

"The Long and the Short" of Copying Panorama Negatives at Library and Archives Canada

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Abstract

The vast photograph holdings of the Library and Archives Canada include a large and significant collection of cellulose nitrate still photographic negatives. From the fine portraiture of Yousuf Karsh to the Merrilees collection documenting all aspects of early transportation in Canada to historical National Defense, WWI & WWII material, this is a collection in demand. Within the collection there are between four and five thousand nitrate panorama negatives in a variety of sizes and all tightly rolled. Many are in original metal tube containers, many are without primary housing, and most are inaccessible to even archivists to provide proper identification and develop finding aids.

Apropos to this collection in it's current state, Library and Archives Canada's mandate to preserve the documentary heritage of Canada, to be a source of enduring knowledge accessible to all, and to serve as the continuing memory of the government of Canada and its institutions, is severely impeded.

The purpose of this paper will be to identify options for making this collection of rolled panoramas accessible to clients, while preserving the original. Digital copying is deemed the preferred method of delivery of these images to clients for many reasons, however, problems arise when attempting to scan them due to their current physical state. This paper will include a discussion of research into different scanning technologies and software, and highlight conservation concerns such as handling, and light and heat exposure during the copying process. What other institutions have done previously and how they are currently approaching the copying of panorama negatives will also be addressed.

All of the cellulose nitrate film collections at the LAC are housed in an offsite storage facility with some environmental controls. However, this facility is considered substandard and therefore a new state of the art facility is in the planning stages and includes cold/sub zero storage. Finding a methodology for scanning of the panoramas is becoming a more pressing issue, as copying prior to being placed in cold storage, for a least high demand items, is desirable.

Biography

Greg Hill is currently A/Manager, Long Term Access Projects in the Care or Collections Branch, Library and Archives Canada. Previously he held senior conservators positions in the 'Prints and Drawings' and Photograph conservation laboratories. Prior to joining the staff of the National Archives of Canada in 1988, he worked for the Provincial Archives of Manitoba and in private practice.

Janet Kepkiewicz graduated from University of Western Ontario with an Honours BA in Canadian History and earned a diploma in Applied Museum Studies from Algonquin College. Since 2002, Janet holds the position of Collection Manager: Art, Photography and Philatelic Records at Library and Archives Canada.

Tania Passafiume graduated in 1998 from Queen's University, with a Master's in Art Conservation focusing on paper conservation. She then attended the Certificate Program in Photographic Preservation and Practice at George Eastman House. There she focused mainly on photographic materials and continued this course of study for the following two years as an Andrew W. Mellon fellow in the Advanced Residency Program in the first cycle. Next, she was an Andrew W. Mellon fellow in photograph conservation at The Art Institute of Chicago. Tania is currently a conservator of photography at Library and Archives Canada Preservation Centre in Gatineau, Quebec