

Department of Photograph Conservation
Sherman Fairchild Center for Works on Paper
and Photograph Conservation

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1 ♦ Preparing Avedon MURALS — The upcoming exhibition *Richard Avedon: MURALS* celebrates the centennial of the seminal photographer's birth, and centers on the display of three spectacular oversized photo murals made in 1969 and 1971. 'Oversized' feels like an almost inadequate descriptor for the panels, which will be on display in the Joyce and Robert Menschel Hall for Modern Photography beginning in January. The largest of the three monumental murals in The Met's collection, *The Mission Council, Saigon, South Vietnam*, measures just over 10 x 32.5 feet, with each of the artwork's five panels being approximately 10 x 6.5 feet. *The Chicago Seven*, shown above, consists of three similarly sized panels. Ensuring that they are well documented and safe for display requires monumental effort.

Mounted on canvas and stored rolled on wide-diameter tubes, these gelatin silver prints are housed off-site in a temperature- and relative humidity-controlled environment. The tube dimensions extend beyond the width of the photographs and are supported at each end on a form, so the rolled photographs are suspended in air, with no pressure on the lower surfaces of the rolls. During storage and transport, the delicate photographic surfaces are protected with unbuffered Renaissance paper interleaving. Unlike photographs that are stored matted, the Avedon murals can only be shared with the public by unrolling and hanging the multiple panels on supportive cleats attached to the gallery walls. This physical manipulation of such

large-scale objects requires choreographed teamwork and the experienced hands of The Met's conservators and technicians. Prior to exhibition, during examination or rehousing, conservators closely examine each artwork, reviewing all aspects of its history and cumulative light exposure, and compare their observations and documentation with prior condition notes and photo-documentation produced during previous exhibitions. These examinations allow conservators to make informed decisions concerning the method and length of display, as well as recommendations for light levels during the run of a show. Minute comparisons between the present condition of a photograph with the existing documentation results in a detailed description of the object's history and use at The Met. For the Avedon murals, these examinations have been recorded since their acquisition in 2002, when they were exhibited here in [Richard Avedon, Portraits](#).

The initial pre-exhibition examinations of the three murals were undertaken many months in advance, giving the conservators, technicians, and numerous other Met staff the time to finalize documentation and prepare the gallery and materials needed for their complicated installation. Due to their size, the monumental photographs must be brought into the Museum still rolled, with any final preparations for display taking place in the gallery. As any reproduction cannot do them justice, we encourage you to come see them for yourselves in *Richard Avedon: MURALS*, which opens January 19, 2023.



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Images: ♦ Top: Conservators and technicians install one segment of the *Andy Warhol and Members of The Factory* mural in the Joyce and Robert Menschel Hall for Modern Photography in preparation for photo-documentation by Met Photographers Juan Trujillo and Eugenia Burnett Tinsley. Bottom: After photography the panel is rolled for safe transport, to be stored until the gallery can be cleared of equipment and the full three-part mural installed. Credits: Eugenia Burnett Tinsley ♦ Richard Avedon (American, New York 1923–2004 San Antonio, Texas), *Andy Warhol and Members of The Factory, New York City, October 30, 1969*. Gelatin silver print. Panel A: 10 ft. 2 in. × 10 ft. 5 3/4 in. (309.9 × 319.4 cm) Panel B: 10 ft. 2 1/8 in. × 10 ft. 3 1/4 in. (310.2 × 313.1 cm) Panel C: 10 ft. 2 in. × 10 ft. 5 3/8 in. (309.9 × 318.5 cm). Gift of the artist. 2002 (2002.379.3a–c) © Richard Avedon

2 ♦ Indian Conservation Fellowship Program — Rajeev Kumar Choudhary joins our department this winter as part of the [Indian Conservation Fellowship Program](#) (ICFP). A conservator at the [Museum of Art and Photography](#) (MAP) in Bengaluru (Bangalore), Rajeev represents the final cohort of conservators who have participated in the ICFP over the past decade.

In 2012, following a Memorandum of Understanding between The Met and the Indian Ministry of Culture, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Indian government, The Met and the Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg ([SRAL](#)) in Maastricht, Netherlands, undertook a pilot phase of the ICFP. In this pilot phase, the SRAL offered an exchange for specialists in paintings conservation, and The Met offered placements in objects, paper, photograph, and textile conservation. In 2016, The Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art joined the consortium offering additional placements in paper conservation.

