

Towards a Standardised Terminology for Photographic Materials in The Netherlands

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Extended abstract

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Introduction

In Dutch museum collections the technological specifications of photographic objects do not follow a common standardised terminology. Especially in the case of contemporary photography, a variety of terms and techniques, often translated from English or deriving from brand names, coexist at the expense of clarity. This can be an obstacle to correctly identifying and preserving these objects. A terminology working group has been formed to improve this situation; it is part of ‘Project Collection Knowledge 2.0 / Photography’, a three-year research program on the preservation of photographic objects in Dutch collections initiated by the Dutch Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (SBMK) in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE)¹. A new standard terminology can improve the understanding of photographic objects in collections, clarify preservation needs and contribute to the overall professionalisation of communication relating to photographic materials in the Netherlands.

The working group

The SBMK Photography Terminology working group consists of nine members including photograph conservators, conservators of contemporary art, registrars and art historians. Over the span of half a year, the working group met eight times through digital one-hour meetings. The meetings were used to divide up work and discuss different viewpoints on individual terms. Between meetings, digital preparatory and follow-up work was done. Two members formed the group’s informal secretariat and worked an estimated total of 70 days. This pensum does not take into account that the working group benefited considerably from previous work carried out by the Rijksmuseum outside the scope of this project.

Creating a workflow

First, an inventory was made of the terminology already present in the registration systems of the four museums that participated in the workgroup. The collected terms were divided into six main categories: photographic processes, photomechanical processes, digital printing processes, finishing techniques, materials, and forms in which the processes are used, such as, for example, ‘collage’. The final list, which is meant to organically grow in the future, currently contains 370 terms.

¹ Participating museums are: the Amsterdam Museum, the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, the Bonnefanten Museum, De Domijnen, the Frans Hals Museum, De Hallen, Het Nieuwe Instituut, Huis Marseille, the Kröller-Müller Museum, Kunstmuseum Den Haag / Fotomuseum Den Haag, Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Rabo Kunstcollectie, RCE-kunstcollecties and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The National Archives, the Nederlands Fotomuseum, the Netherlands Institute for Conservation+Art+Science+ (NICAS) and the Rijksmuseum participate as advisory partners.

An Excel sheet was designed to give the terms a hierarchical structure and allow group members to record their thoughts and opinions. It was shared with working group members via an online platform.

Each term was first provided in English, followed by the preferred Dutch term, possible brand names and a definition of the term. Possible non-preferred terms, synonymous ‘trivial names’, were listed as well, since they may be frequently encountered in the literature (Fig. 1). Sources were provided for definitions and process names. To keep the document manageable, editing rights for participants were limited. Exceptions to this principle were only granted for the purpose of voting on different terms in a questionnaire in which group members could express their approval, disapproval, doubt or abstention, and in which they could also add comments. Disagreement on terms was settled by following general guidelines that had been set at an earlier stage. As the time needed for discussion far exceeded the time allotted for that purpose, the secretariat took preliminary decisions on individual terms, while taking the comments collected in the questionnaire into consideration. The final list was subject to approval by all of the members of the working group.

Preferred English term	Preferred Dutch term	Brand name	Definition	Trivial name
silver dye-bleach print	zilverkleurbleekdruk	Cibachrome, Ilfochrome, Agfachrome CU 410, Azochrome, Bauchet, Cilchrome, Gasparcolor, ...	Een subtractief kleur-fotografisch procedé waarbij kleurstoffen die in de emulsie aanwezig zijn, ...	c-print
English alternative term	Dutch alternative term			
-	cibachrome (Van Dijk, 2011: 295), zilverkleur-stofbleekprocede (Heyse 1981: 774), zilverpigment bleekafdruk (RKD), zilverkleurbleekdruk (Rijksmuseum)			

Fig. 1. Elements of the working document

Transparency

As mentioned above, each proposed term was supported with one or more references. The starting point for this was a terminology project by the Rijksmuseum's photograph conservation studio that had been carried out prior to the start of ‘Project Collection Knowledge 2.0 / Photography’.

