expressed in the retention schedule of the host organization.⁴ The reader will have to assume that the single term “acquisition policy” encompasses both realities: private archives created outside the institution and the institution’s records.

2 During a presentation at a seminar on appraisal in Montreal in 1998, we asked the sixty or more participants how many of them were involved in the care and management of photographic archives and if they had performed or planned to perform a selection among these documents. The majority responded affirmatively to our questions. We then attempted to get a sense of the level of confidence exhibited by participants in selecting photographs. Only five participants felt comfortable in this task.

3 This does not discount their relevance when appraisal, carried out for acquisition or selection, relates to the higher level (from the fonds to the sub-sub-series).

4 In fact, the retention schedule of the host organization replaces an acquisition policy. We are referring specifically to those retention schedules which take a “total” approach to records management and not to those which apply a blanket rule of permanent retention to all non-textual documents.

Archival Values Applied to the Selection of Photographs

Schellenberg emphasized that the photographs found in institutional archival fonds are different from their textual counterparts in that their archival value is drawn from the information they possess “on persons, places, subjects, and the like with which public agencies deal; not from the information that is in such records on the public agencies themselves.”⁵ This is completely correct for the records of an archives’ host organization as well as for private archives. In fact, if we take this from the point of view of the user of photographic archives, we discover the widespread lack of interest for evidential value and for *provenance*. Users look for specific information. If by chance they are curious about a photograph’s provenance (in order to include it in the reference for a picture), they are rarely particularly interested in the context in which it was created.

Preparing the Archivist for the Selection of Photographs

The first tool available to archivists is their own knowledge. Consequently, before attempting an appraisal, archivists must have the following:

- an intimate knowledge of the provenance of the fonds and of the context of creation of the documents under appraisal;
- an understanding of the entire fonds;
- a background in history (this does not mean that archivists must be historians; rather, they must have an interest in history and familiarity with its methodology) to allow a judgement of the value of the documents, their evidential value with respect to the context of their creation, and their informational value within the larger context of the documentary resources available for research;
- an awareness of the needs of users who consult photographic archives for their informational value; and
- sufficient knowledge of the history of photography and its techniques in order to identify the physical characteristics of the documents and their uniqueness, the importance of the photographer, etc.

This preparation is the essential element in the success of the appraisal. Even if the archival repository is equipped with the proper appraisal tools, an appraisal will be on shaky ground if the archivist is unprepared.

5 Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1956), p. 148.

Appropriate Appraisal Criteria for the Selection of Photographs

There are many appraisal criteria described in various publications.⁶ Some apply specifically to photographs. The following section outlines the most pertinent criteria for the appraisal of photographs:

- The intelligibility of information or the quality of the medium
- User needs
- Subject
- The intentions of the participants in the creation of photographs
- Accompanying documentation
- Uniqueness or originality of the information
- Age of the medium and of the information
- Aesthetic quality and significance to the history of the art and science of photography
- Accessibility/restrictions

The Intelligibility of Information or the Quality of the Medium

As a basic principle, photographs that have obvious technical defects may be discarded. Although there are exceptions to this rule,⁷ preserving badly produced or preserved documents serves no purpose when their information is unusable and irretrievable. The main technical factors to consider are:

- focus, speed, and depth of field (the photograph is blurred);
- exposure to the light resulting from the diaphragm aperture (the photograph is badly exposed and its contrast is unvaryingly pale or dark); and
- processing (the fixing bath or washing was deficient, causing the accelerated deterioration of the image).

6 On this subject, see William H. Leary, *The Archival Appraisal of Photographs: A RAMP Study with Guidelines* (Paris, 1985), and the Archives nationales du Québec, *Normes et procédures archivistiques* (Québec, 1996). See also Canadian Council of Archives, *Building a National Acquisition Strategy* (Ottawa, 1995), which presents a list of criteria which apply particularly to appraisal for acquisition but which are similar to those for appraisal for selection.

