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Article: Recentering the Bench

Authors: Aisha Wahab, Kristen St. John, and Richenda Brim

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American Institute for Conservation
727 15th Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
info@culturalheritage.org www.culturalheritage.org

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Recentering the Bench

INTRODUCTION

This article describes work done throughout 2020–2021 in Stanford Libraries’ Conservation Services unit to revise documentation practices to promote more inclusive, anti-racist, and accurate descriptions in conservation documentation.

This work was motivated by two projects. In 2019, Conservation Services participated in a pilot project to share conservation documentation through linked data. This coincided with revisions to internal conservation documentation forms.

Following the murder of George Floyd and the anti-racist uprisings of the summer of 2020, the authors of this article began to see work on these two projects as an opportunity to align internal projects with a desire to promote anti-racism, to examine Eurocentric practices, and to seek greater accuracy in documentation.

This work was informed by the institutional context and anti-racist work being done in libraries and archives. The article explores how anti-racist and Eurocentric biases can be defined and identified in conservation. The article also discusses what was done to revise forms, terms, expectations, and projects. A summary of work to date and suggestions for future action conclude the article.

ANTI-RACISM IN LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

Over the past decade, libraries, archives, and affiliated organizations like the Digital Library Federation and the Association for Computers and the Humanities have begun in-depth reviews of their metadata standards with an eye for developing more inclusive practices that respectfully and accurately describe their collections (note 1). A few notable actions concerning anti-racist and inclusive description in libraries and archives include a 2014 Dartmouth-initiated petition to the Library of Congress to replace the subject heading “illegal aliens” with the phrase “undocumented immigrants” and the 2017 article “Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy

in Archives” by Michelle Caswell, associate professor in Archival Studies in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA (DeSantis 2016; Peet 2016; Caswell 2017). In her article, Caswell considers the outcomes from a discussion with students about the pervasiveness of white privilege in archival practice and suggests corrective actions, including training in cultural humility for archivists. In 2019, Princeton University Library Rare Book and Special Collections Technical Services, one group inspired by Caswell’s work, formed an Inclusive Description Working Group after completing a “description audit project.” They published a “Statement on Language in Archival Description” stating their goal to describe collections “respectful to the individuals and communities who create, use, and are represented in the collections” (Suarez 2020). In 2020, there was a groundswell of description review activity in libraries and archives in response to the murder of George Floyd. Many libraries and archives developed public statements on harmful language in cataloging records and finding aids that have been compiled on the [Cataloginglab.org](https://www.cataloginglab.org) (2021) page “List of Statements on Bias in Library and Archives Description,” including the Stanford Special Collections and University Archives Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Cataloging and Archival Description.

Recognizing that conservation is not a silo but part and parcel to libraries, archives, and other cultural heritage institutions, the authors felt it incumbent upon them to stop and reflect on the language being used in their conservation documentation, especially as departmental linked data and conservation documentation projects were under way. The authors wanted to consider not only how language used in their work contributes to the systematic racism that pervades all aspects in the United States but also how it contributes to racism and bias in the conservation field.

During the evaluation of documentation practices for the linked data project and the revision of in-house documentation forms, the staff realized the need to discuss specific terminology, including even the most basic terms like *recto* and *verso*. The authors wanted to evaluate if their documentation practices were inclusive and respectful. Did their documentation include the practices and traditions of global cultures? Or did the existing terminology

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used “other” these diverse practices and traditions into a monolithic non-Western grouping that relied on an assumed European baseline, where European practices and timelines set the standard against which all other cultures are defined? Staff asked how and why terms were used with special attention to terms that are defined in exclusionary, Eurocentric, and/or colonialist language. They asked how they could reject white-centric, Eurocentric, orientalist, and colonialist practices of description. What changes to current documentation practices are necessary? And last, were other conservation labs already asking these questions or implementing change?

OUR PROJECT

Linked Data

In 2018, Stanford Libraries joined the Linked Conservation Data Consortium, a project aiming to develop and promote the use of linked data for the sharing of conservation documentation. In the fall of 2019 Stanford Libraries participated in a pilot project with three other research libraries to share 30 to 40 conservation treatment reports from the past 40 years that describe conservation treatment to books that needed boards reattached. The goal of the project was to model information from the reports so they could be searched across institutions to answer research questions about trends in treatment types over time and materials in use.

Linked data is a set of standards and protocols used to generate machine-readable information out of structured data such as checkboxes or prepopulated fields in a conservation treatment report. If other reports are organized similarly, searching across large groups of documentation for items, materials, or activities can be efficient.