The Getty Research Institute's Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) was the main digital platform used as a source for English terms. Where possible, the Dutch equivalent, AAT-Ned, which is coordinated by the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD), as well as a Dutch dictionary were consulted for Dutch terms and their definitions. Specialist literature on photography was also consulted for existing terminology in Dutch: An encyclopaedia on photography and film (Heyse and Schans, 1981) and the well-known handbook by Jan van Dijk (Dijk and Maes, 2019) were particularly helpful. In addition, Dutch art journals such as *BK-Informatie. Tijdschrift voor Beeldende Kunstenaars* were consulted. Working group members occasionally suggested new terms for which no sources could be found, and Dutch printing labs were contacted to learn about the day-to-day terminology of their businesses.

Consistency

To achieve consistency in the final list of terms, the group agreed on a set of guidelines designated to give direction to translations and discussions. A balance often had to be found between the meaning of a term, its Dutch spelling and its practical use. An example is the case of the initially proposed

term ‘inkjet kleurstofthermosublimatiedruk’, in English ‘inkjet dye diffusion thermal transfer print’. It was decided to use the term ‘inkjet kleursublimatiedruk’, a shorter term that is easier to manage and used in practice. Whereas the English term ‘dye’ is ‘kleurstof’ in Dutch, the group decided to consistently use the shorter term ‘kleur’ instead for all terms where this issue played a role, based on common language amongst the group members. The word ‘thermo’ was also omitted as it is redundant, since in this process the sublimation of dyes is not conceivable without the help of heat.

Another application of the guidelines relates to brand names, which are sometimes used as synonyms for photographic processes. These were always distinguished from process names and recorded separately. For example, ‘Cibachrome’ is listed as a brand name, and it was decided to use the more generic ‘silver dye bleach print’, in Dutch ‘zilverkleurbleekdruk’, as a process term.

There was much discussion about photograph process terminology. The Excel sheet lists the term for a process in general as well as the term for a process as applied to the object. The latter is particularly useful for labels and entry texts of exhibitions and catalogues. Using the general process term to answer questions, such as “What is on the wall?”, would otherwise lead to long terms, such as ‘Agfacolor process on glass’ or ‘albumen process on paper’. Instead, the list suggests the use of terms for the object itself, such as ‘Agfacolor plate’ and ‘albumen print’.

While these guidelines were helpful to a certain extent, they could not always provide logical solutions to terminological issues that were encountered during discussions. In these cases, the working group members relied on their own expertise and a certain sense of common language usage. The diversity of professional and linguistic backgrounds of the working group members proved particularly helpful in this respect.

Implementing the proposed standard terminology

The terminology will be introduced in workshops on the identification of photographic materials for registrars and collection managers that form a part of SBMK’s ‘Project Collection Knowledge 2.0 / Photography’. We hope that the terminology will subsequently be used to describe photographic objects in their collections.

In addition, the list of standard terms will serve as the basis for a follow-up working group on the implementation of the terminology in museum registration systems. Finally, the terminology will be applied in a digital identification tool that is being developed as part of the project and that will be made available online. The overall goal is to make the list available to all institutions willing to embed the standard terminology in their registration systems.

Preliminary conclusions

The SBMK Photography Terminology working group has not yet completed its task. The following points may be interesting for similar projects:

- Careful planning of the entire process is important, as considerable time may be required.
- Transparency in decision-making processes and choice of sources could be beneficial for similar projects in the future.
- Continuous input and feedback from different stakeholders in the working group are crucial for acceptance of the proposed standard terminology.
- Efficient implementation measures need to be considered to ensure the use of the new standard terminology in practice.

- It is important to find a larger context for the standardised terminology. In the Netherlands, for example, the RKD organises the Dutch AAT, and gaining their support for the new terminology will prove to be essential for its implementation in museum registration databases.

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