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INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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IT'S PICTURE TIME!

By Karen DePauw, coordinator, IHS Local History Services

Every fall, schools around the country begin keeping a record of students, teachers, and staff by photographing everyone for the yearbook, thus creating a permanent record for that year. In the same spirit, this fall would be a perfect time to evaluate how your organization captures images of the items in your collection. We have previously discussed digitization projects in general ([Dissecting Digitization: Part I](#); [Making Choices in a Digitization Project](#); [Dissecting Digitization: Part II](#)). However, photographing a three-dimensional item can often present more challenges than scanning flat documents.



[Interior of Charles Miner's photographic studio in Fort Wayne, Indiana.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

EQUIPMENT

The necessary equipment for photographing collection items is a bit more extensive than simply purchasing a scanner. The basic hardware includes:

- Camera - Although a point-and-shoot can capture simple snapshots, a slightly more advanced camera that allows you to do a white-balance, change apertures and manually focus the lens (no worries, we will deal with some of these terms later on!) can help pictures come out their best.



ONLINE RESOURCES

[Digitising Collections](#)
(Digital Pathways)

[Guidelines for the creation of Digital Collections](#)
(Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois)

[NPS Museum Handbook Appendix K: Photography](#)
(National Park Service)

[Photographing Collection Items](#)
(Museums Australia Victoria)

[Photographing Museum Textiles](#)
(Museum Textile Services)

[Top 10 Tips for Collections Photography](#)
(Museums and Heritage)

FROM OUR LENDING RESOURCE CENTER

[Digital Curation Projects Made Easy](#)
(Carmen Cowick)

[Collections Care and Stewardship](#)
(Juilee Decker)

[Digitization and Digital Archiving](#)
(Elizabeth R. Leggett)

UPCOMING TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

- Tripod - Using a tripod will allow you to take non-blurry photos of images, especially when you use a higher aperture.
- Lights - Two lights that can adjust directionally are a great starting point. For many items, two clamping work lights from the hardware store can even do the trick.
- Neutral Background - This might be a solid-colored wall in the museum or a large piece of solid-colored paper that can be suspended from a pole and rolled out when needed. While a wall can work just fine, paper is a better choice as you can create a gentle slope at the bottom to ward off shadows and create a softer background.

[Archival Processing](#)

Sept. 5 -
Connecting to
Collections Care
webinar.

[Formative Evaluations
for Exhibits and Public
Programs Online Course](#)

Sept. 9 through Oct. 4 -
Northern States
Conservation Center.

[Creating Connexion:
Building Partnerships
with Your Board
Members](#)

Sept. 12 -
AASLH webinar.



Various pieces of photographic equipment.

After gathering the necessary supplies and deciding on the standards of the photograph (more on that in [Dissecting Digitization: Part 1](#)), it is time to get everything set up.

SETTING UP

It can be a good idea to set up a photography space in a part of the museum that can be completely darkened except for the lights used in the photo set up. This allows maximum control of the light levels and shadows in the photograph.

Set up your neutral background or set up the photo equipment in a space that naturally provides it, like against a blank wall. If using paper, make sure it does not crease at the bottom but curves gently as this will help soften the shadows in the background. Place the tripod and camera so they point straight at the center of the photo set up. Put the lights on either side of the camera.

If you are photographing smaller items, make sure you have a table in order to lift the objects up. To get the best photograph, you want to align the camera with the center point of the object. With smaller items this will be much easier if they start out at table height.

Getting the lighting right is one of the hardest parts of photographing objects. Making sure the lights you purchase are able to move around the space and point in all directions can be very helpful. By moving lights

closer or further from the object and pointing them at different parts of the object (perhaps one towards the top and one towards the bottom) it is possible to get an image of the item without too many shadows or dark spots. Often the way lighting looks in person can appear a bit differently through the camera lens, so it can be helpful to place the lights, take a photo, and then adjust the lights as needed. Once you get a feel for where lights should point when photographing different types of objects it will get much easier in subsequent photo sessions.



[J. Irwin Miller with Camera](#). (Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

TAKING THE PICTURE

Now that all of the main components of the photography set up are ready, it is time to think about the camera. A camera's instructional booklet is always best for understanding exactly how these different features are changed, but here are some things to consider.

- The aperture dictates how much light comes through to create the picture, if you are photographing something that is very dark, like a black dress, it can help to have a higher aperture setting so more light comes through and the garment does not end up looking like a black blob.
- A white balance is helpful in making sure that the colors of the item show up accurately when the photograph is taken. By changing the white balance you can cancel out things like a yellow cast from your light bulbs. Along the same lines, it can be helpful to take one photograph with a [color card](#) clearly visible. This allows for any color adjusting with photo software after the image is taken.
- If the standards set for taking photographs of the collection indicate a TIFF image, set the camera up to take images in RAW format. This will allow you to save them as TIFFs once downloaded to a computer. This format also allows for the most detail-rich images and digital files.

There are some great resources with tips and tricks for photographing different types of items, like reflective objects, and dark items. Check out the sidebar for links to additional resources that cover some of these topics.

Now, go get snapping!

This is a free publication. Anyone may subscribe.

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