

Conservators and Curators: A Cooperative Approach to Treatment Specifications

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THIS PAPER IS ABOUT RESPONSIBILITY, communication, the physical conservation of historically significant items, and the preservation of their meaning.¹ Its underlying premise is that although we have made significant progress in our methods of treatment and our attitudes toward these materials, we have not yet arrived at a point where curators, conservators, and scholars grasp the relevant complexities involved in their preservation. In academic and research institutions with rare book or special collections holdings there is a growing recognition of the necessity for a continuous process of mutual education and communication between the curator and the conservator. The trend is toward a more cooperative approach in determining how—and how not—to treat a rare book. Through dialogue, curators and conservators are recognizing that they share a key professional end, albeit one that they pursue from different directions, which is the maintenance of materials for as long as possible in the best condition possible. Here “best condition” means the retention of an item in a state as close as possible to unaltered, preserving as much as possible of its original form and meaning without jeopardizing its longevity.

There are several reasons why the idea of a cooperative approach toward treatment specification is growing. Perhaps one of the most obvious is the acceleration of the amount of conservation activity itself.

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Administrators of research collections are confronting the inevitable—i.e., that their collections are composed of organic materials and it is only a matter of time before the contents of their libraries disintegrate. In increasing numbers, they are deciding that the time to begin preserving their collections is now, not in some dim budgetary future. Witness the number of preservation programs being established across the country, the expansion of existing regional conservation facilities and the services they offer, and the establishment of more and more in-house treatment facilities on both a large and small scale.

In the past, many libraries with no formal preservation programs did provide their rare book and special collections access to conservation treatment resources. Now, however, the preservation programs supported by research libraries include general collections as well, thereby significantly increasing the pool of candidates for conservation treatment. Even in smaller local libraries, archives, and historical societies, the means to conserve items of special importance are being found through programs funded by grants, private donations, and government allocations. Though these institutions may not have their own treatment facilities, they can use the services of regional centers or the growing number of private conservators. The bottom line is that conservation treatment is now accessible to more collections than ever before. This means that more curators and conservators are assuming responsibility for determining the appropriate conservation treatment of more material.

Another reason for growing efforts at better communication between curators and conservators is the increasing consciousness of both professions that any intervention may, in fact, obliterate characteristics of an item which could have research or historical significance.

A codex book is an object constituted of multiple and separate components; gatherings, binding construction, metal furniture, fastenings, etc. Combined, these form numerous subtleties of historical interest and theoretical evidence, indicating period fashion and provenance; divided, they lose much of their meaning and power to conjure human thought. Bibliographical integrity is not something one can dismantle and recreate. Judged in this way the integrity of the individual volume is only as strong as its most fragile or weakest part; as with a painting, when only one color may fade but the artist's intention is altered for ever, the integrity is fragmented.²

Ferguson points out that even the patina of age imposed upon a book as it passes from place to place and owner to owner is a record of historical significance.

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For both curators and conservators this increased preservation activity has highlighted areas of weakness in their professional training programs. In the past, book conservators have tended to be craft or "fine" bookbinders, trained in English or European trade binding shops with little, if any, exposure to the "scientific, historical or aesthetic aspects"³ of the composition of books and documents. And, as Christopher Clarkson, conservator of the Bodleian Library, points out "the present European conception of bookbinding is being misapplied when imposed on pre-18th century European books or on books from alien cultures. The thoughtless application of late European bookbinding traditions have caused immense damage to cultural property throughout the world."⁴

The inadequacy of this training for the job of preserving historical integrity has been bemoaned by a few conservators for many years. In 1967, Paul Banks, then conservator of the Newberry Library in Chicago, expressed the need for the development of a *profession* of book conservation that would combine the scholarly orientation of the curator, the pure research training of the scientist, and the artisan skills of the bookbinder.⁵ Several years later, Peter Waters voiced the need for the training of conservators to become more qualified for the responsibility of treating "old books." A conservator should be, in his estimation, "scholarly, with a broad knowledge of librarianship, mathematics, chemistry and physics, the history of culture, and of book technology, who also has had a sound practical training in restoration."⁶ He proposed an international training center for book and archives conservation which would include courses on conservation and materials science; history of art; history of book technology; art conservation theory; documentation and bibliography; study of the book in relationship to restoration practice, insofar as it affects the scholar, scientist, restorer; and paleography, in addition to the standard subjects such as the causes of deterioration of library and archives material, environmental storage, and restoration and repair techniques.⁷ Significantly, the center was to be designed not only to train conservation technicians but also to create an environment in which librarians, archivists, scientists, scholars, administrators, and students could pool their knowledge and "create a unity of understanding and purpose hitherto unattainable."⁸