7 It may be essential to preserve the only photograph documenting an important event even if it has technical defects. This may be the case for a press photograph whose instantaneity could affect the resulting image. In other circumstances a photographer may have adjusted the light and the shutter speed in order to evoke a rush of emotion or to produce an aesthetic effect. The archivist who carries out appraisal and selection based on this criterion will have to know the context of creation of the documents and the intention of the photographer. A picture entitled "Rush Hour, Place d'Armes" on page 27 of *La gestion des archives photographiques* is a good example of a photographer intentionally creating a blurred image for a specific reason. A woman's haste to cross the Place d'Armes is evident in the blurring of one of her legs and her head.

The level of deterioration of a photograph (water or mould damage, a broken glass plate negative, the negative's emulsion is coming unglued from the glass or film, etc.) can lead to disproportionate conservation treatment costs when weighed against its evidential and informational value.⁸

On the other hand, some cases require the archivist's attention. Cellulose nitrate film negatives (1889 to 1951) possess well-known dangerous properties (it is both very flammable and extremely difficult to extinguish once burning). This is also the case for cellulose diacetate film negatives (1934 to 1955) whose film and emulsion do not react in the same manner to variations in relative humidity and temperature, potentially causing the emulsion to separate from the film. Archivists wishing to preserve cellulose nitrate or cellulose diacetate film negatives must consider the production or transfer costs of the emulsion as part of the appraisal process. For their part, colour photographs possess an unstable pigmentation and require costly preventative reproduction or preservation. In this case again, archivists must be rigorous with appraisal criteria.

User Needs

The acquisition policy must clearly identify the mandate of the archival repository as well as the institution's areas of specialization – those subjects it wishes to document. The archivist must also be acquainted with the users of the archives and their subject interests. Responding to client needs is not without risk and it should not detract from the institution's need to focus on its mandate. Any link between user needs and selection requires serious reflection. The institution's mandate may be diluted as the user of photographic archives rarely makes a distinction between an archival repository and a documentation centre. It is useful to remember that what differentiates an archival repository from a documentation centre is that an archives is based fundamentally on *respect des fonds* and on a recognition of the evidential value of documents.

Subject

William H. Leary believes that it is difficult to judge the relevance of a subject to any given community. He observes that “any photograph that can help man-

⁸ It is important to note that some imperfections can be corrected. These defects are usually the result of poor processing in the darkroom, an inadequate preparation of the media, or inappropriate storage conditions. A laboratory treatment could correct the problem, but it may be costly. Problems that can be fixed in a darkroom or through restoration include: silver mirror fogging; the dulling effects of silver salt oxidation; a weak image contrast; a deterioration of the negative's cellulose nitrate or cellulose diacetate; the loss of information due to the reaction of chemical residues in the emulsion; and the overexposure of an image. Klaus Hendricks et al., *Fundamentals of Photograph Conservation: A Study Guide* (Toronto, 1991) and Bertrand Lavedrine, *La conservation des photographies* (Paris, 1990) address these problems.

kind better understand its multi-faceted activities should be collected.”⁹ Leary goes on to say that when “evaluating the significance of photographs, the appraiser should recall that one of the unique strengths of photography is its ability to document the mundane, the trivial, the everyday texture of life so often ignored by more traditional records.”¹⁰

It is important to establish parameters for this research of pictorial information. An archives must first identify the subjects it intends to document. This list should correspond to its areas of specialization in matters of acquisition. For example, in addition to documenting the programs of its host institution, the archives at Concordia University in Montréal specializes in the documentation of fine arts, cultural communities, communications, education, and music.¹¹ The archives could further refine these subjects in the context of the selection of documents deemed to possess a significant informational value. These subjects could be sub-divided into more specific areas of specialization while still maintaining their link to the university’s core mandate: promoting teaching and research in the community it serves. An archival repository can also take the lead from the questions asked by users: archivists conducting appraisals can maintain frequent contact with users when providing reference or through dialogue with colleagues responsible for reference services.¹²

William H. Leary¹³ proposes a list of subjects likely to draw the interest of an archives. However, we believe these subjects can be dangerous when taken at face value. The list covers a wide range and an archives which seeks to address them all runs the risk of becoming a generalized documentation centre. An archivist could however use this list to find the appropriate terminology to apply to those subjects falling under the institution’s mandate.

