Choices and Challenges Symposium 2004
Session: *Preservation Strategies: Balancing Access, Use, Exhibition and Preservation*
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In the special collections of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I am the sole conservator charged with care of the collection, we have well over 200,000 rare books and 20 million manuscripts. The disproportion between needs and resources in our collection is sometimes daunting and is but a microcosm of the larger problem faced by all of us charged with collecting, preserving, and providing access to increasingly rapidly growing collections. Although it may appear self-evident that curators and conservators are in the business of preserving the historical and cultural record, what is rarely acknowledged from within the profession is our role in shaping that record, since our behind-the-scenes decisions – collecting *and* conservation – directly affect what is saved and what is not. The cultural biases that influence these crucial choices remain largely unexamined. Yet collections continue to grow and we continue to make decisions. So how do we decide? Who participates? And what is the nature of the decision-making process?

The demands for "access" and "use" in museums, libraries, and archives vary, but for the purposes of today's discussion, I want to emphasize the similarities. One common denominator among our collections is that some one – at some time – has already labeled them as "valuable." Working in an academic setting, my particular professional concerns center on the relationships between our collections and contemporary scholarly production and the ways cultural assumptions about value affect the conservation decision-making process.

George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* offers an instructive metaphor for the relationship between conservators and curators. The complicating factor is that each of us thinks that we are Henry Higgins and the "other" is Eliza Doolittle! We're often so busy educating one another about what we think is important and making assumptions about what we each know, don't know, should know, shouldn't presume to know, that I think we often omit some of the most important questions when we're discussing conservation decisions.

Many of you are familiar with the essay by Stephen Weil, emeritus senior scholar at the Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies, titled "The Proper Business of the Museum: Ideas or Things?"[1] If we add libraries, archives, and conservation to his question, it suggests a useful framework for reflection on the decision-making process. I think it's pretty clear that we're all focused on objects – Weil's "things." About ideas, it's not so clear.

As a conservator with a library degree, working in a research institution, I straddle two professional cultures. A little background about the field of conservation might be useful here. Since its origins, North American conservation education has taught the conservator to view an object primarily in terms of its physical structure and chemical makeup. We focus chiefly on the evaluation of tangible attributes of an individual book, document, or textile, for example – determining what is original and what is not, what is damage and what is not. Even in our postmodern age, the defining paradigm of conservation orthodoxy remains resolutely empiricist and scientific. The subjectivity inherent in the very notion of values challenges conventional ideas about the role of the conservator as an "objective" expert. And my reading in all the fields

we represent – museum, library, and archival – reveals a similar tension between claims of objectivity and neutrality and a growing challenge by cultural relativism.

To facilitate our discussion of the idea/thing continuum, I'm breaking with long-standing conservation tradition and not using slides of objects with this presentation. Although I was drawn to this work through the objects, after working in the field for some time I was no longer fully engaged by objects alone. I found myself asking questions such as: Why am I treating this book and not that one? Why am I treating this book, when I'm convinced it won't be used in the next 39 years? I saw value being considered – usually monetary – but where was use? I'd been working in special collections for a long time, so I looked for answers in the reading room. I asked questions, I looked at the "hold shelf" and at the shelving truck. Periodically I would help researchers with awkward books or open uncut pages. But why did I so rarely see the kinds of materials I was treating being used in the reading room?

These weren't the questions I was trained to ask. My conservation education had focused on the *materiality* of books and documents, along with a modest introduction to the historical and social context of their *production*. As I reflected back, however, I was amazed to realize that, with only one exception, I was never asked to consider the content or to ponder how a scholar might use it. Content, of course, leads directly to "the user." Even though we'd always said, almost like a mantra, that our goal was providing access to rare research materials, when I started thinking about the user I became conscious that just under our rhetoric of providing access there was almost always a very strong subtext suggesting the researcher was an *adversary* who will *unfortunately* handle—probably carelessly—fragile materials that we are trying to preserve. Not surprisingly, this often results in a deep ambivalence toward – if not downright conflict with – users. And, need I remind you, to a conservator the curator is a user. But if not for the users why do we bother?

