

A Guide to Photographic Documentation in the Field

by Janice M. Glowski

(New 19 August, 1997; Last updated 23 July, 1998)

*****Please submit your comments and suggestions.** (This Guide is not intended to be a static document, but a first publication of what, I hope, will result in a detailed compilation of scholarly knowledge and experience in the area of photographic documentation. Please submit your comments, suggestions, and anecdotal information for inclusion in the Guide to glowski.1@osu.edu. All submitters' comments and suggestions will be properly acknowledged and credited.)

I. An Introduction to the Guide

Too often, scholars returning from photographic documentation research in the field proclaim the following upon their return: "Where is this picture from?", "I can't believe I didn't take a detail of this," "Is that an inscription on the base of the shrine wall!", or some similar exclamation of distress. This may not be the case for scholars who do not rely heavily on visual materials for their research, but for those who do, these comments are all too often appropo. I have seen even the most experienced photographers/scholars sigh in dismay over lost, forgotten, or blurred photographs.

This web page provides a brief set of guidelines for undertaking photographic documentation in the field. It is intended to assist the novice art historian with field research, but portions of it might prove useful for scholars in other fields who work with visual resources. In essence, it provides guidelines that will help scholars forgo the stages of trial and error that too often lead to problems, unwanted surprises, and disappointing or costly mistakes. Seasoned veterans who are looking for new ways to make their research more effective, productive, and usable to future generations might also find the Guide useful.

Like many guides, this page contains "hints and tips" and "dos and don'ts" that will, hopefully, save scholars time, money, and effort, while simultaneously providing rigorous standards. Although this guide has its roots in field research experience in Asia, many of the systems and processes can be applied to photographic documentation in other research areas.

This Guide to Photographic Documentation also addresses the growing need for research and photo documentation standards. To date, no standard for photographic documentation in the field has been established. However, advances in digital technology have not only opened the doors to a greater sharing of information, but have underscored the need for scholars to adhere to documentation standards, thereby ensuring the preservation of scholarly knowledge in usable formats. The need for standardization is particularly relevant in the discipline of Asian Art History, where, often, no formal photographic record of an object exists beyond an individual scholar's photographic collection. If scholars of Asian art can ever hope to benefit from the documentation work of their predecessors and future generations, some type of standard should be adopted.

While I do not propose that this guide represent a formal "standard" for photographic documentation, I hope it will raise the question of needed documentation guidelines in the History of Art community. Please send Comments and Suggestions that can be included in this Guide.

II. Acknowledgments

Without the benefit of John C. and Susan L. Huntington's years of field experience, this Guide could not have been created. The standards outlined here reflect both John's training as a professional photographer and Susan's detailed documentation methodology. Their creative initiative, diligence, and willingness to share their approach are the foundation of this Guide. Any innovations or new insights that may appear in this text stem directly from my experience working as a member of their field research teams and using their field notes and photographs over the past seven years to help continue the development of The Huntington Archive at The Ohio State University. Most, if not

all, of the information dealing with cameras and photography was transmitted to me by John Huntington. Any errors found in this guide regarding photography are mine, not his. Also, my deepest thanks to T. Matthew Ciolek, Web Master and information specialist extraordinaire, for suggesting that I write this guide as a Web-accessible document. I hope it meets his expectations.

III. The "Field"

The "field" is any place that scholars go to research and collect information. It can imply travel over great distances or a short trip to a nearby location. The field consists of everything from a museum, to a temple in the center of a bustling metropolis, to a deserted archaeological site. Regardless of the location or field "type," the preparation for and the philosophical approach to documentation of art, architecture, ritual, and texts is, essentially, the same.

IV. Photographic Documentation

Simply put, photographic documentation is the precise recording of, among other things, art, text, architecture, ritual, or a physical location. At its least, it provides a visual record acknowledging the existence of an object or place at a particular moment in time. At its best, it provides a thorough visual document of an object or place, both recording its existence and allowing for serious scholarly research through photographic means. Photographic documentation, then, provides a "complete" record of an object or place--a record that will prove useful to future researchers.

