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Article: Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group 2020 When Damage Has Meaning: How Conservation Interacts with Interpretation

Author: Jessamy Gloor and Lauren Telepak, Discussion Group Co-Chairs

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American Institute for Conservation
727 15th Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
info@culturalheritage.org www.culturalheritage.org

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Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group 2020

When Damage Has Meaning: How Conservation Interacts with Interpretation

INTRODUCTION

The Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group held a virtual panel of two curators, an archivist, and five conservators to discuss their encounters and relationships with damage and with signs of use and creation. The panelists shared examples of damage that tells stories, approaches to treatment (or nontreatment) for this damage, the importance of strong conservator-curator/archivist communication in decision making, and how conservators can add and contribute to the interpretation of library materials. The discussion centered on decision making around damaged materials, communication, and sharing expertise with a wider audience.

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS

VICTORIA STEVENS

APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION: THE JUDGMENTS BEHIND THE CONSERVATION OF INTENTIONAL AND UNINTENTIONAL DAMAGE

Victoria Stevens looked at three separate objects to examine the definition of damage and how it can function as an integral part of these objects' stories. She used these examples to show that an understanding of damage and how it occurred must be factored into a conservator's decisions.

The Distribution Book of the Salters' Company, one of the great Livery Companies of the City of London, was the first example. The book was a 1609 stationery binding that covered 173 years of the company's charitable giving. It was saved

This open discussion took place *virtually* on August 4, 2020, during AIC's 48th annual meeting. The moderators organized and led the discussion and recorded notes. Readers are reminded that the moderators do not necessarily endorse all comments recorded, and although every effort was made to record proceedings accurately, further evaluation or research is advised before incorporating any observations into practice.

unscathed from the 1666 Great Fire of London but was badly damaged in World War II when the cellar where it was kept for safety exploded from a buildup of gasses in 1945. Stevens categorized the volume's history of damage into several categories. The first was "constructional evidence and damage," or damage that occurred during the creation of the object, in this case, rope marks from the drying process. The marks evoke the drying loft of a 17th-century paper mill, contrasting with the blemish-free paper manufactured today, and remind us of the type of damage that paper conservators avoid at all costs in their own treatments. Unfortunately, the rope line created a weakness throughout the text block. Next was "evidential damage through use." Here these were signs of prefire use from handling, such as ingrained surface dirt, especially in the fore edge and lower half, and gaps between sections. "Evidential damage through use and abuse" was the most dramatic category. The scorching and fire damage from the World War II explosion caused extensive embrittlement, cracking, and discoloration, and left a 4-cm halo around the edges of the text block. This damage was accelerated through use, resulting in extensive edge tears, chipping, and losses. The final example of both use and abuse was where a scribe folded the pages vertically to create straight columns. Like the rope marks, when combined with the explosion damage, these creases were now more liable to split and tear. Stevens took a delicate approach to strengthen these areas, using RKO 100% kozo Japanese paper with wheat starch paste in the most vulnerable areas, switching to RKO remoistenable tissue with 3% gelatin where there was iron gall ink media, and avoiding the media whenever possible. In this way, the evidence of creation, use, damage, and abuse were all maintained while allowing the book to be used.

T. E. Lawrence's undergraduate thesis manuscript of 1910 was the next example. The volume was the Jesus College's examiner's copy and included Lawrence's margin annotations in preparation for publication in 1936. Lawrence was one of the first scholars to complete an undergraduate thesis, and the thesis covered his trek on foot through what is now Syria. He studied the crusader castles and reported his findings in a typescript that he almost certainly constructed into a

text block himself, in a rough guard book style using an over-stitched sewing method. He inserted drawings, photographs, postcards, and maps on homemade guards. The text is full of character, including Lawrence's apologies to his tutor for not being able to map out accurate floor plan measurements of a particular keep due to their being "a lusty colony of snakes" at the base of the tower, or apologizing again to his publisher for his lack of detail as he "had malaria rather heavy these days."

Lawrence trimmed the support pages by hand, as shown by jagged scissor cuts, sometimes into the pages below. These accidental cuts, clear evidence of Lawrence's working methods and a glimpse of that instant when he must have realized he was cutting more than the page he intended, were in the tail gutter and on thin paper. Stevens made the decision to repair these accidental cuts because of their vulnerable position, but again with a delicate approach to preserve the evidence.

The final example was a 1798 publisher's proof copy of William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, his first collection of poems created with his friend and fellow Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Several corrections needed to be made, and to show that this was a rejected proof, the printer spoiled the copy by tearing several inches into the first leaf. (In the following, see Hosselkus and Johnson's presentation for one way to correct already-printed copies and Ryan and Wingfield's presentation for a more dramatic way to reject a proof.) Without this background information, the tear just appeared to be severe handling damage, in a vulnerable position, at the front of the text on this beautiful and important first edition copy. Stevens repaired it and only learned of the tear's significance later. Thanks to reversibility, Stevens was able to remove her repair. Without the tear, the book is just another valuable first edition. With the tear, the volume is part of the story of the creation of this well-known text, and like the first two examples, a precious survivor. All three examples illustrate the importance of taking a step back before treating damage or signs of use, to understand where they come from and what they mean.

Victoria Stevens, ACR, Library and Archive Conservation and Preservation Ltd., UK

TODD PATTISON

THE ROLE OF CONSERVATION IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE

Todd Pattison used damage to highlight the conservator's key role in interpreting physical evidence, and the fallacy of using a single digitized book to represent an entire printed edition.

The digital version of one copy of a printed book is often considered to represent all physical copies created, regardless of the copies' individual histories. Digitization projects attempt to capture "the best possible image," with damage being a problem to be "reversed" by conservators, who return the book to an idealized state for digital capture. Instead, Pattison argues, the variation in production and the visible damage in these

volumes is valuable information about the dissemination and consumption of printed books. Conservators, with their specialized knowledge and skills, are best placed to recognize and interpret the significance of damage.

Pattison's first example showed how production damage can illuminate a book's creation process. *Six Months in a Convent*, the narrative of Rebecca Reed, who claimed to have been under the influence of Roman Catholics, was issued during the height of anti-Catholic sentiment in Boston. Predicting a hit, the publishers had the text stereotyped before printing. These thin metal stereotype plates could then be easily reprinted without the additional cost of resetting the type. The publishers struggled to keep up with demand in March and April of 1835, printing more than 50,000 volumes by the fall of that year.

