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PRAGMATISM AND COMPROMISE IN CONSERVATION

By Peter D. Verheyen

The ideas for this guest editorial began gestating several months ago when I was first invited to contribute it. In addition to my current experiences working as the head of a research library preservation department, I had the good fortune to work with interns and engage in professional development activities. More recently, the 2011 American Institute of Conservation (AIC) conference was especially thought provoking.

I write this from the perspective of an apprentice-trained bookbinder and conservator who has spent most of his career working in academic research libraries in the US, work that has included working primarily with special collections, but also heavily used circulating collections and digitization. During this time I have also worked with many other conservators, interns from conservation/preservation programs and students of museum studies and librarianship. While the mission ensuring the long-term health of and continued access to the Library's collections has not changed, how we do that work and prioritize activities has. This has been a result of changes in staffing, funding, and the priorities of the organization writ large.

The past year has seen a number of changes in conservation education in the US. The closure of the Preservation and Conservation Studies program at the University of Texas at Austin (founded in 1981 at Columbia University) is perhaps the most significant. The Mellon Foundation funded coordination effort among the three remaining major conservation programs (Winterthur, New York University and Buffalo State) will seek to ensure that conservators can continue to receive formal training in book conservation. Unlike a dedicated program for library/book conservators, students in these programs will receive a more fragmented experience with less time at the bench than they received before. This will require greater effort to obtain the additional training, in addition to their other coursework. These changes have led to a reexamination of alternative paths to becoming a conservator including a renewed interest in the apprenticeship model, programs such as the North Bennet Street School in Boston, and study abroad at programs such as West Dean (UK). There are advantages and disadvantages to the academic model and alternatives – greater theory vs. hands-on time at the bench – but with a commitment to life-long learning these can be balanced. However, given the decline in available positions, where can these graduates find employment? This is one area where pragmatism can make a significant impact.

What has always been missing are entry-level "assistant" conservator positions that enable a recent graduate to work besides a more experienced conservator to develop their skills and receive mentorship. Without these positions many new professionals found themselves thrust into leadership positions before they had an opportunity to mature their skills. "Technician" positions are more often available, and seem to be increasingly calling for more experience and training. Yet, these positions are deemed "beneath" inappropriate to graduates of these programs. Perhaps a realization that even routine benchwork is essential for building the treatment skills of trained conservators, journeyman years if one will, will lead to a perceptual upgrade of these positions, especially those calling for more developed skills. This would also benefit those coming from alternative training paths and give them a career path that allows for upward mobility providing they meet the other criteria. Could this be a win-win for the profession?

At the same AIC conference, Barbara Appelbaum presented a very compelling paper entitled "Conservation in the 21th Century; Will a 20th Century Code of Ethics Suffice?" [1]. In it, she asked us to think about AIC's code of ethics and the concepts of cultural heritage and personal property. In particular she noted that "Thorough training is required to practice in an ethical manner. Ethics and guidelines for practice require substantial knowledge in order to use them appropriately. Another reason that ethics cannot be the ultimate guide to conservation is that many different solutions to a problem can be equally ethical. As the author of a rather long book on decision-making, I can attest to the fact that treatment choice is not primarily a matter of ethics, but of judging the large number of factors that come under the term "appropriateness".

Mary Striegel (Chief of Materials Conservation at the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training) wrote commenting on Appelbaum on AIC's Conservators Converse blog, "We must realistically evaluate all that is going on around us and understand the needs of the museum, private collectors and the public" [2].

Other presentations, in particular "Digitization and Its Effect on Conservation Treatment Decisions: How Has Wide-spread Digitizing and Collections Changed Our Approach to Treatment?" [3] focused on the compromises conservators have to make in support of large- and small-scale digitization. As conservators we enjoy being able to give an item all the attention it requires, becoming lost in the nuances and details until we are done. However when working on a collection level, especially in support of something like digitization we must change how we approach the work, organize sustainable workflows, and often make compromises in how far we take the work. In the end, we find ourselves doing just enough to stabilize the piece without compromising the ability to properly treat it at a later date, all in high-volume production environment. Perhaps frightening, these kinds of projects are only going to become more common and important as libraries and similar organizations with extensive holdings begin to digitize for access. With the attention given to these projects, conservators must ensure that they become part of the planning process as well and educate all involved on issues of care and handling, as well as safe storage of the originals. As our budgets continue to be cut, we must apply the same large-scale methodology towards improving storage and creating enclosures and even treatment, ensuring that we can make the maximum impact with the resources we have. At the same time we must continue to treat those items of greatest significance – they will be the ones to receive the most attention and handling – something that will nurture our need for challenges and keep our skills sharp.

In the end, as our field changes in all respects – from education, to employment, to the work we do – we must ensure that we respond positively and proactively, adapt to new situations and demonstrate our continued value and the necessity of our work.

References

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[3] B. Doyle, "AIC 2011, Day Two Notes", in *Preservation & Conservation Administration News*, URL (accessed 19th February 2012)

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