

The Code of Ethics and Manuscript and Archival Conservation

by Marian Peck Dirda

The first part of the Code of Ethics that I would like to address is the single standard (Part One, II.C.). It states that, regardless of value, "the highest and most exacting standard of treatment" be applied to objects and that, a little further on, with "large groups of objects . . . procedures should be consistent with the conservator's respect for the integrity of the objects." This applies specifically to manuscript and archival conservation. Well, the Library of Congress has many classes of items to be treated. Many of the items are of very high intrinsic value or of large value to the collections and include such materials as art on paper, manuscripts, maps, or music material which in many ways fit into the classic art on paper, highest integrity treatment category. And the treatments at the Library of Congress, the standard treatments, are not inconsistent with what one might generally think one may conduct on an object. One point that I want to bring up, though, that does exist in archives and libraries, is that there are other kinds of materials, large groups of manuscript materials, for which this standard is not particularly applicable. And those are library and archival materials whose value resides in the information, the evidential nature, or the overall assembly of items in the collection, and where there may be no, or very little value that resides in any particular object in the collection. An example might be the papers of Margaret Mead, where it is really the assembly of items that is of the value for researchers, but where any individual item may have absolutely no monetary value, or very little monetary value. But still these items are unique, and they are valuable as originals.

Such collections are made up of large quantities of papers and if the highest standard of practice is always applied to each individual item, these items may never receive treatment. However, they do need some level of treatment and one cannot wait to go through them piece by piece as if they were art on paper. So, for manuscript and archival collections of this type, I believe that certain treatments are acceptable and good, even though they may cause various problems, such as some loss, as long as this loss is not particularly obstructive. I can think immediately of an example where you might have rubber cement stains on typescript, immerse the whole thing in a solvent bath, and bleed out a component of the ink. Although perhaps not that visible (and assuming you do not have any feathering), you have definitely caused a loss. Another example might be a color shift when you deacidify iron-gall ink. For manuscript collections, these may be perfectly appropriate treatments. This is Marian Peck's personal opinion and not Library of Congress policy.

Another part of the Code of Ethics with which I have a problem is reversibility (Part One, II.E.). It says that one should avoid materials whose removal endangers the object and "avoid techniques the results of which cannot be undone. . . ." I do not disagree with these statements, and I think they should be left in the Code of Ethics. But I do think they do not take into account that many times treatments cannot be undone, or that we do not intend that they ever be undone. I would like to add therefore that we should intervene with care when we do intervene. That is, if we do chemical intervention, we should acknowledge that it is permanent. If we bleach, if we deacidify, we have done something that cannot be undone. Also, when we use certain materials, such as a fixative on a gouache, we are essentially making a permanent treatment because

in most instances it is not going to be possible to take the fixative out. Therefore, I think that conservators should exercise care in selecting well-tested, stable materials, and that they should exercise restraint in treatment.

Next I would like to consider Part One, III.E. and F. which cover report writing, and these drag us a little bit into the Standards of Practice section, Part Two, IV.A.,B.,C., all of which also cover report writing. I do not really have any problems with these parts of the Code of Ethics. They are very general, they say that you should write reports. I want to make a two-sided point here. First, sometimes we do not write reports well enough. We should strengthen these and be very conscious that when we do our condition reports that we describe the object, who the conservator is, the date of treatment, identify the object, describe its condition, and describe what problems it has. Then in our treatment reports, we need to be very conscious that we *do* want these reports to be read by an outsider. I mean not just you and not the person who knows your techniques intimately, but that you describe the materials and techniques that were used and how the treatment affected the artwork for others as well. Second, I do not believe that we, as paper conservators, need to do all of the extensive report writing and photography as called for in the Standards of Practice. The nature of that documentation can be affected by various conditions, such as the character of the item, for example, whether it is a single item, or an item that has multiple parts. You may not be able to do the same depth of description for every single part of a multi-part item, although you should describe the whole, and describe it adequately. Similarly, I think the nature of paper conservation treatment sometimes mitigates against writing very extensive reports and

the creation of photodocumentation if we are only taking hinges off, for example. In the Library of Congress, we have many, many items and if we waited to take before-and-after photographs of every hinge removal, we would get nowhere. And going a little further, I should say that, at the Library of Congress, we also do not take before-and-after photographs if it is for an item for which the treatment is not expected to cause much trouble. This is getting into more controversial territory, which I will acknowledge. For instance, an engraving by Durer might get the before- and after-treatment photographs, even if it were just going to be bathed. But many nineteenth century etchings and engravings might not get the photography. We do, however, undertake photography for watercolors for example, where either the format is changed or potential treatment problems might be expected. In conclusion, there is, in paper conservation, some room for less extensive photodocumentation and some change in the requirements for written documentation.