Benjamin Bradley's bindery was able to meet the ambitious production schedule, completing as many as 1300 bindings a day. Although these were cloth publishers' bindings, Bradley used four different board decorations, and close examination of damage to the text and covers tells more of the binding story. Even though the text was printed from stereotyped plates, the copies are not identical. The metal plates were put on and taken off the press bed many times, apparently somewhat carelessly, to produce the 50,000 volumes. With Arielle Rambo, chief of cataloging at the Library Company of Philadelphia, Pattison identified 31 instances of significant damage to the plates, such as loss of text at the bottom of one page and a long scratch on a different page. Examining 39 physical copies and 5 digital copies allowed them to order the copies chronologically by the degree of damage.

This allowed the librarian and conservator pair to determine the sequence of the different covers in this edition. In the first two bindings, Bradley used dies he already had on hand, which included his signature, presumably while waiting for an overall brass die specifically commissioned for this book. This overall die appears on the third binding, without his signature. Bradley then had his signature engraved on the die, resulting in the fourth and final binding. About 90% of the bindings have this fourth, signed overall die, and more than 95% of the extant bindings include the Bradley name somewhere. Besides receiving about \$5000 for this one book, Bradley issued almost 50,000 books advertising his bindery on the covers, a powerful marketing tool that the publisher failed to recognize.

The next example was the adhered-board binding structure. Here, boards are attached to the text prior to covering, using a leaf or stub of the endsheet construction, and the boards are not laced on with the sewing supports. This structure was widely used during the same period that case binding was first introduced, and books bound this way can often be misidentified as case bindings if there is no damage to make the structure visible. The skills, experience, and expertise of a conservator are often critical for distinguishing between these binding methods.

Once the adhesive is applied and the pastedowns are put up, it is difficult to distinguish between the attaching leaf and an extended spine lining, which is sandwiched between the board and pastedown on many case bindings. Raking light on one example illuminated the attaching leaf's location underneath the covering material, showing that the boards were attached prior to covering, unlike in case binding.

Removing later, damaging endpapers on an 1838 binding revealed the adhered-boards' structure of another binding. In addition, the cloth was trimmed extremely close at the bottom edge, and the binder used one of the clipped corners to cover the board. There is a readily available digitized version of this text, so this copy becomes more useful for its physical characteristics, which show not only how binders were working but also their attitudes about what was good enough to sell. For this reason, Pattison did not treat this volume further, and encourages conservators, especially in library settings, to expand their roles to interpret and convey physical aspects of bound volumes to curators and library users.

Pattison also used conservation skills to carefully deconstruct some examples acquired specifically for this research. They were treated with certain conservation principles in mind, especially that the deconstruction could be reversed in the future, by re-adhering the pastedown that Pattison lifted. He proposes that conservators may occasionally selectively deconstruct objects for teaching or research purposes, especially when those objects are as plentiful as the industrialized book of the 19th century.

Digital surrogates are convenient, and libraries will steadily move toward their creation and use, performing more "advanced" weeding of collections, if conservators do not help make the argument for physical objects. To stay relevant and continue to tie conservation toward institutional missions, Pattison advocates that conservators use their skills to facilitate research and pedagogy more fully, especially as conservators are often in the best position to illuminate various aspects of material production and use.

The digital capture of one object will never fully capture all of the information represented by a group of objects, especially for printed books. The same is true when looking at conservation. Rather than try to return objects to some "ideal state," we need to preserve all of the information, often including damage that we might initially consider treating, and then we must be able to identify, explain, and communicate the significance of that damage to others.

Todd Pattison, conservator, New England Historic Genealogical Society

ELIZABETH RYAN AND REBECCA WINGFIELD
SALVAGED FROM LAKE ERIE: CONSERVING GINSBERG'S
IMPROVISED POETICS AND PRESERVING A STORY

Elizabeth Ryan and Rebecca Wingfield used examples from Stanford University Libraries' Allen Ginsberg papers to

illustrate a system for balancing the competing demands of historical authenticity, long-term preservation, and user access. The 1300 linear ft. collection is one of the libraries' most heavily used, and the ephemeral nature of parts of the collection and its traces of use and abuse are all part of the story it tells.

Wingfield used the original draft of "Howl," and its materiality, to illustrate Ginsberg's centrality in the Beat Generation, plus why these materials are requested for exhibitions both at Stanford and internationally. Ginsberg typed this first draft on three-hole punch paper in a burst of inspiration. Ginsberg then folded and mailed the draft to Jack Kerouac for his critique. Kerouac then mailed the draft to another friend, John Clellon Holmes. The draft, on its fragile paper and with multiple folds, documents both the spontaneous creative process and the importance of circulating drafts and soliciting criticism.

The collection is also popular for teaching and shows students not only the various drafts of poems but also that poetry involves more than just writing texts. Audio and visual recordings document collaborative readings in bars, clubs, and campus auditoriums, highlighting the ephemeral and performative aspect of Beat poetry. Handmade construction paper flyers, handbills, beard trimmings, and Ginsberg's shoes round out the picture.

In 2016, an antiquarian dealer offered Stanford University Libraries one of the original proofs of Ginsberg's 1971 work *Improvised Poetics*, initially printed by Anonym Press in an edition of a thousand. Ginsberg was unhappy with the book's design and the numerous typographical errors, and the publication was abandoned. Legend says the edition was dumped into Lake Erie by the publisher, but several copies were salvaged by an enterprising fan with a rake.

Unsurprisingly, this copy shows severe water damage. Stanford already held a copy of the corrected 1972 edition but was missing this original proof printing, which adds more layers to the text's creation. Wingfield brought the conservation department into the discussion to start strategizing about how to preserve this damage while still allowing researchers and students to use the item.

Ryan said the book generated considerable interest at the monthly conservation department meeting. Their conservation laboratory is remote from the libraries and uses the online tracking tool Jira to take curator and collection manager requests. The system includes space for bibliographic details and other relevant information. The department also holds campus office hours for in-person consultations (and has plans to continue these via Zoom during the pandemic) and uses collaboration tools for file sharing. Ryan emphasized that it is helpful to have multiple communication channels.