ICFP fellows join various conservation labs for three to six months at the host institutions to build further skills and expertise, which they can disseminate upon their return to their home institutions. The hosts benefit from the exchange as well, learning about the fellows' home institutions, their collections, and their conservation challenges. Here in the Photograph Conservation Department, we have hosted two previous Indian fellows: Vikram Singh, (2017) from the [Mehrangarh Fort](#), Jodhpur, Rajasthan; and Nikhil Ramesh, (2018) of the [Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya Conservation Centre](#) (CSMVS).

After each fellowship, department heads and supervisors are invited to visit the fellow's home institution and to participate in a two-day meeting with Indian Ministry of Culture officials, where fellows share their achievements. During his fellowship, Rajeev is participating in many of the day-to-day responsibilities shouldered by the conservators, including installing and deinstalling exhibitions, undertaking the work necessary to prepare artworks for loans, and in analytical training with Associate Conservator Katie Sanderson focusing on using the microfading tester and taking color measurements with a spectrophotometer, skills that will help Rajeev and his colleagues at the MAP. In turn, we are learning about this brand-new museum which opens its doors to the public in December, about the history of photography in India, and about current materials and practices.





3 ♦ Fine-Tuning the Time-Based Media Conservation Lab: Condition Checks — Since summer 2021 (see the article in [Bulletin 23](#)) the time-based media lab has been established as a dedicated space housed in the Imaging Department to handle the acquisition, exhibition, and treatment of time-based media artworks.

Associate Conservator Jonathan Farbowitz, Andrew W. Mellon Conservation Fellow Kayla Henry-Griffin, and Felice Robles, a Mellon Intern through the Conservation Center, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, use the media lab regularly. Most recently, they have been examining the condition of several new acquisitions of video art in the same meticulous manner that a photograph conservator would examine a photograph under a microscope.

Since the early 2000s, most time-based media art has been born-digital, meaning it was originally created in a digital format. Newly acquired works typically arrive on hard drives or USB thumb drives, which contain the video files, audio files, or software that constitute the artwork.

The moment of acquisition is the best time to ensure that the Museum has all the appropriate digital files and physical components that are needed for exhibition and future preservation. This makes a thorough condition examination at the point of acquisition critically important.

Ensuring that the Museum has the right resources to exhibit the artwork as the artist intended is the essential goal of condition checking. For a video installation with four separate screens that must stay in sync with each other, conservators will make sure that the video files for all four screens are the same duration. As another example, if an artist states that the artwork should be presented in surround sound, conservators check to make sure that the files delivered have at least six channels of audio, the minimum required to show a work correctly with surround sound. Conservators watch video files or listen to audio files in real-time to check for unintended audio or video errors or glitches that would interrupt the experience of the artwork. Watching files in real-time and completing condition reports can be a lengthy process; completing these acquisition requirements for *The Lightning Testimonies* by Amar Kanwar, for example, took 45 hours!

