Curator or Conservator: Who Decides on What Treatment?

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How do curators of special collections material feel about the introduction of modern materials into early books in the course of conservation treatment; about the disruption of the text block or the removal of attachments, pins or clips from manuscripts prior to treatment; about the potential alteration or loss of evidentiary material as a result of treatment? Such questions, raised by Don Etherington (Head of Conservation at the HRHRC at the University of Texas) at the 1984 RBMS Preconference, dramatically highlighted an absence of curatorial opinion about routine conservation treatment decisions. Who, the curator or the conservator, should have the authority to resolve problems posed in the course of conservation treatments? In order to try to answer this question and address its many ramifications, an RBMS ad hoc Committee was appointed. Known as the Committee on Curatorial Issues Raised by Conservation, it began its deliberations in January 1985. The main task of the Committee was to try to develop guidelines that would help direct the working relationship of curators and conservators at the treatment level of library materials. This account is not meant to be a comprehensive discussion of the issue, but rather a report on our meetings to date. We are really just beginning to tackle the subject and are interested getting as many opinions as we can.

To begin, the Committee tried to define four areas of curator/conservator working relationships: what curators should be able to expect from conservators; what conservators should be able to expect from curators; what curators and conservators should be able to expect from their administrators; and the impact of conservation treatment decisions on the use of library materials. As the

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discussions and work of the Committee proceeded, however, it became clear that the question of how conservators and curators were supposed to work together had to be answered before any other issues could be addressed. Broad areas of concern and question for both curators and conservators included ethics, education, communication, and authority: Does the conservator’s “unswerving respect for the aesthetic, historic and physical integrity of the object” and the librarian’s commitment to make the information conveyed by the object widely available allow for a common goal, the object’s preservation? Do librarians know enough about the variety of conservation treatments available to make intelligent decisions about the options the conservator puts before them? Do conservators know enough about library operations and objectives to offer perhaps less ideal but more practical services? What is the point in a conservator’s preparing a well-documented treatment proposal if the curator routinely pays cursory attention to the details and instructs the conservator to “just do what you think best?” What components of an object constitute and convey its meaning and how are those elements best conserved? If disagreement arises as to how an object should or should not be treated and used, who has the final say-so in the decision—the curator or the conservator?

A symposium was offered in March 1986 by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center’s Conservation Department that attempted to provide a setting for answering some of these questions. The symposium, titled “Paper: The Conservation of Meaning,” was attended by curators, archivists and librarians, all of whom were given an opportunity to view photographs, works of art on paper, books, and manuscripts from the Center’s collections which required treatment. Participants were presented with a number of treatment options appropriate to each case and were then asked to engage in discussions with conservators. The discussions were structured roughly on a five-part agenda: identifying the elements and qualities of the object to be conserved; discussing the effects of conservation treatment on those elements and qualities; documentation; deciding on appropriate treatments; and identifying extrinsic factors which modify or override sound treatment decisions.

The symposium was a mixed success. While much stimulating discussion took place and many good points were raised, agreement and like-thinking seemed remote possibilities and no clear conclusions were reached. In fact, the symposium mirrored many of the problems the Committee members had come to realize were hampering their own progress in turning out guidelines. Curators did not seem to share the same urgency and depth of feeling expressed by conservators about presented problems. And there was difficulty in keeping the discussions focused at the treatment level. Curators tended to veer off into larger, preservation issues of library collections. They viewed individual treatments as just a small part of collection management concerns rather than an integral or even
independent problem. Clearly too, the conservation profession faced several unresolved questions about its own practices that, in the absence of answers, rendered some arguments moot.

As an example of one of the thornier issues, two of the more polarized discussions revolved around the statement, made repeatedly by a conservator, that curators should be the ones to make final decisions regarding conservation treatments. On the surface, it seemed a strong statement of fact upon which some guidelines might have been based. However, in the course of discussion, it came out that some conservators felt that curators often made decisions regarding treatments based on an unquestioning trust of conservator’s technical expertise, rather than on a critical discussion of the treatment options available and their potential impact on the aesthetic and evidential value of the material being treated. Many conservators felt that curators should instead base approval or disapproval of treatment proposals on a fuller understanding of the technical components involved.

