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Stories Images Tell Us: Reflections on the Activities Performed at the Seminar-Workshop on Photograph Conservation at the ENCRYM

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ABSTRACT

Photography carries a technical dimension and a visual syntax that make it unique. Considering this premise, the ninth semester students of 2023 of the Bachelor's Degree in Restoration at the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía "Manuel del Castillo Negrete" (ENCRYM, INAH) submitted intervention proposals for the conservation of images both from the photographic collection of the institution—based on the diagnosis they conducted—and those recovered in 2023 from the time capsule buried in the current headquarters 20 years ago, including one of its founder, Manuel del Castillo Negrete, which, when intervened, led to a reflection on the meanings and connections images evoke.

KEYWORDS

photography, conservation, technical dimension, emotional significance

THE MOTIVATION BEHIND THE TEXT

When interpreted as historical documents, photograph conservation poses a significant duality: the technical dimension of their intervention and the humanistic reflection inherent in their conservation. In this regard, the report

carried out by Marcela Vázquez Bárcena and Julia Andrea Vilchis Villavicencio (2023) as part of their social service at the Laboratory on Photograph Conservation (*Seminario-Taller de Conservación de Fotografías*, STCF, in Spanish) at the ENCRYM illustrates in detail the conservation processes applied to the work, particularly to the portrait of conservator Manuel del Castillo Negrete, founder of the eponymous Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía "Manuel del Castillo Negrete" (ENCRYM, INAH).

The work of the students, who examine every stain, crack and alterations in the image with an almost forensic approach, allows them to work in detail on the signs of aging and wear that accumulate over time (Figure 1). With tools such as brushes, solvents and Japanese paper, they face the challenge of removing the photograph from the base and recovering the missing gelatin, not only restoring its physical integrity, but also reestablishing it as an object bearing historical significance and community value.

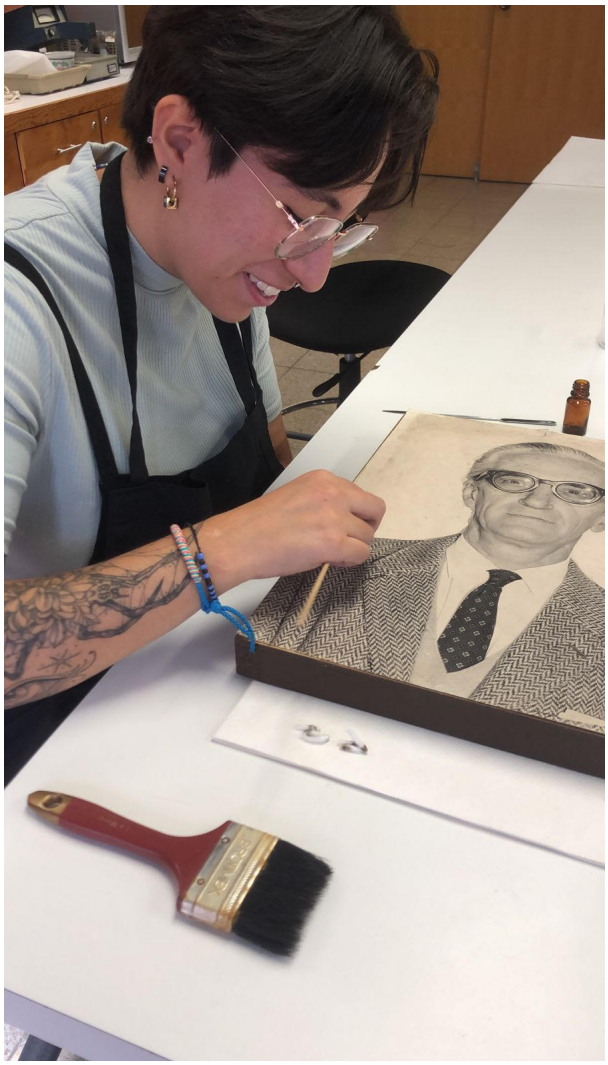


FIGURE 1. Marcela Vázquez Bárcena working on the photograph (Photo: Claudia María Coronado García; courtesy: Laboratory on Conservation of Photographs).

Is a photograph solely a material object? This question invites us to go beyond technical aspects, and consider the deep meanings it carries, which, in my opinion, are the immaterial piece that encourages its conservation, the piece that reminds us that photographs are not only "read", but also "felt." Photographic collections thus acquire a unique dimension as guardians of stories and memories, fostering an emotional connection between the image and the person who observes it.

As Liliana Dávila (2015, p. 148) points out, they embrace a technical dimension and a visual syntax of their own that make them unique, grounding them in a context and linking them to a specific origin. However, one of their main values does not lie in their materiality, but in the emotional response that photographs arouse in those who collect, preserve and contemplate them.