Before you all start nodding your heads knowingly about how difficult conservators can be, I must mention that, over the years, I've become aware of a similar attitude toward users – and often toward conservators – which is pervasive throughout special collections (and very likely in museums too). Indeed, much like my conservation education, my special collections education also focused on tangibility and was accompanied by its own version of adversarial attitudes.

In an essay on the future of special collections, curator Daniel Traister examines these attitudes and ruefully comments that, "All of us know people who have been turned away from, had difficulties at, or experienced condescension, downright rudeness, or suspicion . . . while trying to use . . . rare book and manuscript repositories."[2] A colleague of mine who is known for her expertise in the treatment of illuminated manuscripts was not only refused access to a manuscript she wanted to study, but also shouted at for the audacity of her request by a curator in a prestigious research library. Another colleague works with curators who trust her to take apart rare books and even submerge them in water, but not enough to allow her any but the most begrudging access to "their" stacks.

The alchemy between curatorial and conservation cultures affects how we think, how we do treatment, and how we talk to one another. Ultimately, this presentation is about changing perspectives and shifting the spotlight from things to ideas. Stefan Michalski of the Canadian

Conservation Institute says it well in an essay re-evaluating the traditional assumptions underlying conservation decisions: "I am a conservation scientist, and I have spent thirteen years discovering why paintings crack . . . and what to do about it. Now that I understand cracking so well, I am not sure how much it matters. "[3] If we are to problematize decision-making and the way we prioritize materials for conservation, we need to ask new questions. Questions like "What is the meaning of this artifact, and how does it manifest that meaning – in this institution?" And to make such questions happen, we need a new paradigm for our discussions. The wonderful thing about an occasion like this symposium is the opportunity for discussion across professions. An emphasis on developing better communication among conservators, curators, and researchers is necessary if we are to share the benefits of a more collaborative process.

In July, I conducted a mid-career workshop on Values and Decision-making in Special Collections Conservation in an effort to introduce a more reflexive user-centered decision-making process. In preparation for one aspect of the workshop, I sent a query to several scholarly and special collections listservs. Not in *response* to my query, but in *reaction* to my statement that the workshop would include an exploration of "a broad range of interpretive strategies employed by contemporary scholars," I received the following inquiry from a fairly well-known denizen of the rare books world: "Do you . . . mean 'research strategies?' I don't see the relevance of 'interpretive strategies.' *Literary theory for conservators?*"

I quote – loosely – from my reply:

> Well, the short answer is that I do think that literary theory is relevant to conservators, at least to the degree that they should understand that some of the scholars who work with special collections use/read materials/texts differently than do others: bibliographers, historians, literary theorists studying reader-response, and scholars who interpret books as material culture – among others. With few exceptions, conservation education has stressed the need to understand only the work of a narrow range of researchers – primarily "historians of the book" – usually those studying manuscript production and the hand press period (with the study of 19th-century Victorian bindings thrown in for good measure). As a result, the way we look at materials and draw conclusions about what is "valuable" is often much narrower than it should be.

I went on to explain briefly that in order to serve the vast majority of researchers who actually work in our reading rooms, we need to learn about a fuller range of research approaches in which scholars utilize texts and images, only *sometimes* in conjunction with physical evidence, for questions beyond the scope of traditional bibliographic inquiry.

Quite often, book and manuscript conservators raised on a diet of literature about treatment of early printed books find themselves treating pamphlets with titles like *Do Not Grind the Seed Corn* when they end up in the "real world" of a research library. Similarly, objects conservators who have developed their skills on 18th-century microscopes made of ebony, ivory, and brass, may find themselves working in a history museum on a slightly smashed box of Quaker Oats from the 1930s. The gap between training expectations and reality has helped to create a circumscribed vision of values and a related set of attitudes for some conservators.

At the same time, many conservators work with curators who privilege some types of materials over others. The culture of special collections libraries and the prevailing ethos that still assigns value based on age, canonical status, and monetary value deflects attention from the fact that many materials that libraries and archives have traditionally ignored have become the most sought-after resources for the study of non-traditional subjects.

