

Conservation and the Politics of Use and Value in Research Libraries

ABSTRACT

Faced with massive collections of many thousands of artifacts as potential conservation candidates, curators and conservators in libraries and archives are continually making choices that influence the availability of rare research materials for future use. The cultural biases that influence decisions about which artifacts will receive conservation treatment are often invisible. Both conservation training and the culture common in many of the institutions that employ conservators reinforce this invisibility.

Materials that libraries and archives have historically undervalued are often the most valuable resources for the study of non-traditional subjects and overlooked groups. In discussing these materials, issues raised include: How is “value” determined? What defines “usable” and how does that affect the definition of what “needs” conservation?

The conservator’s understanding of the cultural context in which certain classes of materials were originally produced and used is becoming accepted as a vital part of our expertise in individual *treatment* decisions. Now, as institutions face the daunting responsibility of anticipating the needs of future researchers, this same knowledge should be utilized in the decisions about how materials are *selected* and *prioritized* for conservation. I advocate a fuller intellectual partnership of conservators with curators and scholars in the preservation of cultural material.

Behind the everyday activities in a library conservation lab there exists a web of assumptions derived from both conservation and library cultures. These assumptions underlie a range of philosophical questions about how we prioritize special collections¹ materials for conservation

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treatment, how this selection process may affect the historical record, and what we as conservators have to do with how this all works. It seems self-evident that curators and conservators are in the business of preserving the historical record, but what isn’t so clearly seen is the way that we also play an invisible role in its shaping, as decisions we make ultimately affect what is saved and what is not. I’d like to direct a spotlight at the intersection of use and value as materials are selected for treatment. Using my experience with a recent exhibit, I’ll describe the evolution of my thinking about the work we do and some of the issues that I believe lie at its core.

As library conservators, we think especially about the concept of current use, which may include an exhibit, a class assignment, an item requested frequently, or an item so fragile that it can’t be handled safely even once. In a library, current use may demand intervention simply to allow the pages of a book to be turned or a manuscript with acidic ink to be handled without losing text. But it is also our responsibility to think about future use. These questions, of course, are not unique to conservation in libraries and archives. At the recent Getty Conservation Institute’s conference called “Mortality Immortality?,” then-director Miguel Angel Corzo put it simply in relation to twentieth-century art when he asked, “. . . how do we choose what will be saved? [and] Who will make the choices?”² Decisions for prioritizing conservation work are the result of a complex equation based on many factors, primary among them use and value. But the question remains, “How is value defined and who defines it?”

Over time, I have watched my definition of value shift. After working in the field of conservation for about fifteen years, I became aware of a significant change in my thinking about the work I was doing. An elusive sensation, it would periodically emerge as a general feeling of discontent and a sense of alienation from the profession. As I tried to become more conscious of this experience, I recognized that it was particularly present when I was

working on certain materials and less so when I was working on others. I began to notice a pattern.

Working on more ephemeral materials—the collection underdogs, the “other” in traditional library collections of highspots—I felt far more engaged than when I worked on the “high art” of the canon. At first, I thought it was simply a matter of personal preference, but then I began to see that my subjective experience was running parallel to cognitive changes in my relationship to the two distinct professional contexts within which I work—the field of conservation and the library world in which materials are selected for conservation.

Looking back, I began to see that I brought assumptions from my conservation training, which had taught me to view an object—in my case, a book—primarily in terms of its physical structure and chemical makeup. This materials-based perspective allowed room for aesthetics (and history to a limited extent), but chiefly in the realm of evaluating tangible attributes—determining what is original and what is not, what is damage and what is not, in short, what “belongs” and what does not. And it was implied, though not directly stated, that subject content is not considered part of our domain as conservators.

