

Conservation Unit: Policies and Procedures

The Conservation Unit is part of the department of Preservation and Conservation; it shares the University Library's Conservation Laboratory with the Book Repair Unit, located in the Buhr Building just north of the U-M Athletic Campus. The specific charge of the Conservation Unit is to address the needs for physical preservation and conservation¹ of original library materials in the University Library's special collections. In addition to the Special Collections Library, located in the Hatcher Graduate Library, Conservation serves ten smaller collections of special material located in separate rooms or locked cages in many of the divisional libraries.

Conservation employs 2.8 FTE conservators and claims a part of the time of the head of Preservation and Conservation

The basis for the Unit's procedures and policies is the assumption that the curatorial decision to separate certain materials into a "special collection" identifies these items as having value as physical objects that may be compromised if they were stored and handled in the same manner as the general collections.² Conservation staff evaluate and treat materials on an item-by-item basis, working closely with curatorial staff to ensure appropriate decisions are made; they are familiar with and follow the principles of the Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) <http://www.conservation-us.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=489>

The following outline traces materials through the process of selection for conservation, treatment, and return to the library. For the sake of efficiency items for treatment are normally selected and discussed in batches at one or two times during the year; in some situations (e.g. items required urgently for use or display; active infestations of mold or insects) negotiations concerning single items are entirely appropriate.

- Items for conservation treatment are selected by curatorial staff for each collection. Conservation staff can assist in the selection process by performing conservation surveys of collections (several such surveys have been completed in the past and are on file) and by discussing with curatorial staff types of damage that should receive treatment.
- For each item selected curatorial staff fill out the first portion of the Conservation Record form (sample attached). This form identifies the item and seeks further information that may be relevant to

¹ The meanings and usage of several related terms tend to vary in different contexts but in the library community the following definitions are generally understood: *preservation* is the umbrella term for all activities and policies promoting the longevity of both original materials and their contents (including preventive strategies such as climate controls and avoiding harmful housing materials as well as reformatting programs – microfilm, photocopy, digitization – aimed at preserving the intellectual content of the original) while *conservation* is the active intervention to stabilize and extend the life of an original object (e.g. mending tears, reattaching a loose board). Another term, *restoration*, refers to replacing components of an original object in an effort to recreate its original appearance. In a research collection restoration must be undertaken with great caution, if at all, to avoid misleading subsequent users as to what is original and what is restored.

² The physical treatment of materials in the Library's general collections is provided by a commercial binder for routine binding and rebinding (managed by the Bindery Preparations Unit) and by the Book Repair Unit for repairs that fall outside the terms of the commercial binding contract. These units focus on providing cost-effective protection and preservation of information in print format. General questions about the physical preservation of materials (e.g., environmental conditions, shelving, storage, handling) may be directed to the head of Preservation and Conservation; both Conservation and Book Repair staff are trained and will respond to assist with disaster recovery of library materials (wet books, fire, etc.) in any collection.

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conservation decisions (e.g. noting a deadline when the item will be needed for exhibition or noting that the signature on the flyleaf is an important part of the history of the book and must be preserved).

- A conservation staff member then meets with a library staff member to discuss the second part of the Conservation Record form, the treatment proposal. In many cases agreement on the proposal can be reached quickly during the meeting and notes made by checking boxes on the Record form; for some items a longer discussion may be necessary and/or the item may need to be taken to the Conservation Lab for examination and tests before a written treatment proposal can be developed. In either case the library staff member will be asked to sign off on the treatment proposal. At this time Conservation staff will also estimate the time required for the proposed treatment to assist library staff in planning and selecting priorities for the collection. The Conservation staff member also signs the form to acknowledge transfer of the item into the custody of the Conservation Unit. Copies of the signed record form are available on file at the Conservation Lab and are provided to the library if requested.
- It is the policy of the Conservation Unit that special collection material is always transported to and from the Lab under escort of either Conservation staff or staff from the library that owns the item; special collection material is not shipped via the Library mail service. This policy helps ensure continuity of security for materials that may have great monetary value and avoids damage that may arise if the material is handled by people unaware of its special fragility.³ Because of the perennial parking problem around the University campus, transport for special materials can be problematic. Options include: personal car (with or without arrangements for a special loading zone permit) or borrowing the University car maintained by Inter-Library Loan (check with Conservation about policies and procedures in advance). We share the burden of transportation with the libraries we serve: Conservation regularly undertakes arranging transport to the Lab and requests that the library make the arrangements for transporting materials back from the Lab.
- At the Buhr Building Conservation maintains a locked, alarmed vault where all special collection materials are kept when not actually receiving treatment. It is the Unit's policy that special collection materials are not left unattended in the Lab (e.g. during lunch time) but are always locked away.
- During treatment written documentation of the description of the item as received and of the work performed is prepared (including photographic records when appropriate). These records are maintained on file at the Conservation Lab; copies are provided to the library on request. A slip of acid-free paper is tipped inside the back board of books or placed with single sheets recording the date and Conservation work number and alerting future staff and patrons to the existence of these records.
- Occasionally during treatment new factors are discovered that prevent the treatment from being carried out as originally proposed or within the time originally estimated. Minor adjustments are usually made within Conservation by consultation with the head; major adjustments are referred back to the curatorial staff for approval. Library staff are encouraged to indicate, at the time the original proposal is discussed, the extent to which they wish to be consulted about such alterations.
- When work on an item or batch of items is complete, a Conservation staff member contacts appropriate curatorial staff to arrange a review meeting. At this meeting Conservation staff present the completed work and documentation and discuss the treatments performed; the library staff member signs off on the Record form to accept the work and acknowledge the transfer of the item back into the library's custody.

³ Materials from the general collections being routed to and from the Book Repair Unit are regularly sent by the Library mail service.

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In addition to treatment of individual items Conservation staff also provide other related services on request such as:

- A temperature and humidity monitoring program; one-time measurements of environmental conditions (temperature, relative humidity, light) in storage and display areas; assistance interpreting these measurements and developing recommendations for action.
- Assistance identifying preservation-related concerns, specifications, and vendors for furniture for storing or displaying library materials.
- Identification of preservation-related concerns, specifications, and appropriate vendors for housing library materials (boxes, folders, etc.); often such materials may be purchased with Preservation funds in the preservation supply request program.
- Instruction for staff or patrons on handling special material and/or assistance to libraries in developing in-house policies for handling the collections.
- Assistance developing packing and strategies for protecting materials during transport on exhibition loan or during a library move.
- Instruction and assistance preparing safe exhibition mounts for special collection materials.
- Research and assistance in planning the physical preservation aspects of projects (grant-funded or otherwise) that involve changes in the storage, housing, or use of the collection.
- Assistance with emergencies that affect or threaten the collection: water, fire, mold, insects, collapsed shelving, etc.

For help with these or similar problems affecting the physical condition of the collections contact the head of Preservation and Conservation.

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