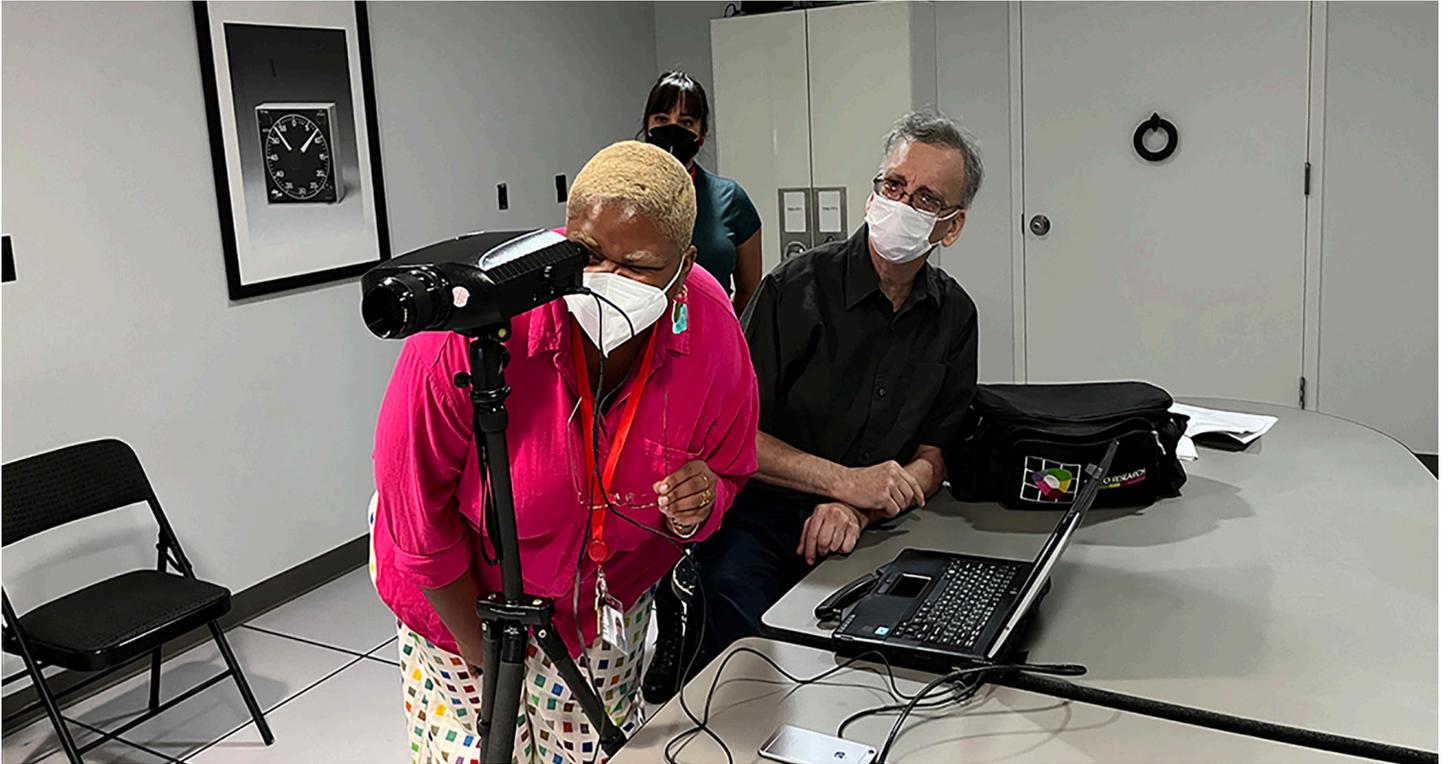
After condition checking and gathering an understanding of how an artwork is exhibited, media conservators also evaluate whether the files delivered to The Met are suitable for long-term preservation. Preservation files are usually either uncompressed, where no compression algorithm is applied to the content, or losslessly compressed, where a compression algorithm reduces the file size without discarding any information. If adequate files have not been provided, the Museum contacts the artist or gallery to discuss obtaining suitable ones.

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Images: ♦ Jonathan Farbowitz, Associate Conservator for Time-Based Media, at his desk in the TBM Lab. ♦ Jonathan discussing the contents of an artist-provided hard drive with graduate intern Felice Robles and Andrew W. Mellon Fellow Kayla Henry-Griffin. Credits: Aleya Lehmann



Proper calibration of monitors and audio equipment ensures that the colors seen and audio heard in the lab faithfully represent the original image and sound content provided by the artist, and that all equipment is adjusted in reference to the same standard. As our primary viewing monitor (a Sony BVM-E251) needed calibration, Jonathan, Felice, and Kayla worked with consultant Maurice Schechter to calibrate the device according to the relevant standards for film and video (REC.601 for Standard Definition video and REC.709 for High-Definition video). Maurice was a chief engineer at DuArt Media Services who has also worked with museums, galleries and artists to digitize videotapes and other analog media and to restore time-based media artworks. Jonathan also worked with Met colleague Chris Heins, an Imaging Specialist, to calibrate the lab's computer monitors to the same standards, so that there is alignment between all screens used for condition examination. The TBM lab requires a mixture of different equipment that has the capacity to work with legacy video, audio, and software formats like standard definition video

that would have been shown on a Cathode Ray Tube (CRT) television, now largely obsolete.

The equipment in the lab is not a static entity. Over time, software needs updating and overall equipment needs change. Caring for the variety of equipment in a media lab can sometimes feel like tending to a garden rather than keeping a well-oiled machine running.