Physically, this *Improvised Poetics* volume is a single section of folios with a laminated paper cover wrapper attached with staples. Water damage, detached and torn covers and

leaves, mold, and corroded staples were all problems to be addressed within the context of Wingfield's request to keep the damage from submersion visible. Ryan proposed a treatment to stabilize the book, and Wingfield agreed, with the caveat that after treatment it should be clear that this item had been underwater for a while. Staples and surface corrosion were removed and inactive mold vacuumed. Torn leaves were repaired, and the covers and pages joined with toned chochin Japanese paper. The covers were consolidated with paste and attached to the existing folios with loops of linen thread passed through the existing staple holes.

This copy is signed by Allen Ginsberg and came with a ticket stub, adding another chapter to the story. According to the dealer's description, this book was signed at a 1986 Detroit event. The owner relayed that at first Ginsberg refused to sign this copy, having disavowed the book, but finally relented for the sake of their friendship. The ticket stub was placed in a Mylar L-sleeve and is stored with the book in a custom corrugated box. This background story is recorded in the treatment documentation.

Ryan referenced Fiona McLees' ICON Book and Paper Group presentation on the conservation of three Franz Kafka manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, "From author's draft to select library holding: the metamorphosis of Franz Kafka's manuscripts." McLees offered a framework for evaluating conservation treatment outcomes from access, user, and stakeholder perspectives, acknowledging the sometimes-uneven effects that even small treatments and enclosures can have on intangible qualities. Ryan believes that the *Improvised Poetics* treatment has had a favorable outcome within this framework. The volume retains that intangible quality, the aura of a Beat-era lake-dump survivor. In this case, the paper was not brittle, and all parts were there, so it was possible to return the item to its original format. This balance is often difficult to achieve with other modern ephemeral materials, and layers of housing may be needed to enable users to safely view brittle pages. This runs counter to the intention of items that were produced with casual regard for longevity. Damage that happens because of this attitude is part of the story, and balancing this intangible quality with physical conservation is a challenge that benefits from research use and curatorial perspectives.

Ryan pointed to recent talks and discussions that address the problematic lack of diverse perspectives in cultural heritage preservation, which ask whose stories conservators may be erasing. Cultural aesthetics and historic perspectives about damaged objects vary, and seemingly small decisions made at the bench accumulate and contribute to a larger narrative, further emphasizing the importance of thoughtful and collaborative decision making. Making documentation accessible and widely available promotes transparency about conservators' work and decision making. Preservation department head Kristen St. John and operations manager Ryan Lieu have been working with the Linked Conservation Data Project so

that the profession can more easily share observations and practices. On an institutional level, the department is currently revising their treatment documentation forms so they can feed into metadata created by other library departments. These records will eventually link to Stanford University Libraries' catalog, making them available for anyone to learn which interventions have been made by conservators, and the rationale behind these decisions.

Elizabeth Ryan, conservator, Stanford University Libraries

Dr. Rebecca Wingfield, curator for American and British literature, Stanford University Libraries

ERIKA HOSSELKUS AND JEN HUNT JOHNSON
INTENTIONAL ACCIDENTS: IDENTIFYING CORRECTIONS
IN EARLY PRINTED MATERIAL

Jen Hunt Johnson and Erika Hosselkus discussed their discovery of the intentional use of iron gall ink to edit the text in an early printed Peruvian periodical, *Gaceta de Lima*. Ongoing research seeks to understand how extensive these corrections were, to confirm the point at which they were made, and to understand what this might reveal about printing in colonial Peru.

Iron gall ink burn-through is a common occurrence in many early manuscripts. Although burn-through is generally an unfortunate and unintended consequence of iron corrosion, one example at the University of Notre Dame's Hesburgh Libraries proved to be clearly intended. The *Gaceta de Lima*, an early printed Peruvian periodical (1749–1776) came to the conservation unit in preparation for the exhibit *In a Civilized Nation: Newspapers, Magazines and the Print Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Peru*. During the course of treatment, an unusual burn mark was discovered obliterating a single word in the printed text in one issue of the periodical (November 1759–January 1760). The mark was suspicious, as it burned completely through the page but was controlled and isolated. A second mark was later found in an earlier issue (March 1758–April 1758), this time partially obliterating a single word of text.

The *Gaceta de Lima* is Peru's earliest official newspaper. It began regular and continuous publication in 1744 when Peru was still a colony of Spain. The paper served as the mouthpiece of the colony's highest officials. The University of Notre Dame holds one of the few extant collections of this important newspaper, including at least 15 unique issues held nowhere else. The *Gaceta de Lima* regularly reported on the health of colonial officials, epidemics, civic and religious festivals and processions, city council elections, arrivals and departures of ships in the Peruvian capital, and other occurrences of public interest, and was published through the 1770s.

Hosselkus wanted to display multiple issues of the *Gaceta de Lima* to fill an entire flat case in the exhibition. The

University of Notre Dame's collection, acquired in the mid-1990s, arrived in a red 19th-century binding that had broken into chunks over time. Faced with this challenge, Hosselkus approached Johnson to discuss conservation treatment options for the *Gaceta de Lima*.

Hosselkus and Johnson ultimately decided to disbind the volume to reflect how the issues were originally disseminated and to permit the display of multiple issues simultaneously. Holes and stains in an early text usually do not signify anything unusual, but in thinking about what created a mysterious burn mark, Johnson realized that this did not look like accidental damage. It clearly had the appearance of being burned or corroded along the edges, but the burn appeared too controlled and too perfect, only obliterating a single word in the printed text.

In working through the leaves, the second instance of damage was discovered, but here the cause of the damage was far more obvious. Magnification revealed that a brown substance had been applied on top of the printed text, and surrounding the word was a rust-colored halo, consistent in appearance with the damage observed with corroded iron gall ink. These areas of damage were determined to be intentional strikeouts, made to correct the printed text, as opposed to accidents of chance. In the previous example, the burn-through of the iron gall ink had been so accelerated that the entire word disappeared in the fallout. For confirmation, they collaborated with Dr. Khachatur Manukyan, a colleague in the nuclear physics laboratory on campus to analyze samples throughout the text using XRF. The results showed high concentrations of iron in the areas with the brown substance.

Excitingly, these corrections are not unique to the copy at Notre Dame. The John Carter Brown Library at Brown University also holds a copy that features these same corrections. One word is struck out—"electo," or "elect"—and was likely corrected to reflect that the individual under discussion, a bishop, had already assumed office by the time this issue went to press. This was an official publication, so titles and status designations were likely particularly important, making a hand correction worthwhile. This technique has implications for understanding early printing practices, particularly those that may be unique to an early periodical publication. Continued research aims to determine how common such handmade corrections were, whether certain printers made them while others did not, and what the content of the corrected text reveals about such editorial efforts. This project has also led to an interest in other ink markings that appear to have been made by readers, rather than printers, prompting questions about how readers interacted with these early newspapers.

