

# LIBRARY OF CONGRESS COLLECTIONS POLICY STATEMENTS

## Photography

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### I. Scope

Photography is a documentary and expressive medium and a subject of study itself. Specific collecting guidance is provided in this document for documentary photography, artistic photographs, photojournalism, and for the history of photography to address these aspects of the medium, starting with the origin of photography in the nineteenth century and continuing to the present. The collecting policies for documentary and artistic photography and photojournalism define the range, nature, and subject matter of photographs that are acquired for Library of Congress collections. The policy for the history of photography indicates which aspects of the visual and material culture of photography are held in the Library's collections. Special format statements address the collecting of photographic archives and albums.

Please note, while this Collections Policy Statement covers actual photographs, books and other formats about photography are covered by other Collections Policy Statements, specifically the [Chemical Sciences](#) and the [Technology](#) Collections Policy Statements. For information about related collections see the Collections Policy Statements for [Fine and Decorative Arts: Books and Periodicals](#), [Fine and Applied Arts: Non-Book Materials](#), [Manuscripts](#), [Moving Image Materials](#), [Music](#), [Theater](#), and [Folklore and Folklife](#).

The Library has a mandate to “inspire, inform, and serve all Americans by engaging their cultural and intellectual curiosity and creativity.” The photography collections support this larger goal by documenting a range of national and regional subjects, and by representing the history, concerns, and significant achievements of the American people with an emphasis on diversity. Areas of interest to Congress, including coverage of significant national legislative activities, programs, issues, and the impact of these efforts on the nation and the world, are collected to document a plurality of viewpoints in American society. The Library also collects photographs of international importance, supporting the research collections and interests of the Library's area studies divisions.

### II. Diverse and Inclusive Collecting Statement

As the nation's de facto national library, the Library of Congress strives to build an expansive, yet selective, collection that records the creativity of the United States and is reflective of the nation's diversity and complexity. The Library's mandate is to have collections that are inclusive and representative of a diversity of creators and ideas. A priority includes acquiring material of underrepresented perspectives and voices in

the Library's collections to ensure diverse authorship, points of view, cultural identities, and other historical or cultural factors. The Library also seeks to build a research collection that comprises a globally representative sample of international materials that are diverse in voice and perspective, relative to their places of origin, further supporting the Library's mission to sustain and preserve a universal collection of knowledge and creativity for Congress and future generations.

Diverse collecting is mentioned within many of the Library's Collections Policy Statements. In addition, the Library has adopted several specific collection policies in an effort to ensure it is building an inclusive and representative collection. For more information, see the Library's Collections Policy Statements on [Ethnic Materials](#), [LGBTQIA+ Studies](#), [Women's and Gender Studies](#), [Independently Published and Self-Published Textual Materials](#), and [Countries and Regions with Acquisitions Challenges](#).

### III. Research Strengths

The Library of Congress supports both research about photography and researchers using photography to document the breadth of American history and culture. The photography collections are strongest in American subject matter, covering social history; arts and culture; technology and science; landscape and the built environment; public policy and programs; journalism and the press; and portraiture of prominent, noteworthy and significant public figures in the fields of politics, government, science, and culture, including music, theater and dance. Particular emphasis is placed on documentary photography that depicts the lives of ordinary Americans, whose everyday experiences represent broad segments of American society and culture.

In its capacity as an international research library, the Library of Congress collects photography documenting subjects of global and international interest, non-U.S. events, individuals and trends impacting or affecting American history, achievements and concerns, and matters of American interest, influence and concern abroad. Included are regions designated by the Library as areas of concentration consisting of Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, and Europe, including Russia. While the Library's photographic documentation of regions and countries other than the United States is less comprehensive than its American coverage, the Library endeavors to work with area specialists to selectively acquire documentary photography and to a lesser extent artistic photography. Priority is given to photography that documents a shared history with the United States or represents important contributions to the history of photography in general.

### IV. General Collection Policy

Original photographic images in their various forms, including those created digitally, are collected to support the mission of the Library of Congress across the broad spectrum of its collecting areas.

