It Takes Two to Tango: A Conservator's View of Curator/Conservator Relations

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This article is the result of the authors' experiences in a major research library's Preservation Department and Conservation Laboratory. It was noted by the authors that previous articles have discussed how to decide what should be treated and who should make treatment decisions. Little has been written concerning what information is needed to make intelligent conservation decisions and how it can be obtained. The RBMS Curators Conservators Discussion Group provides a forum for these issues, but mechanisms must be established to foster effective communication at the institutional level.

Conservation treatment decisions made by one person may not serve the best interests of the item or the collection. Like a tango done alone, a conservation decision with only half the necessary information may result in quite another dance. This article discusses how the curator and the conservator obtain the information each needs to make an informed choice regarding the individual conservation treatment of bound material in rare book and other special collections. The information required to make a reasonable choice is identical whether the curator is working with a conservator employed by the collection (in-house) or who has been contracted from outside the institution (private practice or regional center).

The rare book curator and the conservator have the same objective: preserving the material. The basic information that each has to offer plays an important role in determining the appropriate preservation decision for a particular volume. Each person brings to this relationship skills and expertise that the other needs in order to make an informed treatment decision. The conservator is looking at an individual volume and making treatment recommendations based on the physical needs of that

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volume. The curator’s knowledge of the volume’s importance to the collection (monetary and research value), the significance of its physical attributes (bibliographic and associative), and how the material will be used (exhibits, research, and/or artifactual) must also be factored into decisions relating to the preservation of the volume. The conservator’s final treatment recommendation must balance this information against time constraints, costs, and appropriate alternatives. The curator’s decision to go ahead with the proposed treatment is based on confidence in the conservator’s skills to carry out the treatment in the stated time and with the expected results. Without the information and confidence that each person has in the other’s knowledge and expertise, the final treatment may not be appropriate for the volume.

How do you get to this point? What questions do you need to ask and how do you judge the answers?

THE DIALOGUE

The conservator knows what treatments are possible and should be able to explain what full conservation treatment involves for a volume as well as other preservation options, for example, stabilization, basic repair, or protective enclosure. The conservator should also discuss the implications, both financial and physical, of each choice. A full conservation treatment is the most costly in terms of time and money. If you have an in-house conservator, you will probably never see a bill, but other items may not be treated because the conservator’s time will be taken up with the full treatment of a particular volume. In the case of contracting with an outside conservator to do the treatment, the entire annual conservation budget may be expended on a single volume. The curator needs to balance this commitment against the value of a particular volume and its importance to the collection. The curator also needs to consider the significance of existing physical attributes.

Once the conservator and the curator have explored these considerations, the conservator will evaluate treatment options in light of this information and prepare a treatment proposal tailored to the volume’s needs as they were identified during the discussion.

It may be useful to clarify an important fact at this point. Any conservation treatment, regardless of how minimal, changes the physical attributes of a volume. Of course, there are degrees of interference. A full conservation treatment is the most dramatic example. If in the opinion of either curator or conservator the volume’s usefulness or value will be diminished through any interference, choosing one of several types of protective enclosures is the only reasonable course. However, there are numerous options between full treatment and simply putting the volume in a protective enclosure.

These options vary depending on the item. A treatment just short of full conservation may involve removing the textblock from its cover, repairing or refor-
ing the sewing, doing paper mends, making minor repairs to the original cover and then reattaching the volume to its original cover. At each step there are variables and decisions concerning how far the treatment should go. Many times the variables are unknown until the work has begun. The curator must understand that even a thorough examination before a treatment cannot possibly reveal all the factors that may complicate the proposed treatment. Hence, the conservator must have a clear understanding of the item’s importance in order to judge how far to take that treatment. If there is any question in the conservator’s mind, the responsible conservator will contact the curator.

To stabilize the item the conservator may recommend minor mends to the item’s cover/case or textblock and then a protective enclosure. Perhaps the spine piece has fallen off. This is not unusual in nineteenth-century hollowback bindings where the joint leather is pared very thin. In many volumes with this problem the boards are firmly attached and the textblock is solid. Attaching the spine piece with a tube is a minor repair. After this repair a protective enclosure may or may not be necessary, depending on the overall fragility of the item.

