

NOT FADE AWAY

IN THE FIRST MASTER'S PROGRAM OF ITS KIND IN THE COUNTRY, TWO MAJOR ROCHESTER INSTITUTIONS HAVE COME TOGETHER TO TEACH STUDENTS HOW TO MAKE PHOTOGRAPHS LIVE FOREVER.

BY CARLIE FISHGOLD



One of the most valuable photo, film and related-technologies collections in the world rests quietly behind the gardenscapes of the George Eastman House (GEH).

“Any scholar of photography or film is aware of the George Eastman House, but I think that the people in Rochester are aware of the George Eastman House for the house, not the collections,” says Joan Saab, a professor in the visual and cultural studies (VCS) department at the University of Rochester and the director of photographic preservation and collections management (PPCM)—the only masters program of its kind in the country.

GEH’s motion picture collection has more than 4 million artifacts and 30,000 titles, the technology collection is the most comprehen-

sive in North America, and the photography collection houses more than 400,000 photographs and negatives.

“Honestly, next to MOMA, the Getty Institute, and the Library of Congress, the Eastman House has things that are equally exciting,” Saab says.

As two considerably small programs, VCS and PPCM are able to carve out a place for technical museum training. GEH’s conservation laboratories, registrar’s offices, curator’s quarters, administrative offices, and storage facilities become classrooms to PPCM students.

Identifying photographic process, creating storage and display housings for photographs, examining distinctive markings and other meaningful features—these are essential aspects of study for students, according to GEH

curator-in-charge and associate professor of art history, Lisa Hostetler, Ph.D. Emphasis is placed on the photograph as an object (think of a finger pointing at aspects of the physical photograph), while the UR program teaches context (not the physical photograph, but historical contexts to the trades of preservation and collections).

“The courses at Eastman House are designed to be hands-on,” explains Olivia Arnone, graduate program manager. “The work they do is practical so that when they leave here, they have gained valuable experience through their training that they can bring directly into jobs in the field.” Electives offered on the UR campus are a scaffold for various histories, contextualizing photographic content “so students know what they are looking

at,” Arnone says. “What history or theory they choose to explore is up to them.”

When Saab initially took on the partnership initiative, she could immediately see the symbiotic benefits of cultural production between the two institutions.

“Conservation and preservation is a sort of salvage mission, right?” she asks, rhetorically. “How can we prolong the life of this object, or at least get a snapshot, for lack of a better term, of this particular work or series of works, or category of works going forward when the object no longer exists? That, for me, is the set of questions that I never really thought about.”

Saab also is inspired by the dynamic of students’ different approaches.

“PPCM students come at these objects and histories with a different set of questions, which really opens up the discussion in very exciting ways. ... We’re not just looking at

theoretical or abstract concepts,” which tends to be a method of projection in the classroom for VCS and art history students to isolate and test arguments, “but rather, material objects with histories and futures. So it’s this idea of preservation and conservation anticipating a future moment for these objects; their lives are ongoing in ways that are important to think about for everybody in the room, including me.”

Participating UR professors have access to the collections as curricular aids throughout each semester—a major perk to the “teaching museum” philosophy touted by the GEH director Bruce Barnes. VCS professor of art and art history Grace Seiberling taught in the premier semester of PPCM in 2014.

“By asking questions and working with staff, students are bringing to light parts of the collection that were lost to view,” Seiberling says. “Cataloguing is incomplete and students

are finding things, like the records of the Photographic Society of Philadelphia, which were not recorded.” As a result, photographic archives are fine-tuned and PPCM scholars become museum collaborators. Everybody wins.

Beyond the walls of the museum and classroom, Saab sees a larger goal.

“There seems to be a vibrancy and excitement around GEH for the right reasons,” she says. “I’m not saying George Eastman wasn’t a great man and his house shouldn’t be preserved ... but I do think some of the materials in that collection deserve to be spotlighted as much, to share the stage. In that way, bringing some sort of academic spotlight onto the PPCM and VCS programs could, of course, help the community. And the house itself.”

George Eastman House Collections are available to the public for viewing by appointment. For more information visit eastmanhouse.org/education/research



Left to right: Lisa Hostetler, Joan Saab, Olivia Arnone