To create linked data, each term referenced in a report needs a unique identifier (e.g., a URL). When varying terms are used for the same concept, it is possible to align them by pointing to a shared concept. This improves searching across institutions that may use different terms for the same concept.

In conservation, this alignment is desirable, as often different conservators use different terms for the same structure, material, or concept depending on their training, educational programs, and/or employers. Examples can be referring to a type of paper as “blotter” or “blotting paper” or referring to a particular book feature as a “headband” or an “endband.”

Alternately, some conservation specialties use the same word to mean different things. “Grain” is defined in one way by a paper conservator but has a different meaning for an objects conservator working with a wooden item. Although a conservator will most often recognize these distinctions, a machine will not, hence the need for unique identifiers.

As preparations for the pilot got under way, Ryan Lieu, operations coordinator for Conservation Services, prepared a spreadsheet of terms used in current (fall 2019) documentation forms. Documentation forms consisted of Word documents with checkboxes for major topics/categories and room for notes and diagrams. The spreadsheet recorded all terms used for checkboxes but did not include or anticipate terms that might be used in narrative notes.

In December 2019, staff met in a half-day session to identify concepts through scope notes or definitions that matched the use of the term in documentation. Sources that were already available for use in linked open data were preferred, although other sources were acceptable when definitions could not be found (note 2).

For most terms, staff found acceptable matches, but in quite a few cases, scope notes and definitions were not satisfactory. A few months later, as staff in the department began to explore how Stanford University’s Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access in a Learning Environment (IDEAL) initiatives could be implemented in departmental work, the authors of this article decided to revisit the terminology spreadsheets and to examine more thoroughly what definitions and scope notes were contentious and how that could be addressed.

As a more extensive review began, repeated patterns of Eurocentrism were identified. Four areas with examples from the departmental spreadsheets are presented next.

Ignorance/lack of representation of practice. Eurocentrism can be evident from the absence of terms in vocabularies or glossaries to adequately describe materials or structures found in collection items created beyond European or North American practice. Broader research on these collections and work with scholars will add additional terms to vocabularies.

Eurocentric definitions may also exclude or ignore practices. One example is this definition for *manuscript*:

Manuscript: Handwritten documents, particularly books and other documents created before the invention of the printing press. May also be used to distinguish certain documents from published or otherwise printed documents, as in the cases of typed personal letters or a typescript from which printed versions are made. (<http://vocab.getty.edu/page/aat/300028569>)

This scope note fails to recognize that the manuscript tradition was the dominant method of text-based information for centuries after the invention of the European printing press in many areas of the world. It centers a Western narrative of technological progression that excludes much of actual global practice.

Definitions that define practice narrowly. A closely related type of Eurocentrism is defining a material or practice so specifically that it excludes examples that could readily be described

by the same term. An example of this is found with this definition for *wooden board*:

Wooden board: *Plank-like wooden boards ranging in thickness from approximately 4 to 20 mm (and occasionally thicker). (<https://www.ligatus.org.uk/lob/concept/3699>)*

This range of measurements may apply to wooden board bindings in the European tradition, but it ignores other practices such as thinner boards that are common to many Armenian manuscript bindings. The inclusion of a specific thickness range without direct connection to specific traditions or examples does not lead to a more accurate definition.

Date ranges without geographical reference. Another common bias is to offer date ranges in definitions without specifying a location. *Gouache (paint)* is an example:

Gouache (paint): *A matte, opaque watercolor paint typically having gum arabic, gum senegal, or dextrin as a binder . . . Gouache was used for miniature paintings in the 16th–18th centuries, for decorative paintings on interior walls, and for printing wall paper patterns. (<http://vocab.getty.edu/page/aat/300070114>)*

This scope note describes its use on miniature paintings in the 16th to 18th centuries—but does not specify where. In definitions like this, the date range may be accurate for Western European items but not for practices in other parts of the world.

Descriptions of physical positioning of books. Because the Roman alphabet (reading left to right) is the dominant alphabet in North America and Europe, many of the terms used to orient a text result in ambiguity or confusion when describing volumes read from right to left. References to the front of the book or the top board can be used accurately with either text orientation, but forms or diagrams may not reflect the other orientation. One solution may be to indicate left board or right board, but is the need for this clarification an additional reflection of Eurocentric practice?

The terms *recto* and *verso* have been used to describe the sides of leaves within a text. They frame the *recto*, or right side, of the text as the carrier of primary information. This fails to acknowledge that for other text reading practices, the left side may hold the primary information.

Some scope notes or definitions orient the parts of the book to how they are positioned on the shelf, presuming that books stand upright on shelves rather than being stored lying down on their sides.

