

Moving the focus point: from conservation treatment to preventive conservation

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Abstract:

Today preservation and conservation theories and practices have to deal with larger collections in terms of number of items, and variegated collections as regards to the type of materials. Careful planning is required for carrying out various activities for the preservation and access of texts especially in the current economical situation, bearing in mind that even if conservation treatments have been greatly improved during the last few decades, they must be evaluated in a broader context. This paper focuses on the difficulties involved in caring for collections and discusses the aspects of prioritizing and decision-making: when dealing with collection preservation, the curator must be capable of evaluating the vulnerability of collections and developing long-term preservation strategies.

Keywords: Preservation; Conservation; Librarianship; Preservation Management.

Preservation and conservation in libraries and archives

There are two important tasks involved in keeping collections alive: it is essential to ensure their physical preservation while maintaining their value as a support for study and research (text accessibility) at the same time. It is often difficult to combine these two requirements, which can easily lead to an excess of intervention or to a severe limitation to access and use. It is well known fact that the approach to book and document conservation has always been affected by the relevance of textual contents of items: the main focus posed on the written content of books has often led to invasive and drastic conservation treatments, aimed at recovering the readability of texts and the mechanical usability of books, yet with little respect for the material aspects of the items, including their historical stratification.

Although preventive conservation, as a perceived requirement in libraries and archives and institutionally recognized series of activities, has a relevant historical background which dates

back to the conference of Saint Gall (1898) or even earlier¹, the restoration procedure is still more widespread than the preventive conservation approach. An insight concerning competences and skills in preventive conservation in five different countries was given, ten years ago, in the *Report on Preventive Conservation of Documents* (eds Di Febo, Livesey & Munafò 2004)², still a useful reading on the matter.

The aims and methods of the conservation treatment underwent important changes in Italy in the last decades of the XX century, also due to dramatic events such as the Florence flood of 1966. This event represented a turning point in the approach to book restoration from several points of view (Di Renzo 2009); it has shed light on the need of a close cooperation between the librarian and the conservator, and on a different approach in conservation treatment, customized on the single item in respect to its material aspects, rather than being a standardized, mere rebinding of a damaged book. Book conservation has thus progressively gained its autonomy from bookbinding, evolving and refining theoretical approaches and methods. Due to a growing awareness of the material characteristics of books, a more comprehensive approach to preservation and conservation has been introduced for the education and training of conservators. Therefore nowadays training on preventive conservation is part of the educational programmes of conservators. Although the quality of conservation treatments has been greatly improved, an attentive evaluation is essential to choose the most suitable method for preserving our collections.

Larger, heterogeneous collections: preservation difficulties

In recent years the reduction in the allocation of public funds to libraries has greatly influenced preservation policies: this reduction has put purchasing policies at risk and led to drastic measures in budgetary management. Long-term planning can be problematic in times of economic difficulty: short-term planning seems to prevail since it solves more urgent and immediate issues and needs. Nevertheless, the correct evaluation of preservation and conservation possibilities can enable us to achieve important goals for collections especially in times of economic difficulty.

When choosing a method of intervention for the management of heritage collections, it is important to compare the benefits of an overall preservation plan with conservation treatments for single items. Due to their nature, conservation treatments are essentially item focused: they are usually planned and carried out on single items or on small groups of items. This consists in repairing existing damage and slowing down the process of decay that concerns all materials; in best-case scenarios, the decay process is just slowed down – but there is no second birth, it is neither possible nor desirable to carry out a “how-it-was-at-the-origin” restoration by means of conservation treatments. Moreover, the conservation treatment has clearly no preventive role in preservation issues such as pests, mould etc.: it nearly always depends on the general preservation conditions in which collections are kept. Of course a proper preservation plan is also required for freshly-restored items, which may appear to be obvious, yet in my experience as preservation advisor I have often seen freshly-restored items stored in inappropriate storage rooms whose environmental conditions were unsuitable for

¹ For an historical overview on preventive conservation see Bertini (2005, pp. 19-38).

² The survey was carried out in the framework of the ConBeLib project and was based mainly on questionnaires sent to libraries and archives. The Italian results were certainly influenced by the small sample size (30 institutions, and among them some of the most important libraries and archives at national level), but important issues were highlighted, especially when observed ten years later.

paper-based materials, and where whole collections required more urgent preservation measures than single volumes required conservation treatments.