On the other hand, librarians with curatorial responsibilities have traditionally received their training in an M.L.S. program and/or hold subject masters and Ph.D. degrees. In few cases has their education included more than a rudimentary introduction to the preservation of

books and paper, let alone any exposure to actual conservation techniques. They too are recognizing the necessity of better academic preparation for preservation responsibilities. Helmut Bansa, in an article entitled "The Awareness of Conservation: Reasons for Reorientation in Library Training" calls for a "new consciousness of librarianship"; one from which better understanding and judgment with regard to books as physical objects will result. "The basic course should inject into the librarian's mind the realization that books are not just carriers for information but that they are also a structure of complexly organized materials which, like all highly-ordered materials, tend to a state of disorder."⁹

Unfortunately, few formal programs exist today which address the broader educational needs of curators or conservators facing today's preservation and conservation decisions. Columbia University's School of Library Service implemented the first degree-granting program for library preservation administrators and conservators in 1981. The curriculum includes courses in the history of books and printing, technology and structure of records materials, descriptive bibliography, and chemical problems in library and archives conservation.¹⁰ The chief designer of the program, Paul Banks, has long advocated the necessity for a broader education for book conservators.

Another program sponsored by the School of Library Service at Columbia University is the summer Rare Book School. It has offered five-day, noncredit courses "some...directed toward working rare book and special collections librarians and archivists; others...intended to attract persons working in the antiquarian book trade; bookbinders and conservators...."¹¹ Course titles have included: "The History of the Book"; "Medieval and Early Renaissance Bookbinding Structures"; "Italian Humanistic Manuscripts of the Fifteenth Century"; "Evidence of Ownership: Tools and Techniques for Investigating the History of an Early Printed Book"; "Introduction to Descriptive Bibliography"; and "The History of American Book Design."¹² Courses on preservation and the theory and characteristics of conservation binding have also been offered.

In a 1982 article on preservation, Margaret Byrnes cites only a handful of opportunities besides the Columbia program:

Other reports of formal training opportunities include a preservation mini-course at the University of Michigan School of Library Science, a seminar on the conservation of library materials offered by the University of Texas Humanities Research Center, Wayne State University's course in the conservation and administration of photographic collections, three summer courses on the same topic offered at

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the Rochester Institute of Technology's School of Photographic Arts and Sciences, and a new conservation certification program at San Francisco State University.¹³

The number of library schools offering introductory courses in preservation has been steadily increasing but these are almost always survey courses covering the gamut of preservation activities from reformatting to commercial binding specifications, from environmental standards to disaster preparedness, from the chemical instability of machine-made paper to exhibition preparation. Rarely is there time or the faculty expertise necessary to concentrate on the philosophical and practical identification of historical, aesthetic, and evidential value of individual items or collections.

Requests for funding have been made by several universities with established conservation facilities to enable them to expand their training capabilities. If funded, these programs will undoubtedly emphasize the importance of understanding to the extent possible the full evidentiary significance of an item or collection before specifying treatment. Again, however, the training will not (nor is it intended to) produce conservators who have all the theoretical knowledge required to come to that understanding alone.

We have then a situation in which more conservation treatment is being specified for a wider range of materials. At the same time, as experience expands the knowledge of both curators and conservators beyond the bounds of their traditional education and training, each is recognizing new challenges and complexities in conservation treatment decisions. Simultaneously, each is becoming aware of the inadequacies of his own and each other's preparation for treatment specification for many materials.

