

Conservation at the American Philosophical Society: An Institutional Profile in 1992

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Introduction

The American Philosophical Society (APS), founded in 1743, was based on a proposal by Benjamin Franklin and became the first learned society in this country. To this day the promotion of useful knowledge is of primary concern. The library, with 180,000 volumes and 6 million manuscripts, constitutes a major center for research in the history of science, medicine, technology and Americana to 1840. Although this is a collection of moderate size, it plays an important role in serving a worldwide community of scholars. In order to provide access to most, if not all the materials within the collection, care and maintenance have long been a high priority.

Early preservation records

Checking the Librarian's report in the Society's Year Books reveals some interesting information. Sporadic preservation efforts go back to the early 19th century, when the Declaration of Independence was first "worked over." In the 1890's certain manuscript collections were shipped to the Library of Congress to be cleaned, repaired and mounted. Forty years later archival folders were first put to use, as the manuscript collections were catalogued.

The most interesting early conservation records are those kept by Carolyn Rugh, (later Carolyn Horton). They date from May 1935 – December 1935, but Mrs. Horton was employed for several years on a free lance basis. In this particular log she clearly describes a number of treatments and accounts of her time and material expenses. The actual work can be identified easily by looking at her notes. It speaks of quality and good judgement.

The APS was also among the first institutions to regard microfilming as an important preservation measure. A conference on the scholarly use of microform technology held more than fifty years ago, contributed to the founding of University Microfilms.

The first comprehensive conservation program

In 1961 Willman Spawn became the first full-time conservator, although his part-time involvement with collection maintenance at the APS had begun in the late forties. Upon his new appointment he was provided with a small modestly equipped lab and an assistant. Willman Spawn designed protective enclosures and established guidelines for the treatment of manuscripts and books. While he and his assistant undertook work mostly on flat paper items, a great number of rare books were sent out to be restored or rebound.

Fritz and Trudi Eberhardt, two German binders, who settled in Harleysville, Pennsylvania in the early sixties, restored and rebound hundreds of leather and vellum books during their twenty year affiliation with the APS Library. Records of other binderies include the names of MacDonald in New York, Storm in Arizona and Wessely in England. The practice of sending serials out to library binderies continues and results in approximately 400 hardbound volumes per year.

Shortly before Willman Spawn's retirement in 1985, 60,000 volumes were moved to a new location, a converted bank building with environmentally controlled and light protected stacks. Prior to this move Willman Spawn planned and conducted a major project of housing 30,000 items in wrappers, folders, and boxes.

Conservation at the APS today

As the next conservator in line, my first task in 1986 was to redesign the lab. This was made possible by a 1985 grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. The space was tripled and new equipment was purchased. We are set up for all the treatments we need to do now, but hope to add a few more pieces of equipment in

the near future.

Two conservation technicians, Denise Carbone and Julie Snell, work with me three days each per week. Denise is a recent graduate from the University of the Arts master's program in Printmaking and Book Arts. She received her training through an APS summer internship and work at the bindery of the Library Company of Philadelphia under the guidance of Jennifer Woods. In fact, both libraries now share her services on a 3 to 2 day ratio; we all profit from the vital exchange of methods and ideas. On several occasions the two institutions have also arranged to purchase materials together, thus taking advantage of bulk prices and greater varieties of supplies.

Julie, with a degree in Fine Arts, came to the APS as a volunteer, after working for the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (CCAHA). She has taken every opportunity to learn and improve her skills, including doing extensive reading.

In keeping with the APS's commitment toward the professional development of its employees, the technicians' training exceeds the basic every day routines. They are involved with problem solving, experimenting with techniques and to some extent decision making. Each year one of them may participate in a major conference or workshop at the Library's expense. Certainly their involvement with professional organizations will grow, as they become more rooted in the field. Self-motivation, interest, manual skill and common sense are attributes both of them have.

The growing number of requests for internships has prompted Dr. Edward C. Carter II, the Librarian, to admit two candidates each year. A summer internship is reserved for a student from the Graduate Book Arts program at the University of the Arts. For the past two winters we have had two German interns.

The Conservation Department reports to Hildegard Stephans, Associate Librarian for Administration. The Librarian however has the final word. He is committed to and supports our conservation program. He pays a short visit to the lab almost daily and always lends us an ear.

Conservation policies

Size, condition and use of the collection as well as the budget are the main factors that determine the maintenance program of our library. The historical value is predominant, and it is our concern to guard its integrity. We strongly believe that enclosures are the first and best step to protect fragile and endangered specimens. Yet we encounter and work on a great number of items where repair, re-backing or re-binding does not interfere with, or destroy originality and historical evidence. Every item should withstand use and handling; after all, we are a working library, not a museum.

We perform two functions in one space: one concerns mass production treatment, the other focuses on the conservation of single items.

Enclosures of all kinds, including mylar encapsulations, make up the bulk of our yearly production. Cleaning, flattening and mending of documents, maps, and drawings constitute another volume of work.

Pamphlet treatment

Pamphlet binders have never been used at the APS. Until the early forties pamphlets were library bound in small batches, as they came in, regardless of subject and size. By the late forties a new system developed. From then on pamphlets were put into individual folders, cataloged and stored according to subject in upright manuscript boxes. It is now one of our tasks to take the earlier deteriorating bindings apart and make the pamphlets individual again. After being cleaned, repaired and even re-sewn, they stay together as a volume in a slipcase.

Work flow and specifications

Most staff members, especially the librarians and cataloguer, target books and other materials that need our care. Periodic dusting and shelf arranging uncover preservation problems as do the unpacking of newly acquired collections. Treatment decisions are made in the conservation department but the librarians are often consulted. Rush items are given top priority and turned over as soon as they are needed. Other items collect on our backlog shelves, where they are organized into categories. Ideally we each focus on one

category at a time. If it has grown out of proportion, we work on it together. In reality however there are many disruptions in this routine. A new collection may enter the library and need immediate attention. We are also responsible for the installment of in-house exhibits as well as for the matting and packing of those materials which the APS lends to other institutions.

Twice a year we plan and conduct preservation and small exhibit workshops for institutions that lack preservation programs.

Program roots and influences

We do not follow any particular school of thought although my early training with Laura Young has been instrumental in providing basic guidelines. Close associations with Gary Frost, Pamela Spitzmueller, Jeri Davis, Maria Grandinette, Virginia Wisniewski-Klett, Judith Reed, and Nelly Balloffet have also had considerable impact. In the conservation lab of the APS our philosophy is to stay informed, to examine, to experiment, to adapt and to progress.