Treatment for the *Gaceta de Lima* continued as planned, but no efforts beyond documentation were made to address the areas damaged by the corroded ink. The issues were

disbound, guarded with lightweight kozo paper and wheat starch paste, and then re sewn as individual pamphlets, grouped as initially issued. They were housed individually in acid-free folders and stored flat with the library's rare boxed items.

It can be easy to dismiss minor damage in early printed material, particularly in books or publications where there is a significant amount of physical material. This project provided a great reminder of the tiny clues that materials give us to offer more context and that a successful conservator-curator relationship provides opportunities to explore these questions and make new discoveries that might otherwise be overlooked.

Dr. Erika Hosselkus, special collections curator and subject specialist for Latin American studies, University of Notre Dame

Jen Hunt Johnson, special collections conservator, University of Notre Dame

QUINN FERRIS AND SIOBHAN MCKISSIC
RECONSIDERING DAMAGE: COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES
TO THE CONSERVATION OF THE GWENDOLYN BROOKS'
ARCHIVAL COLLECTION

Quinn Ferris and Siobhan McKissic reflected on their work with the Gwendolyn Brooks' Archival Collection. They used the thought processes and the questions that arose around their collaboration as a conservator and an archivist with this collection to begin a discussion about a shift in approaching conservation treatment, especially for archival collections.

Gwendolyn Brooks was one of the most influential American poets of the 20th century. Born in 1917, she came of age in Bronzeville, Chicago. Her poetry shone a light into the small and large happenings of Black life on Chicago's Southside, and she used her work as a poet and educator to uplift the voices of Black writers and advocate for issues that affected Black people. Brooks received significant recognition and acclaim when she received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1950 for her book *Annie Allen*, making her the first Black person to win in any category. She was the Poet Laureate for the State of Illinois from 1968 until her death in 2000 and served as the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1985, a position now known as the US Poet Laureate.

The Brooks Collection is defined by the wide range of materials and the editorial marginalia and labeling Brooks left behind on those objects. Brooks wrote verses on her grocery lists, pasted clippings onto other clippings, and bundled photographs in albums, one behind the next. She created new layers of meaning by reworking drafts of poems already published. As she tore lines of poetry out of her notebooks, ripped photographs, clipped the corners of correspondence, and taped addresses to the backs of the many cards she

received, her papers became a sweeping reflection of her personality, her awareness of her legacy, and her desire to impose a distinctive organization.

The first attempt to conserve this collection came in anticipation of an exhibit at the Poetry Foundation in Chicago in 2017 curated by Anna Chen, a former rare book curator, which opened a series of dialogs and investigations between herself and Ferris around the notions of damage, best practices, and stewardship. Once McKissic took over the management of the collection in 2018, she joined Ferris in this work and they began to draw further connections between those earlier conversations and how they align with broader questions of social justice and inclusivity in both special collections libraries and library conservation.

The treatment approach, although basic in methodology, challenges established notions of how conservation should (or should not) be perceived. Ferris and McKissic wanted to avoid adding a layer of conservation “interpretation.” Instead, Ferris used conspicuous repair, and high-contrast loss compensation, to maintain the evidence of intentional damage. This treatment philosophy is intended to honor both the “damage” to the collection as part of its life, as well as the need to use the archive in perpetuity as part of a research collection.

Ferris and McKissic note that *damage* in conservation is defined as “physical harm caused to something in such a way as to impair its value, usefulness, or normal function.” So what do we do when we encounter an object whose value is specifically derived from or enhanced by the damage that has occurred? Furthermore, how do we reconcile the creator’s use of materials, like pressure-sensitive tape, that we have learned are inherently bad when their existence is inextricably linked to the value of the item? When damage is viewed in the pejorative, it frames conservators as the people charged to fix or correct that damage, which has historically led to unintended misinterpretations and prescriptive attitudes about caring for collections. Ferris and McKissic not only implore the audience to begin interrogating standards of practice that prioritize a right way of doing things without acknowledging nuances in a particular collection or item but also their own motivations that can result in unintentional loss of context and/or unequal treatments for related materials within a single collection.

The speakers also pointed out that if we choose to take on the responsibility of fixing an object before it is damaged “further,” we should ask how we are leaving the user out of the conversation. How are we othering and belittling the user’s knowledge before they have even entered the room? And finally, how can “showing our work” and making conspicuous treatments give users back one of their senses and recognize the true fragility of an item? If patrons can see the “bandage,” they will know to be gentle, which will extend the life of collections while increasing use and engagement in the field of preservation and conservation.

The presenters proposed the need for a paradigm shift—not to the treatment methodology itself, but to the intellectual framework around that methodology. They propose that we should reconsider damage, both intentional and incidental, in our collections. An unconcealed treatment approach gives the user more information about the history of the object and about its creator’s intentional care practices. McKissic and Ferris suggest that just because conservation professionals have the skills to remove the tape, reconsolidate broken objects, and artfully conceal areas of repair and compensation, it does not always mean they should. The nature of the relationship between archivist/curator and conservator needs to deepen beyond just writing treatment proposals and granting approval into a symbiotic partnership in the care and advocacy of collections. Finally, this connection between conservator and curator/archivist also needs to extend out to the users, considering them as part of the “community of care,” especially when a collection is defined by damage and removal.

Quinn Ferris, senior conservator for special collections, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Siobhan McKissic, archival and literary manuscript specialist, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

DISCUSSION

After the presentations, the moderators took questions and comments from the chat box and read them to the panelists. The answers have been paraphrased.

Question: For the conservator plus curator/archivist duos: What advice do you have for strengthening and maintaining open channels of communication between our professions?

Ferris: One thing that has made this collaboration exciting is that Siobhan [McKissic] and I are friends, but you can’t always count on that being an element of a working relationship. We’ve had a lot of discussions recently about conservators getting a seat at the table and being included in discussions, and that’s really a two-way street. If we want to be brought into consideration by our allied professionals, we also should bring them into conversations that we have internally and make them feel like our partners. The more that happens, the more there will be opportunities for it to happen, and the more there will be opportunities for co-educational scenarios or collaborative projects.

