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Five ways to preserve your pictures

Follow these tips to make sure your photos survive the test of time

by Stuart Miles published on 18 May 2009

As Corbis announces the launch of a multi-million pound facility to protect and archive its 50 million photo Sygma collection in France, what can you and I do to protect our pictures at home if we haven't got a spare couple of million kicking around?

We sat down with Henry Wilhelm, a leading authority in photo preservation and the chief architect of the preservation methods used at the new Corbis facility to find out.

Make a copy

According to Wilhelm the most important thing you can do is make a copy of your favourite photo and display that instead of the original. Sunlight, the air and humidity are all photographs' worst friends. Most people want to display their most valuable or prized image, but that's the worst thing you can do.

Don't put them in the freezer

While the Sygma collection is kept at temperatures up to -20 degrees Celsius, Wilhelm doesn't recommend trying to do the same by putting your photographs in your freezer at home. "The humidity would ruin them in days". Plus if the power gets turned off the last thing you want is ice cream over your favourite holiday snaps.

Meta, meta, meta

How many times have you looked at an old picture and wondered what, who, where and why? The more information you can write on the back (not with a Biro) the better. If that sounds a bore, at least write down who is in the picture and when you took it. That way, when your descendants look in a 100 years time it will help them more than you can imagine piece together the jigsaw of your memories.

Store in a cool dry place



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It sounds a cliché but storing your photos in a box in a cool dry place is the best bet. Willhelm suggests the best place for this in your house is your bedroom. "It's the only room you actively temperature control. Nobody wants to sleep in a hot or cold room". A downstairs cupboard is equally good, but a lounge can get too hot, especially if you have lots of parties or a fire that you regularly light.

Digitise and backup

Scanning old prints should be done only to share says Willhelm. The most important thing in the whole process is the original artefact - ie the photo or negative. Don't just scan and then bin pleads Willhelm.

If you've already gone digital, then make sure you back up your images and don't keep them on a single drive, and certainly not your laptop that can get nicked. DVD's are good, but can be easily damaged, while online storage has the added concern that although free at the moment, could get expensive in the future if companies start to charge for data.