In the practice of conservation, it is possible to decipher the message of an artistic object with the right information. But is it the same in photography? Even without written sources, is it possible to interpret what it depicts, who is in it, or even discover what gave rise to the image? The answer is affirmative, although this requires a different type of skills and knowledge that I will further explain.

DECIPHERING THE MESSAGE

It is precisely this emotional connection that drives the ninth semester students of 2023 to carry out photograph conservation activities in late 2023 and in early 2024. They enthusiastically proposed to apply the knowledge acquired at the Laboratory on Photograph Conservation (STCF) as part of their undergraduate studies at the ENCRYM to identify photographic techniques, carry out diagnoses and develop intervention proposals for the conservation of images requiring it.

First, they explored the ENCRYM Library's photographic collection and, to the object of study, they later incorporated a special collection of images from a time capsule created by the ENCRYM at the inauguration of its current headquarters in 2003, and which was opened almost 20 years later, in the fall of 2023. These photographs were added to the project for diagnosis and conservation, making it possible to note how much—or how little—the field of restoration has changed in two decades. Through a visual comparison and a memory exercise, these images prompt reflection on the evolution of the discipline. This is how we could reminisce what the spaces sheltering the Centro de Estudios para la Conser-

vación "Paul Coremans" or Centro Churubusco[1] looked like, as well as the working methods, attire and hairstyles of the time, yet we were far from being able to identify individuals who were students, faculty and professionals at the time.

However, among the selected pieces was a portrait of Manuel del Castillo Negrete, eponymous founder of the ENCRYM (Figure 2): a print on RC paper created using the silver technique with monochromatic gelatin, 60 cm high by 40 cm wide. It was an impersonal image, similar to that of an official ID photograph, such as those used in passports: a white background, no shadows, uncovered face, no glasses, and no expression—since smiling distorts the face.[2] Paradoxically, this type of photograph—the least artistic—is often the one that officially portrays us as citizens.

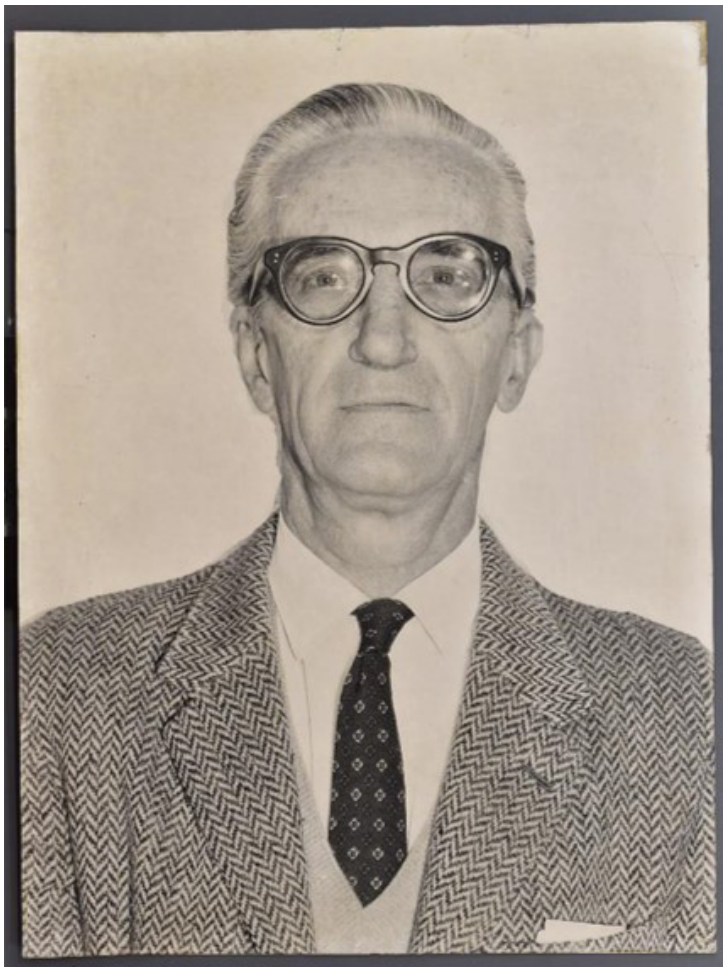


FIGURE 2. Image of "Portrait of Manuel del Castillo Negrete" (Photo: Julia Andrea Vilchis Villavicencio; courtesy of the author).

[1] It was under the direction of Manuel del Castillo Negrete in 1966 that the Ex Convento de Churubusco was destined to be the headquarters of the Centro de Estudios. In 1968, the curriculum changed, and it officially became the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía.
[2] As mandated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the case of the photograph appearing in a Mexican passport.

