

The Conservator as Collection Manager:

Implications for the Profession

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The Museum Conservator/Administrator

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It has been interesting and exciting for me to watch the field of conservation - and particularly paper conservation - grow since I was a student in 1974. At that time, the Winterthur Program had just begun, Queens was in the formative stages, the Fogg and Oberlin were bringing their three-year training programs to a close, NYU was taking a limited number of students, and Cooperstown did not yet have a full-time, year-round paper conservator on their faculty. The twelve subsequent years have seen an increase in both the ranks and in the professionalism of paper conservators. New positions have opened up in museums where no paper conservator or only one previously existed. The birth of several regional centers and the increase in conservation staff at libraries and archives have provided a variety of new challenges. With this increase in numbers and in job opportunities, the once seemingly straightforward and basic role of the paper conservator as practitioner has necessarily changed. There are presently many more ways in which a paper conservator may be involved in the conservation profession; several of these paths have become quite specialized and in the future may be narrowed down that much more. Along with this growing activity and with an increase in the number of labs, we are seeing more conservators involved in administration, or, as this panel has termed it, in collections management.

When I joined the staff at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1981, the museum had been without a paper conservator for eight years. I had just finished three years of a graduate training program, including a year with a private paper conservator, a year's advanced internship, and two years of work at a regional center. At that time, there was just a small handful of trained paper conservators gradually filling the newly available positions. It was not unusual for young professionals to find themselves in roles which they had to help establish and define. I had the new experience of organizing a paper lab for a large museum with an active exhibition and loan schedule, with very specific collections to address. After two intense years working alone, re-establishing the lab and keeping pace with an exhibition program which was very dense with paper related objects, the museum took on an intern for paper conservation who later became the assistant paper conservator. With the recent additions of a conservation technician and an advanced intern, the paper lab now numbers four. Somewhere between my third and fourth year, uneasy feelings which started in my second year came to the surface as I observed myself doing less and less in the way of conservation treatments and more and more in the way of pushing paper, managing people, and choreographing the growing responsibilities for the paper lab. I kept thinking, "Well, next year will be better," in anticipation of once and for all gaining control over my widely ranging duties. Each "next year" has brought helpful changes, but with additional people to keep busy and with seemingly ever increasing tasks, fitting in treatment is often a sporadic and sparse affair. I have found

myself at times "protecting" the other conservators in the paper lab during particularly busy exhibition preparations by taking on as much of certain sorts of administrative duties as comfortably possible, rather than spreading out those responsibilities. I have tried, when necessary, to shield the conservators in our museum lab from the distractions and attention draining activities which could keep them from doing their best conservation work, providing them with longer stretches of uninterrupted, reduced anxiety time.

My administrative duties, which may often include numerous meetings, juggling multiple deadlines, being on hand to respond to telephones, students, curators, crises, and dramatic changes of plan, result in a usually high pitched, rapid-fire pace of a work day. While some of this can be occasionally minimized, there is still enough to keep me always literally hopping. Such a pace is not sympathetic to sitting down at odd moments and doing careful, restrained, thoughtful conservation treatments. (When the latter have been necessary, I have personally found weekend days the only way to make undisturbed treatment time. Other museum conservators in similar positions - if unable to maintain a steady variety of treatments - may be able to take on private work to keep their hand in. Generally, I am drained enough from an intense five day schedule that weekends and private work are not attractive options.) In summary, I am essentially the manager or choreographer of the paper lab, the person tagged to receive most of the incoming "whatever." I am responsible for being responsible, for consistency, promptness and for quality control. For my lab colleagues, I become critic, coach, and kibitzer.

As a paper conservator of Western works of art on paper, I am by necessity a generalist. The wide variety of often unusual and unpredictable materials and techniques found in Western art on paper requires me to be a problem solver. I do not, for instance, have the long tradition of training and technique available to a Far Eastern scroll mounter; however, I do not have the relatively more known and predictable array of papers, inks and paints used by Chinese and Japanese artists. For us, this makes thorough examination, testing, and mock-ups imperative. What I can learn from the Far Eastern mounters, from the best bookbinders, and from the tradition of flat paper repair done in certain of the European countries, is the importance of craft and its development to a very high degree. In our efforts to become more professional, craft is sometimes forgotten. Aside from assembling successful approaches, materials, and techniques for our young field of paper conservation, we need to cultivate levels of skill that can only be achieved through practice, repetition, and sensitive observation. We must similarly cultivate a high sense of uncompromised quality where such a level of practice is called for. It is the day-to-day practice of a conservator's craft which results in the continued refinement of a practitioner's eye and hand. We need skilled surgeons who can carry out the most complex of treatments on the most valuable of objects; we need conservators who practice in what I would call the higher realms. This sort of work cannot be achieved by a practitioner who is consumed or frequently distracted by administrative or similarly taxing duties. Degree of talent, sensitivity, and intellect (or sophistication of equipment), cannot make up for lack of practice. Timing, judgement, and an

especially sensitive use of the hands are dependent on their continually being put to use. Certain administrative duties are antagonistic to the sort of patience required by long, tedious, or specialized conservation procedures. This is why I have often tried to limit delegating particular types and quantities of the administrative work in the paper lab at my museum. I want someone to be producing beautiful, high quality work, rather than have that quality diluted. When the occasion calls for it, it takes a certain amount of courage for a harried, rusty conservator to relinquish certain difficult, long-term projects to a more practiced and manually agile colleague, rather than using those projects to prove oneself. The discomfort of not being as adept as one has been in the past at carrying out certain procedures is especially trying.

We do need appropriately seasoned individuals in the now more visible conservation administrative roles. This role of lab manager or collections manager is not completely new, there are just many more conservators finding themselves in such a position, trying to juggle the growing demands of conservation professionalism on all its levels, acting as important liasons between conservation and other institutional departments or individuals. Administration brings up a new area in which many conservators have not been necessarily trained or prepared. A seminar arranged by Don Etherington at the Humanities Research Center in Austin last year for conservators heading labs or conservation departments began to address specific shared issues. Whether or not training programs address this aspect of the field, it will continue to

evolve as it has, which is "on the job."¹ Some practitioners - as it happens in other professions - may find themselves scaling down or giving up their craft for a different role as teacher or administrator. It can be difficult for those who find themselves losing what they have most enjoyed; it may be rewarding to others who find the new and varied demands challenging or exhilarating.

What I would most hope for the present and for the future is a strong balance of respect amongst all the different sorts of conservators as they continue to evolve, whether the individual's focused activity be teaching, scientific or scholarly research, treatment, administration, or work related to private practice, museums, exhibitions, archival collections, or regional centers. As the field grows we will find ourselves in new and different roles. This increasing diversity is quite exciting; we have much to learn from each other. We will very much need each other's support.

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¹A paper delivered at the Oxford Conference, Oxford, England, April 1986, presented changes in curriculum at the School of Conservation at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen, Denmark. The speaker outlined the educators' attempts to accommodate the now more widely ranging responsibilities of conservators, particularly those related to large institutions.