

Chapter 9

Conservation Since 2000

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes changes in conservation practices in the twenty-first century. As public spaces were repurposed from storage to study and work space, collections were moved into dedicated spaces that could sustain tighter environmental controls than an open stack environment. Digital access relieved pressure on print collections in many libraries, while digitization projects required intervention by conservators. Rehousing replaced repair as a default preservation strategy for many materials, and improved housing materials played an increasingly important role in conservation. In this chapter, conservation for disaster recovery is examined from the perspective of short-term in situ response techniques, and longer term laboratory treatments to restore access to affected collections. Surveys have suggested that routine practices have evolved slowly since 2000. With an emphasis on novel and unique techniques in the peer-reviewed literature, many important questions about routine conservation procedures in disaster recovery have remained unanswered.

INTRODUCTION

Trends in library conservation policies and techniques since 2000 have had a substantial impact on emergency preparedness and response. Many of these changes have resulted from an increased emphasis on prevention over intervention. This transformation reflects a shift toward digitization and collaborative collection development, which has reshaped library collecting policies. The most important factor in book and paper conservation is the presence of water, whether in the form of humidity in the air, rain from the sky, a leaky pipe above the ceiling, rising damp through the foundation, or storm surge from a hurricane. This chapter highlights new developments in the field of library conservation, including the conservation of books, paper, and photographs. Preservation of audiovisual and born-digital media is beyond the scope of this chapter; however digitally-printed media are included as prints on paper.

While supported by traditional peer-reviewed literature, this chapter also relies upon conference proceedings and online open access journals in order to achieve a better balance between book and paper conservation. Since 2000, most mainstream peer-reviewed articles on library material conservation have

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addressed general preservation and paper conservation, rather than the hands-on conservation treatment of bound volumes.

Conservation treatments in this chapter are discussed in sufficient detail to permit readers to understand their advantages and disadvantages in comparison with other treatments; they should not be considered recommendations or endorsements of any individual treatment. Specific treatment instructions can be found in some of the references cited, but the methodologies might not reflect accepted standards. The objective of this chapter is to equip librarians to make informed choices about collection recovery options.

BACKGROUND

The 1966 flood of Florence's Arno River is widely credited with creating the modern field of library conservation. Certainly, there was a previous generation of art conservators, some of whom served as "Monuments Men" during World War II, and founded many of today's professional organizations and training programs for art and artifact conservation (Edsel, 2013, 2014). However, the response to the Florence Flood galvanized the library conservation community in an era when the systematic preservation of artifacts was just beginning to take precedence over restoration and craft traditions.

Early conservation efforts tended to focus exclusively on rare materials, leaving most library materials in book mending programs that did not adhere to standards for preservation. In 1990, the Research Library Group articulated a strategy for collections conservation as part of a general preservation program. Collections conservation was driven by use or circulation and condition (Merrill-Oldham & Schrock, 2000). Discussions about the state of library conservation in the 1990's addressed the trend toward rehousing as a substitute for invasive treatment and the tension between reformatting and "the book as artifact" (Fredericks, 1992). In 1992, the Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) began to expand the discussion of processes and techniques for circulating and non-rare materials with a collections approach, rather than the single-item method typically presented at AIC meetings. The focus of the collections approach was to establish protocols and specifications to allow a library to sort items into batches, based on the pre-defined parameters for a finite range of treatments (Grandinette & Silverman, 1994). The principal role for the conservator in such a conservation program was to set standards and to provide guidelines for their application.

In recent years, there has been a growing appreciation of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cloth cased bindings. Most public libraries had already weeded these books on account of their age, yet many of them have remained in academic libraries. Unfortunately, research libraries frequently categorized these books as non-rare, so many of them had been rebound as part of standard collection maintenance (Silverman, 2007). To ameliorate this problem, research libraries have created new workflows for rehousing or transfer to off-site storage for this group of "medium-rare books" (Baker and McCarthy, 2006).

Most treatments have continued to follow established models, using time-tested materials and techniques. New treatments have been sought to address persistent problems for which no good solution had been found in the past. Conservators tended to be somewhat cautious about applying unknown materials to objects of value. As a consequence, many new treatments represented incremental shifts from past practices, rather than radical departures from existing norms.

Since the 1970's, the conservation literature has placed heightened emphasis upon analysis of artists' materials or investigations of new materials. A bias against publishing information about "standard

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