This analysis of sources and definitions does not seek to diminish the work of colleagues who have compiled these thesauri, glossaries, and vocabularies. The time and expertise that compilers have put into building resources usable by conservators and others is significant, as is the benefit to having these resources within the conservation field.

However, failing to broaden terminology and address Eurocentric biases presents challenges. Ambiguity in terminology and definitions can lead to confusion and misunderstanding. It limits the ability to generate quick and accurate descriptions of a conservator's work. It makes it harder to search documentation. Not only within the records held within a specific institution, but as institutions share documentation more openly among peer institutions and outside researchers, clarity and inclusive accuracy will be even more important.

Documentation Forms

In addition to the linked data scope notes project, the conservation staff at Stanford Libraries also undertook a project in 2019 to revise the lab's conservation documentation forms. With the linked data project under way and an upcoming shift to a searchable database system this year, the conservation department hoped to refresh and solidify a semistructured hybrid documentation form with checkboxes for searchability and narrative for flexibility. The narrative sections of the documentation forms allowed space for these variations, for the unusual, and for further explanation of the item being treated, its condition, and the treatment.

In the creation of the form's checkboxes, conservation staff realized the limitations of specific terminology available and being used within the lab and conservation, the lack of consensus of certain terms, and the lack of knowledge to include more expansive terms. For example, in creating the unbound documentation form, several terms were included that could help distinguish between papermaking techniques and traditions. Initially, terms that had been used in the past and/or were frequently being used in the profession were included, such as the terms *machine-made*, *handmade*, *Western*, and *non-Western*. Although possibly convenient, the terms *Western* and *non-Western* caused some discomfort, concern, and a desire to pause and reflect. Discussions emerged among the conservation staff around book and paper conservation terminology in the context of an anti-racism framework, the need for re-evaluation, and how the conservation unit wanted to move forward in an inclusive, respectful, and anti-racist direction.

Conservation staff believed there was value in including specific terms that could be used to search against in researching treatments. For example, when wanting to see how conservators have treated paper from Japan, being able to distinguish between papers from different parts of the world would be helpful. Yet using "Western" and "non-Western" categories that resulted in lumping all the world's papermaking traditions other than Europe and North America—and the cultures and people who contributed to these traditions—into a single "non-Western" box seemed inappropriate, disrespectful, and Eurocentric. More questions among the staff were raised: What were the other options? Should the

form include boxes for “European paper” and “East Asian paper,” or should the checkboxes be even more specific like “Korean paper” or “Japanese paper”? Do the lab’s conservators feel they have the knowledge to use these checkboxes? With questions surfacing, it was decided that in addition to evaluating the lab’s documentation terminology and scope notes, there was a need to reach out to other conservators and specialists, as these questions were bigger than one lab. Were others confronted with these quandaries, and were others thinking about and discussing current terminology practices?

COLLEAGUE INTERVIEWS

During February and March 2021, colleagues at seven other research library conservation labs were interviewed. Additionally, five individuals with expertise in specific regional practice were interviewed (note 3). All interviewees were sent the same set of questions in advance with some additional questions for experts reflecting their area of expertise. These questions may be found in the appendix to this article.

The interviews provided a lot of valuable and interesting information, and a few major themes were noted. When it came to current documentation practices, most conservators were using a mixture of both narrative and checkbox formats. Most were interested in the possibility of searchability; however, currently, checkbox formats were used primarily for time efficiency and less for searchability, as few participants had searchable databases. Many institutions and individual conservators did have some type of preferred terms list. No one preferred terms list was used across the board, and some institutions had multiple preferred terms lists among different individuals. Both in-house and published guides were used. Among the published guides, there were a few like the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s *Descriptive Terminology for Works of Art on Paper* (Ash et al. 2014) that were referenced by several participants.

Opinions about specific terminology varied in the context of geographic or cultural identification of practices and materials. Some found terms like *Western* and *non-Western* discomfiting or problematic and did not use those terms, whereas others found the terms problematic but still used them out of convenience, and some disagreed and did not find using the terms *Western* and *non-Western* problematic at all.

Examining more specific naming practice, trends in conservation did appear to follow associated fields to some degree. Shifting language trends dealing with materials produced under Muslim-ruled areas in history, art history, codicology, and the art world have been taking place over the past decade (Lawrence, n.d.). Where paper produced in areas under Muslim-ruled empires has been referred to as “Islamic paper” or sometimes grouped incorrectly as “Arabic paper,” more nuanced terms such as *Islamicate paper*, *paper from the*

Muslim world, *paper from the Islamic world*, and *paper from the Islamic heartland* are progressively being favored. Sometimes terms with more specificity such as *Central Asian Islamic-style paper*, *Kashmiri paper*, or *Persianate paper* are also being used when expertise is present.