In determining the suitability of any photographic materials, consideration is given to their size, quality, physical condition, and relationship to other materials in the Library. Practical matters such as the organization, housing, and use of collections are also taken into consideration. A degree of flexibility in applying the following criteria is desirable. If a possible acquisition would fill a significant gap in the Library's holdings, its importance might outweigh possible negative factors. Some of the technical considerations are listed below.

- In acquiring all photographic materials, the highest technical and expressive quality is sought. Strong consideration, however, is also given to photography that provides unique, privileged access to

subjects less commonly documented by professional photographers and to acquisitions that represent the ways in which Americans experience and apply photography in everyday life. Whenever possible, contemporary materials should meet accepted archival standards.

- The Library acquires born-digital materials when these materials represent the final form of a photographer's work. Working files that show decisions on process will be considered selectively, with the understanding that these files may require reformatting for future service. The Library does not collect digital copies of physical work, except as reference surrogates for acquired photographic prints, negatives, or slides.
- The Library of Congress considers several factors when acquiring digital works to ensure long-term preservation and accessibility of collections. The resources the Library consults to achieve this goal include [Sustainability of Digital Formats Planning for Library of Congress Collections](#) to assess preservation factors and the [Library of Congress Recommended Formats Statement](#) to assist creators and librarians with selecting appropriate formats. When considering re-formatted materials, the Library consults guidelines outlined in the [Federal Agencies Digital Guidelines Initiative](#). In all instances, the Library seeks to acquire photographs that are equal in quality to the publication version, best edition or master copy.
- Slides or transparencies which are original photographs will be acquired on a selective basis. The Library endeavors to acquire for its permanent collections only those slides and transparencies which present information of value for reference or research that is not available in the Library in another form. Written or recorded texts that are issued with slides or transparencies will be retained with them.
- When acquiring large collections and archives, recommending officers take into account the cost of processing, storage and preservation. Ideally, large collections are to be organized with prints in good condition, with negatives keyed to prints, and are to be accompanied by caption information or identifying metadata.
- Before the decision is made to acquire a collection, all concerns related to cataloging and preservation are to be documented in writing.
- Questions of legal rights and restrictions are to be considered where pertinent, and are to be documented in writing before any acquisition is final.
- A determination will be made whether each potential acquisition would better serve the public if placed in another institution.

The Library of Congress does not systematically acquire snapshots, travel photos, photographic or digital copies of prints, drawings, posters, commercial art reproductions, or other graphic work, in lieu of original works. With the long-standing exception of ongoing additions to the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record/Historic American Landscapes Survey (HABS/HAER/HALS) collections produced by the National Park Service, the Library does not collect photographs produced by the United States government or its agencies; portions of extant archives whose acquisition might contribute to the dispersal of significant bodies of material and correlative loss of documentary or creative integrity; photographic documentation of events, individuals, concerns, and issues that are of a strictly local or regional interest except under special conditions. The Library of Congress will avoid duplicating established collecting patterns and/or established strengths of other major repositories of

photography. In addition, efforts are made to reconcile the continued development of established Library areas of strength with the continuing and established collecting activities of other major institutions.

## V. Specific Collecting Policy

This statement addresses the acquisition of works in the format of photographic and photomechanical media collected by the Prints and Photographs Division and within other divisions throughout the Library of Congress. Photography is the process of recording images on a light-sensitive medium like glass, metal, paper or film, or on a digital sensor. Physical output occurs in a variety of ways involving either chemical or photomechanical (ink on paper) processes. Increasingly, data files from a digital camera or photographic editing software are preserved in lieu of photographic negatives.

Photography in its various formats is collected to support the Library of Congress' mission to sustain and preserve a universal collection of knowledge and creativity for Congress and an international community of scholars and researchers.

### A. Documentary Photographs

- The Library endeavors to acquire a wide selection of photographs documenting United States history and culture, and including:
  - Photography that depicts American society and culture and represents diverse American experiences, including the home, the workplace, and the land on which people live. Photography depicting American folklife is selectively acquired in consultation with the American Folklife Center.
  - Persons or events of national political, historical, or cultural interest. While the collections are strong in portraiture of prominent individuals, other institutions, such as the National Portrait Gallery, continue to collect more extensively in this area.
  - Certain periods or subjects, such as the Depression, the Civil Rights Movement, AIDS, the environment, the industrializing world, etc. Periodically, the Library will evaluate whether continued collecting of a certain subject is beneficial to researchers and determine new subjects for concentrated acquisition.
  - Changing developments in architecture, technology, costume, and cultural opinions.
- The Library endeavors to acquire on a worldwide basis a selection of photographs following the same categories as collecting for the United States.
- Material of strictly local interest generally is not acquired, but is referred to the appropriate regional institutions.