While researching interesting subject matter, the archivist must remember that photographs are endowed with a particular nature: their informational value may be analyzed at a number of levels. When we look at a photograph, we see first the object or subject the creator or his or her client/sponsor aimed to photograph. An attentive eye will, however, see the other layers of informational value. These details will also be of interest to the researcher.

For example, consider the image “St Catherine Street Looking East,” taken in 1937 by Conrad Poirier (see Figure One). This title given by the photogra-

9 Leary, *The Archival Appraisal of Photographs*, p. 43.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

11 Groupe d’archivistes de la région de Montréal (GARM), *Champs d’acquisition* (Montréal, 1996).

12 The institution can accept suggestions from staff providing reference services as long as they relate to an area of specialization. A high number of requests from users concerning a non-existent or poorly documented subject may result in that subject being adopted by an archival repository; it would then be added to its acquisition and selection policy as an area of specialization.

13 Leary, *The Archival Appraisal of Photographs*, pp. 44–46.



Figure One: *St Catherine Street Looking East*. Photographer : Conrad Poirier. October 5, 1937. Negative on film. Montréal Centre of the Archives nationales du Québec.

pher expresses his first and obvious intention but several additional data elements may interest users and could be emphasized. Such is the case with the neon sign for Buckingham Cigarettes, the telegraph office of the Canadian National Railways, the souvenir shop, the presence of cars and a tram, the pedestrians, and the rainy evening. The title proper does not even mention that Sainte-Catherine Street is in Montréal. When appraising for selection, the archivist who seeks to fill particular information needs must think of these other levels of analysis.¹⁴

The Intentions of the Participants in the Creation of Photographs

The archivist must also seek to do justice to the intentions of the participants in the creation of the documents. The archivist must have a good knowledge of the context of creation of the documents being appraised for selection and must be immersed in the values contemporary to their creation. We identify

¹⁴ The chapter entitled “Description” in Charbonneau and Robert, eds., *La gestion des archives photographiques* attempts to establish guidelines for this analysis because all available information should not necessarily be described.

five participants whose aims underlie the creation of the photographic archives.¹⁵ They are:

- The photographer, who is simultaneously artist, craftsman, and technician, using pictures as a means of self-expression and as a reflection of personal objectives. Moreover, when photographing an individual, the photographer may seek to communicate a personal opinion of the subject through the expression or the posture of the person.
- The individual or the group of individuals photographed, because they seek to convey a positive image of themselves. In the case of the portraits found in the fonds of professional photographers, it is often easy to identify the picture reflecting this intent because it is generally the one which was printed and purchased. This will also be the case with the official photographs of groups of students or of workers where the individuals seek to be depicted as they want to be seen.
- The customer or of the sponsor of the shoot who seeks a testament to personal or professional activities in showing an eldest son's first communion or goods for a catalogue.
- The technician, assistant to the photographer, who can resize or retouch an image in the darkroom.
- And, finally, the person who gathers and documents the photographs. Their role is reflected in the order given to the pictures and the wording of their titles. These are testimonies in themselves and add to the evidential value that needs to be preserved.

The intentions of the participants in the creation of the photographs need to be identified and taken into consideration. This is somehow easier when the appraisal is done on large and homogeneous units. To do thorough research, the appraisal and selection needs to be meticulous and the archivist needs to take the necessary time. This makes it possible to apply the analysis to small units where the archivist can proceed by comparing individual documents.

Accompanying Documentation

The documentation accompanying a photograph can be very useful for appraisal and selection; without it, the archivist cannot render a decision. An unidentified image cannot offer evidence or inform – a picture is not always worth a thousand words. The *Rules for Archival Description* direct that essential questions be answered: what (title); by whom (statement of responsibil-

15 A single person can play several of those roles. This typology of the intentions which prevail in the creation of photographs was inspired largely by Frédéric Ripoll and Dominique Roux, *La photographie* (Toulouse, 1995), p. 38.

ity); when (dates of creation); in which context (scope and content). Photographs that archivists want to preserve must answer (or allow an answer to) at least some of these questions. A document that does not answer these questions – even following exhaustive research – should satisfy other criteria, such as age, originality, and aesthetic quality; if it does not, the preservation of the document is unjustified.