Wingfield: For *Improvised Poetics*, an engagement with conservation started at the point of acquisition. I knew upfront that I had questions about this item, how usable it was going to be, and what kind of treatment it might need. I also had concerns about wanting to preserve that damage, because it was

central to what the object is and its history. Echoing the earlier comment, it's about recognizing our respective strengths, specializations, and professional knowledge. As a curator, I have had conservators come into classes so that students can learn how a conservator and curator see different things in a single object. I'm trained as a literary critic, so I tend to want to go right to the text, whereas a conservator goes right to the material aspects. This is another way to build that connection between curators and conservators.

Johnson: At Notre Dame, curators and conservation meet once a month to go over treatments. This has been a great way to share some of the work we're doing and to open up conversations with our curators. I give a lot of credit to our department head, Liz Dube, for keeping that going. Curators can share their knowledge of materials as well, which develops mutual respect between both sides of the table that allows some of these conversations to come up down the road. When I noticed this issue in the *Gaceta de Lima*, my first thought was to share with Erica [Hosselkus] and see if she could add information to help me understand what that mark might be. Asking "How can we educate each other?" and "How can we learn from each other?" is important in developing those relationships.

Ryan: It was a pleasure to join Rebecca [Wingfield] in a class in special collections to talk about the conservation of the James Joyce *Ulysses* first edition. This was an opportunity to watch students use and interact with collection materials we worked on. I think that having that kind of experience in the reading room as a conservator helps us think about our work through a user's or researcher's lens. We also do monthly office hours on campus, and our department head, Kristen St. John, is on campus and engaged in what's happening there. This is very helpful, and in our relationship with curators, we often present a range of options from less to more invasive and so create a dialogue about how far to take a treatment, which really helps to inform how we make our decisions.

Stevens: The dialogue between archivists or librarians and conservators is the key to everything because we're both going toward similar goals, which is use. Without that discussion about how an object is going to be used or the scope for its use, conservation is completely bound and, in the worst-case scenario, is pointless. There are no reasons why wonderful collections that require careful handling can't be accessed in a physical way, with some thought between conservators and curators. It's all about touch, feel, smell, sound—all those things that make these objects really come alive. Digital screens are so useful and so interesting but are ultimately frustrating because you want to touch something, to feel something, to get that connection. The only way that conservation can facilitate

that is by having a really clear dialogue with the curator, the librarian, or the archivist.

Question for Beth [Ryan] and Rebecca [Wingfield], and Siobhan [McKissic] and Quinn [Ferris]: Your presentations mention the need to reassess our frameworks for conservation, and even how we define damage. I like the phrase "the need for us to interrogate our perspectives" when considering treatment. Can you please talk more about that?

Ferris: One of the things that was hard was that at the time of working on this collection, I was a relatively new conservator. The conversations I was having were not necessarily going against, but rather expanding, ideas that I had adopted in the early part of my post-grad school education and training. It was eye-opening to feel that I wasn't doing a "good" job, even though I was sticking to the request of the curator to a T, and really having incredible conversations with her and learning a lot. There is so much of our practice that can sometimes be stuck in who taught us, how they taught us, and what they taught us. While all of that is valuable, it can sometimes lead us to one-track thinking without realizing it. At least it did for me. A good example is that everyone learns a particular way to make paste, and every institution has a very specific technique, and feel their way of making paste is the best. We know there are all kinds of ways to make paste, and it's generally acknowledged that those different ways are functional. I think the same is true for how we internalize the basic directives of what we do. It was incredibly eye-opening for me as a young conservator to have to push back against that in myself.

McKissic: For me, it really is about interrogating the things that we've learned. Similar to Quinn [Ferris], I'm also a new archivist. I have been doing it for a while, but in terms of having that degree and the "professionalism" of it all, I'm relatively new. I'm coming at it from the perspective of having worked almost exclusively with Black material and Black institutions before coming to Illinois. The way we did things was good, but not always what would be considered standard, and I think everyone agrees that you can't always get to "standard." When I started to learn how larger institutions do things with the resources they have, I'd have people tell me "Oh, you know you can't really do that. Oh, that's not the way it is." And I'd ask "Why? For what reason?" We're lucky right now in terms of archives and conservation, to be in the middle of a good amount of scholarship coming out about decolonizing our professions and thinking really critically about what things we need to keep and what things we do not really need anymore. I just think it's time. It's really time.

Wingfield: I want to echo something that Siobhan [McKissic] said in her presentation, that from a curatorial point of view, "the damage is the good stuff." That's really where you get at what makes an item unique. You see the traces of its history.

There's a lot of work that still needs to be done around stripping the word "damage" of its overly pejorative connotations. I appreciate the work that our conservation department at Stanford is doing to document the conservation work that they've done, because that too is now part of the story of *Improvise Poetics*, specifically of the copy that we have. The idea of giving patrons and scholars and students access to that work is really important to understand the history of the object and why certain things happened to it and why it's in the state that it is right now.

Ryan: I think that when you've been working on books for a long time, you become increasingly sensitive to details and decisions about intervention. Concerning *Improvise Poetics*, I'm thinking about how Quinn [Ferris] said "just because you can." That was at the forefront of my mind while I was working on this book. I realized I had to keep restraining myself from doing more. I so wanted to remove those little bits of paper on that cover image and I had to keep saying, "no, don't do that." It was an interesting exercise in restraint. Having someone say "I want this to look like it was dumped in water" was liberating in a way. Since that treatment, my approach has shifted a bit. I approach treatments with damaged materials in a more questioning manner. You have moments in your work where your perspective shifts a little, and this was one of them.

Question: I'm interested in the idea of doing less treatment as a way of respecting the creator, their intentions, and avoiding imposing a conservation view on materials. Do you think there are preservation techniques that favor this view? Obviously, a good environment, but maybe even "more Mylar, less mending"?

McKissic: I love Mylar. I'm also an archivist, so I'm usually just seeing things that are ripped and torn. You get 50 boxes, and everything is ripped in half. Sometimes I say "We don't need to call conservation for this. This is not the best use of Quinn [Ferris]'s time today." Usually, I'll text and say "Should I do more of the Mylar?" Mylar is life! I love it. Let's hear from a conservator.

Ryan: If we have a set of materials that are similar, for instance, the brittle journal issues containing the first printing of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, we might prioritize some of the more important issues for more in-depth treatment so they can be handled and leave the other issues untreated.