Why should one undertake photographic documentation?

If art is "text" or understood to contain information, then one can look at photographic documentation as a recording of this information at a fixed moment in time. When researching a text, perhaps nothing is more frustrating than discovering a missing page or not being able to read a poorly scripted ligature. Researching an object or place is no different in this respect. One might have an overall picture of a structure and, perhaps, even several details, but without thorough documentation, sections of the "text" are missing or details are unreadable. Therefore, complete documentation of a site is essential if one can ever hope to "read" a work of art.

It should be noted that there is a difference between a "beautiful" photograph and photographs that document an object or place. A "beautiful" photograph of a Shiva Nataraja (a dancing form of the god Shiva) image might show a side view that off-sets the face and omits portions of the ring of fire around the deity. Such a photograph might demonstrate exceptional composition and framing that captures a "sense" of the image. However, it does not provide the documentation necessary for a detailed study the image. It records the work of art's existence, but provides little else in terms of information.

Standardized photographic documentation of this same work might include: overviews of the front, sides, back, and bottom of the sculpture; details of the top, middle, and lower section of the front of the image; details of all attributes and stylistic elements; and, when present, details of inscriptional evidence. This combination of photographs would allow the scholar to examine all portions of the image, as well as to identify the location of the details.

V. Preparation for Field Research

What To Take (This may vary, depending on the locations and conditions of the "field.")

****As a general rule, take everything you think you might need, and don't rely on purchasing items at the site. Natural disasters, political upheavals, boycotts, and strikes—to name just a few potential problems--can effect one's ability to purchase goods in any location.****

Notebooks. (Depending on the length of your stay, bring at least one to two large notebooks for line item documentation. One legal size notebook can hold notes for approximately 10,000 photographs and some small sketches and ground plans.)

An second, smaller notebook can also be used to record general site information, sketches, and interview notes (CK).

Plastic cover for the notebook. (Something sturdy with a closing mechanism to protect the pen ink from water.)

Pens. (Preferably with an ink-type that won't run if it gets wet.)

Use different colored pens for different types of information. For example, documentation notes can be taken in black, information from people at the site can be in red, and thoughts and ideas can be written in blue.

2 Tape Measures. (This is helpful for measuring the dimensions of an object in a museum.)

Take two tape measures: one smaller, cloth tape measure for use near museum pieces and one larger, retractable tape measure for architectural settings.

Film.

Without a doubt, buy film before you go!

Color slide film:

Take 25% more film than the estimated need.

Also, try to buy all of the film from a single batch number for consistency of color

Black and white print film: Even if you don't intend to use much black and white film or want to create black and white prints from color slides, having 5-10 rolls on hand can be very useful.

Tripod.

When fully extended, the tripod should stand several feet taller than the photographer. It should not "torque" or move when fully extended and twisted from the top. A camera with a large telephoto lens seated on a fully extended tripod can produce camera movement when the shutter is clicked and the internal mirror moves, even with an apparently sturdy tripod.

2 Cable Releases. (This will also help to reduce camera movement during tripod photography).

The wires inside of cable releases are very thin and can break easily, so take spares.

Camera. (The only tip regarding cameras is to buy a quality product. The cost of the camera is a mere fraction of the total cost to document. So, don't waste money buying a cheap camera.)

Carry a spare camera body that fits all of your lenses. A used one will do. Again, given the total cost of the trip, a second camera body is a small price for getting the photographs.

Take the instruction manual for the camera (CK).

Lenses. (Quality counts!!! Also, think about the places you will be documenting and plan for the most extreme of circumstances.)

A recommended set of basic lenses are:

35-70mm zoom lens

70-200mm (or greater) zoom lens

A wide angle lens

A macro lens for small items, such as coins and very close details

Strobes.

