

Report on the Committee on Curatorial Issues Raised by Conservation

The American Library Association (ALA) has within it the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) which has as one of its constituents the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS). In 1984, the Executive Committee of RBMS appointed a Committee on Curatorial Issues Raised by Conservation (ad hoc). This Committee, after meeting for two years transformed itself into the Curators and Conservators Discussion Group. The history of the Committee's activities and the reasons for its transformation into a discussion group form the substance of my report. I draw on library materials for examples. Consequently, my remarks may mean most to conservators working in library settings or with library clients. There are parallels in the work of curators and conservators in museum settings, but there are also enough distinguishing factors I think to merit a separate focus on library work.

The Committee on Curatorial Issues Raised by Conservation was appointed in direct response to some questions raised by Don Etherington during a presentation he made to rare books and manuscripts librarians attending a conference in Austin, Texas, in 1984. Don's questions centered on the issues that arise at the treatment level of library materials. He questioned librarians on how they felt about:

1. The introduction of modern materials to early books in the course of treatment;
2. The disruption of the text block or the removal of attachments, pins or clips from manuscripts prior to treatment;
3. The potential alteration or loss of evidentiary material as a result of treatment;
4. Conservators collation practices;
5. The alteration of an original structure to improve on a poor design; and
6. The attachment of treatment notes to the conserved object.

Don Etherington's questions highlighted, dramatically, an absence of curatorial opinion about and input into routine conservation treatment decisions. And Don's comments raised a very persistent question. Who, the curator or the conservator, has the decision-making power to resolve problems posed in the course of conservation treatments?

With this question in mind the ad hoc Committee was charged with the task of trying to develop guidelines that would help direct the working relationship of curators and conservators at the treatment level of library materials. (The task of determining and recommending standard conservator collation practices fell to a separate RBMS Committee altogether -- the Committee on Conservators' Collations -- and its report should appear within the year.)

The ad hoc Committee's first meeting, held in January, 1985, was well-attended by library curators and administrators. Those attending the Committee's first meeting quickly realized the need for input from the conservation community, but nevertheless set out to attempt to define four areas of curator/conservator working relationships:

1. what curators should be able to expect from conservators;
2. what conservators should be able to expect from curators;
3. what curators and conservators should be able to expect from their administrators; and
4. the impact of conservation treatment decisions on the user of library materials.

Related assignments included the completion of a literature search on curator/conservator relations, a review of the relevance of existing standards governing the two professions, and the setting up of liaisons with other groups.

Important liaisons were established with professional conservation organizations, regional conservation facilities, and conservation educators in time for the Committee's second meeting. The second meeting was held in June, 1985, and represented an unprecedented gathering of library curators and conservation professionals.

Draft statements were presented at the second meeting and those dealing with the respective expectations of curators and conservators were the most fully developed and discussed items on the agenda. In fact, the interaction of curators and conservators quickly became the nucleus for discussion in this and all subsequent meetings. Until the question of how conservators and curators were supposed to work together was answered, administrator and user considerations did not seem addressable.

Broad areas of concern taken up in the draft statements included ethics, education, communication, and authority. And again, the concerns were mostly phrased as questions:

-Does the conservator's "unswerving respect for the integrity of the object" and the librarians's commitment to make the information conveyed by the object widely available allow for a common goal, the object's preservation?

-Do librarians know enough about the variety of conservation treatments available to make intelligent decisions about the options the conservator puts before them?

-Do conservators know enough about library operations and objectives to offer perhaps less ideal but more practical services?

-What is the point in a conservator's preparing a well-documented treatment proposal if the curator routinely pays cursory attention to the details and instructs the conservator to "just do what you think best?"

-What components of an object constitute and convey its meaning and how are those elements best conserved?

-If disagreement arises as to how an object should or should not be treated and used, who has the final say-so in the decision? The curator or the conservator.

A symposium was offered in March, 1986, by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center's Conservation Department that attempted to provide a setting for answering some of these questions. The symposium, titled "Paper: The Conservation of Meaning", was attended by curators, archivists and librarians who were given an opportunity to view photographs, works of art on paper, books, and manuscripts from the Center's collections which required treatment. Participants were presented with a number of treatment options appropriate to each case and were then asked to engage in discussions with conservators. The discussions were structured roughly on a five-part agenda:

- I. Identifying the elements and qualities of the object to be conserved
- II. Discussing the effects of conservation treatment on those elements and qualities
- III. Documentation
- IV. Deciding on appropriate treatments; and
- V. Identifying extrinsic factors which modify or override sound treatment decisions

The symposium was a mixed success. While much stimulating discussion took place and many good points were raised, agreement and like-thinking seemed remote possibilities and no clear conclusions were reached. In fact, the symposium mirrored many of the problems the Committee members had come to realize were hampering their own progress in turning out guidelines.

Curators did not seem to share the same urgency and depth of feeling expressed by conservators about presented problems. And there was difficulty in keeping the discussions focused at the treatment level. Curators tended to veer off into larger, preservation issues of library collections, viewing individual treatments as just a small part of collection management concerns rather than an integral or even independent problem. Clearly too, the conservation profession faced several unresolved questions about its own practices that, in the absence of answers, rendered some arguments moot.