Ferris: One of the directives that we have started investigating is this idea of doing treatments on items before they have been damaged. For instance, clearly, they have been damaged by the creator and there are big losses there. I was taught to assume that *that* damage can lead to more damage

down the line. For those sheets of paper where there are losses that go quite far into the paper, we say somebody is going to damage that because they're handling it, but that's an assumption we make without a lot of evidence. I personally haven't had to treat something after it has been circulated in the reading room and then been further damaged through handling. I'm not saying that there isn't handling damage, there certainly is, but I really believe in this idea of "What if we approached talking to the people who are using the materials as a way of bringing them into the care and keeping of these materials? What if, instead of making them feel afraid that they're going to do more damage to something, what if we make them feel like they are the front line in learning how to protect the object and become part of its history?" This is a more positive outlook and removes the onus to do the treatment before we really understand how people are interacting with these materials. This depends on the individual object and its context, but I am interested in seeing more of us investigating this as we progress in this line of thought.

Johnson: I would like to echo Quinn [Ferris]. I struggle with that question, "How is this item going to be used?" We can be overprotective of certain items, and when you think about the type of box or enclosure, it all impacts how a user will interact with that object. In some cases, that is supportive and helpful, and in other cases, it does create this distance and a layer of removal from accessing the piece. If you can provide appropriate education and ways to handle something safely, in some cases we could give a little bit more trust to our users. I do understand that there are plenty of cases where that's not always worked out. That's something that I really struggle with when I think about "What does this object really need? What's important about it? How is any sort of protective measure going to impact that feature?"

Comment: Communication can certainly be a preservation technique.

Question for Todd [Pattison]: When deconstructing a book to reveal internal structures that are not readily visible before the intervention, are there special housing needs or even handling needs that have to be expressed to researchers? How might you identify books that might benefit from "deconstruction" and exposure before you begin treatment?

Pattison: This tags along to the question that we just had in terms of communicating to the user and starting to re-examine what can be damaged when someone's going to use an item. How likely is that damage? How extensive would the treatment be if we feel that there would be further damage? When is that treatment going to need to take place? In 2 years? In 5 years? In 10 years? Sometimes I do think we should put

treatment off and say “Let’s wait to see when it gets damaged to do that treatment,” because in the intervening time we may learn something about that object and realize that we don’t want to treat it for whatever reason.

To get to this specific audience question, I try to not do a lot of deconstruction. Let me make it clear that I’m not taking things apart all the time, but there are certain questions that I think either people have answered incorrectly in the past, or that we just don’t know. If you can find objects, again that aren’t particularly precious either from a monetary standpoint or from a historical standpoint, that we can learn from, I think that makes a lot of sense. You need to be careful that you understand an object fairly well before you start to do any deconstruction on it, and you have to realize that it might be in a more vulnerable position. Boxing is probably going to be a key, depending upon how you deconstruct something. I ask myself “Is there a strong need to answer this question, or am I just being curious?” In that case, there’s a lot of things I’m curious about that I’m never going to answer, so I just forget that. But there are certain questions that researchers need to have answered because they’ve either misinterpreted objects in the past, or that would help to explain some questions that they really haven’t been able to get to the heart of yet. Users by and large tend to really be respectful of the objects if we model that respect and set good examples. Damaging objects is the last thing users want to do, so they tend to be very careful, especially if we give them any kind of education about how they can use the material.

Question: What are some other instances of unusual evidence of use or manufacture you’ve come across that might be less well known to conservators?

Pattison: One thing that is probably well known to conservators, but that is a real dilemma, is what to do with repurposed business records, for example, business or ship log records that have been reused as a scrapbook with newspaper clippings or other ephemera pasted on top of what one researcher really wants to see. This new use has been a very immediate act, organizing and curating that ephemera. That can be damage, if you will, although I would call it more reuse. These objects are difficult to approach as a conservator because you have two competing research interests.

Ryan: The damage found in early manuscripts and papyrus can be useful in digital fragmentology practice. For example, in some cartonnage papyrus records, we removed plaster to reveal the writing underneath. We were curious to know if papyrologists might be interested in our pretreatment documentation records. They said the records could be very useful because knowing that plaster was there before treatment

could provide an archaeological context that might help digitally link fragments that have been separated over time and place. This is a good example of how pretreatment documentation can be useful to non-conservators.

Stevens: I think it was brought up in the Ginsberg presentation. One of the things that really fascinates me about industrial era bindings is metal components or components that are incompatible with each other. Obviously, the Ginsberg volume is a fairly extreme example. If it’s been in saltwater, that’s about as bad as it can get for those staples. The whole canon of wire stitch bindings will eventually be utterly destroyed by well-intentioned but ultimately difficult decisions. The staples that hold them together are a unique form of binding as valid as any other, that’s systemically and without a great deal of thought being deconstructed. They are very tricky, they do create a preservation nightmare, and they are corrosive, but I think that we do have to triage our objects before we pick up a bone folder. I just listened to a presentation on early publisher’s bindings and cloth cases. There are fascinating examples of things that are at incredible risk of being obliterated by conservation. I really do think as you progress through your career you do less and less, and you make much better judgments about the things that you’re going to be conserving and what you’re going to be leaving alone. Again, we’re getting back to the curatorial/custodian/conservator conversation about the capacity of your object, as a conserved object or as an object that’s going to be left alone. Metal components in bindings in particular and other ephemeral or sensitive objects, like textile linings, are absolutely fascinating.

Question: There was mention of bringing the descriptive terminology of conservation work in line with that used in archives and libraries. Can you give some examples? Is the concept of intentional damage noted or encountered in the descriptions in catalog records?

Ryan: Our department head is involved in the Linked Data Conservation Project that is working to improve information sharing for conservation treatment documentation across institutions through its work with standard terminologies and data modeling. For treatment documentation at Stanford, we’re currently working with our operations manager who has a background in data modeling. We’re analyzing the terms we use, and how concepts are linked within a treatment and with other standard terminologies. This work will eventually allow us to make our documentation available through Stanford’s catalog. Rebecca [Wingfield], you might be able to speak about catalog descriptions. We’re trying to put more dealer descriptions in catalog records and are communicating with our rare books cataloger about conservation treatments

that may prompt changes in descriptive information in item records.