A reliable conservator will not hesitate to say that a treatment is outside his or her abilities or knowledge. Just because something is in a bound format does not mean a book conservator is the professional who should execute the treatment. Photographic albums and scrapbooks immediately come to mind as items that may need the specialized treatment skills of a photographic or paper conservator.

One must be wary of radical treatments or guarantees. Guarantees by a conservator that the item will last hundreds of years after a specific treatment should cause you to question more closely what the treatment involves. Giving such a guarantee is also a violation of the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works’ (AIC) Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. Questions that should be asked of the conservator who proposes a radical treatment or makes such a claim are:

- Has the conservator done this treatment before? What does the treatment entail?
- Can the treatment be reversed or undone? How and by whom?
- Has the conservator ever undone this treatment? What were the conditions under which this was done? What were the results?
- Is this a treatment commonly done by other conservators?

**IN-HOUSE CONSERVATOR**

The discussion between conservator and curator can be a time-consuming process. It also requires tact and diplomacy on both sides. There are several ways to develop a working relationship when there is an in-house Conservation Laboratory. The Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, and Columbia University Libraries as well as other institutions have set up systems whereby one representative
in each special collection is responsible for working with a conservator. In the case of
the Library of Congress, each special collections division has a liaison or liaisons in the
Conservation Office. All work on one collection is coordinated through two people,
one in the collection and one in conservation. The New York Public Library and
Columbia University Libraries have one person in each special collection who is
responsible for discussions with the conservator. These representatives develop a
relationship with the conservator. The conservator and the department representa­
tive learn from each other. The conservator becomes sensitive to how decisions are
made in special collections, what treatments are preferred by the department, and
what parts of the collection are designated as conservation priorities. The collection’s
representative, who may be the curator but also may be a designated staff member,
 begins to learn about the possibilities and limitations of physical treatment. As each
party becomes more knowledgeable about the other’s needs, the conferences regard­
ning treatment for individual volumes become less time consuming and more useful.

These conferences are not held daily or whenever the curator or special collec­
tions representative comes across a volume needing conservation. Regularly sched­
uled meetings are necessary to minimize interruptions to both the conservator and
the curator and to provide a context for longer-range conservation planning. The
meetings should be held at mutually agreeable intervals. At Columbia these confer­
ces are held at the end of every month to review work for the following month. This
allows the curator to set aside work as it comes to his or her attention and to plan larger
projects. As the curator becomes more knowledgeable about physical treatments, he
or she may begin to batch work. One month may be designated a time to deal with
minor treatments and quick mends. Another month or even two months may be set
aside for a full conservation treatment of a single volume. After discussion with the
conservator, the initial plan for the month(s) may change, but the longer the curator
and the conservator work together, the more likely it is that the curator will be able
to estimate time and batch treatments accordingly.

In an institution where there are a number of special collections, a system
allocating time to each collection will need to be set up in order for each collection to
get its fair share of the conservator’s attention. These are frequently referred to as
“point systems.” One point represents a given period of time, usually about one hour.
It can be a very formal system such as the one at the Library of Congress or a less
formal system such as is in use at Columbia. Either way, the premise is that the
conservator has a finite amount of time and each collection deserves a portion of that
time. The time may be divided equally or weighted according to size or value of a
particular collection. There may also be unallocated time that is moved from
collection to collection on a monthly, quarterly, or annual basis so that each collection
has an opportunity to do a large or complicated project or meet unanticipated needs.
The conservator and the curators of the various special collections, perhaps together
with unit administrators, will have to negotiate how the time-points will be allotted.
While establishing a point system, it is wise to review various treatments and the time involved with the different choices. These discussions provide an excellent opportunity to clarify the various levels and types of documentation. According to the AIC Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, the conservator must make “an adequate examination and record of condition” before performing any treatment. The conservator also “has the obligation to record and report in detail to the owner or custodian the materials and methods of procedure employed in treating the object.” Ideally every treatment would be fully documented. However the reality is that at most institutions only work on items receiving a certain amount of time (at Columbia it is over ten hours) or certain types of treatment (e.g., deacidification) is documented in any detail. The curator should be aware of the AIC Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice and the conservator’s interpretation of those standards. Any treatment that alters the volume substantially should be documented. Although a minor mend to paper or cover is an alteration, it probably will not get detailed documentation.

