

Archives Conservators Discussion Group 2004: Paper Mending: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How

ABSTRACT

Paper mending was the topic for the 2004 Archives Conservators Discussion Group. As presented by those attending the discussion group, a wide range of staff in archives may be engaged in paper mending, from senior conservators to student assistants or volunteers. There is however a lack of training materials specifically aimed at archives paper conservation. Participants described decision-making for paper mending in archives; practices ranged from opting for alternative solutions (use of Mylar sleeves) to full treatment. Some institutions focus on materials during processing, selection in others is driven by use or exhibition. Discussion of materials focused on pre-fabricated mending materials, either commercially available or prepared in-house. A selected bibliography on paper mending is appended.

This year's topic for the Archives Conservation Discussion Group was paper mending. The session was invigorated by returning to an active discussion format instead of brief presentations. We prepared questions to guide conversation based on various considerations for mending: who is involved with mending, what are appropriate techniques, when and why are decisions made to mend, how are people trained, and how are projects supported financially. A show of hands revealed that our group for 2004 was made up of conservators in archives (9); in libraries with partial responsibility for archives (14); and

This open discussion took place on June 13, 2004, during the AIC 32nd Annual Meeting, June 9–14, 2004, Portland, Oregon. The moderators organized and led the discussion and recorded notes. Readers are reminded that the moderators do not necessarily endorse all the comments recorded and that although every effort was made to record proceedings accurately, further evaluation or research is advised before putting treatment observations into practice.

didn't identify (10). After the introduction, we broke into smaller groups. Each group elected a note taker, and we worked our way through the questions. The individual groups reported back to the larger group to share ideas and bring up further questions. The prompting questions appear below, followed by selected comments. References and resources follow.

MENDING: GENERAL DEFINITION

Locally joining splits or tears or reinforcing cracks in a paper support using an adhesive material (*Paper Conservation Catalog* 1984, chapter 25).

WHO: THE PERSONNEL

Who's doing the mending? Is it always a trained conservator? Do archivists, students, volunteers, or others do basic mending? Are you training others to mend? Are you supplementing training with documents and tutorials that are online, on videos, or in books? Are you utilizing workshops available through regional centers or other groups? Are these training materials appropriate to archival collections (often they are focused on library collections)?

Many labs have long-term or student technicians and support work at remote branches. Some do not mend at all on a regular basis, choosing rehousing over targeted-value or exhibit-based treatment. One institution has a "stabilization unit" staffed by an assistant conservator and technicians who treat large quantities of archival materials; the other unit is staffed by three senior conservators. Another lab has eighty percent student technicians. Another makes use of distance education remote technology to run interactive training sessions for staff.

WHAT: APPROPRIATE TECHNIQUES

What mending materials and methods are you using (Japanese paper and paste? Heat-set tissues? Filmoplast?

Remoistenable tissue?). In the context of general library collections conservation, portions of a collection are likely to be considered nonpermanent and so a variety of mending materials can be used (e.g., “archival” tapes). Do we have that luxury in archives? How do we balance the need to have accessible collections, yet maintain sound conservation techniques? How much time do you spend removing previous inappropriate or damaging mending?

Discussion about prefabricated mending papers was lively. The materials used run the gamut from commercially made heat-set tissue to Japanese tissue and paste and homemade remoistenable tissues (starch, methylcellulose, hydroxypropyl cellulose (Klucel), or butyl acrylate-based (Lascaux)—depending on appropriateness, complexity of treatment and lab equipment or staff expertise). Disturbingly, someone mentioned that “Filmoplast heat-set adhesive may be causing inks to move and crosslinking occurs”; in the lab where this was noted, “heat-set tissues are used for bridge mends, but not over text” to avoid the potential problem. It was noted that “heat-set tissues are especially good for coated papers” and “training unskilled staff is easiest with Filmoplast or heat-set tissues.” The popularity of remoistenable tissues appears to be increasing.

WHEN AND WHY: THE CONTEXT OF DECISION-MAKING

In the context of the huge archival collections we maintain, when is a decision made to mend and by whom? How do curatorial staff recognize the need to mend and what is your procedure for having items enter a treatment queue? How do you prioritize treatments and collections? Does mending occur with initial processing or only after use? Do you try to anticipate a collection’s projected use? Do you focus on “high value” collections? And how do you define value? How involved are you in the decision to work on a particular collection or portion of a collection?

Many libraries don’t mend—choosing rather to encapsulate or sleeve—unless an item is of “sufficient value.” Alternately, repair is applied by trained archives technicians during processing, with the idea that in a large archive, “if you don’t do it when you process, it may never be done.” In larger archives, “archival and conservation staff identify materials in collection for treatment”; for example, at the National Archives and Record Administration (NARA), record liaisons are responsible for assessing use and condition and prioritizing treatment in a queue, considering also historic value, exhibition, or new acquisition status. In other labs, “a curatorial prompt is needed to determine treatment”; “Mylar sleeves inserted during processing are a prompt to conservation”; and “research staff ID items as they access items.” Those present reported removing inappropriate repairs ten to seventy percent of the time,

reflecting the range of prioritization and resources at our institutions. To improve selection for preservation, more tools specifically for archives could be developed for educating archives managers and staff to prioritize repairs (such as: structural versus cosmetic; disbinding and separation by format in an archive versus a library). It seems that we are more used to the concept of phased preservation in libraries than in archives.

HOW: RESOURCES

How are resources found for training or for a project? Do you lobby for external and internal resources for particular projects or collections? How much time do you spend in seeking out resources for conservation projects—both internal and external to your institution? How often do you initiate grant applications with a conservation focus or is repair and conservation treatment part of larger grant proposals including processing?

This topic fell victim to time constraints but it was agreed that no one has enough staff or money! It was noted that money is regularly budgeted for rehousing supplies, so that conservation supplies should be piggybacked onto budgets for enclosure materials if there is no separate conservation budget. Money-saving tips included the use of commercial and homemade prepared remoistenable tissues to minimize waste of prepared adhesives, such as expensive precipitated starch paste. Paste storage systems, such as crimpable aluminum tubes or sterilized boiled jars and commercially available single-use packets were mentioned as cost-saving measures, since there is generally a high degree of spoilage when prepping paste. Prepared adhesives can also support staff in remote locations without ready access to lab supplies. Having prepared materials also minimizes setup time, important for those with part-time staff.

SUMMARY

Whether or not heat-set tissues were appropriate generated much discussion, based on ease of use versus potential reversibility and ink migration problems. We noted an increase in the manufacture and use of a variety of “home-made” solvent (water, alcohol) remoistenable tissues. Areas for further development identified include development of training media specific for an archives context that could be used in distance education. There is a lack of training materials specifically designed for an archives mindset, especially for selection and justification of treatment. The following questions arose: how often curatorial input is needed, how much documentation is maintained in archives conservation, and how much time is spent on it and for whom.

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