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What's your Source?: The dilemma of scanning negatives vs. prints to represent images in photography collections

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This is a brief presentation about a very particular problem: Determining the appropriate source when digitizing photographic collections—the negative or a print derived from that negative? The question is most relevant to institutions with photographer-based collections in their holdings, although it is also applicable to the digitization of photographic materials in general.
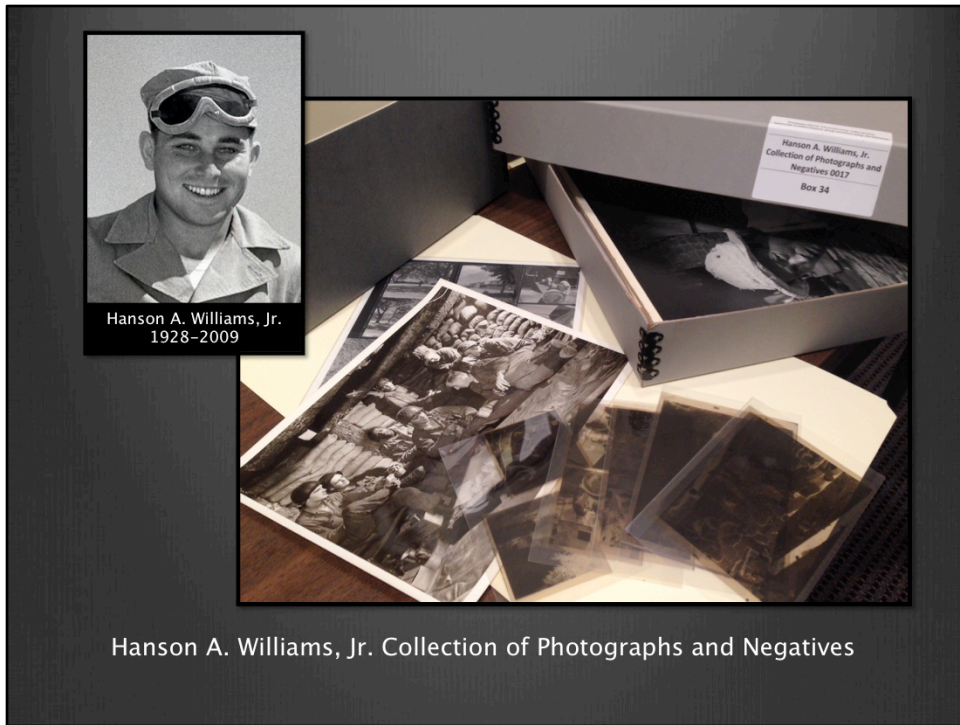
Hanson A. Williams, Jr. Collection of Photographs and Negatives

We encountered this problem while digitizing the collection of alumnus and photographer Hanson Williams, which includes over 14 linear feet of negatives and prints from his college days and the Korean War.

Scan from negative   Scan from print

The decision to scan the negative or the print is not so straightforward, as each scenario presents its advantages and disadvantages. Scanning from the negative, in general, values the image for its informational and documentary qualities, while scanning from the print emphasizes the artistry and commentary of the photographer. The question quickly becomes philosophical: what *is* the image in photography collections and *why*?

Best Practices?

"Because of the importance of uniqueness in appraising archival records, photo archivists emphasize that the camera negative (or colour transparency) is the record copy of any photograph."
        –William Leary (1985)

"We recommend digitizing from the negative (or the earliest generation of the photograph) to yield a higher quality image. However, in the case of photographs developed according to artist specifications, the photograph itself should be digitized rather than the negative."

        –Yale University (2010)

In archival practice, this question is often reframed as: what constitutes the "original" in photography collections—or what is the "record copy"—and the issue has been debated for decades. In *The Archival Appraisal of Photographs*, from 1985, Bill Leary states: "Because of the importance of *uniqueness* in appraising archival records, photo archivists emphasize that the camera negative (or colour transparency) is the *record copy* of any photograph." But critics, such as Joan Schwartz, caution that archivists too often emphasize uniqueness at the expense of *purpose* when working with visual materials.

Many digitization policies today reflect an awareness of both perspectives. The digitization guidelines for still images published by Yale University, for example, are typical of many such guidelines: "We recommend digitizing from the negative (or the earliest generation of the photograph) to yield a higher quality image. However, in the case of photographs developed according to artist specifications, the photograph itself should be digitized rather than the negative."

So let's look at some of the advantages of scanning from a negative. Again, this approach emphasizes the informational value or documentary aspect of the image—attributes traditionally valued by archivists. The first benefit is sharper detail or clarity, especially when you drill down into the image using a zoom tool.