Parallel to my self-questioning about this perspective, the conservation field as a whole was addressing the issue of how to broaden its intellectual framework, which had grown out of a Western art historical model, to better address the needs of a wide range of objects that require a different type of approach. This was particularly true for materials that have been used in the course of daily life, be they Native American shoes, nineteenth-century scrapbooks, or a plantation owner’s account book. In the special collections of libraries and archives, an object’s meaning often lies in its history, not its appearance or an ideal version of its condition at the time it was produced.

Across the conservation specialties, we are now broadening our approach and adopting perspectives that privilege the cultural context of an object’s production and use over the values of Western art history. Library and archives conservators have also begun to look at these issues, but my experience and a review of current literature indicate that the discussion remains generally focused within the context of making treatment decisions for individual items. Troubled by this narrow focus, I’ve begun questioning why our intellectual understanding of the collections in our care is not allowed to influence the way we look at *whole* collections as we address the issues of selecting and prioritizing materials.

My own interest in conservation admittedly began from an object-oriented base as well—I like old books. But after working for some time, I began to experience a shift from considering primarily aesthetic or even material qualities to considering research value to scholars. Now, the *first* questions I ask myself are “what can this tell us?” and “how

will it be used in research?” Only after that do I ask “what is this material?” and “how was it made?”

My understanding of research value has taken time to develop because my conservation training had so often identified the researcher as an adversary—a destroyer of books! I realize now how completely this attitude shuts down the potential for dialogue and separates us from the people for whom we do this work and the intellectual community in which we can and—dare I say—should participate. It isolates us within a paradigm of the detached specialist—which ultimately casts us in a technical and thus more limited role. The shift in my awareness of how an artifact may be “read” not only expands my sensitivity to the objects in my care, it also increases my ability to assess materials for research potential.

At the same time that I was thinking about cultural bias in the field of conservation, I came to realize that the manner in which librarians and archivists selected materials for treatment also had a cultural bias. This was dramatically brought home to me in 1997 when I co-curated an exhibit called “The Invisible Process: Ingenuity and Cooperation in Finding Women’s Lives”³ and looked more closely at the relationship between conservation and research on women.

It was then that I first became conscious of biases in the ways conservation resources are allocated—biases that can be virtually invisible to us, because many of us in conservation are so thoroughly participants in the dominant culture. Because the exhibit was about women, I came face to face with issues of gender bias, though it is clear that a race or class analysis of how materials are privileged for conservation would reveal similar assumptions at work.

Of the 200,000 rare books and sixteen million manuscripts in our collection, a quick review of those assigned high priority and sent for treatment in the conservation lab revealed that these choices had been driven by unspoken assumptions in which value is historically equated with men (and men of European descent especially).

At the time of the exhibit, 364 items from three different special collections had been prioritized for treatment over the previous several years. Of these, only thirty-five were by or for women specifically, and fourteen of those were selected only because of the exhibit—by me! Where were the women writers, their pamphlets, their magazines? Why wasn’t I treating these? Remembering that each time an item receives treatment, another remains on the path to disintegration, it’s clear that these choices will ultimately have an irreversible effect on the historical record. Virginia Woolf put it well in *A Room of One’s Own*, “Speaking crudely, football and sport are ‘important’; the workings of fashion and the buying of clothes ‘trivial’! And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction.” And, apparently to the selection for conservation as well.

The issue of women’s (and other overlooked groups’) representation has been considered from the point of view

of collection-building strategies in libraries, archives, and in many museums for some time. It takes only a small leap from there to see that it's time for a similar effort to assure a conscious consideration of representation in the materials being prioritized for conservation. What is the point of collecting materials that we then allow to disappear?

As I continued to think further about where women's lives were documented, I realized that not only were many of the sources that could illuminate their lives historically undervalued, but that often these materials were the most vulnerable to loss. Many popular culture materials, such as advertisements, posters, and magazines, were ephemeral and never intended to survive. The quality of the materials used in their production (and often, even in books published for women) is usually insubstantial and susceptible to rapid deterioration. Without a conscious understanding of their often unique value as documentation of ordinary women's lives—and a concerted effort to preserve them—they will not survive.