All full conservation treatments must be fully documented as outlined in the AIC Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. These full treatments, whether performed by an in-house conservator or a contract conservator, must have written documentation. Documentation of conservation treatments means a full discussion between the curator and conservator and then a written report, submitted to the curator for signature, which includes a description of the volume’s present condition, the proposed treatment, the estimated time to complete the treatment, and a set of “before” photographs. The RBMS Ad Hoc Conservators’ Collations Committee has developed a set of recommendations covering collations of material to be treated. Collational statements are to be sent by curators with material, and “conservators should compare the collations sent with the materials with the result of their own investigations, and in their treatment reports inform curators of discrepancies.” The curator signs off on the proposal indicating approval. After the treatment is completed, a full description of the treatment as executed, along with “after” photographs, is attached to the pretreatment condition report and the treatment proposal. The treatment description should list all procedures that were performed. The procedures should be described in reasonable detail; simply stating the item was deacidified, for example, is not acceptable. The treatment report should state the pH prior to deacidification, the type of deacidification used, and the pH after deacidification. This group of reports comprises complete documentation for an item, and the curator as well as the conservator should have access to it.

**CONTRACT/OUTSIDE CONSERVATOR**

Many institutions do not have an in-house Conservation Laboratory: the curator
must identify potential contract conservators and evaluate their qualifications and work. Calling the AIC office in Washington, D.C., is a good place to start. The AIC staff will be pleased to send a list of conservators in a specific geographical region and with a particular specialization need, e.g., books, art on paper, paintings. However, the AIC does not pass judgment on the quality of a conservator’s work. There is no licensing or certification of conservators, nor does it appear likely that such a system will be established in the near future. AIC, in common with other professional societies (for example, the Society of American Archivists), is grappling with the complex issues surrounding professional certification.

Other curators are a useful source of recommended conservators. The advantages of using someone that a colleague has used are a built-in reference and an opportunity to examine the work done by the conservator under consideration. Placing a “Request for Proposal” (RFP) in publications such as the Abbey Newsletter, The Guild of Book Workers Newsletter, and the AIC Newsletter is another possible strategy. The RFP should briefly outline the project, including general bibliographic information on the volume(s), degree of treatment expected (full, minor repair, protective enclosures), a comment on the general condition(s) of the material, and who to contact. The curator may combine any of these alternatives to assemble the field of candidates.

The following procedures are important to the final selection of a contract conservator:

1. **Interview the conservator.** This may be done over the telephone. However, if the conservator is coming to examine the material in response to an RFP, the curator can use this visit to discuss the project as well as other similar projects the conservator may have done.

2. **Check references.** It is imperative that you speak with one, and preferably two, other clients who have used this conservator’s services. If it is at all feasible, the curator should personally examine the work done by this conservator. A conversation with a curator that worked with this conservator can help to establish whether the work was completed on time, and how the curator feels about dealing with this conservator. A good question to ask is: “Would you use this conservator for future projects?”

3. **Make the item(s) available** to each potential conservator. Even the most experienced conservator should not give a treatment proposal and a cost estimate without actually examining the material. [An exception to this is a request for protective enclosures. If the project is to produce 100 drop-spine boxes, most conservators could quote a series of costs per box based on size.] In the case of a broadly issued RFP, all conservators interested in the project must have equal access to the material.
A note about the range of conservation services available and their fees: there are private conservators, regional centers, and commercial services all offering "conservation services." It is quite likely that the curator will be surprised by the prices charged by private conservators and regional centers. Most private conservators value their time very highly; and, because they approach each item as valuable, they will propose the fullest possible treatment. Regional centers have much the same approach. Commercial services may be a cost-effective alternative for less intensive treatments. Consider what the project requires. If the project involves protective enclosures or encapsulation, it may be worthwhile to check with the commercial services.

Regional centers and commercial services should not be exempt from any of the above procedures. Talking with the supervisor, checking references, and making the item(s) available to their representative are all essential steps. A large organization is not a guarantee of quality.

The curator selects a conservator after having received the treatment proposals and estimates, interviewed the conservator, and checked references. If the project is especially large or complicated or the item(s) involved quite valuable, the curator may consider contacting a disinterested conservator to assist in judging the proposals. Following these procedures may not guarantee the best conservator for the project, but it certainly will increase the likelihood of making a good match.