### B. Artistic Photographs

The Library acquires, on a highly selective basis, photographs which show excellence as works of art, in conception and presentation of image and form, and which are illustrative of a movement, an aesthetic theory, or particular period of artistic photography made by leading and under-recognized practitioners. Opportunities to strengthen parallels among work represented in the photography and fine print and drawing collections are sought.

### **C. Photojournalism**

The Library acquires photojournalism documenting newsworthy individuals, places, events, problems, crises, and achievements. Very selectively, the Library acquires news photography morgues and the archives of leading photojournalists. Each news photo morgue should cover a different time period so that together the morgues provide users with an unbroken visual timeline or encyclopedia of the past, without duplicative content. The Library also seeks small collections and individual items that represent important contributions to the history of photojournalism.

### **D. History of the Medium**

The Library endeavors to acquire a selection of photographs that illustrate the full chronological history and technical advancement of the medium in its many iterations, including digital print and file formats. Emphasis is placed on documenting the changing nature of photographic formats, the profession of photography, and the visual and material culture of photography's use and consumption.

### **E. Photographic Archives**

The Library acquires, on a highly selective basis, collections in any of the above categories that represent a complete, self-contained unit. In most cases, these collections constitute the archive of a single individual or the product of a single institution. With the long-standing exception of ongoing additions to the HABS/HAER/HALS collections produced by the National Park Service, the Library will not acquire pictorial records of Federal agencies, as these records are the responsibility of the National Archives.

### **F. Photographic Albums and Other Bound Volumes Containing Photographs**

The library selectively acquires bound volumes containing photographs that support its various collecting areas, missions, and goals. These include photo albums: intact, unpublished, bound collections of photographs created as a record of a family, a social group or a special occasion, a business organization or whatever else the compiler deems important to document. Special emphasis is placed on acquiring published works illustrated with original photographs of documentary or aesthetic interest.

## **VI. Best Editions and Preferred Formats**

For guidance regarding best editions for material acquired via the Copyright Office, see: <http://copyright.gov/circs/circ07b.pdf>.

For guidance regarding recommended formats for material acquired via all other means; e.g., purchase, exchange, gift and transfer, see: <http://www.loc.gov/preservation/resources/rfs>.

For information regarding electronic resources and web archiving, see the following Supplementary Guidelines: <http://www.loc.gov/acq/devpol/electronicresources.pdf> , <http://www.loc.gov/acq/devpol/webarchive.pdf>, <https://www.loc.gov/acq/devpol/opencontent.pdf>, and <https://www.loc.gov/acq/devpol/datasets.pdf>.

## **VII. Acquisition Sources**

Photographic materials are collected to support the mission of the Library of Congress across the broad spectrum of its collecting areas. The Library acquires documentary and artistic photographs in various forms from a variety of sources including photographers, collectors, dealers, auctions, galleries, copyright deposits, etc. Additionally, opportunities to acquire web only published support material that bolsters existing collections or documents noteworthy events through web harvesting and archiving are beginning to be pursued.

## VIII. Collecting Levels

Meeting the Library's Diverse and Inclusive Collecting Statement (see Section II) and the collecting levels outlined below requires continual evaluation of the publishing landscape, sources of expression, current events, and socio-cultural trends to thus maintain effective collecting policies and acquisitions methods. Changes in publishing or in the creation of materials covered by this policy statement may necessitate collecting efforts not explicitly referenced here. Such efforts will be handled on a case-by-case basis while the Library evaluates the need for policy statement updates.

The Library of Congress acquires photographic materials selectively within each category as described above in the Specific Policy Guidelines. Acquisition is determined by the content of the work offered to the Library for gift or purchase, the desire to not duplicate the collecting efforts of other institutions, the attempt to fill in gaps in existing holdings, efforts not to duplicate existing collections, and the financial cost to the Library in accepting material, whether it be financial, spatial, or other.

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