Scan from negative (detail)

Scan from print (detail)

Benefits of scanning from the negative: Baseline clarity

Negative   Print

The second benefit of scanning the negative is often greater clarity in areas of high contrast.

Finally, scanning the negative provides more visual information.

Disadvantages of scanning from the negative:

- Not the photographer's final product

    "While the negative may in fact be 'the truest record' of what was in front of the lens, it is not the document intended to convey a message to an audience."
    –Joan M. Schwartz (1995)

- Appear visually "flat"

The primary disadvantage of using the negative as your scanning source is that the negative does not represent the photographer's final product. As put by Joan Schwartz: "While the negative may in fact be 'the truest record' of what was in front of the lens, it is not the document intended to convey a message to an audience."

Second—as we have seen—while the image might be clearer, negative scans often appear visually "flat," lacking contrast or visual dynamism.
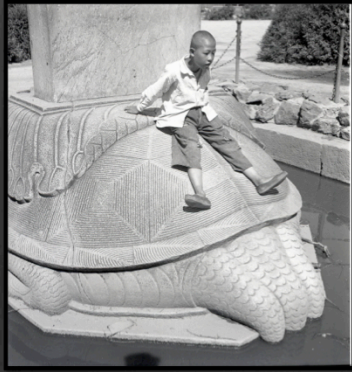
That's a nice segue to the benefits of scanning from the photographer's print. In short, scanning from the print captures the *transformation* that occurs in the darkroom from negative to photographic document. Techniques employed by photographers include adjustments to the contrast, tone, and saturation of the image, as well as targeted modifications through dodging and burning.
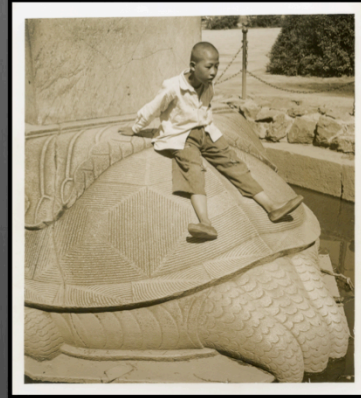
Benefits of scanning from the print: Printing techniques

Negative

Print

Benefits of scanning from the print: Printing techniques

Negative   Print

Second, the way that a photographer crops an image while developing a print affects the visual composition of the image and makes a statement about the image's importance.

Benefits of scanning from the print: Physicality

"The physical condition of the object, the dirt and damage, is evidence of its other lives." –Joanna Sassoon (2004)

Finally, scanning the print captures the *physicality* of the photographic document. This includes inscriptions, captions, or marginalia (even signs of wear and damage). More so than the negative, the print has lived "other lives" before coming to the archives (in the words of Joanna Sassoon). What's more, multiple prints of the same image, enlargements, and mounted works in a photograph collection all point to the photographer's activities, intentions, and the value he or she placed on particular images. The impact of these cumulative materials is typically lost in the digitized version of the collection.

Pepperdine's approach to the Hanson Williams
Korean War Photographs:

A compromise workflow

- 1,358 negative only scans

- 761 print only scans (no negative)