Uniqueness or Originality of the Information

When determining the uniqueness or originality of a photograph, the archivist is concerned with determining both its evidential and informational value: which photographs among those appraised offer unique evidence of the activities of the creator of the fonds? Once evidential value has been established, which photographs offer unique informational value to the user and which are rare? If one finds that the evidential value of a document is non-existent, is preservation justified? If the document is neither unique nor original and only serves to support documents preserved in other fonds or collections, the photograph should not be preserved.

Age of the Medium and of the Information

In order to identify the age of a photograph, one must have some knowledge of the history of photography.¹⁶ William H. Leary¹⁷ recommends:

- the preservation of all photographs dating from the period 1839 to 1889 (because of the scarcity of the information, the fragility of the media, and the exceptional pictorial quality of the documents);
- the application of selection criteria for photographs dating from the period 1890 to 1940 (if its age is in doubt, Leary opts for the preservation of the photograph);
- and the application of rigorous selection criteria for documents dating from the period 1940 to the present so that archives only preserve essential information that will remain relatively easy to manage.

The use of such a chronological division is not without risk. We must also consider the information itself. It may be considered useful in a large urban centre where subjects have been well documented over a period of time. However, in another region where a photograph taken in the 1940s is considered

16 On photographic history and chronology, see the chapter entitled “Aperçu historique” or the annex “Repères chronologiques” from Charbonneau and Robert, eds., *La gestion des archives photographiques*.

17 Leary, *The Archival Appraisal of Photographs*, pp. 41–42.

historical (e.g., mining towns in Québec's North Shore region) or is seen as a new subject (e.g., the Montréal aeronautical industry in the 1940s or the gay rights movement since the 1960s), Leary's chronology may not apply. Consequently, an archivist must both qualify such basic rules and apply them cautiously. The archivist's best tools are a knowledge of history, a knowledge of the fonds (the documents and their creator), and knowledge of other fonds available both in the institution and in the region.

Aesthetic Quality and Significance to the History of the Art and Science of Photography

In order to recognize a document's aesthetic quality and significance to the history of the art and science of photography, an archivist must weigh certain questions, such as:

- Is there particular originality in the treatment of the subject, the framing, and the light?
- Does the photograph exhibit sensitivity on the part of the photographer?
- Does it stir particular emotions on the part of the viewer?
- Does the fonds under appraisal include a photograph created by a photographer whose own fonds has disappeared and whose traces are rare?¹⁸
- Does the archivist's institution, for example, have a daguerreotype in good enough condition to be presented during a guided tour?

Accessibility/Restrictions¹⁹

Let us consider the accessibility of documents. When a decision is made to preserve photographs because of their significant evidential value, restrictions such as those imposed by the *Copyright Act* can have a marginal negative impact. However, when preservation is based on the informational value of a document and the evidential value is non-existent or weak, accessibility becomes a major concern. The institution cannot burden itself with documents that are difficult to manage. The value of these documents is marginal at best because their informational value is difficult to exploit. In the case of photographs, restrictions are mostly related to reproduction and publication.