Wingfield: When we acquire new items, we are trying to put more information that comes from the dealer about the original condition of the item into catalog records. And our catalog records usually note, in the public version, whether or not an item has been to conservation, so that can also be tracked.

Question: In thinking about Quinn [Ferris]'s comments regarding educating those handling objects rather than treating preemptively to prevent additional damage, I am considering digitization. I have found it to be common practice to mend tears and treat so-called vulnerable damage prior to photographing objects for digitization. This is typically done both to (1) prevent the exacerbation of existing damage and to (2) communicate that the object is being properly cared for and not neglected. My question is, do you think this second objective is valuable?

Pattison: I have really strong opinions about this question. I tend to think that when you're digitizing an object, you should be capturing that object at that moment in time. That means doing as little as possible before you digitize it. Now, I would have no problems if you want to digitize it twice. Digitize it first so that someone can see how it was and then do whatever conservation treatment you want and then digitize it again. I don't agree with this idea of putting it into a more idealized state before you digitize it, because you're changing it. We hopefully keep really good records, and I commend Stanford for trying to make those records accessible to everybody. It just isn't the same as being able to have that record of all of it, exactly as it was before you put it out there.

Ferris: I would agree with Todd [Pattison]. Part of the reason we feel an impetus to make things look as though they are cared for is because we have this notion that all damage is bad. So, if we were to investigate or dismantle the idea that damage is bad in our interactions, in our moments of education, and in our moments of collaboration with colleagues, then having a digitized image of an object that is in a less than pristine state wouldn't feel like an affront. While the intention is good, I think it's one that we don't necessarily always engage with, in a way that is circumspect of what we're communicating in an unconscious way.

Comment from the chat box: Some people use the phrase "change in condition" instead of "damaged" to describe signs of use and degradation.

Question: Sometimes archivists/curators hesitate to help make treatment decisions and default to the conservator's opinion. But we want their opinions! For the archivists/curators in the

room, what kinds of questions can we ask our curatorial colleagues to encourage their input?

McKissic: This conversation worked for Quinn [Ferris] and me because I have a little background in general preservation and some experience doing minimal treatment. So, we already have a common language. It's really more of making sure everyone's on the same page. The first thing we did when we were talking about this was to ask: What sort of language do you have around damage? What sort of language do you have around treatments in archives? We also shared literature with each other and talked it through. In terms of what sort of questions to ask, it's hard. I say it's just important to make sure there's communication. It's really important to make sure that they understand why you're making the choices you are making and why you are asking the questions that you're asking because we all do different jobs for a reason. We're really focused on the things we are focused on, and that is our job. Sometimes we forget that you can step into someone else's little world to understand them better. I think you should ask them if they want to come to visit. Ask them if they want to watch some of the repairs so that when you're talking, they can fully understand what you mean by this kind of damage.

Pattison: I actually have some standard questions that I ask curators and archivists, because after 30 years in this field, I'm used to them differing to me and the last thing I want to do is drive the conservation treatment. I can let them know "no we can't do this" or "we could do this," but ultimately they need to make that decision. So, first and foremost ask: Why is this important? What are you going to do with the piece? We've collected it; how is it going to be used? How do people access this piece? How do they approach it? What kind of research could they do on it today? What kind of research could they do on it in 50 years? Really asking them questions so that they understand and have the opportunity to think about it. They tend to be very busy. So, really drilling down and trying to get to the essence of what an object really is to your institution. It's not the same for every institution. How are people going to use that object?

Wingfield: It's important to engage curators on how the item might be used and its significance. But I also think it's really important for curators to understand that there's a range of approaches that could be taken. Sometimes I think curators have a tendency to think, "Okay, well the conservator is the expert in preservation so they're saying it needs this treatment, so I have to say yes if I want it to be preserved." Make sure that curators are aware that there is often a range of treatment options possible, including no treatment.

Hosselkus: I'd like to emphasize again the importance of communication, which is a major theme of this panel. Something

I've learned as a curator, working with Jen [Johnson], is that the answer to the question "What should we do with the object?" is never simple. It always evolves. I often find that I start out with an object with one idea in mind. I talk to Jen and she presents options, and my own thinking evolves over time. I've had to become more comfortable with the fact that this is a conversation that fluctuates and changes in response to various input. So, just knowing that preservation and conservation decisions aren't simple is something that, as a curator, I have found useful to come to.

Ferris: Although we had the advantage of Siobhan [McKissic] already having the preservation language, I did not have the archival language. We refer to ourselves as a blanket of "library and archives conservators," but the emphasis of that training, for me anyway, was really on the library and not the archival aspect. In order to feel comfortable working in an archival collection, I had the opportunity and the ability to take an archives class and learn something about the theory of arrangement and description. That was definitely a blind spot in my education. We happen to have an Information School here that was readily accessible for me. I don't necessarily think that would be available to everyone in every situation, but I do think that meeting your partner halfway is really important in figuring out "What are my blind spots in this endeavor? How could improving upon them or expanding them help me be a better collaborator? How can this help me be more circumspect about my thinking about this object or this treatment?"

Stevens: I think that's a really good point Quinn [Ferris]. I think that we demand, all of us, that our process-driven treatments are understood, but I think that we don't have the tools that we sometimes need to understand the way an object fits into a collection from a curatorial point of view. And I think that gap is something that conservation courses could help fill. To be able to understand a little bit more about the archives and library approaches to description. This is definitely a two-way conversation.

Question: I find myself having many professional conversations about how "intervention is damage," but it is simultaneously an unpopular opinion to "do less." What would it take for current conservation to transition to a less-is-more approach to intervention?

Pattison: First, I want to echo something that Rebecca [Wingfield] said—that no conservation is an option. To me, it's the default setting. You should approach every object with this idea that "I'm not going to do conservation." It's not because I'm lazy. You need to be convinced of the need for conservation. What's the overwhelming or overriding reason that you would want to change this object? You

have to understand you're going to change it no matter how careful you are with your documentation and with everything else that you do. You do make changes. I liked it when Victoria [Stevens] talked about the example where she undid a treatment because I think that's a very important lesson to learn. We may want to undo treatments simply because we didn't question why we were doing them in the first place. Why weren't we just leaving it as is and saying nothing has to change? I would say that's your default setting and then someone or you yourself have to convince you that there's a need for conservation treatment.