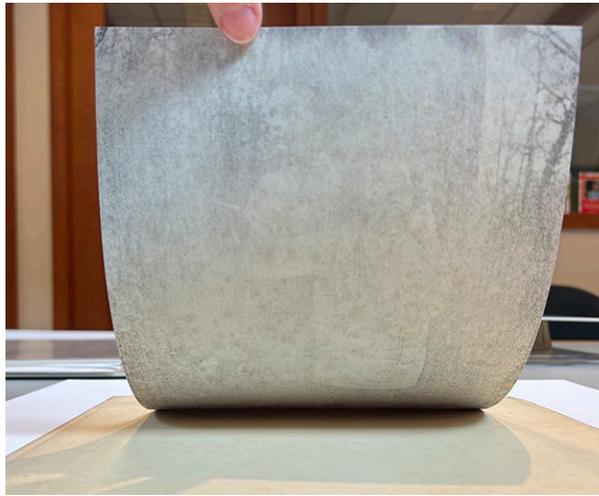
As we are fine-tuning our equipment, we are also fine-tuning our workflows. We have hired Maurice to spend additional time in the lab with Jonathan, Kayla, and Felice to provide advice and answer questions based on his decades of experience working with artists and technicians on video and audio-based works. He has a deep knowledge of audiovisual formats and how they were used in production over the last 70 years, which can inform our practice and decision-making as conservators. Fine-tuning and training allow us to increase our technical knowledge and to make the media lab more useful and efficient.

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Images: ♦ Andrew W. Mellon Fellow Kayla Henry-Griffin aims a spectroradiometer while consultant Maurice Schechter and Graduate Intern Felice Robles look on. The measurements of this instrument are used to calibrate a flat screen monitor in the time-based media lab. Credit: Jonathan Farbowitz



5 ♦ A Conservator's Discovery — When artworks are selected for exhibition, whether onsite at The Met, or for loan to another institution, it presents an opportunity to examine, document, and care for objects that might not otherwise come to the conservation lab. Such was the case for a recent loan of nine photographs to the Taft Museum in Cincinnati, Ohio. The group comprised eight photographs by the photographer Nancy Ford Cones, and one by her husband, James Cones.

Although these artworks were acquired by The Met in 1983, they have never been exhibited. The photographs' arrival in the lab introduced us to the images and to these yet unfamiliar artists. Nancy Ford Cones was a well-known and respected photographer in the early part of the 20th century, working in Kentucky and Ohio. She partnered with her husband, James, who printed her photographs in various processes and on a variety of different papers.

The materials and techniques that the Cones' employed in their practice were on full display in the group requested for loan, which included a wide range of sizes, formats, paper supports, and photographic processes. Although most of the various processes could be identified through visual examination under the microscope, Met Research Scientist Silvia Centeno helped to substantiate the identification of a selection of the prints by performing X-Ray Fluorescence analysis, a non-invasive analytical tool used to determine the presence or absence of metallic image material in each print. With Silvia's help, we were able to confirm that the group included five gelatin silver prints, three gum bichromate prints, and one platinum print.

Accurate identification of photographic process allows a closer understanding of the chemistry and structure inherent in each object, and thus promotes more nuanced preservation and exhibition decisions.

During her condition examinations, Associate Conservator Katie Sanderson made another discovery. She noticed that one of the gum bichromate prints (1983.1091.24) had a faint image visible on the verso. It was not the same as the recto image, and after a search through the Museum's collections database, she located the same image as another Cones gum bichromate photograph (1983.1091.2). This discovery reminds us of the depth of the Museum's collections and opens a small window into the Cones' working practices. As the paper was clearly re-used after the image on the verso was rejected, the Cones' careful assessment of print quality, as well as their judicious re-use of paper are indicated in Katie's findings. Additional study of this artist couple and the full collection of 34 Cones prints in The Met's collection may further our understanding of these recently re-discovered artists and their working practices.

This delightful discovery is just one of many examples of how close examination and a technical understanding of the history of photographic practice deepen our appreciation of the richness of The Met's collection of photographs. With each new project, we relish the opportunity to learn about new artists and their techniques, and to collaborate with colleagues across the Museum to glean as much technical and art historical information about the artworks and their makers as possible.

