

Photographing Collection Items

Online Practical Training Video - Transcript

I'm Peta Knott, Project Manager of [Victorian Collections](#) and today I'm at a collection store to give you some tips on photographing collection items.

A significant part of caring for historic items is digitising them. This can take the form of creating a digital scan of documents, photos and books or it could be photographing collection items such as shoe lathes, flour sifters, clocks and framed pictures. Digital images of collection items are an integral part of online cataloguing systems such as Victorian Collections, and having collection items photographed makes identification and sharing of information a lot easier.

Many historical societies and community collecting groups are daunted by the process of photographing their collections. They think it necessary to purchase expensive equipment from specialised suppliers. This is not true.

It is quite easy and affordable to assemble a photo studio consisting of: a plain backdrop, two lights, a tripod and camera. This can all be purchased for around \$200.

The backdrop provides a consistent background upon which you place your historic objects or large books. It could be a large piece of cardboard, an old single colour bed sheet but here we have curtain backing material attached to a cardboard roll. It is durable, washable and easy to pack away.

Other necessary items for a photo studio are two lights, a tripod, a camera and a space in which to set the equipment up either temporarily or permanently.

Using two movable lights allows you to control the light levels on your historic object as opposed to using a flash. The two lights depicted are fluorescent work lights purchased from a hardware store. Make sure to use white or daylight globes.

Camera tripods are required to reduce camera shake and produce clear photographs.

Do not be concerned about purchasing the latest expensive camera. Most point and shoot cameras manufactured in the last few years will take excellent quality photos.

Now that the photo studio is set up it is time to organise the historic items. Basic principals in handling historic objects are: wear gloves to keep the items free of oil and grease, plan where you are moving the object from and to and make sure there is ample clear space to do this. Always support the object from the bottom whether that is transporting them by hand or on a tray. It would be terrible to drop an object while moving it to be photographed.

The main premise behind standard museum photos is to take an accurate representation of the object without shadow or shine to interfere with viewing the object. It doesn't have to be particularly artistic as long as it is in focus and captures the whole object.

It is recommended to take at least two photos, one with a scale bar and registration number for collection management purposes, and one of the item on its own for public viewing on a catalogue or publication

When positioning your historic item to be photographed, make sure that there is a gradual curve in your backdrop where it changes from being vertical to horizontal. This will assist in minimising shadows when it comes to lighting. Another tip is to keep your object a distance from the vertical backdrop – another shadow avoiding tactic. Start off with your two lights at 45 degrees to the object as can be seen here. Minor adjustments to the light might be needed to remove shadow and or shine.

Next it is necessary to line up the shot. The standard way of photographing a museum object for collection management purposes is to fill the frame with as much of the object as possible. Position the camera straight on to the object and try and capture all visible details.

A scale bar in the right hand lower corner is used as size reference and if laminated can record the registration number easily connecting the photograph to the collection item.

The scale bar must be positioned in the midline of the object so that the correct size is given. Locating it in front or to the back of the object would give a false sense of size. The scale bar must also be parallel to the camera not lying down or at an angle.

Once the collection management photo is taken, the scale bar and registration number can be removed and a photograph for public consumption or publication can be taken. This often means turning the object at an angle to show depth or unique characteristics

by turning this small clock at an angle, it is easier to see the structure and scale of the object.

This box is being photographed at an angle to show depth and to record the text on two sides.

Sometimes multiple images are required to show the different components of a historic item or to show how they were used.

Macro shots are useful to show small details such as makers' marks. Most cameras have a macro setting to aid in taking close up shots.

Other helpful features of most digital cameras are the guidelines on your camera screen, these can assist in lining up the image in the frame to make sure that it is square.

It is important to record all features and markings on historic items, particularly if they are fragile or faint like this handwriting.

Most historic items will be fairly easy to photograph with a bit of practise. However, shiny objects can cause great angst amongst photographers as the surrounding environment is reflected in the object. Objects such as silver trophies or shields, metal teapots or bowls, medals and coins, clocks and flour sifters all have this problem

as can be seen in this framed work which is reflecting the camera and photographer! This is very distracting and takes away from the historic information sealed behind glass.

A light tent can resolve the difficulties of photographing shiny reflective items as the inside of the white light tent is reflected back in the object giving it a uniform finish and showing all the

features of the item. Light tents of various sizes can be purchased cheaply in camera shops and online.

Light tents achieve very professional results with shiny objects or framed works. These items are positioned inside and the light tent zipped up to minimise reflections with only the camera lens poking through.

This is the same flour sifter photographed outside and inside a light tent.

Another example of the difference between framed pictures photographed outside and inside a light tent.

Any attempt to photograph this item using flash or harsh lighting would quickly render the fine detail on the clock face illegible. But with a light tent, all details can be clearly seen in the photograph

While it is usually best to scan flat items such as documents, photos and books, sometimes it is necessary to photograph them if they are too large to fit on the scanner or if they are fragile

It is more appropriate to photograph fragile historic books and they must be carefully supported and prevented from fully opening which might crack the spine. While there are specialised book supports available, a floppy pillow either purchased or home made is a low cost option with similar results.

Once the book is positioned with a supported spine, align the camera so that it is vertically over the book. It will help to have the book as close to the front edge of the table as possible. Some tripods have an arm which allows the camera to extend over the book quite easily. Standard tripods require a little trick which is to shorten the front two legs of the tripod to achieve a similar effect.

It is helpful to have a camera with a rotating screen so that you can preview the image

This is an example of a photo using the leaning tripod method. While the book is not totally square due to angle of lens, it still provides a good record of the object

If you are able to spend a little more money or have an available handyman, a camera stand can be very useful for photographing books and documents

The stand allows the camera to be mounted directly above the book and helps to minimise lens distortion

Here you can see an example of a photo taken with a camera stand. It provides a more accurate representation of the book.

There you have some handy tips for photographing collection items with minimal effort and expense. All the photos that you have seen in this presentation were taken using the low cost photo studio. And the person operating the equipment is not specialised in photography, just well practiced! So you can see that very professional looking results are possible with low cost equipment, minimal training and skill, but perhaps a little bit of patience.

More resources available:

www.mavic.asn.au/resources

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