As an example of one of the thornier issues, two of the more polarized discussions revolved around the statement, made repeatedly by a conservator, that curators should be the ones to make final decisions regarding conservation treatments. On the surface, it seemed a strong statement of fact upon which some guidelines might have been based. However, in the course of discussion, it came out that some conservators felt that curators often made decisions regarding treatments based on an unquestioning trust of the conservator's technical expertise rather than on a critical discussion of the treatment options available and their potential impact on the aesthetic and/or evidential value of the item(s) being treated. That a curator should base his or her approval or disapproval of treatments on a fuller understanding of the technical components involved was put forward as a more desirable response.

Some curators, on the other hand, felt that conservators, bound by their code of ethics to an "unswerving respect for the integrity of the object", might not be able to respond to the many extrinsic factors curators must weigh before making decisions

about conservation treatments. Faced with pressures of budget, institutional mission and political expediency, a curator might choose the less optimal treatment; trusting in the conservator's technical expertise to stabilize but not fully restore an item or entire collection.

However, were this to happen, there might be a tendency on the part of the conservator, having placed the burden of the decision on the curator, to then refuse to carry out the less optimal treatment on the grounds that he or she was ethically bound to perform only the best available treatment on any object regardless of its value. It was recognized that a very strong feeling exists among some conservators that strict adherence to the letter of the AIC Code of Ethics is synonymous with "professionalism".

The ethical dilemma this scenario dramatizes (or perhaps necessarily melodramatizes) is perhaps best analogized as a judge/executioner relationship. The curator is the judge, but the conservator has to carry out the sentence. One essential difference needs to be emphasized. If the conservator (executioner) disagrees with the curator (judge), he or she may feel obligated to refuse to carry out the treatment (sentence), even at the risk of his or her job. Some conservators may feel that they cannot shift blame for an unethical treatment back to the party who ordered them to perform it. Curators, coming more out of a tradition of institutional employment and fealty, have a difficult time comprehending the fierce loyalty of conservators, who have a tradition of private practice as well, to their profession over their jobs. This dilemma needs to be better understood by both curators and conservators and it needs to be understood as potentially working both ways. If the conservator is in an administratively superior position to the curator, the conservator may be seen as the judge, determining a book or manuscript unsuitable for either circulation or photoduplication, and the curator as executioner, having to explain to a scholar that the needed book or manuscript is not available to them either in its original form or in a secondary medium. Admittedly this situation does not now occur very often, but the possibility needs to be allowed in the event conservators assume library administration positions.

In June, 1986, an RBMS pre-conference workshop on curatorial issues raised by conservation only served to reinforce some of the implications of the HRHRC Symposium. The pre-conference workshop was well-attended by curators but discussion took place at a very elementary level and it was felt that many of the attendees were only just beginning to realize the existence and magnitude of the issues. In fact, belying the Committee's focused attention on the curator/conservator relationship, the curators in attendance at the pre-conference workshop seemed most interested in the impact of conservation treatment decisions on the user.

Taking the HRHRC symposium and RBMS workshop results into consideration, the Committee, at its fourth meeting in New York City last summer, voiced the opinion that it was premature and inappropriate to issue any guidelines for dealing with the many practical and philosophical questions that are asked about the conservation treatment of library materials. It was the thought of the Committee that curators, on the whole, had not yet had enough experience working with conservators to respond meaningfully to the often sophisticated points raised by the conservation profession about treatment matters. At the same time, the

conservation profession was seen to be moving toward significant changes in areas from which any guidelines set forth by the Committee would have been predicated. Two notable areas of change are possible revisions of the AIC Code of Ethics concerning standards and documentation of treatments and a tabling of the AIC certification program until the foundational elements of such a program can be reexamined and more firmly grounded.

It was thought that any guideline issued now, before curators and conservators themselves were clear about their aims and had more opportunities to educate themselves about each other's professions, would become outdated quickly. There may be a need for guidelines five years from now -- certainly there is considerable interest -- but the issues exist in too rapidly changing an environment to ensure stable resolution at this time.

The Committee felt that what was needed instead of guidelines was a continuing forum for discussion through which education about and publicizing of the issues could continue. Consequently, the Committee recommended that it be discharged as a Committee and converted into a Curators and Conservators Discussion Group. The recommended action was taken by the RBMS Executive Committee and the Curators and Conservators Discussion Group held its first meeting at the ALA mid-winter meeting in Chicago in January.

The discussion Group hopes to add to the body of information on Curator/Conservator relations and to encourage the education of curators and conservators about each other's professions. The Discussion Group will act as a forum to carry forward ideas generated by the Committee and will provide a ready place for new issues to be first addressed. It will work to publicize the issues by encouraging the publication of relevant articles in appropriate journals and by suggesting programs to be held at the annual meetings of such interested organizations as ALA, the Society of American Archivist (SAA), and AIC. Finally, the Discussion Group will encourage the establishment of formal liaisons with some of the organizations that were represented informally at the forum meeting of the ad hoc Committee. In these ways, the Committee feels that the momentum gained by its activities can be most fully taken advantage of and built upon.

Conservation professionals interested in the activities of the Discussion Group are encouraged to participate. The Discussion group meets at ALA's Mid-Winter and Annual meetings. Topics for discussion will be publicized in the RBMS Newsletter and in Conservation Administration News (CAN). I maintain a mailing list to which you may add your name by writing to me at HRHRC, P.O. Box 7219, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, 78713-7219.

Cathy Henderson, Chair
RBMS Curators and Conservators
Discussion Group, and
Research Librarian, HRHRC