From this point of view, the variations in the types of heritage collections have undoubtedly played an important role as well. Nowadays, the “special” collection in a library or an archive is no longer simply a collection composed of extremely old and precious items. More and more often the special collection includes items that the traditional conservation science was not used to dealing with: modern books, limp paper bindings rather than valuable bindings, editorial bindings which also need to be preserved due to their historical value as single items – since they may be rare – or part of a special collection. In other words, there is more and more written cultural heritage requiring preservation, including such fragile books that were not originally intended to last for long: today they require specific preservation measures. Curators have to face double issues: bigger collections and unchanged (or smaller) financial resources. When we think of the growing importance and diffusion of modern collections, such as the personal fonds of intellectuals, or industrial archives, including a relevant amount of various documentary typologies and supports (e.g. photographic paper, film, tracing paper...), we see how much preservation tasks have increased, and how they have become more demanding and multifaceted over the last few decades³. The growing instability of the supports which characterize these collections, as well as the great amount of items, represent a problem from a curatorial point of view. Somewhat deceiving results are obtained when carrying out conservation treatments on modern books rather than on traditional materials, which is mainly due to the poor quality of the paper and the fragile structure of the binding. The conservator knows how difficult, time consuming and at times deceiving the conservation treatment of a modern book of the Sixties can be. In some cases, important issues can arise simply by re-sewing the book: the thread cuts into the poor quality paper, thus requiring repairs which can lead to a thicker spine, and consequently giving problems in reusing the original cover. New approaches for conservation treatments have been implemented and bookbinding certainly requires skills which are unlike those of traditional bookbinding. A typical example is the treatment of editorial bindings. For decades the conservation treatment of limp paper bindings of this kind actually consisted in rebinding it on a cardboard support, thus radically changing the physical and mechanical characteristics of the item⁴ while nowadays the need for a more respectful approach to the physical structure of the modern book has been acknowledged. The limits of a successful intervention in modern book conservation have undoubtedly contributed in making us increasingly aware of the need of an effective preservation plan, which is capable of slowing down the amount of damage caused to books and documents. The cost of a full conservation treatment of a limited number of books can quickly rise to the cost of a preventive conservation action (dusting, or rehousing) for a small-medium collection. Together with a growing awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of the interventive approach, this kind of evaluation can improve consciousness of prevention.

Knowledge, awareness, tools

The importance of awareness on this point cannot be underestimated. What may seem normal today – preventive conservation as part of the training of a conservator, as already mentioned above – is not taken for granted in the case of librarians, who have to make strategic decisions

³ See for example Zanni Rosiello (2001).

⁴ The stiff binding was chosen because it is more resistant to frequent use. In the best cases, the original cover was left within the new binding, but often this caused the loss of the spine.

concerning the care and management of collections. If we focus on small and medium libraries, where there are few available human resources, normally the librarian, who is also the curator of special collections, has not been specifically trained in this field and has acquired theoretical tools on preventive conservation thanks to his/her autonomous initiative, e.g. by studying specific literature or by attending seminars and courses during his/her working life: this updating of competences has fostered communication between curators and conservators, also achieving significant results when making decisions on book conservation. The training of librarians in preservation should certainly be encouraged and strengthened, because it is essential for making future decisions concerning the preservation of collections. This kind of awareness and comprehensive approach to collection preservation, which include the capability of choosing the most effective and less drastic preservation operations, are mainly required in order to be able to prioritize measures correctly, spend money effectively and select the right type of preservation materials; they also act as a sort of inhibitors for especially large conservation treatments.

Several sources are available and nowadays we certainly know – or have ways of finding out – how to care for our collections: we can rely on a multiplicity of resources, extensive publications as well as concise overviews and guidelines. The principles of IFLA have been also translated into Italian and they are useful tools for curators; there are also “workbooks” and summarized guidelines on preservation issues, which are published in great number by public institutions in different countries, and which provide librarians with precious advice concerning the care of collections⁵. However these tools cannot be considered as substitutes for more in-depth knowledge on preservation – there are no shortcuts for the care of collections: the role of a specific training in this field is essential since summarized guidelines can only be useful if they are used by skilled and capable personnel⁶. As explained in a recent report of the British Library concerning the level of preservation management in libraries and archives of UK (Peach & Foster 2013), lacks in preservation policies, in different aspects – rehousing, surrogation, etc. – appear to a more in-depth view: preservation actions are sometimes undertaken without a close link to the various factors which, in the specific situation of the collection, cause the decay of materials. In other words, the ability of correctly prioritizing initiatives of conservation by taking into consideration various factors (such as the use of materials, availability of digitized copies, rehousing, environmental conditions) enables us to manage conservation effectively rather than carrying out a series of isolated actions that produce mediocre results. Since the main aim of a preservation plan is to slow down the deterioration of materials, it is essential to understand the causes of deterioration in the specific situation, and consequently perform actions so that all the various factors of materials decay can be effectively reduced to a minimum. A real understanding of collection vulnerability is the first step for correct prioritising, and preservation assessment surveys are essential for this purpose. A useful example of a comprehensive approach to preservation is environmental monitoring. Taking environmental data and accurately storing them in our computers is not a preservation action in itself: it is essential to study the data in order to determine which problems may arise and their causes, evaluate their relevance in the long-term preservation of collections, and take the appropriate measures not only in reference to standards, but also in consideration of the climatic history of our collections. Moreover, when taking these measures, it is also important to evaluate sustainability: passive microclimate

⁵ Just to mention some examples, the booklets of the British Library Preservation Advisory Centre (BLPAC n.d.), the leaflets of the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC n.d.) and, in Italy, Munafò, Di Febo, and Egidi (2008).