The portrait caught our interest, first, because it depicted the founder of our school, and, second, because it showed traces of use—marks and stains were visible in the image. Moreover, it revealed something beyond what its manufacturing technique and alterations show: an emotional and profoundly human dimension.

It was later discovered that the image was an enlargement of what may have been a passport photograph, taken in a different context. At the level of the neck and ears, one could see the less accurate edges of an edition that attempted to adapt the image to the current format through hand cropping (Figure 3). In fact, the portrayed subject's glasses seemed to reflect a different scene, far from the impersonality of a photo room for official documents, which suggests a more intimate and personal space and moment.



FIGURE 3. Close-up of the cutout in the background for the "Portrait of Manuel del Castillo Negrete" (Photo: Julia Andrea Vilchis Villavicencio; courtesy of the author).

This reminded me of Max Siedentopf, creator of the "Passport Photos" series,[3] in which he explores the contrast between what is visible and concealed in this type of image. Siedentopf demonstrates how art can express what lies beyond the apparent, defying the restrictions that are usually imposed by the rules in portrait photography. Through his work, he invites us to imagine the alternate worlds and almost impossible scenarios that surround the

[3] Max Siendentopf, *Passport Photos* series. Accessed on October 31, 2024 https://maxsiedentopf.com/passport-photos/.

portrayed subjects. It can be regarded as a visual game that made me think about the possible stories, real or fictitious, woven on the day Castillo Negrete was photographed. How many narratives could that image convey without the need for a single word?

Siedentopf also reflected on how photography, "a tool for capturing 'objective truth,'" paradoxically becomes a means of expressing subjectivity. Every time someone looked at Castillo Negrete's portrait, interpretations varied; there were those who saw it as formal and rigorous, while others perceived an affable personality in it.

Personally, I never met him, and I assumed that, for that same reason, our students would have no idea who he was either. However, to my surprise, the students immediately recognized Castillo Negrete, and when I asked them how they knew who he was, they replied, "Because he is identical to Inés' father, she's our classmate and Castillo Negrete's granddaughter." They recognized him because of the kinship, not because of the historical datum or the reasons that led to the naming of our school.

This portrait remained on display for a long time in one of the hallways of the current Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural (CNCPC), at the time when it shared premises with the ENCRYM. The stains, tears, wear, and visible alterations on the image bear witness to its constant exposure and its close connection with both staff and students, and with those who studied or worked around the founding date of that center, or because Don Manuel gave them a lecture.

They are imprints that reflect an emotional connection with those who walked those hallways, similar to the symbolic relationship evoked by the portraits of national heroes in schools. Now, stored in the collection and protected by an interleaving sheet, far from the school community, the photograph has remained in good material condition over the years. However, in the process of conservation it has lost the living connection that sparked memories, anecdotes and a shared memory of those who knew him, no longer evoking stories or the possibility of reigniting our collective memory.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Photographic documents teach us that the conservation of an image goes far beyond its physical repair. It is an act of respect for the past and a tribute to memory, both individual and collective. Conserving photographs like that of Manuel del Castillo Negrete requires an effort to keep the stories they hold alive, so that future generations of our school and community can not only enjoy them,

but also learn from them and appreciate their historical and emotional value.

Finally, I would like to quote Joan Fontcuberta: "Photography is the proof of something, the support of evidence. Evidence of what? We must ask ourselves. Perhaps evidence only of its own ambiguity." (1997, p. 42). This reflection reminds us that the photographic image preserves the appearance of a moment and carries with it an emotional and subjective weight that transcends visual evidence. The conservation of a photograph, then, is not limited to protecting its materiality, but entails safeguarding the memories, stories and feelings that have been projected on them or on the characters they depict.

By conserving this portrait, or the photographs in our personal collection, we protect the visual testimony of those who came before, and we also keep alive the connections that link the past to the present. In them, time seems to stand still, allowing us to share the same emotional space, where the image is not only a record, but also a catalyst of collective memories that transcend generations. As Fontcuberta (1997, p. 42) rightly suggests, by taking care of a photograph, we question ourselves and enable our capacity to imagine a world that may have existed.

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She holds a degree in Restoration of Movable Property with a specialization in Museography from the ENCRYM-INAH (Mexico) and a master's degree in Modern and Contemporary. Her academic background is enriched by a focus on photograph conservation acquired through professional internships at the Cineteca Nacional. She has collaborated in public and private museums and managed more than 40 exhibitions nationally and internationally. She has published on the conservation of ephemeral and contemporary edible objects; her analysis of the challenges they pose regarding conservation is noteworthy. She has been a teacher at the ENCRYM for the past 10 years, where she continues to teach the new generation of conservation and preservation professionals.