

Long-Term Preservation of Photographic Originals and Digital Image Files in the Corbis/Sygma Collection in France

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Abstract

The Corbis/Sygma collection in France is one of the most important documentary photography collections in the world. The Corbis “Sygma Preservation and Access Initiative,” a project that began in 2004 to ensure that the collection’s more than 50 million objects, including slides, negatives, prints, and contact sheets, are carefully preserved in a secure cold storage facility outside in Garnay, France (approximately 45 minutes by train from Paris) while at the same time making the collection more widely accessible and shared with people around the world.

Since 2005, a team of Corbis editors and archivists have been undertaking the initial phases of the “Sygma Preservation and Access Initiative” leading up to the move of the collection from its present home in Paris to the new facility in Garnay. This has involved changing the archive classification system to organize pictures by photographer, rather than by theme, to regularize royalties, promote the collections and make it accessible to the public by digitizing prints, negatives, and transparencies.

Corbis is collaborating closely with the photographers to make the collection more widely available to researchers, print and online publications, and to the general public worldwide by searching, identifying, and digitizing the most significant photographs from the collection to be available via the Corbis website (the Corbis digital image archive and web servers are principally located in Seattle, Washington, with backup data

storage housed in redundant offsite locations). Since 2002, Corbis has digitized more than 60,000 pictures from the Sygma collection to bring the total number now available online to more than 800,000 searchable images.

The overall preservation program is a combined effort that utilizes low-temperature, humidity-controlled cold storage to preserve the photographic originals, and secure, backed-up servers and a long-term data format migration strategy to preserve high-resolution scans made from the photographic originals, as well as digital captures made by photographers in more recent years. Corbis is a private corporation owned by Bill Gates.

Biography

Wilhelm was a founding member of the Photographic Materials Group of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. In 1978, he was one of the founding members of American National Standards Institute Subcommittee IT9-3 (now incorporated into ISO and known as ISO Working Group 5/Task Group 3 [WG-5/TG-3]), which is responsible for developing standardized accelerated test methods and specifications for the permanence of color photographs and digital print materials. Wilhelm has served as secretary of the group since 1984 and he presently serves as Project Leader of the ISO WG-5/TG-3 Technical Subcommittee on test methods for Indoor Light Stability. Wilhelm is also an active member of the ISO task groups responsible for storage standards for color and black-and-white films and prints.