⁶ It is essential that librarians and archivists in charge of collections are given a specific training, so that they can identify key problems in their preservation and take appropriate measures. See also Marcheva-Kanova (2011).

control could be a useful tool for reaching a climatic stability for our collections as it exploits the characteristics of the building, instead of relying on indiscriminate air conditioning⁷.

We must also bear in mind what use is to be made of the collection, but relying totally on trends concerning the access and use of collections for making preservation decisions can be misleading. As any librarian and archivist knows, the paths of study and research which make the user ask for access to written sources concerning a specific topic, are also subject to trends and popular issues of the moment. Wherever their origin lies, these trends influence the intensity with which some written sources are requested by users in a totally unpredictable and discontinuous way: it sometimes occurs that frequently requested items can be totally overlooked by users after a certain period of time. This situation represents a challenge for preservation management and tends to give it an irregular performance of the action-reaction type, with the aim of limiting physical damage due to handling. For the reason, providing aids such as book supports in reading rooms can be a useful tool for preventing and mitigating physical damage on items.

Digitisation can also help to limit access to vulnerable items: it is nevertheless important to remember that it can be a double-bladed knife since digitisation could potentially increase the request for the original texts. This is particularly true when dealing with manuscripts and ancient books, whose physical characteristics prove to be interesting due to the codicology and history of the book: in these cases, the availability of a digital copy can increase the demand of the originals; in the case of modern books and documents, on the other hand digitisation can also be an alternative way for accessing originals. This is what was observed in a recent project carried out by the University of Turin, the KADMOS project (*Kahle Documents Management, Organization and Study*). The project was undertaken in order to rearrange and preserve the archive of the German orientalist Paul Ernst Kahle (1875-1964), which had been acquired by the university due to its relevance in the field of oriental studies⁸. Digitisation concerned the correspondence section of the archive. In this case digital images of documents represent an alternative way for accessing original documents and has significantly reduced the handling of originals: since the website was created and images of Kahle's correspondence were little progressively made available for registered users, we have observed that almost all the users who accessed the images of letters did not ask to see originals afterwards, thus confirming the role of surrogacy played by digitisation. In the KADMOS project, the preservation plan was allocated a considerable amount of human and financial resources. One of the main tasks concerned the evaluation of the overall preservation conditions of the archive, together with a careful estimation of costs and evaluation of benefits of conservation treatments on single items. The preservation assessment survey was carried out, including environmental and pest monitoring; according to the results of this survey, decisions were made concerning the rehousing and storage of the archive. Another

⁷ Research and literature on the topic are relevant and also come from museology studies, carried out on works of art: the environmental conditions are crucial for every kind of artefact and studies performed also in contiguous fields such as museology, can be very useful. See for example Bernardi (2004), Filippi, Perino and Bonvicini (2013). In the proceedings of the Conference *Museum Microclimates* (Copenhagen, 19-23 November 2007), edited by Padfield and Borchersen (2007), several contributions are devoted to libraries and archives (Padfield et al. 2007). A number of studies currently focus on the need for a more flexible and conscious evaluation of rigid standard specifications for museum climate: see for example Ryhl-Svendsen et al. (2010) and postprints of the conference *Klima un Kulturgut: Wissen und Unwissen* held in Munich in 2012, edited by Ashley-Smith, Burmester and Eibl (2013).

⁸ The project was co-funded by Regione Piemonte, Directorate for Innovation, Research, University and Sustainable Energy Development, in the frame of the "Bando Scienze Umane e Sociali 2008". For further information see the website of the Paul Kahle Fonds (UNITO 2013).

important aspect is education in the field of preventive conservation, which has also played a role in the project: besides the presentation of the project in workshops and educational programmes on archive and library science, a specific internship has been established for the preservation assessment survey and the cleaning of a specific part of the fonds (the offprints collection). Other projects focused on the conservation of written cultural heritage have stressed the educational relevance of preservation activities⁹; this link among preservation, research and education is meaningful and can contribute significantly in giving a wider breathe to projects focused on preservation and conservation, and in improving awareness about cultural heritage.

Conclusion

Conserving less, preserving more: if this is what we hope will happen in our institutions in the near future, it is certainly true that conservation treatments and preservation activities should go side by side for a comprehensive evaluation of our collections. Conservation treatments will always be effective for items in bad conditions, but knowing to what extent a good and effective preservation plan reduces the need for conservation treatments can be extremely useful for library-management decision makers; at the same time, it allows the achievement of important goals for the effective preservation of our collections.

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⁹ We can mention the project on Mauritania manuscripts, titled *Sauvegarde des bibliothèques du désert*, performed in 2008-2010 by Italian and Mauritanian institutions, focused on the education and training of local employees in the field of preventive conservation, in both its theoretical and practical aspects (Giacomello & Pesaro 2009; CRCBC 2010)

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