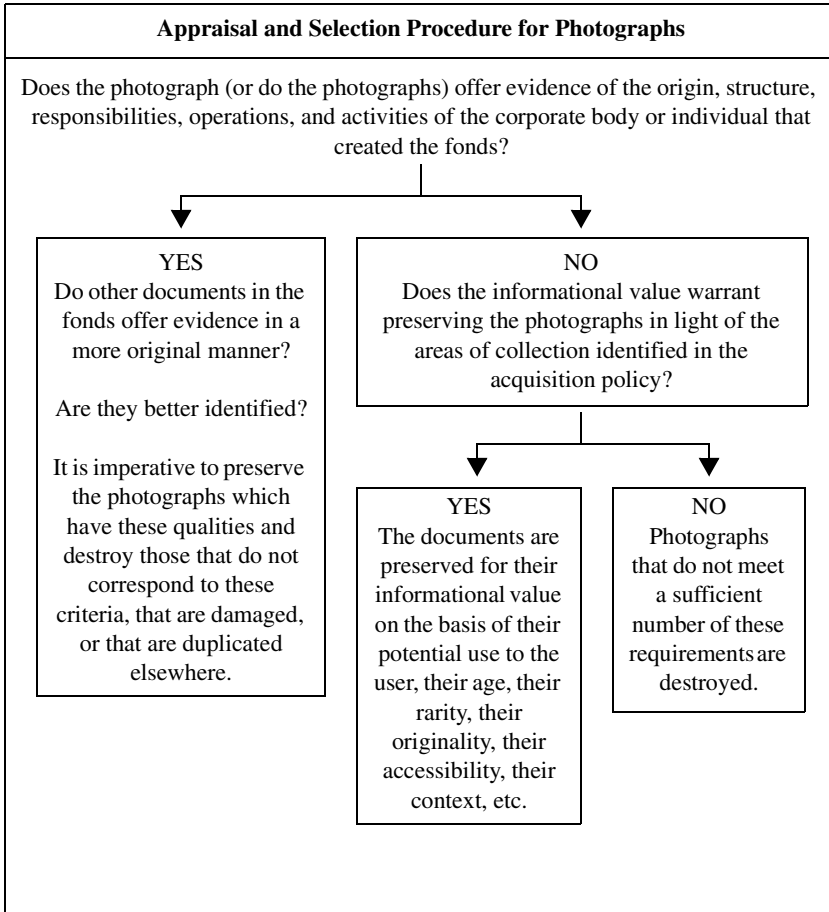
18 For example, this would be the case for prints produced by the Dupras and Colas Studio of Montreal. The studio operated from 1906 to 1944 and only 247 glass plate negatives are present in the fonds. All other "original" documents were destroyed. Following this logic, an archival institution that does not find it useful to preserve the prints of this studio because the documents do not possess evidential value and their informational value is weak, may wish to preserve the prints because they represent rare traces of this important studio. The prints are important to the history of photography in Montréal.

19 On the subject of restrictions and access, see the chapter entitled "Diffusion" in Charbonneau and Robert, eds., *La gestion des archives photographiques*.

Impact of Restrictions on Appraisal and Selection			
If the evidential value is pre-dominant	— Access restrictions have no impact	— Copying and publication restrictions have no impact	— Restrictions have no impact on the appraisal and selection
If the informational value is predominant	— Access restrictions should have a significant impact	— Copying and publication restrictions should have less of an impact	— Appraisal and selection should be rigorous

Procedure for the Appraisal and Selection of Photographs

It is our belief that archivists must equip themselves with tools that will facilitate the appraisal and selection of photographs. The following diagram illustrates the considerations, the archival values, and the criteria necessary to complete this difficult selection task. This procedure, when conducted in conjunction with appraisal criteria, will facilitate the harmonization of selection practices in an institution without hampering the exercise with burdensome templates not appropriate for file- or item-level selection. The appraisal procedure for photographs can be summed up as:



The appraisal and selection of photographs is a useful exercise. We must, however, never forget that these archives are often included in multi-media archival fonds. Consequently, there may be a need to integrate processing methods for various media. When several media are found together, it is important to appraise them all at the same time. Generally, the preservation of one medium compels the preservation of the other media. Gerald F. Ham emphasises that the criteria used to appraise the textual documents of a fonds should generally be used to appraise the fonds' photographs.²⁰ This technique

20 Gerald F. Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago, 1993), p. 61.

will avoid the loss of links of *provenance* which diminish the archival value of a photograph by reducing its evidential value.

Original or Copy

The original of a photograph is, with some exceptions, its negative.²¹ Consequently, the preservation of the negative is important.²² If an archives has a negative and several prints of an image, it only needs to preserve the negative (the original) and one print (the copy) for user reference. Several negatives reproduced on a single print sheet allow the institution to preserve only the sheet instead of several larger user copies. As well, as soon as the reference print (copy) is available in another consultation medium, the print copy loses its usefulness. The only exception to this rule is the author's print, often signed and printed on fibre paper. This print should be preserved for exhibition purposes.

Some institutions acquire fonds that contain only prints. Even though these are copies, the appraiser cannot make hasty assumptions. The appraiser must look for potential evidential and informational value and apply the procedure discussed above. We feel it is inconceivable to destroy prints that offer essential evidence of the creator of the fonds only because the photograph (print) is not an original document and the negatives are owned by another institution. If on the other hand, the negative is preserved in another institution, and the photograph only has informational value, the archivist has the option of destroying it.