Some curators, on the other hand, felt that conservators, bound by their code of ethics to an “unswerving respect for the integrity of the object,” might not be able to respond to the many extrinsic factors curators must weigh before making decisions about conservation treatments. Faced with pressures of budget, institutional mission, and political expediency, a curator might choose the less optimal treatment and trust the conservator’s technical expertise to stabilize, but not fully restore, an item or entire collection. Were this to happen, however, there might be a tendency on the part of the conservator, having placed the burden of the decision on the curator, to then refuse to carry out the less optimal treatment on the grounds that he or she was ethically bound to perform only the best available treatment on any object regardless of its value. It became evident during these discussions that a very strong feeling exists among some conservators that strict adherence to the letter of the AIC Code of Ethics is synonymous with “professionalism.”

The ethical dilemma this scenario dramatizes (or perhaps necessarily melodramatizes) is perhaps best analogized as a judge/executioner relationship. The curator is the judge, but the conservator has to carry out the sentence. One essential difference needs to be emphasized. If the conservator (executioner) disagrees with the curator (judge), he or she may feel obligated to refuse to carry out the treatment (sentence), even at the risk of his or her job. Some conservators may feel that they cannot shift blame for an unethical treatment back to the party who ordered them to perform it. Curators, coming more out of a tradition of institutional employment and fealty, have a difficult time comprehending the fierce loyalty of conservators, who have a tradition of private practice as well, to their profession over their jobs. This dilemma needs to be understood better by both curators and conservators, and it needs to be understood as potentially
working both ways. If the conservator is in an administratively superior position to the curator, the conservator may be seen as the judge, determining a book or manuscript unsuitable for either circulation or photoduplication, and the curator as executioner, who has to explain to a scholar that the needed book or manuscript is not available to him either in its original form or in a secondary medium. Admittedly this situation does not now occur very often, but the possibility needs to be allowed in the event conservators assume library administration positions.

In June 1986, an RBMS Preconference workshop on curatorial issues raised by conservation reinforced some of the implications of the HRHRC Symposium. The preconference workshop was well attended by curators but discussion took place at an elementary level and many of the attendees seemed to be only just beginning to recognize the issues and their magnitude. In fact, belying the Committee's focused attention on the curator/conservator relationship, the curators in attendance at the preconference workshop seemed most interested in the impact of conservation treatment decisions on the user.

Taking the HRHRC symposium and RBMS workshop results into consideration, the Committee, at its fourth meeting in June 1986, voiced the opinion that it was premature and inappropriate to issue any guidelines for dealing with the many practical and philosophical questions that are asked about the conservation treatment of library materials. The Committee thought that curators, on the whole, had not yet had enough experience working with conservators to respond meaningfully to the often sophisticated points raised by the conservation profession about treatment matters. At the same time, the conservation profession was seen to be moving toward significant changes in areas from which any guidelines set forth by the Committee would have been predicated. Two notable areas of change were possible revisions of the AIC Code of Ethics concerning standards and documentation of treatments, and a tabling of the AIC certification program until the foundational elements of such a program can be reexamined and more firmly grounded.

The Committee felt that any guidelines issued now, before curators and conservators themselves were clear about their aims and had more opportunities to educate themselves about each other's professions, would become outdated quickly. There may be a need for guidelines in five years—certainly there is considerable interest—but the issues exist in too rapidly changing an environment to ensure stable resolution right now. The Committee felt that what was needed instead of guidelines was a continuing forum for discussion through which education about and publicizing of the issues could continue. Consequently, the Committee recommended that it be discharged as a Committee and converted into a discussion group. This recommended action was taken by the RBMS Executive Committee, with the result that the Curators and Conservators Discussion Group held its first meeting in January 1987.
The Discussion Group hopes to add to the body of information on curator and conservator working relations and to encourage the education of curators and conservators about each others' professions. The Discussion Group will act as a forum to carry forward ideas generated by the Committee and will provide a ready place for new issues to be first addressed. It will work to publicize the issues by encouraging the publication of relevant articles in appropriate journals and by suggesting programs to be held at the annual meetings of such interested organizations as ALA, the Society of American Archivists (SAA), and AIC. In these ways, it is felt that the momentum gained by the Committee's activities can be most fully taken advantage of and built upon.

The Discussion Group welcomes letters and comments from readers of this article or, indeed, from anyone who is involved in dealing with these problems. Please send any comments you might have to me (HRHRC, UT Austin, P.O. Box 7219, Austin, TX 78713-7219). If you are interested, I hope you will be able to join us at meetings of the Discussion Group which are held at Annual and Midwinter Meetings of ALA.

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