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Images: ♦ Left: Nancy Ford Cones (American, 1869–1962), *Early Morning on the River - The Fishergirl*, ca. 1912. Gum bichromate print, 9 1/2 × 7 1/2 in. (24.2 × 19.1 cm). Gift of Margaret Ford Cones, 1983. (1983.1091.24) ♦ Center: Verso of *Early Morning on the River - The Fishergirl*, with a "shadow" of *Doubtful Weather*. ♦ Right: Nancy Ford Cones (American, 1869–1962), *Doubtful Weather*, ca. 1912. Gum bichromate print, 9 5/8 × 7 5/8 in. (24.5 × 19.4 cm). Gift of Margaret Ford Cones, 1983. (1983.1091.2)



Locations and Hours

The Met Fifth Avenue

Sunday–Tuesday and Thursday: 10 am–5 pm
Friday and Saturday: 10 am–9 pm
Closed Wednesday

The Met Cloisters

Thursday–Tuesday: 10 am–5 pm
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Date Night at Met Fifth Avenue!

Fridays and Saturdays 'til 9 pm

Current Exhibitions

Robert Wood Johnson, Jr. Gallery Rotation

July 7, 2022 through February 7, 2023

Maha Maamoun: Selected Works

December 5, 2022 through June 5, 2023

Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room

Ongoing

Upcoming Exhibitions

Richard Avedon: MURALS

January 19 through October 1, 2023

Robert Wood Johnson, Jr. Gallery Rotation

February 9 through May 16, 2023

Berenice Abbott's New York Album, 1929

March 2 through September 4, 2023

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Image: ♦ Richard Avedon (American, New York 1923–2004 San Antonio, Texas), *Marian Anderson*, 1955. Gelatin silver print, 26.5 x 34.2 cm (10 7/16 x 13 7/16 in.). Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1961 (61.565.2) © Richard Avedon ♦ Here is the great contralto singer Marian Anderson. By waiting for the moment when Anderson closed her eyes, Avedon was able to suggest her intense inner concentration on the song and to allow us, the viewer, to focus on her mouth. Even if the viewer knows nothing about Marian Anderson, one can still see in this photograph the total commitment to her voice, that she was the very embodiment of song. And if in fact the viewer is aware of the social context of the photograph—that Anderson fought in a very quiet and effective way to be heard in the 1930s, one would be able to detect a kind of moral probity and strength in this portrait as well. ♦ On view in *Richard Avedon: MURALS*, January 19 through October 1, 2023.



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With steadfast commitment and support from our friends, The Met's Department of Photograph Conservation continues to thrive and be a crucial resource for the preservation of works of art, as well as a vibrant center for research.

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Maha Maamoun: Selected Works includes *2026*, a nine-minute single-channel video created in 2010, a year before the Egyptian revolution that toppled then-president Hosni Mubarak. The work combines two references to time travel: Chris Marker's experimental "photo-roman" (photo-novel) *La Jetée* (1962) and a science fiction novel by Mahmoud Osman in which the narrator travels to Egypt in the year 2026. Viewed today, Maamoun's work appears to foretell real-world events, while narrating a scene of time-travel in which a revolution has both already happened and has yet to occur.

Richard Avedon: MURALS celebrates the centennial of the artist's birth on May 15, 1923 with the presentation of a selection of the photographer's most innovative group portraits and is organized around his monumental photomurals. ♦ The exhibition is made possible by Joyce Frank Menschel.

Berenice Abbott's New York Album, 1929 is made possible by The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, Inc. ♦ Consisting of some 280 small black-and-white prints arranged on thirty-two pages, the album marks a crucial turning point in Abbott's career and offers a rare glimpse of a photographer's mind at work.

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Image: ♦ Berenice Abbott (American, Springfield, Ohio 1898–1991 Monson, Maine), [*Album Page 9: Lower Manhattan*], 1929–30. Gelatin silver print, Page: 25.3 x 30.5 cm (9 15/16 x 12 in.), irregular. Gift of Emanuel Gerard, 1981. (1981.1246.37–.46) © Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd. Inc. ♦ In 1921 Ohio-native Abbott left New York to study in Paris. Returning to the city in 1929, she found it transformed and ripe with photographic potential. Following the model of French photographer Eugène Atget, Abbott ventured around New York photographing seemingly incidental, but often profound, scenes that captured the city's changing character. Assembled by Abbott, the album from which this page derives comprised a kind of photographer's sketchbook for subjects and themes. ♦ On view in *Berenice Abbott's New York Album, 1929*, March 2 through September 4, 2023.