

Manuscript and Archival Collections: New Acquisitions

The interaction of curatorial, cataloging and conservation personnel during the initial processing of manuscript and archival collections is of primary importance to repositories such as the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas. The sequence of operations through which a new acquisition is processed is designed to ultimately result in the sorting and cataloging of the items in the collection, their housing and preservation, and the preparation of the collection for scholarly use.

In institutions where the acquisition of large collections is not a regular occurrence, the operations of accessioning, sorting, housing and cataloging might engage the efforts of only a few personnel during a relatively brief period of time. In institutions routinely receiving large quantities of new material, these activities are often spread over longer periods, with separate units responsible for individual aspects of the process. In any case, it is important to proceed in an orderly fashion which is flexible enough to respond to the special problems which might be inherent in the acquisition.

Because of the variety of sources from which new collections are acquired and because of the various circumstances surrounding their arrival, the acquisition of new collections often presents problems for curatorial, cataloging and conservation personnel. The condition of a collection which is poorly housed at the time of purchase is not often improved by uncontrolled and unsupervised packing and shipping. Old and poorly constructed containers made from unstable materials may be damaged when handled without special care or when shipped by carriers having little

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knowledge of their fragile condition. It is not always a lack of concern by the originating party which is responsible for the conditions of packing and shipping; they may reflect a lack of resources to correct them or an unclear knowledge of the procedures which should be followed. The receiving institution should, where possible, take full responsibility to see that packing methods are understood by the persons in charge of this activity. If necessary, it should provide them with a courier to expedite packing and shipment, or with the proper instructions and requisite materials to facilitate these processes. This is especially true when accepting the transfer of collections donated by private and non-professional sources who might be unfamiliar with the procedures.

Regardless of the degree of attention given to the packing and shipping of a collection, the physical condition of the items which are enclosed may present complex problems. Manuscripts which have been housed in damp and humid environments may be infected with mould. Papers salvaged from fire are vulnerable to handling and may be the cause of additional problems when boxed or stored with undamaged items. Termites, cockroaches, silverfish and ants within the cartons of new acquisitions should be expected, and books, photographic materials, paper, textiles, works of art and ephemera are often packed haphazardly in communal storage. When situations such as these are encountered with the arrival of a new acquisition, the physical movement and shifting which is involved in the initial examination and subsequent accessioning procedures become critical moments in the history of the collection.

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While accession procedures vary from one institution to another, the objective of accessioning is essentially to inventory the contents of the new collection. This may be done by a simple count of the arriving packages, by an assessment of quantity such as a measure of linear footage, or by comparing the items with a seller's list. Other systems result in the assignment of unique numbers to each item in the collection. Initially, small acquisitions may be processed in more detail than larger collections, though this may depend on the type and the importance of the materials which are involved and the state of order in which they arrive. In most cases, the accessioning process should involve at least a cursory examination of the material which has been received. This unpacking of the cartons, and any initial rehousing or emergency conservation treatment which might be involved, may have profound influence upon the physical well-being of the collection and its scholarly integrity.

Cataloging departments are generally ill-equipped to safely or conveniently handle certain problems associated with damaged collections, and these may require the attention of conservation personnel soon after their arrival at the repository. Conservators, aware of the many advantages of early treatment and rehousing, will approach these problems with enthusiasm. With the cooperation of conservation personnel, some institutions have established routine fumigation procedures for all new acquisitions, and similar applications are being made possible by recent advances in deacidification procedures. Nonetheless, even the most conscientious personnel can seriously disturb the integrity of a collection if certain non-conservation considerations are overlooked.

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While it is easy to criticize many of the styles of housing in which manuscript and archival collections are found, it is important to remember that these existing housings, with their occasionally cryptic annotations, are often vital to the identification and ordering of the items which they contain, and must be retained as part of the collection. Major associations and records of provenance may be lost simply by the discarding of an unsuitable container. The removal of photographic artifacts from an archival collection of documents may render the collection meaningless. Associations formed by the proximity of one item to the next may be obscured during a rehousing operation performed by personnel whose motivation is primarily the physical care of the collection rather than the preservation of its intellectual content.

It is preferable that curatorial and cataloging staff be the first to examine a new collection when its physical condition is not in immediate danger. Along with conservation personnel, only staff members directly involved with the accessioning process should have access to the collection prior to completion of these procedures. When problems are encountered which require attention beyond the normal scope of the accessioning processes, conservation and accessioning personnel should work closely together in an attempt to minimize both the physical damage and the potential loss of information associated with the collection. Detailed photographic and written records describing the types of cartons, annotations associated with the cartons, and the arrangement of the items within the cartons should be made. Damage and physical condition should be documented for conservation

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records and for such business as insurance claims or other settlements. If a collection has been damaged subsequent to its purchase, legal considerations might require clarification prior to the implementation of any conservation or preservation procedures. When these matters have been attended, the damaged materials should be transferred to the conservation department for whatever treatments are appropriate.

It is the responsibility of curatorial and cataloging personnel to advise conservators about significant relationships within a collection requiring treatment. The conservation staff can not be expected to be knowledgeable about details of important associations between items in a collection, nor should they need to organize material or rearrange its order. The technical skills and specialized training of conservation personnel should be directed towards the correction or prevention of conditions within collections for which the intellectual or aesthetic content has been or could be disturbed as a result of physical and chemical damage or by improper housing. Curatorial and cataloging personnel must make known their knowledge of the historical and intellectual significance of the materials in the care of conservation, that this knowledge may be taken as guidelines for the application of treatments which are sensitive to the individual nuances of each item being conserved.

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