Our willingness to engage in dialogue with each other and with our users to make hard choices in a never-ending queue of candidates depends on a common understanding of our shared mission. This in turn demands that we articulate more fully *what* it is that we're preserving. Is it an idea or a thing? Part of the problem may stem from the fact that it is indeed hard to find the words to talk about some of these ideas. Nevertheless, our basic understanding of what we are conserving is at the root of *how* we make decisions – consciously or unconsciously.

The classic example is a scrapbook – often complex, both in terms of content and care. As we weigh the options, we're deciding where the meaning lies. Is it found in the photographs, letters, and ticket stubs or in the Gestalt of those items as they are adhered in an arrangement to sheets of paper with glue, cardboard, cloth, etc.? Is the scrapbook just the *arrangement* or is it also an immaterial manifestation of the creator's act of adhering them? If the paper of the scrapbook itself jeopardizes the preservation of the contents, is it better to disbind and preserve the contents – or not to disbind and thus preserve the whole meaning, even if the scrapbook remains in vulnerable condition? What might be true for a scrapbook compiled by a Civil War soldier in a military prison might not be true for a scrapbook compiled by a campus theatre group. Both may have the same physical structure and similar chemical makeup. But are they the same? Treatment outcomes may or may not differ, but asking the questions is crucial.

As I now practice conservation, the object is only a starting point – critical, but only as a carrier of the *meaning* it embodies. The object is necessary to experience "it," but "it" is what I want to conserve. How can "it" be named? Is it possible to talk about it without fetishizing the object or reverting to sentimentality and nostalgia?

I have found an apt metaphor in what I call the *hologram of an object's meaning*. "Unlike a photograph which records an image as seen from one particular viewpoint, a hologram is a record of an image as seen from many viewpoints." Hologram comes from the Greek "holos" meaning "whole" and "gramma" meaning "message." The *hologram of an object's meaning* conveys its "whole message."[4] So the questions I think we must ask ourselves are: What are the factors that affect our position and frame what we *see*? How do we need to position ourselves – as conservators – to see the *hologram* of an object's meaning? What might we need to ask a curator or researcher in order to see it more clearly?

Any hope of achieving this session's goal of **"***balancing* access, use, exhibition and preservation" would require that we engage in a multi-level reciprocal dialogue about why we're doing what we're doing. Too often our discussions in this context are centered on binary relationships that fail to reflect the complexity of cultural institutions in the 21st century. We talk about preservation as *opposed* to access; artifact as *opposed* to content. There is no *inherent* conflict between preservation and access in the great majority of cases. Instead, I believe that we create the conflict when we don't articulate *what* we are preserving.

So what might it look like if we were to have a different conversation – one that positions the user in front of the curator and the conservator as they're making decisions? Let's consider two contrasting examples.

An 1869 book of poetry by Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton, bound in deep purple cloth, is selected for an exhibition of Victorian poets. The exhibition space has higher light levels than desirable, especially for a light-sensitive material like this purple cloth. The traditional conservator says, therefore, that it can't be exhibited without damage. In answer to this I ask: If we don't display this book in an exhibit that a thousand people may attend – because its binding may possibly fade – *what* are we preserving?

In a parallel example, an 1897 diary of the first female student at the University of North Carolina is selected for an exhibit of Southern women's diaries in that same exhibit space. The ink is faint and the paper is poor quality, already quite discolored and somewhat brittle. A conservator says that the item is very sensitive to light and can't be exhibited without damage. Let's reverse my previous question. What are we gaining when an object of clear importance to an institution is likely to lose contrast, become less legible, and suffer further deterioration of the paper – even *if* a thousand people see it in an exhibit?

In the first example, a decision *not* to display the book reflects an implicit value judgment about meaning. But for whom would we be saving the "perfect" purple when 99.9% of the exhibit goers will experience the book as a textual object? And how sure are we that the purple we see today is the same purple that existed when the book was originally published? It's also a printed multiple held by at least 43 other libraries, and its meaning in the context of a research library will not be seriously compromised by slight fading of the binding. Of course, the conservator might also design a means of protecting the binding if it isn't critical in the context of the exhibit, but that doesn't change the nature of the questions that needed to be asked first. *On the other hand* – would the questions or answers be different if this book was part of a collection of Victorian bindings.