Take at least 2 strobes (and 2 strobe extension cords) that can read through the lens. The strobe extension cord is especially important to use when photographing through glass.

Take extra batteries for the strobes (CK).

Compass. (This can be especially helpful when the sun is not visible, and one is documenting several sites (CK).)

Flexible Reflector Disks. (These not only place sunlight on images that are in the shadows, but also can be used to block glare and even lighting.)

Comfortable Camera Bag(s) with Padded Shoulder Straps.

Developing.

(There are positive and negative issues to address when considering developing film in the field or waiting for a developer you know and trust. Going to an unknown developer can mean poor quality developing, scratches, dust, and color alterations. On the other hand, developing film while in the field can allow you to identify camera malfunctions and missed shots before you've left a site.)

*One possibility is to make the first roll of film print film and develop it at the end of the day, just to be sure nothing has happened to the camera while enroute (CK).

*Another safeguard is to develop those rolls of film that document, according to the photographer, the most important images. Then, if one is concerned about the quality of developing, that roll can be reshot and developed elsewhere (CK).

Become familiar with your equipment before going to the field.

Perhaps one of the worst mistakes that can be made in field documentation is to not test equipment prior to departure. One should shoot at least six or more rolls of film at home. Ideally, one should try to photograph everything from architecture to small objects, such as coins. Shoot one to two rolls at a time, have the film developed, and try to improve upon your techniques. In addition to becoming familiar with your equipment, this process tests for problems with the camera, lenses, shutter mechanism, and light metering.

Whenever possible, make contacts ahead of time.

For museums, try to let them know you are coming and, if possible, obtain permission ahead of time to access storage areas. Those museums that will permit you to photograph will likely be more receptive with a warning of your arrival. Try to speak directly to the person who has the authority to permit you to photograph.

Know the sites before you go.

In other words, know the conditions under which you will be shooting. Ask yourself questions like, will most of the architecture be in shadow? Will most of the work require a tripod? Will the work require another person's assistance?

VI. The Documentation Process

Architecture: Photographing from the outside to the inside.

Begin by titling your notebook page. Include the name, date, roll number, location, and any other information that may be relevant. Your notebook page might look something like the sample page. *(Also include your name, a contact number or location, and the "REWARD IF RETURNED" on the inside front cover.)*

Begin photographic documentation by taking overviews of all sides of the exterior. Be sure to move in an orderly manner around the structure completing all overviews before beginning with detailed photography.

A good way to ensure complete overview coverage is to take one overview standing at each of the cardinal and intermediate directions (i.e. 8 photographs.)

Whenever possible, place some type of measuring device in the photograph, so that later users will have some reference to an object's size, beyond people (who can vary greatly in height) in the picture (TMC).

It is imperative that with each photograph taken, the negative number and a complete description of the item being photographed is recorded in the notebook.

One can always write down too little information, but one can rarely write down too much information.

One easy way to successfully include all relevant information is to write from the general to the specific. See the sample page for details.

Once the exterior overviews are taken, begin to systematically photograph each wall of the structure.

Document each wall in the same order that the overview photographs were taken.

Take overviews of each section of the wall, then return to systematically photograph the details of each wall section. Again, as you move in for closer and closer details, be sure to follow in the same order.

A systematic approach that includes orderliness will eliminate the most dangerous part of photographic documentation: the photographer's choice to decide whether something is "important" or "worth" photographing. The field is not the place to make that decision. Remember, it is always better to have too many than too few photographs.

Once the exterior of the building has been completely documented, move toward the interior.

Be sure to photograph all passageways, entrances, and exits as you move through the structure. These photographs can be extremely helpful later.

Again, at least eight overviews of the interior from each of the cardinal and intermediate directions should be taken. If the structure is extremely large, more than eight overviews might be necessary. Don't worry if all of these photographs are not beautifully composed. Each will contain invaluable information about the relative placement of items in the interior.