- 31 negative and selected print
  scans of the same image

So, after taking all of this into consideration—and following a lively internal debate—
we settled on a compromise digitization plan for the Hanson Williams Korean War
photographs toward the goal of creating a robust, open access digital collection. In
addition to these stand-alone negative and print scans, we selected 31 images to be
represented by both a negative scan and a selected print scan. This workflow
attempts to honor both approaches: the comprehensive, documentary aspect of the
collection (a focus on the negatives) and the more biographical, artistic aspect of the
collection (an inclusion of selected print scans as well). Now, evaluating the artistic
merits of works is not necessarily part of a traditional archival education. While
selecting prints for this latter group was ultimately subjective, we tried to reinforce
our decisions with evidence from the collection—such as described for the previous
slide.
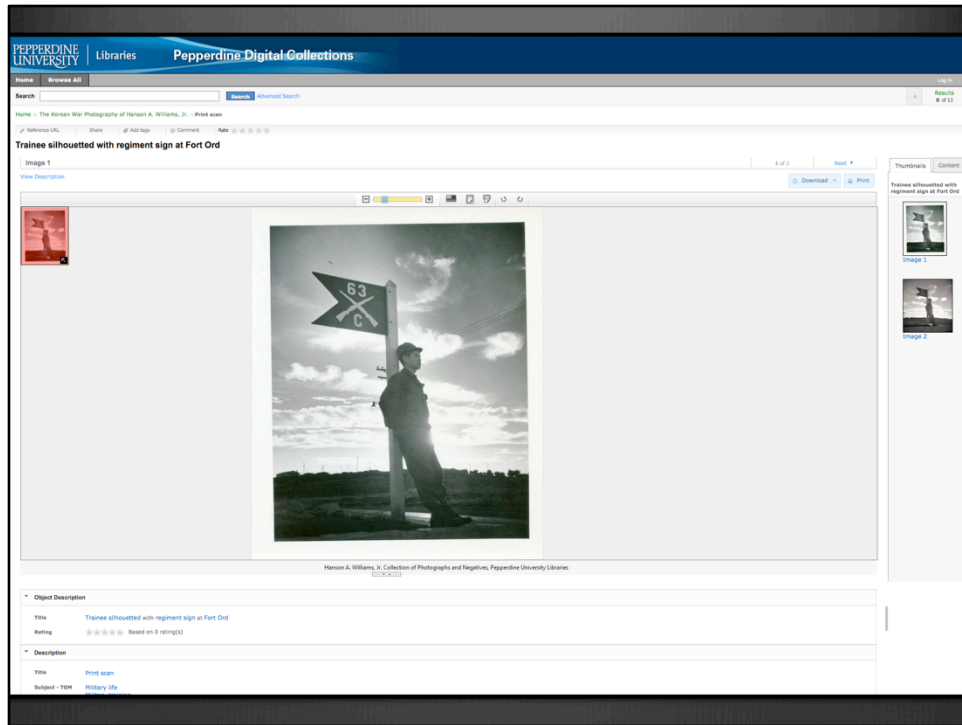
In the digital collection, the images for which we scanned the negative and a print appear like this.

Conclusions
and
Takeaways
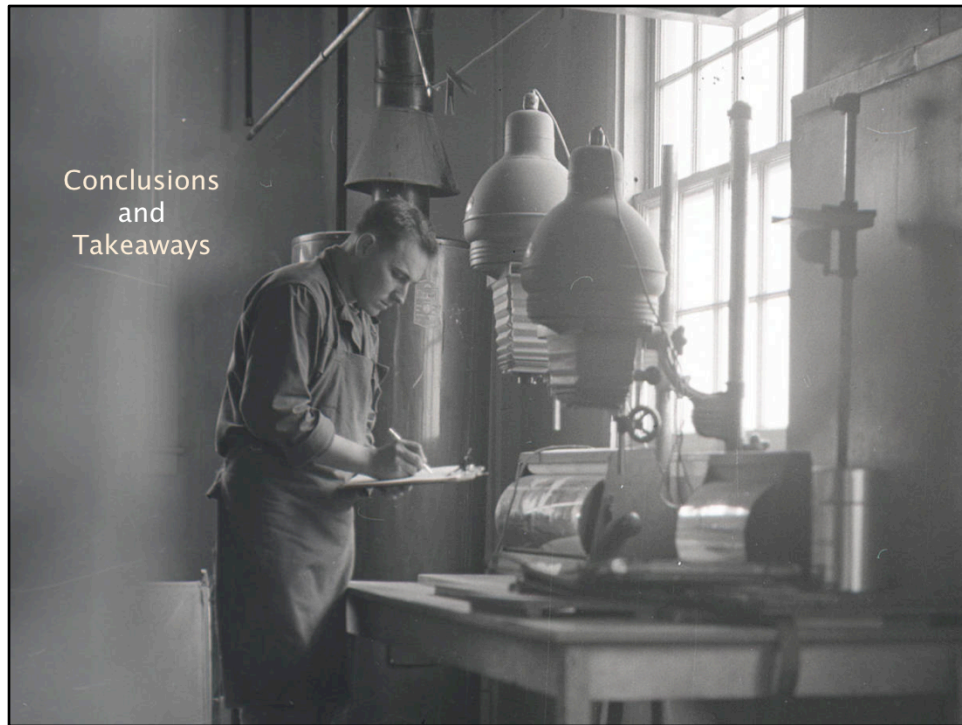
Earlier I asked: what *is* the image in photography collections and *why*? The answers will depend on the purpose and spirit of the collection itself: is it a *documentary* collection about the *visual record* produced by a body of work or is it a *biographical* collection about the *creator* of that work? Having it both ways can be challenging, as both the staffing resources required for scanning and the long-term maintenance of the resulting files come with a price tag. For the Williams collection of Korean War photographs, we felt that the material was important enough to warrant investment in a compromise approach that makes a complete visual record available to researchers while honoring the artistry of the man behind the collection.

Thank you

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