As contemporary scholars across disciplines rely more frequently on artifacts of material culture and artifacts of cultures outside the mainstream, library conservators have been confronted by the need to understand the cultural context in which these materials were produced and, just as importantly, how they will be used by researchers. Scholars looking, for example, at a young woman's diary may see it not only as text, but may also value the physical object as a carrier of information about the social setting in which the diarist lived. A first glance at Martha Ryan's Cipher Book (fig. 1a) tells us that the original binding is highly damaged; a second glance (fig. 1b) reveals that it is handmade of sacking cloth, lined with fragments of penmanship practice with such moral admonitions as, "Avoid all appearance...., Honour Father and Mother...., A good girl will mind...." Clearly, if this volume were rebound and the original cover discarded—still a common practice in more libraries than I care to think about—we would lose vital evidence about the social milieu and historical period in which this book was created.

Likewise, as materials are prioritized for conservation at the collection level, we must allow both research value and physical vulnerability to play important roles in our decisions. A good example is the manuscript of a sermon delivered in 1890 by Primus Priss Alston, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation (fig. 2). Alston

was an ex-slave who studied for the ministry and went on to serve almost thirty years as an ordained priest in Charlotte, North Carolina. There is no question that this highly deteriorated document doesn't *look* like it's very valuable when placed next to an illuminated manuscript or an early printed book. But in fact, its research value is enormous, and it's clear that this material is vulnerable to loss if not treated.

When viewed at a collection-wide level, the impact of perceived value can multiply exponentially if we look at a situation like my own in the context of a major research

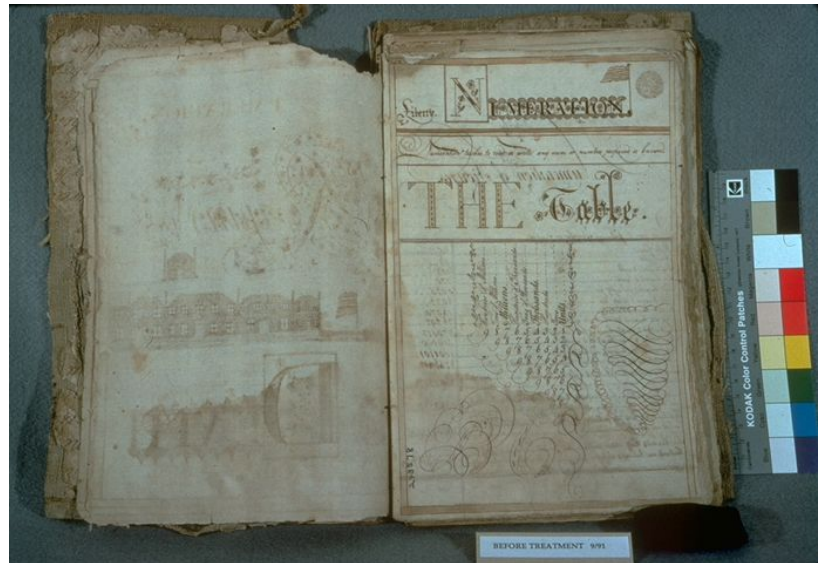


Fig. 1a. Mathematics exercise book kept by Martha Ryan, North Carolina, ca. 1781. Martha Ryan Cipher Book #1940, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

