

questions for Mary Schobert



M.F.A., Southern Illinois
University, in 1981

At the Conservation Center:
23 years

Apprenticeship, CCAHA

1. Are you a photographer yourself?

No, I'm a painter. I do watercolors on paper, but my own snapshots are often a starting point. I love the snapshot aesthetic—the shadow of the photographer, the arm that gets in front of the camera, the captured moment. And photographs have such power. I have one of my grandmother as a girl on the farm in Denmark where she grew up that I've treasured since I was a child.

As for a connection to conservation, I'm not sure there is one. Before I worked on photos I was a paper conservator. I've always really liked exhibits of works on paper — they are usually not about grandeur and big statements, but tend to be intimate in scale and tone — sort of like a private conversation, instead of a public performance.

2. Why photography conservation then?

Nora Kennedy (who is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art now) was the CCAHA photograph conservator for a couple of years. She left for a one year appointment at the Museum of Modern Art at a time when there were not many photograph conservators around. Our director asked if I wanted to get additional training in photographic materials, since I had worked with both Nora and Debbie¹ on some photo treatments. Debbie was willing to take on my training. It meant a lot that she believed in me.

I wrote my own proposal to the Kress Foundation to do a year-long training with Debbie. She was teaching the photo block at Winterthur. One day a month for the next year Debbie and I would work together and do treatments and discuss topics. We talked on the phone frequently in between visits. She was an incredible teacher. She is very organized and energetic, so we really got the most out of the time we had. She has such a passion for the work, every day was fun. And there was always coffee and doughnuts.

3. Is there something about photography conservation that you are drawn to? Or, are there times when you prefer working with paper?

Well, I love the artifacts, but there are limits sometimes to what you can do with photographs that can be very frustrating. Sometimes there are stains you can't reduce and techniques that are appropriate for paper supports but not for photographs. When you get into papers with a baryta² layer, right away you are working with this laminate structure that just doesn't respond to treatment as readily as a sheet of uncoated paper fibers—you just can't do as much.

And sometimes I think the longer you work in conservation the more conservative you become about what ought to be done. The simple solutions are often the best—good housing, some skillful inpainting.

4. You are the longest-running employee of CCAHA. Tell me a bit about how it was 20 years ago and the differences you notice today.

Twenty-three years ago, paper conservation was a still a young profession. Marilyn Weidner³ had this bold idea to create a regional center. A Dacron lining was a big event. Everyone would help or watch. There was an emphasis on constant education in the lab and with each others treatments because everything was new: "Here's something everybody should come and see."

The scale of the whole operation was so small. I remember Lois Price⁴ and Marilyn jumping up and down because we received a grant that was going to bring a \$16,000 treatment project into the lab.

5. Do you have a favorite piece that you've worked on?

"Thomas Eakins and Students, Swimming Nude." It's an icon of American photography. When the Philadelphia Museum of Art did the Eakins show a couple of years ago, I did a major treatment of this print. It's a large platinum print that had been acquired by Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts as part of the Bregler collection in 1985.

This photo had losses at corners and a fair amount of abrasion. It was very satisfying to return it to wholeness. It's a beautiful photograph.

—Katie Hawkins

¹ Debbie Heis Norris, currently Chair, Art Conservation department, Associate Professor and Conservator of Photographs, University of Delaware.

² The baryta layer makes a smooth and reflective surface for the emulsion.

³ Marilyn Weidner, founder, CCAHA.

⁴ Lois Olcott Price, currently Library and Archive Conservator, Winterthur.