When documenting the sections and details, use the same technique applied to the exterior of the structure. Remember to move in a systematic manner.

Being systematic will also eliminate frequent camera lens changes and will make databasing and slide labeling much faster.

Remember to write a detailed entry for each photograph you take. It may seem like a long and unnecessary process when you are standing in the noon-time heat, but the benefits will far outweigh the work load.

Museums:

The documentation approach used in Museums is similar the approach used with architecture (See section on Architecture).

If you have obtained permission to photograph, be systematic in the way you move through the museum.

Take overviews of all sides of a work.

Take as many details as possible.

Try to photograph the bottom of each image.

In some cases it may be easiest to complete all of your documentation work, then return to each item to photograph the bottom. This could save whoever is assisting you a great deal of time. Always have the curator or conservator handle the image.

Copy the exact information on the museum label, even if you disagree with it. It is important to document the original attributions.

When a strobe is being used, you may be able to hand-hold the camera. However, if you have even the slightest doubt about your ability to hold the camera steady, use a tripod.

VII. General Tips

When arriving at a site, stop, relax, and take a minute to think about your plan. Nothing is more disorganizing than rushing to photograph those items you know you want to document and then trying to retrace steps in order to fill in the gaps.

Taking detailed notes in the field notebooks will not only help you research and collect information more quickly, but will prove invaluable for future scholars in identifying the items documented in a given picture.

When in doubt, use a tripod!

*If you are working alone, don't be afraid to ask for assistance from people living and/or working at the site (CK).

Make sure all of your camera equipment, tripods, notebooks, shoes, other personal items, and team research members are not in the picture. While it may be nice to include team members in some photographs, it can be very distracting when they continually appear in the photographs.

If there is an image, photograph it. If there is a blank wall, photograph it. If there is an empty niche with nothing in it, photograph it.

Include sketches and ground plans of the structure and its details. This can take only a few minutes, but can save you a tremendous amount of time later.

If available, take numerous photocopies of site ground plans. When taking overviews, one can label the roll number at the top of the plan, then mark the angle and position from which the photograph was taken, indicating the corresponding frame (CK).

*For relief panels, it may be helpful to take several photographs using different lenses (30-70mm and 80-200; CK).

Fill the frame with the item you are documenting. Excessive space around the image represents lost information that could have been seen in a more tightly framed picture.

Never say, "I'll remember this," or "I'll understand what I meant by this squiggly line."

Always be sure to locate details by taking additional overviews, particularly if you know that an item may not be visible in your general overviews. In your notes, you can include a reference to the fact that the photograph was taken in order to locate "such and such" detail.

Despite the need to be systematic, try not to be too rigid. In other words, if you are in the middle of photographing the interior of a temple space where singers and dancers perform, and the person in charge of the temple offers to let you photograph in the shrine interior, don't wait!

When you start to feel tempted to skip steps, stop, take a break, and eat something. If you continue in this frame of mind, the likelihood of missed pictures increases dramatically. The minute you hear yourself or a team member say, "I'll understand what I meant by this," that's a sure indication that a break is needed.

Remember, it takes about an hour to get into the rhythm of this type of work. Give yourself time to adjust to the detailed nature of the work before deciding it isn't worth the effort.

Number rolls of film consecutively, even on subsequent trips. The roll number can also include the date the trip was taken.

Indicate both direction in absolute and relative terms (i.e. "window" to the north (left) of the main shrine door).

If something is written incorrectly during the documentation process, do not obliterate the "incorrect" measurement or iconographic identification. Instead, draw a single line through the text and write the correct information beside it. Occasionally, this "incorrect" information actually resulted from an intuitive response and might prove to contain valuable information at a later date. Once the data has been marked-out, it can never be recovered.

Contributors to the Guide:

Ciolek, T. Matthew (TMC), tmciolek@coombs.anu.edu.au

Huntington, John C. (JCH), huntington.2@osu.edu

Karnitis, Catherine (CK)