Digital Imagery and its Impact on the Selection of Photographs

The implementation of digital imagery systems can modify the selection process. It will become more and more common for archives to acquire photographic negatives from their creator, who will keep a digital copy of those negatives for continued use. The archivist will have to be careful in this kind of situation since it is possible that the creator of these negatives/digital files will destroy images once their usefulness ends. This new reality complicates the identification of evidential value since the documents (in this case the negatives) first acquired from their creator should provide the basis for the

21 "Snapshot" processes such as a daguerreotype, ambro-types, ferro-types, and "Polaroids" are the exception.

22 In the case of rolls of 35mm film, they should never be cut in order to preserve only the good images. It is difficult to manipulate cut frames in a darkroom. It is preferable to render the superfluous images unusable using a hole-puncher or a magic marker. The retention of these elements adds to the burden of the "archival management system" and may lead to the user's confusion when using rolls containing both documents found in the system and others essentially destroyed. The same difficulty exists in laboratories that will eventually reproduce images from those rolls.

appraisal. How should the archivist respond in these circumstances? It seems to us that that if an archives has the necessary storage space, it must await the acquisition of the digital photographic files and appraise both in concert to maintain the best evidential value.²³

The Role of the Creators or Sponsors of the Creation of the Photographs in their Selection

It can be useful, sometimes essential, for the creators or the sponsors of the creation of photographs to play a role in their appraisal and selection. Indeed, who is better positioned to explain the context or the objectives of a photo shoot and the importance of a person, object, or activity shown? Archival repositories should involve these experts at the time of the appraisal and selection of photographs, especially if they are of technical nature.

Rationalization of Selection

The appraisal and selection of photographs is a task requiring a great investment on the part of archival repositories. It seems to us that a cost-benefit analysis must be done before committing resources to selection. Archivists must balance the costs of storage space and conservation resources allotted to preservation with those of the selection and later phases of processing and access. It is sometimes more cost-effective to keep everything and put resources into preservation and processing (other than selection) if the result of appraisal and selection is projected to be the retention of most photographs. Archivists must learn to make a cost-benefit analysis in order to put their resources into projects presenting real gains.

The Selection of Photographs is a Top-Down Process

The appraisal and subsequent selection of photographs (and of other archives media as well) is a top-down process because the archivist must first decide on the relevance of the records comprising middle levels of description (series, sub-series, sub-sub-series) before appraising files and items. For example, it is possible that a sub-series may be eliminated entirely if its documents are copies whose originals can be found in the same fonds. This is the most economical method in terms of effort and resources. Therefore, the appraisal preceding selection involves a series of decisions leading the archivist to decide in sequence on the relevance of preserving the documents forming the various hierarchical levels of the fonds (from the series towards the items).

23 In addition, the acquisition archivist should take all necessary steps to obtain a copy of the digital photographic files to satisfy the needs for access and conservation.

Cases Studies in the Selection of Photographs

It is possible to draw some recommendations about appraisal and selection of photographs based on a few examples and case studies. These are not recipes that archivists have to carefully follow because answers to selection problems are often found in an analysis of the context of creation of the documents. The procedures we have recommended for selecting photographs, and their corresponding criteria, should be applied. They leave the archivist free to introduce any necessary nuances.

Photographs Interfiled with Other Media

When creator institutions²⁴ have retention schedules, the best solution for photographs interfiled with other media is to apply these schedules to all documents. Organizations with the necessary resources and systems can request that those responsible for selection identify the photographs that exhibit significant informational value and those whose destruction would represent a substantial loss to research. We are fully aware that this exercise is costly and difficult. In the same manner, if the creator does not have a retention schedule, the archivist must use a selection process that includes the appraisal of photographs among and at the same time as the other media.²⁵

Photographs Collected Separately from Other Media or Photographic Archival Units

Fonds Containing Multiple Media

The sensible solution, respectful of original order, consists in selecting photographs separately, as in the cases of exclusively photographic fonds or descriptive levels. The archivist must, however, ensure that the photographs preserved are linked to textual files that will also be preserved. Textual documents must be processed first so as to identify subjects, persons, and activities that allow the rediscovery of evidential links obscured by the untidiness of the “shoe box” or its equivalent.

