2.2 Simple conservation photography and documentation

Conservation photography is more than just producing a good image; it is about recording accurate information on the condition of an object. With correct lighting, conservation photography will reveal a wide range of information about the structure, method of construction, and condition of an object, showing all its flaws. Good photographic images record the condition of the object at that point in time. If the object deteriorates over time or is damaged later, the photos are useful in distinguishing the new damage from the old. Photographic documentation becomes part of the permanent record for an object.

The type of information that is useful to record along with the photo includes: the date, the artist, maker, or designer, title of the object, which aspect of the object is photographed (e.g., inside left armhole), the image file number, and whether the photo is taken before or after treatment.

Materials needed
- Digital camera
- Tripod
- Studio flash lights if possible (reasonably priced lighting kits are available from camera stores)
- Grey paper or cloth background
- Grey board

Prior to photography
- Always ensure the object is securely supported and not exposed to too much light.
- Check the camera is ready and charged.
- Use a suitable background to bring out the subject matter.
- Conservation photography records stationary objects, so it is good to have your camera on a tripod. If you are not using the auto setting on your camera, use a slow shutter speed and a high aperture (e.g., f11, f16, f32). This will give you a greater depth of field (depth of focus).

Studio set up

1. This photograph shows an 18th century open robe taken in a studio for publication purposes. The studio lighting makes the dress look dramatic, but it does not reveal many details about the condition of the dress.

2. 3/4 back view of studio lit open robe (publication shot).
3. The same dress photographed in a studio for conservation purposes. The lighting is even from top to bottom and shows many more details in the dress structure.

4. Back view of open robe with conservation photography.

5. Diagram of studio set up.

6. This studio set up shows the studio lights positioned for conservation photography. To achieve even lighting, place the lights on either side of the camera/tripod. Both lights should be placed equidistant, facing the object at a 45° angle.
7. Use available room light to photograph the object if you do not have access to a studio and lights. You can use a suitable background material to isolate the subject matter. The colour grey is often used as it doesn’t distract from the object. Place a grey cloth or paper on the wall and drape it onto the floor. Place the mannequin on top of this.

8. An alternative method is to place the mannequin on a plain cloth or board in front of a clean wall. The board or cloth will stop the garment from getting dirt on the hem during photography. Wear socks to stop dirt getting on the board.

9. If a garment is too fragile to be dressed on a mannequin, it can be placed on a sloped backboard to be photographed. The slope will prevent the image being fore-shortened (distorted).


Adjusting the colour balance for a digital camera

Digital cameras have a white balance (WB) function. If you are not very experienced with photography, it is best to use the auto setting on a digital camera. The white balance will then work automatically. If you are more confident with your camera, you can manually set the WB according to the environment ie day light, cloudy, flash, fluorescent (use the picture icons on your camera).

Lighting

- Studio flash lights give the best results. Set the WB to the daylight icon as studio flash mimics day light.
- Available/ambient light can also give good results. Use the auto setting or adjust the white balance. A tripod must be used for this method because you will need a long exposure.
- The inbuilt flash from your camera can be used if the room lighting is inadequate. Beware of hot spots from reflective materials when using a flash.

Photo documentation

As a picture tells a thousand words, photos are the best way of showing the condition of an object. In conservation photography, all aspects of an object are photographed, ie the front, back, inside, top and bottom, if relevant. You can also do close ups of damaged areas.

When you have printed your photos, you can add extra information about the object using waterproof, fine textas. Rather than draw on the actual print, you can stick a piece of mylar (clear plastic) to the top edge of the print. The mylar can be lifted up so that you can see the object without the textas. With colour coding, you can draw on more details of the condition onto the mylar overlay. For instance, all holes in a dress could be circled in blue texta, all frayed areas could be circled in green texta. This is a very effective way of recording the condition of an object.


(Left) Photo with mylar overlay, attached at top edge with double sided tape. Areas of damage are indicated with textas, using colour coding.

(Right) The original photo can still be viewed when the mylar overlay is lifted up.