

What is (and What Isn't) a Photograph Today?

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Abstract

Over the past 20 years, newly evolving techniques of creating and outputting digital information have changed the way we perceive photography today. New technologies that are capable of printing continuous tone color images onto resin-coated (RC) paper supports have become available; these are, for example, dye diffusion thermal transfer, photothermographic transfer, and ZINK, a direct thermal color process. Some processes such as thermal autochrome and Cyclicolor became obsolete relatively soon after their introduction. Inkjet, especially, has become a major player for printing digital images since the mid 1990s. All of these processes must be understood and identified by conservators, archivists and related professionals if the new prints are to be preserved for future generations. Questions of materials, techniques, and terminology must be addressed in order to devise solutions for the acquisition, storage, and exhibition of digital prints.

Terminology in particular has turned out to be a key issue in dealing with new prints. For example, a process that has been given a number of different names in its short, 25-year history is dye diffusion thermal transfer, abbreviated D2T2. These prints look very much like traditional photographs, but differ from them fundamentally in terms of printing technology and material components. They have also been named thermal dye transfer, dye sublimation, and dye diffusion prints. It may be confusing that the last term is also used for the wholly unrelated instant prints such as those produced by Polaroid. Similarly, inkjet prints have been given a great range of names, including giclée, plot, bubble-jet, piezo print, and pigment print. The terms photorealistic and photo-quality are often used to describe the inks and papers used for inkjet; the conscious choice of these terms that reflect the similarity of inkjet prints to the photographic prints we have known for over 100 years is a marketing tool devised by the imaging industry. Many inkjet prints that depict photographic images are increasingly simply being called photos. Is a print defined by its content or by its materials and process?

Although it is common in times of rapid change for terms that historically meant one thing to suddenly collect additional or alternative meanings in popular use, in academic or technical fields a more conservative approach to adopting new definitions is needed. For example, a photographic paper that was not exposed from a negative in a darkroom, but that instead was exposed to lasers that are controlled by digital signals, is, when regarded from the material point of view, still a photographic print or, more simply, a photograph. However, inkjet prints on a glossy, RC base that have the look and feel of photographic prints are still essentially ink on a substrate; they therefore cannot be photographs, at least from the technical and material perspective. The everyday use of the term photograph or photo for prints of images with a photographic quality (regardless of the printing technology), a trend that has become popular in the printing industry and amateur market through the growing use of digital cameras, is therefore debatable – at least in the conservation community.

Language is fluid; a new generation of photographers who have never used film are fast becoming adults, and the imaging industry is maturing along with them. We conservators, curators and archivists need to be able to communicate with the larger world, and only time will tell which terms become accepted and which do not. Thus it is important for us to actively engage in the discussion surrounding the terminology for processes that are similar to the traditional photograph in materials, print quality, and look and feel.

Author Biography

Martin Jürgens received his MS in cross-disciplinary studies from Rochester Institute of Technology (1998) and his MA in paper conservation from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario (2001). Since then he has worked as a photograph conservator in private practice in Hamburg, Germany. Much of his research has focused on the conservation of digital prints. Starting in June 2010, he will take the position of photograph conservator at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.