Items Collected in Albums

Simply put, we believe that there are two types of photographic albums. One clearly reflects the creator by the choice of images, their organization, and their accompanying labels which all testify to their creator’s activity. We

24 Generally, this refers to fonds created by corporate bodies.

25 Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, p. 61.

advocate the preservation of all photographs as well as the maintenance – at least at the intellectual level – of the structure and information contained in these albums. The second type of album does not bear the personal mark of its creator. We therefore suggest a rigorous selection process based on the diligent use of the appraisal procedures and criteria discussed above.

Items Without Links

This case also requires a rigorous selection process based on the use of the appraisal procedure and criteria outlined earlier. In the case of archival units containing only photographs, the preservation of the evidence is directly related to the quality of the archivist's preliminary research (biographical, genealogical, or historical research in the cases of individual, family, or corporate fonds). The archivist will find it difficult to establish the links among documents without this research, especially if these links are poorly identified.

Files Containing Homogenous Material (Studio, Professional, or Institutional Photographs)

The archival units that include these files usually contain extensive series of repetitive images (marriages, identification cards, graduations, portraits, commercial catalogues or brochures, construction projects, etc.). These files are uniform in nature because their photographs generally represent one subject and were created by a single photographer over a short period of time. Exceptional election and sampling can be used to deal with the problems related to the extent of these series.

Exceptional Selection

Exceptional selection is the process of “choosing documents based on the exceptional interest of particular items, as opposed to sampling, which is based on their representativeness.”²⁶ Archival institutions often acquire photographic fonds organised into files. These files represent an event, a subject, a person, a place, a project, etc. Keeping the entire file is not necessary as long as the preservation of a limited number of items supports the integrity of the information contained in the file. Such selection within homogenous photographic files also allows the elimination of duplicate documents.

For example, a file pertaining to an art exhibition can be considerably reduced. Only those photographs depicting the artist in question, the speeches marking the unveiling ceremony, the crowd admiring the paintings, the loca-

26 Archives nationales du Québec, *Normes et procédures archivistiques*, p. 158.

tion, and the layout of the exhibit need be preserved. Some photographs address more than one of these aspects.

Portrait files can receive the same treatment. A selection based on the identification of the client's choice of a particular portrait is relatively easy to do; the negative has been printed and the print copy is included in the file. That same negative has often been retouched and it is possible to see an outline defining the model or pencil or etching marks used to scrape the emulsion.²⁷ Under these circumstances, the selection of the negative chosen by the client is a simple solution. The archivist must however, ensure that the image has not been rendered artificial – it may be excessively flattering. In this case, the archivist should include a more accurate representation. If the archivist does not possess information identifying the photograph chosen by the client, the images that best offer evidence of the client's intention and of the photographer's work should be selected.

Selection offers the advantage of preserving both evidential and informational value insofar as traces of all files originally created are preserved. On the other hand, the disadvantage is that the selection process involves the consultation of all of the photographs in all of the files of the archival unit in question.

Sampling

Another solution to the appraisal problems inherent to large volumes of photographs is sampling. It is particularly useful in instances of large, continuous and gap-free series, which display homogeneity in their subjects and methods. Sampling is a "choice based on variable criteria ... to preserve a limited number of documents to represent the whole of which they form part."²⁸ Confirmation of homogeneity and continuity must precede sampling at any level of description. The verification exercise requires statistical expertise. Each level of description is unique and the strategy developed for one case may not necessarily be applied in another.

Sampling allows the disposal of large quantities of documents without the need to review the entire body of records. On the other hand, even though the evidential value of the fonds is preserved, its informational value is diminished. After sampling occurs it will be impossible to find traces of each file, even those that could have been considered exceptional. It is however possible to conduct qualitative sampling so as to limit the loss of exceptional files. Vic-

27 For commercial reasons the practice of retouching photographs has diminished since the 1970s. Retouching was done mostly to photographs depicting persons (weddings, babies, confirmations, etc.). Official photographs (identity cards, passport photos, etc.) were excluded from this practice.