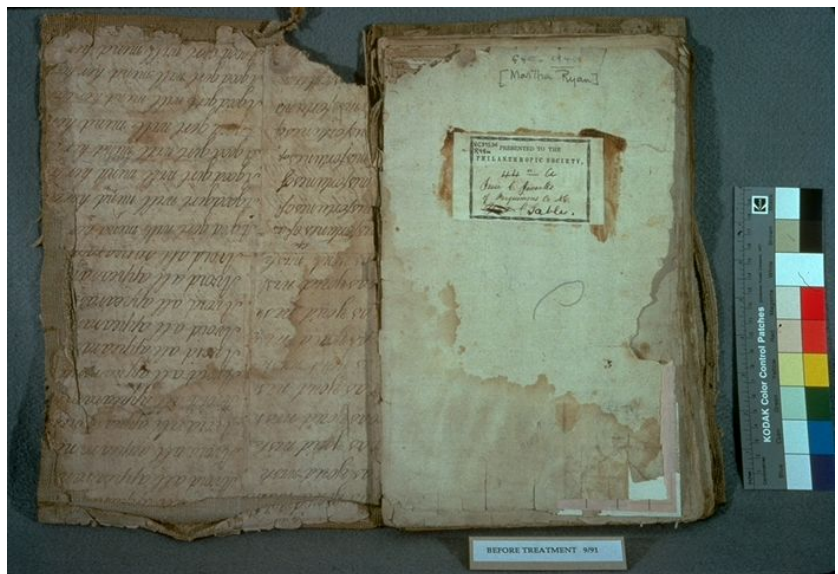


Fig. 1b. Inside front of sacking cloth wrapper lined with fragments of penmanship practice

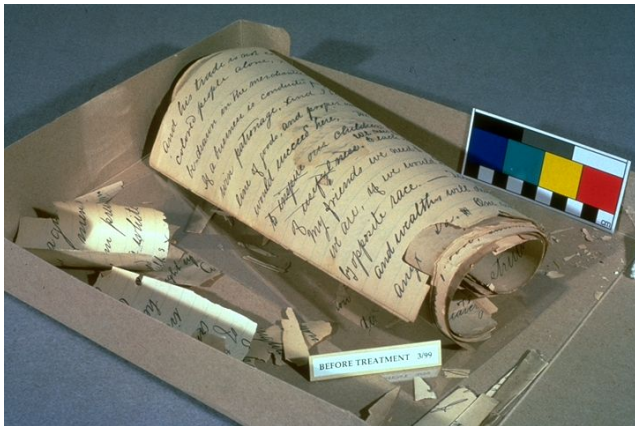


Fig. 2. Primus Priss Alston manuscript sermon, 1890, before treatment. Charles Henry Alston Papers #4931, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

collection where I am the only conservator for hundreds of thousands of rare books and millions of manuscripts. Let's make a hypothetical comparison. How do we weigh the time needed to treat a fifteenth-century printing of a classic text—even if the pages are badly stained and the twentieth-century binding is partially detached and historically inappropriate—against the use of the same amount of time to treat the memoir of an American woman traveler in Europe after the Napoleonic Wars, three country music posters, a diary of a nineteenth-century merchant's voyage to Africa, and a small collection of anti-lynching broadsides. Can we say that the fifteenth-century volume, an incunabulum (something “everyone” agrees is “valuable”), actually needs treatment when these other items, some of them in far more compromised condition, might receive more intense research use and document more diverse experiences?

Without digging too deeply, it's fairly obvious that at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill far more primary research is carried out on nineteenth- and twentieth-century issues of race, class, and gender in American society than textual analysis of fifteenth-century works.⁴ So even though the older item may have cost more to acquire or have more value on the open market, based on its limited research potential within this institution and its basically usable condition, I'd assert that it is not a conservation priority. If suggested for treatment, it becomes part of my job not only to recognize, but to *point out* that the privileging of this one volume comes at the expense of other items that have been historically overlooked as conservation candidates.

I know that some people think that it's not the conservator's job to be involved in those decisions. I've come to believe that it is. In a research library, our charge is the care of the *collection* in the service of the library's mission, however that may be defined. Our responsibility goes beyond

the individual object that's brought to us for treatment and even beyond our decisions to prioritize one volume over another, for example, because it has pressure-sensitive tape all over it. If large areas of the collection with high research value and a high level of vulnerability to deterioration are systematically ignored, I believe it is the conservator's job to be an advocate for those materials. This knowledge must be brought to bear no matter who brings it to the table or how their role has been traditionally defined.