In the diary example, a decision *not* to display the manuscript would also reflect a value judgment – this time with a researcher in mind. The risk of significant loss to the manuscript is clear. Using an alternative item that would convey the same *ideas*, but is made of more stable materials is one choice. Or this may be an occasion to use a surrogate for the original – perhaps even an opportunity to benefit from the possibility of displaying more than one opening at a time in surrogate form. But what if this were an exhibit *about* the experience of female students at UNC? Would the questions, or the answers, be different?

We all have different styles and expectations, but in general I think we don't discuss enough. When we do, conversations are usually reserved for materials of perceived "high value." We're not used to interrogating every object we treat for the answer to "*What* is important about this?" Let's consider just a few more examples.

The Library wants to digitize a fairly rare slave narrative in its original binding held in the special collections. The pages are brittle, already breaking at the inner margin, and it's likely that

more will break if it's scanned, no matter how carefully it's handled. Does that mean it shouldn't be digitized; that it's our responsibility to preserve the artifact? Should we house it in a box to wait for a researcher to come along one day – and probably break those same pages? Or does it, more than ever, mean that it should be digitized because if our copy is like this, most copies probably are? *But what if* this was a text of which only four copies are known to survive: would the questions, or answers, be different? How about *three* copies?

As we enter the 21st century and we collect in the 20th, we need to talk more – and more specifically. There's just too much stuff and much of it is made of unstable materials. When we collect a modern poet comprehensively and his work appears on the front page of a major international newspaper, do we need the whole issue – even if we do collect "the artifact"? Do we need the whole section? The whole page? How about when we collect the graphic work of another poet in a British underground newspaper published only in 1970? Do we need the whole issue then? The whole page? In each case, we have to imagine our researcher in order to think through these questions.

A researcher calls for a collection of crumbling theatre scrapbooks that will definitely crumble more if they're used. They've been sitting in the stacks for years, ignored because they're such a preservation problem. Do you tell the researcher that they're too fragile, or do you find a way to use them as carefully as possible, because otherwise they're no good to anyone? And do you ask the researcher why they're important and perhaps reconsider their slot on your conservation priority list?

How would you respond if you asked a conservator to treat a book with fairly complex problems (which means it could take a lot of time) and she asks if you know how many copies are in WorldCat? Do you hear that as a challenge or as an effort to help make tough choices?

Because this is usually not a question of total omission, but rather one of extreme imbalance, I think many of us are loathe to recognize ourselves in this picture. We can always point to one example or another where we *did* do X. Let's acknowledge that, but not allow it to exempt us from self-reflection. David Stam, Syracuse University Librarian Emeritus, put it far more succinctly than I have: "Why does everybody's Audubon need preservation, when there are so many unique deteriorating materials to be preserved?"[5]

As cultural production accelerates at the outset of the 21st century, the scale of the need for conserving the past must be accompanied by recognition that a goal of "saving everything" is unrealistic. We can't prevent decay; choices must be made; subjectivity and contingency frame every decision. As scholarship changes, research collections and decisions about their care should move in concert with it—it is our *raison d'être*.

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[1] Stephen E. Weil, "The Proper Business of The Museum: Ideas or Things?" in *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990).
[2] Daniel Traister, "Is There a Future for Special Collections? And Should There Be? A Polemical Essay," *RBM* 1, no. 1 (2000).

[3] Stefan Michalski, "Sharing Responsibility for Conservation Decisions, " in *Durability and Change: The Science, Responsibility, and Cost of Sustaining Cultural Heritage*, ed. Wolfgang E. Krumbein (Chichester, New York: John Wiley, 1994).
[4] Betsy Connors, "the holograms," *LightForest: The Holographic Rainforest*, MIT Museum E-Gallery, 30 May 2001. < http://web.mit.edu/museum/lightforest/holograms.html > (accessed 23 October 2004)
[5] David H. Stam, "So What's So Special?" Keynote address for *Building on Strength: Developing an ARL Agenda for Special Collections,* Brown University, 28 June 2001.