In hiring a conservator to do a project, the curator should have the same dialogue as with an in-house conservator. The outside conservator needs all the same information (see above, "The Dialogue"). The curator should also clarify the level of required documentation prior to awarding the contract.

The final treatment proposal signed after awarding a contract may be more detailed than the one submitted in response to an RFP. In responding to an RFP, the conservator is unlikely to spend hours examining the item(s). Look upon the conservators’ responses as bids. Once the contract has been awarded the conservator should do a detailed examination, possibly including photo-documentation. There may be further discussion between the curator and the conservator before the final treatment proposal is presented to the curator for signature. In signing the proposal, the curator acknowledges agreement with the proposal and understanding of what is to be done. Provided the curator and conservator have each fulfilled their responsibilities in this exchange, the completed treatment should be satisfactory to both and the best for the item(s) given the constraints of time and/or money.

**CONCLUSION**

The curator/conservator relationship is a partnership. Like all partnerships it relies on the quality of the communication between the two. Every conservator
recognizes that not everything can be given a full treatment, and every curator knows a collection cannot be “preservation perfect.” It is each person’s responsibility to educate the other about issues and priorities that shape choices to be made. The curator identifies the volume to be treated in terms of:

- unique value—aesthetic, associative, or bibliographic;
- the significance of the volume within the collection as a whole; and
- the use the item will receive. For example, a volume on long-term display in the library of a historic house has conservation needs different from a volume maintained under controlled conditions for use by scholars.

The conservator enumerates appropriate treatment options and explains each in terms of:

- techniques available;
- time involved (which equals money); and
- results; in particular, what is best for the item as well as the collection.

The importance of exchanging information and recognizing mutual limitations and needs cannot be stressed too much. Donors, exhibition demands, and administrative priorities can influence the conservation process for the curator. The conservator tends to view the object in a vacuum and wishes to do the best for that item. These two views can easily come into direct conflict. The conservator must educate the curator about what conservation can do and its technical and ethical limits. The curator must put the item in context for the conservator.

There will always be occasions when the conservator feels the request for a particular treatment is not in the best interest of the item(s). The curator may feel caught between conservation demands and outside demands. How curator and conservator resolve such a problem will depend on the working relationship they have established, the degree of respect and trust each has for the other’s knowledge and abilities, and the willingness to work together to arrive at the best possible conservation decision.

NOTES

3. Full conservation treatment in the context of this article means a major commitment of time and money to a single item. This may involve disbinding and, depending on test results, washing and aqueous deacidification and/or other solvent treatments, page repairs as required, and the textblock resewn in an appropriate manner. The textblock may then be put back in the original cover, if the cover can be repaired, or given a new cover. The original cover, if not reused, should be kept as bibliographic evidence.
4. In the context of this article, interference means any alteration in the fabric (structure or material) of the volume in any way.


7. *Code of Ethics*, Section III, F.


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**RARE BOOK CATALOGUING RULES TO BE REVISED**

The ALA/ACRL Rare Books and Manuscripts Section’s Bibliographic Standards Committee has begun working on revisions for a second edition of *Bibliographic Description of Rare Books* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1981), the Library of Congress’s descriptive cataloguing rules for early printed books and other special collections monographs, pamphlets, and broadsides. Ben R. Tucker, Chief of Descriptive Cataloging Policy at the Library of Congress, will serve as the Library’s liaison to the Committee.

A preliminary survey of rare book cataloguers has revealed widespread interest in issues such as re-examining rules relating to title page transcription and original punctuation, incorporating the Library of Congress guidelines for cataloguing rare serials, developing rules for making special access points, correcting a variety of minor errors, and adding an index and MARC-tagged examples.

The Committee welcomes widespread participation in this effort. The participation of members of the international rare book cataloguing community will be especially welcomed. The revision process will last between one and two years, with discussions taking place at RBMS Bibliographic Standards Committee meetings during ALA Midwinter Meetings and Annual Conferences, beginning at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in Chicago (January 6–10, 1990).

If you wish to be placed on the BDRB mailing list and receive the latest available documents, please contact: Belinda Urquiza, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20540. Specific comments on BDRB should be submitted to Ms. Urquiza. For further information contact: Jackie Dooley, Chair of the RBMS Bibliographic Standards Committee, Central Library C-075-S, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093-0175; (619) 534-1273.
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