As a result of my thinking about these issues, my traditional interactions with curators, where we juggle my time as a primary factor for prioritizing treatment choices, now include a look at subject matter in the context of my knowledge of each collection, its research strengths, and physical condition. In an effort to open the dialogue even further about possible candidates that have not been traditionally privileged, I also consider library- and even university-wide efforts and concerns to propose conservation projects. For example, several years ago, I initiated work with the Rare Book Collection to prioritize and treat items among our nineteenth-century African-American materials. I began with first-person narratives, since these were the most heavily used and are often extremely rare. Eventually, as some of these materials became important to our *Documenting the American South*⁵ digitization project and required conservation before they could be safely handled for scanning, their priority as conservation candidates became more widely acknowledged.

As a profession, we've discussed, dissected, and debated the shift of the conservator from the bench to administration. And as a profession, I believe that we're gradually coming to see that our movement up into the administrative levels of our libraries and museums ultimately protects the collections we care for as our voices become more powerful in decision-making contexts. The questions I'm raising about selection and the knowledge that we as conservators are “allowed” to bring to bear are related to some of the same conflicting views about our roles.

I would like to suggest that we step farther out of our technical role and assert the knowledge that many of us have gained, either through scholarly training or direct experience with our collections and users. Today, gaps in the historical record are widely acknowledged, but a conscious change in patterns of selection for all functions—acquiring, retaining, *and* conserving—is needed to begin to redress the situation and prevent its perpetuation in the future. And especially within the group of materials that are already classed as rare or unique and identified as part of special collections, we must overcome the tendency to think about value in chiefly monetary terms and history as defined by the powerful. I'd like to see us become advocates for the historical importance of less privileged materials. Even in situations where curatorial

prerogative is firmly entrenched, conservators can begin to ask questions that challenge the status quo.

I am comfortable asserting my role as conservator and intellectual advocate for “other-ness,” and I am also fortunate to work in an institution open to my changing role. The task of prioritizing for conservation is always daunting. Working with such massive collections, we recognize that there is not a single answer for every institution or conservation program. But for me, it’s critically important that we acknowledge our role as cultural workers who are players—either consciously or not—in the creation of the historical record and public memory. If we continue to invest all of our resources in materials that have been traditionally valued, will those that have not been so privileged be available for use by the researcher of the future? The issue of what survives is obviously closely tied to both library and conservation work at many levels. Is it so different to censor or discard materials than to systematically ignore those in categories that are often the most vulnerable to loss? It may be different in intent, but the results are similar.

As conservators, we can, and in some cases should, make it our responsibility to go beyond the individual object and look at the whole collection in radically new ways. We must *all* be conscious of *whose* history/culture/art we are preserving. As I see it, part of my job as a conservator is to challenge the invisible assumptions about value in the world of library conservation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1. “Special collections” refers to a range of primary source materials, including rare books, manuscripts, photographs, maps, art works, audio-visual materials, and other artifacts that are maintained in their original format.

2. Miguel Angel Corzo, ed., *Mortality immortality?: the legacy of 20th-century art* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), xv.

3. “The Invisible Process: Ingenuity and Cooperation in Finding Women’s Lives,” Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 3 July – 30 September 1997. Exhibit cat-

alog (66p.), including all text and selected images, is available upon request from the author.

4. For example: *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (1987), Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly; *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (1988), Elizabeth Fox-Genovese; *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina* (1996), Glenda Gilmore; *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (1996), Drew Faust; *Constructing Townscapes: Space and Society in Antebellum Tennessee* (1999), Lisa C. Tolbert

5. *Documenting the American South* is a collection of digitized sources on Southern history, literature, and culture from the colonial period through the first decades of the twentieth century. See <<http://www.ibiblio.org/docsouth/>>.

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