Johnson: Particularly in treating books, they often come to us with so many layers of intervention before we even get to engage with them. When you're choosing a treatment, if you have something that is a structural concern and you feel compelled to intervene, now you also have to deal with the questions: Up to what point do I intervene? What time or what intervention am I going to take this back to? It becomes very complex. We've had a couple of pieces that have really challenged us, between all the conservation staff as well as the curators, to try to decide on what is the right choice. What is the decision we can make now? That's something as conservators we always wrestle with. We're choosing to do some sort of intervention. Is this something you can live with down the road? Knowing that there might be a loss of information that either you weren't aware of, or for other reasons you just had to move forward and make that decision? That's one of the more challenging aspects and, for me, is one of the most interesting ones. When you're wrestling with those decisions and seeing that evidence in books, there's something really beautiful about potentially being a part of that down the road.

Stevens: There is never an action that is totally reversible. Any action that you do as a conservator has an impact on the object. There is no doubt about it. I think as time goes on, you are constantly looking at ways of shaving off that impact you are having on the object. Removing some of the footprints that you leave. It's great to have other people's fingerprints, but you don't want to leave a heavy print when you're passing through. That goes for everything from humidification downwards, or upwards I suppose. We need to be questioning all the time, is this the right thing for us to do with this object? Is this the right treatment to get the outcome that we want? With a bit more caution and less instant results. Humidification is a really good example of that. Why don't you use weight, which can be equally effective? It's all about slow conservation. I think it is very much about making the right decision for the right object at the right time and moving away from blanket collection-based decisions.

Ferris: Also, to Jen [Johnson]'s point, I wanted to add that I think we have already started moving away from levels

of intervention that we used to engage in. In the past, it was assumed that fine binding skills were required because an automatic thing that you would do to a book was to rebind it. There has been some pushback against that. There's been some pushback against the pushback. There is this long-standing debate over whether or not the current professional graduate programs really give book and paper conservators the binding techniques that they need in order to be proficient at this job. I'm not going to weigh in on that, but I think we're already seeing a move away from an automatic, heavy intervention. We're already doing less than we used to. I don't necessarily think that doing less is revolutionary for libraries and archives. We are already dealing with a scope of collections with limited resources, limited time, and limited personnel. Sometimes we do less just because that's what we can do at that time. I also think that the thinking around "why" is changing, and that thought work is really important for the future/new conservators. That really informs decision making, and that's the crux of all of it.

Ryan: When a no treatment option is presented, there is still benefit in the preventive conservation an item will receive. Resources spent on environmental conditions and housings are in themselves a type of treatment that's very useful. I also like what you were saying Todd [Pattison], that something might require more extensive treatment in the future, but just housing it and putting it in a good collection storage area is a kind of benign treatment.

Closing remarks from each of the panelists. Please share something that you want to be sure that our audience takes with them back to their jobs.

All of the panelists expressed thanks to each other and the moderators, and that they enjoyed the discussion and hearing from each other, especially across disciplines.

Johnson: For me, it's the excitement about materials that tell their own story. These decisions are so complicated, and there's so much to know and recognize when we're assessing the damage. We're assessing interventions as well as the language that we are using to identify these things. As we're training new conservators, to Quinn [Ferris]'s point, we should have more of these discussions about how we're making judgments and how we're learning to make assessments. We must recognize that there are so many different ways. We say that, but that's not always the way we act and practice, because it is easy to become too comfortable with what we know we can do successfully. Maybe we tend toward those treatments, and sometimes you just have to do that. So that awareness and being able to continue to talk about this is really fantastic.

Wingfield: Each object is unique, and each is worthy of a discussion. We each bring different areas of expertise to the

discussion. I always learn a lot by talking to our conservators. I hope they learn a lot from me as well about our collections. It's this iterative process when we have to work through what is the best course of action for this particular item and for the uses we envision of this particular item, because that also makes a big difference.

Pattison: I would encourage conservators to think like researchers, to think like users, and to approach the object asking questions. If I was a researcher, what would I want to know about this object? How could I possibly use this? How would the treatment that I'm going to do maybe affect and take away some of those options that people would have in the future? Conservation should be about keeping as many options in the future as possible so that people can come to these objects in different ways.

Ryan: I really enjoyed hearing everyone's thoughts on this topic. After reading the primary source literacy guidelines from the ALA [American Library Association] a few years ago, I began thinking more about how our work might influence material interpretation and about how important it is for conservators to engage beyond the conservation field with this topic. I'm especially grateful today for having curators join the discussion.

Hosselkus: For me, the big theme is the importance of collaboration and communication. I do feel fortunate that I get to work with Jen [Johnson], and we collaborate well. Doing this project was one way of helping me to look at objects differently. I'm grateful that we can work with conservators. Just to listen to the kind of depth of discussion about the objects we deal with, the kind of depth of meaning that they can have, and how various layers of meaning that accumulate over time is mind expanding for me as a curator. Sometimes I get deep into the content of a particular piece but don't step back as much to think about an object. So, it's been enlightening and fun to listen.

Ferris: This feels to me like the beginning of a larger discussion or group of thoughts that are going to really have a significant impact on the future of conservation. We do need to keep a conversation going both internally at our own institutions and externally. We should look for places outside of conservation literature to share this information because this is cross disciplinary.

McKissic: It's a matter of collaborating with each other and really thinking of expanding this information beyond these groups, because I know, for me, the people I interact with aren't just conservators. We also have to think really critically, not just about the people who are with us now, but the impact of the work we do and how it will impact future

researchers. Patrons who don't necessarily feel comfortable in our spaces. These conversations are something that could radically shift who feels comfortable looking at the materials and who gets access to the material that we're using. Also, we're all in our little spaces, but it's always important to remember that you can cross over. Sometimes it can be as simple as making material, that people don't necessarily see all the time, more accessible. I once had the person who's in charge of the digitization just come to me and say, "Hey, we've gotten a lot of this one thing. Do you have any other things that need help? Are there any authors that you really want to highlight, that you think might need some care, that maybe were really low on your priority list before but need a little shine?" Let's all be friends. We can talk and bring in more people.

Stevens: The use of the object is absolutely essential, and from that center, everything else springs. You need to always consider the object's use and its materiality. People will have a better experience with the object when you can expose these two aspects.

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JESSAMY GLOOR

Paper Conservator

The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens
San Marino, CA

jgloor@huntington.org

LAUREN TELEPAK

Senior Collections Conservator

Harvard Library

Cambridge, MA

ltelepak@fas.harvard.edu