In addition to the problem of deciding the best means of conserving and preserving these materials, another major issue must be considered: that of public access to the collections. Because they are the staff in direct contact with readers, curators must interpret the institutional attitudes toward access to and the handling of items not in perfect condition. Most libraries are user oriented so that curators can feel a press for optimal access rather than optimal protection. Hence the librarian/curator is placed in the role of broker between the patron and the collection. Therefore, it is important that decisions to deny access be based not only on firm bibliographic knowledge but also on a knowledge of book structure and chemistry, and potential hazards in order to avoid arbitrary decisions. Curators must think of each individual item in the context of the entire collection and develop varying levels of access to

specific items in order to ensure availability for generations to come. Conservators, on the other hand, because of their technical expertise, are usually entrusted with the authority to determine and execute treatment procedures. Because items are frequently sent for treatment one at a time, conservators may be forced to make treatment decisions without either the knowledge of how an item fits in the context of the collection as a whole or its pattern of use. This is often a greater disadvantage for private conservators who are more isolated from curatorial access.

To the credit of both professions, what is resulting from this heightened awareness and growing anxiety is a valuable dialogue—i.e., an attempt to build bridges across professions to encourage an exchange of knowledge and information between curators and conservators. One such bridge has been built by the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Division of the American Library Association (ALA). In 1984, an ad hoc Committee on Curatorial Issues Raised by Conservation was appointed. The committee was composed of librarians and conservators and was charged to “try to develop guidelines that would help direct the working relationship of curators and conservators at the *treatment* level of library materials.”¹⁴

Discussions of the committee tended to focus on four topics: (1) what curators should be able to expect from conservators; (2) what conservators should be able to expect from curators; (3) what curators and conservators should be able to expect from administrators; and (4) the impact of conservation treatment decisions on the user of library materials. Some of the questions raised during the committee's discussions indicate the confusion and concerns felt by curators and conservators: many curators think that conservators and curators should share treatment decision-making but that since curators are the custodians of the collections, the final authority for treatment decisions should be theirs. This is common practice in the museum field. But what about the curators who are not knowledgeable enough about the items in their care to make responsible decisions and, therefore, depend upon the judgment of a conservator? How can a curator determine the competence of that conservator? Presently there is no certification process for book and paper conservators and the conservators themselves disagree on a procedure to certify, or even the desirability of certification at all. The conservation field's professional organization, the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC), has suspended the certification of paper conservators established several years ago. On the other hand, it is considering the revision of its code of ethics and standards of practice to better represent the materials and

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practices of library conservators. If a curator must, then, rely upon the advice of his/her conservator, how can he/she make a reasonable evaluation of the skill level, knowledge of materials, or ethical and philosophical approach of that conservator? As one member of the committee stated:

At this point in the infancy of book and library conservation as a systematic discipline, one can not assume any uniformity of training, philosophy, treatment, practice, or skill among those equipped as book conservators. Practicing book conservators at this point in time include fine binders, commercial binders, trade binders, and paper, leather and objects conservators. The philosophy which informs the practice of each of these types is distinct and will most likely result in different approaches to the same problem and different sensitivities to the object under consideration.¹⁵

Conservators, too, are concerned about the competence of curators. Can a conservator assume that a curator does, in fact, understand the bibliographic significance, historical and monetary value, past and future use patterns, and the contextual importance of the collections well enough to make responsible treatment decisions? What if a conservator is instructed by a curator to perform a treatment with which she or he does not ethically agree?

Both conservators and curators on the committee agreed that discussions between curator and conservator are crucial to ensure that the physical integrity and useful life of their collections are preserved. This cooperation is especially important when a compromise must be found between use and preservation of the integrity of the physical object. It was recommended that conservators and curators "discuss their respective views on aesthetic and historic value and on what constitutes physical integrity and intellectual or scholarly meaning."¹⁶ Even though disagreements may exist, a recognition of differing points of view may lead to a "reasoned compromise" and avoid the chasm so graphically described by Bansa.¹⁷

After four meetings, the Committee on Curatorial Issues Raised by Conservation decided that it was premature to issue the guidelines it was charged to develop and recommended that it be discharged. It felt that curators "had not had enough experience working with conservators to respond meaningfully to the often sophisticated points raised by the conservation profession about treatment matters."¹⁸ It determined also that it would be more timely to see how the revisions of the AIC Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice will affect the practice of book and paper conservators before guidelines are developed. However, to enable the valuable dialogues initiated by the group to continue and expand,

the committee was reorganized into a discussion group and will continue to be a forum for discussion of curator/conservator relations.