28 Archives nationales du Québec, *Normes et procédures archivistiques*, p. 145.

tor Tremblay has suggested intriguing approaches in this area in a clear and succinct article.²⁹

Impact of Multiple Institutional Image Banks on Selection

It is possible for an organization to have multiple image banks. This does not raise particular difficulties when appraising and selecting if the various bodies which are guardians of those image banks are also the creators and sole users of the documents. It is different if the various image banks (which are generally topic oriented) all have the same creator but different users and guardians.

This could be the case for a large paper company, whose public relations office is charged with the exclusive production of photographs. The public relations office would thereafter distribute certain images to other internal offices such as engineering, forestry, etc. In such circumstances, the archivist of the paper company could be confronted with many image banks, a corporate one belonging to the public relations office and others, specialized, belonging to different offices. The first, the corporate bank, which is the main source of the others, will contain all the photographs whereas the three others will be distinct but probably involve some overlap.

Two solutions are possible for the archivist when considering the appraisal and selection of these documents. Firstly, if the photographs from the different image banks have a code or number assigned by the public relations office, then it would be possible to destroy the pictures held by the other offices if care is taken to record the contents of those specialized image banks as evidence of their organization and use. The other possibility is to preserve all of the image banks if there is no coding to help reconstitute the secondary banks from the main repository in the public relations office. We would consider that the gathering and organization of the specialized image banks is representative of the corporate bodies because they are evidence of the concerns of those corporate bodies and as such, are worth keeping.³⁰

Mixed Content Files (Documentation Centres and Newspapers)

With respect to files of mixed content, new access challenges emerge. These files often include photographs originating from a variety of sources (press agencies, political parties, businesses, etc.) acquired by newspapers and docu-

29 Victor Tremblay, "Méthodes d'échantillonnage. Applications dans le cas d'archivage de dossiers," in Congrès de l'Association des archivistes du Québec, *Sélection et préservation. Des choix rentables pour aujourd'hui et pour demain* (Sillery, 1996).

30 The reader should not conclude that it is necessary to preserve the whole of the photographs in the various image banks. Remember that the appraisal of the documents is done from the top down.

mentation centres for use in specific, often short-term, contexts. Years later, an archival institution receiving these types of accessions cannot presume to be the copyright holder for all the photographs.

For example, a file found in the fonds of a newspaper includes ten photographs. Three were received from a press agency, which created these photographs for commercial purposes. Members of the newspaper's staff produced the other seven. Given that the printed newspaper contains all of the photographs that were published, regardless of their source, and their evidential value is documented, we recommend the destruction of photographs received from other sources when the management of the copyright for these images threatens to become complex.

Conclusion

Although users of photographic archives are only interested in their own research subject and archival practices do not meet the needs of those users who at times consider archival institutions to be documentation centres, archivists must focus on their institution's mandate and the basics of the appraisal process applied to selection when dealing with photographs. First, they must attempt to preserve those documents that offer evidence of their creator. Second, they must try to respond to users' insatiable quests for information while remaining faithful to their institution's areas of specialization as described in its acquisition policy. If archivists proceed otherwise, in attempting to satisfy all information needs, their archives will be transformed into an image bank or a documentation centre. Consequently, the value of the fonds as evidence of the activities of its creator will be diluted. Seen in this light, appraisal becomes part of the continuum of archival functions and operations. In fact, the values, criteria, and tools developed in response to appraisal can also be applied to acquisition and selection.³¹

The present article has proposed a simple procedure to be used in the appraisal and selection of photographic archives. Presented as a series of questions, this procedure acts as an *aide-mémoire* for the archivist. It can be printed and pinned to a bulletin board and consulted during the appraisal process used in selection. The procedure also offers certain approaches to selection that correspond to various types of archival fonds that include photographic material.

These archival values, criteria, appraisal procedures, and approaches to selection cannot substitute for the knowledge and judgement of the archivist nor the preliminary research which must be performed. The archivist must

31 The same is true for many other archival operations like planning the processing of records, arrangement, description, indexing, preservation, and access.

have the time needed to study the fonds, its creator, the context of creation of the documents, and a working knowledge of the history of photography. The archivist must also have a sense of the documents; often in examining the documents one finds the answers to processing issues. Effort invested in this preparation, in this research, can save considerable time in the processing of photographs.