



The American Institute for Conservation

Teaching Book Conservation Methods Within a Training Program

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Abstract

An objective of the library and archives conservation program at Columbia University is the preparation of students for entry into the field. Another objective is the organization and interpretation of the practice of library and archives conservation as a systematic body of information and skills.

At Columbia the instruction in book conservation methods has certain characteristics. One characteristic is the study of historical binding prototypes to consider exemplary and deficient performance of structures. Another characteristic is an emphasis on specification, including discretion in the choice of collection or item treatment approaches.

A lab book entitled; "A Student Guide to Book Conservation Practice", outlines the course work and describes the treatment methods taught within the library and archives conservation program at Columbia.

Teaching Book Conservation Methods Within a Training Program

The program in Library and Archives Conservation at Columbia is a resource for the field in a number of ways. The program prepares people for entry level jobs, helping, the field to fill the increasing number of positions. Equally useful, the program also organizes and interprets the practice of library and archives conservation as a systematic body of information and skills. Less obvious is the potential of the program to instruct its instructors; the program can provide an opportunity for practitioners, as faculty and as visiting lecturers, to test their own ideas and methods in a generative environment.

With these thoughts in mind I would like to comment on the teaching of book conservation methods within the Columbia program. In doing this I conclude my own term with the program. I will be describing characteristics of the book treatment lab courses that I have taught, which are only one portion of the overall curriculum in library and archives conservation.

The program at Columbia admitted its first students about five years ago in July, 1981 and has operated and progressed for five quick years. In quieter times the emergence of the program might have been a more notable event, but while students and instructors were busy evolving and establishing the program, great events were also occurring in the field. In current listings of 140 full time library and archives preservation positions, 60% of these positions have been created within the last five years. In other words, within these five years the field of library and archives preservation has doubled in size. And the field of library and archives preservation has not only grown, it has also changed. Indications of the intense development of the field are the expanded membership and committee work in the American Library

Association Preservation of Library Materials group, the establishment of the National Preservation Program and the conservation oriented revision of the Library Binding Standards. Much development in the field can now be characterized as management of the consumption of whole collections. The scale of the problems are being met with scaled up methods and strategies.

In the specialization of book conservation practice, especially in the direct treatment of single book items, the practitioner can wonder how much longer the field will need or tolerate such work. But I feel that the work of this specialty is only as relevant or irrelevant as the specialized practitioners make it. This is the kind of adaptation and redevelopment of practice that can occur in a university setting.

The program at Columbia has already made some progress in the adaptation of book conservation practice to modern library needs. At Columbia the instruction in book conservation methods has certain characteristics. One characteristic is the study of historical binding prototypes to consider exemplary and deficient performance of structures. Another characteristic is an emphasis on specification, including discretion in the choice of collection or item treatment approaches. Methods are adapted to the needs of books in library use. These characteristics guide experimentation and justify routine methods.

We consider more than eight historical prototypes in our book work. These include the 16th century, wooden boarded laced construction binding from northern Europe, the one piece vellum cover laced case construction binding from 16th and 17th century Italy, one piece paper cover laced case construction binding from 17th and 18th century Italy, lapped component paper cover, case construction binding from German trade work of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the long stitch, wrapper construction archival binding from Northern Europe, the laced construction, hollow tube and tight joint forwarded leather covered binding from late 19th century English and American trade. These are used as either exemplary or deficient models for repair and rebinding.

We use the entire resource of the historical binding craft to provide prototypes for features and methods rather than depend on modern craft binding conventions. These prototypes, in turn, provide the basis for development of specifications for book repair, restoration and rebinding. We have been particularly interested in the adaptive specification of unsupported, sewn, paste and kozo consolidated text, paper cover, case construction binding as a practical, productive and attractive form for the rebinding of small printed texts with weakened papers. The Columbia paper cover, case construction specification is derived from historical prototypes, but also presents many modifications to adapt the work to weaken papers and library use.

The development of specifications from historical prototypes is one of the most fascinating processes in the specialty of book conservation. The process involves the practical interrelation of two abstractions; the functional and production characteristics of a historical binding type and the ideal of the self preserving conservation binding for research libraries. It is interesting to ask why the historical prototypes have proven so generative a basis for the specification of contemporary book conservation work. One reason is that these historical binding types have already clearly demonstrated their relative permanence and durability. Another is that they are not used as absolute models, but selectively for their particular structural features or functional concepts. A further reason is that there is so much that is ingenious and purposeful in historical binding that investigation of them stimulates the innovation needed to solve current problems. In our lab work at Columbia we develop a practical working familiarity with the historical prototypes for conservation bookwork, producing models and associated book treatments. It's an instructive process.

Specification is at the heart of conservation work and the use of historical prototypes as models, both deficient and exemplary, provides one basis for specification of book work. Another basis for specification of bookwork is the idea of differing methods for single item and for whole collection treatment. Single item treatment is oriented toward conservation of non-circulating collections in which single books have particular artifactual and research value and a recognized need for their long term preservation. Collection treatment, on the other hand, is oriented toward extending the service life of circulating collections in which single books have little value as unique items and are expected to have a relatively short term research value. Though these are obviously different categories of library materials, the differentiation of their treatment methods is not always made clear. However, damage to library materials as well as damage to the credibility of direct treatment methods is often caused by misapplication of rare item treatments to general collections or collection maintenance methods to rare items. A simple example would be self adhesive mending for collection maintenance misapplied to valuable single items or paste and kozo, single item sheet work mends misapplied as production mending for general collections. At Columbia both item and collection types of treatment methods are taught, but each type of work is in its own semester to provide a clear contrast.

During the collection treatment semester the entire collection, not the single item, is considered as the "object" This is another interesting concept in the book conservation specialty. The concept is best visualized in the salvage of books from water damage. In this collection treatment method wet books are considered as a single commodity and the intent

is to salvage the collection intact, for return to the stacks and circulation. Fortunately, and unfortunately, the Columbia University Libraries have been able to provide real library flood salvage experience for all the classes in the conservation of book collections.

During the semester in single item treatment the projects are concerned with the self-referential problems of particular books. Of course, in the real world the practitioner can easily have wide responsibilities involving both collection and item treatments. However, individual libraries, conservation facilities and practitioner positions can have a strong orientation either toward single item or collection treatment and it is hoped that the Columbia book lab work distinguishes between and introduces both approaches.

The third and fourth semesters in the sequence for the three year conservator program involve continuing work to develop the student's own treatment interests. A lab book entitled; "A Student Guide to Book Conservation Practice", outlines the course work and describes the treatment methods taught within the library and archives conservation program at Columbia. Following is the Index for this lab book;

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