Another bridge between curators and conservators was built by the conservation staff of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRHRC) at the University of Texas at Austin. In March 1986, an impressive symposium was held at the HRHRC entitled "Paper: The Conservation of Meaning," which addressed very specifically the "sophisticated points" raised by the conservation treatment of single items and collections. It drew participants from the museum, library, and archive professions, curators and conservators alike, to explore the joint responsibilities of caring for paper collections. It began with the assumption that any alteration of the fabric of an original document alters its meaning and that curators and conservators are jointly obliged to do their best to understand its meaning in order to evaluate responsibly the effects of any proposed treatments.¹⁹

The agenda for discussion began with the identification of the elements and qualities of the objects to be conserved. The questions considered were intended to elicit a thoughtfulness about an object which conservators and curators may never have considered. For example, questions were posed to aid in understanding how the physical structure of an object came to be: "How does the object relate to other similar objects? To what traditions of craft or fabrication does it belong? Does the object display innovation? Are materials or techniques used differently than in similar objects?"²⁰

Perhaps the most stimulating questions were introduced under the agenda item "Understanding the Object's Meaning." What is the influence of the creator's culture, including political and social history, iconology, relationship to work in other forms, i.e., that which provided the creator with a language of ideas? What was the creator's relationship to received traditions? Which elements were accepted and employed, which elements were employed and modified, and which elements were invented and introduced into the culture? How was the work understood by the creator (includes his statements about his intentions)? How was the work understood by its original audience? How was the work understood by later audiences? How is the work understood today?²¹

Further discussion centered on determining how the object's physical deterioration interferes with the understanding, appreciation, and significance of the elements and qualities previously identified and what the effects of various treatment methods might be on these qualities. Also addressed was the item's significance beyond the confines of a particular institution. "There may exist tension between an object's function in a given institution, and its value to the culture as an object

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which may outlast several institutions. The physical condition of an object forms a history of its value and uses."²²

Documentation of the object was considered. The question was raised as to whether or not the form of documentation chosen (or any form of documentation) could adequately preserve evidence of the elements and qualities identified as significant. To decide on appropriate treatments, the participants considered the establishment of criteria for evaluating the information learned about the meaning of an object and the effect of treatment on that meaning. Ethical questions were asked, such as what level of alteration, damage, or loss resulting from treatment could responsibly be accepted? Can the improvement in an object's condition as a result of treatment be confidently estimated to outweigh the risk of adverse effects?

Obviously, no curator or conservator or combination of curator/conservator will be able to understand the significance of every item in his/her collection to the extent considered during the HRHRC symposium. However, the depth and breadth of understanding implied by the questions posed during the symposium serve to illustrate the potential complexity of an object's meaning and serve to emphasize that any proposed treatment should be considered a potential intrusion upon that meaning. "The goal of researching an object's meaning prior to treatment was seen as making explicit as much information as possible, so that physical intervention would not proceed from ignorance and later be regretted."²³ There is no doubt that the interplay of curator and conservator and the pooling of their professional knowledge will be required to ensure decisions based on understanding and not ignorance.

Clearly the crux of these treatment decisions has to do with two potentially conflicting needs of scholarship—the right to gain access to an item in a usable physical state in order to explore its contents and artifactual/historical information, and the concern that any conservation intervention may endanger access to this information in its purest form. Therefore, it is important to understand the best methodology for decision-making. However, this is no small task. The recognition of both professions that it is advantageous, indeed necessary, to work more closely together is significant. The opening of avenues for self-education, mutual education, and joint understanding, and the acceptance of levels of responsibility (both shared and individual) perhaps not recognized before will result not only in a more thoughtful approach to conservation treatment but will also enhance our sensitivity to and depth of understanding of our research collections.

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References

1. For the purpose of this discussion, the terms *preservation* and *conservation* are not used interchangeably. Rather, preservation is used to describe the comprehensive activities which serve to prolong the life of library materials or their intellectual content. These activities include disaster planning, reformatting, preventative maintenance, handling techniques, etc. as well as conservation treatment. Conservation is the component of preservation which is the physical treatment of individual items by a conservator or conservation technician. This distinction is gaining wider acceptance in both the library and conservation/preservation fields, although it is by no means universally accepted.
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18. Henderson, "Conservator-to-Curator Statement," p. 1.

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20. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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