Throughout all the interviews, a consistent theme was interviewees’ desire for precision and accuracy in documentation. How this is interpreted varied particularly in reference to geographic or cultural attribution for historic materials or binding styles. Some conservators prefer to limit their description to physical characteristics alone. They might describe a historic paper as white, laid, and burnished. This is seen as neutral and precise. Other conservators are more comfortable in attributing geographic origin based on their experience and knowledge. They suggest that noting material and geographic differences shows respect for the context of the individual creators of items that fill collections. Regarding contemporary repair papers, most interviewees were interested in documenting their geographic origin. However, discussions surrounding the complexity of vendor information and fiber origin, such as papers manufactured in Japan or Korea with kozo fibers from Thailand, sometimes complicated documentation of geographic origin.

Institutional resources can be a key component of the ability to be precise. For those at institutions with catalogers or curators who have expertise in area studies or other languages, conservators may rely on that expertise and limit their description to physical characteristics alone. If items are well described by catalog or finding aid records, they report less need to provide that information. However, other conservators do not have those resources to rely on if they are in smaller institutions or do not have a breadth to the technical resources in their library. Conservators may have knowledge that exceeds that of catalogers or curators, particularly in terms of materials and structures. A conservator’s expertise can be useful to curatorial staff.

During the interviews, there was also engagement around the description of evidence of use as “damage” and if the geographic, cultural, or temporal context of an item affects its description. Anecdotally, there appears to be a shift away from using the descriptor “damage” and growing preference for the descriptors “use” or “wear,” or the phrase “shows signs of wear from possible use.” Some conservators and curators prefer neutral language that does not carry blame, or apply agency or intentionality, coinciding with a shift toward more conservative and thoughtful treatment approaches.

Finally, in our interviews, we found that overall most interview participants felt that terminology and language within the library conservation community was worth evaluating. A continuing theme that echoed throughout the interviews was a need within the conservation field for more accurate and accessible information on terminology and description of materials outside of Europe and North America. Yet there

were also concerns that the creation of specific terminology and language rules can be in and of itself exclusionary and undemocratic at the price of being accurate. The question is: Can there be a balance?

These conversations have begun, as well as projects, at institutions and within the field. Several labs that participated in the interviews felt that a terminology evaluation project was timely for them, often because they were shifting to a new documentation system as well as wanting to participate in anti-racist action within the library field. Some conservators have been participating in terminology discussions and projects that are impacting both the conservation field and related fields, like Karen Scheper and Paul Hepworth's work on the *Terminology for the Conservation and Description of Islamic Manuscripts* (Hepworth and Scheper, 2020) that is being used by codicologists, conservators, and other collection specialists.

ACTION PLAN

The research and interviews provided valuable information capturing concerns and ideas of colleagues. This information has been instrumental in planning how Stanford's Conservation Services unit will move forward with terminology projects.

Linked Data

The terminology work for linked data will continue to develop in conjunction with the evolution and revision of lab documentation forms. Terms with scope notes and definitions available for use in linked open data sources will be used where possible. When terms are evaluated to be Eurocentric or otherwise display bias, two different approaches have been and will continue to be used. In the first, existing definitions will be edited for internal use. This is preferred when terms are too detailed and can be easily modified. A second approach involves writing new scope notes or definitions.

The authors also hope to work with terminology projects where feedback can be given to offer more inclusive scope notes, although the authors have not had time to undertake this phase of vocabulary development to date.

Documentation Forms

Work on the documentation forms is currently ongoing, both to finalize terms and format structure for the transition into a searchable database later in the year. The opportunity to speak with colleagues at the beginning of the year has helped inform the direction of the lab's conservation documentation and terminology checklists.

Terms considered to be convenient but problematic or discomforting, including overarching terms like *Western* and *non-Western*, will be removed from checklists and documentation forms. The unbound documentation forms' checkboxes

will shift away from geographic emphasis for historic materials to a focus on visual characteristics like burnishing and the presence of a watermark as an aid for possible geographic regions and papermaking traditions. The shift in emphasis does not nullify the importance of acknowledging papermaking traditions and the people and cultures that make up these traditions. The lab's documentation will attempt to balance this shift by continuing to provide space in narrative sections for such observations and further notes when knowledge or expertise are present.

For contemporary repair papers, discussions among the conservation staff surrounding documentation of vendor information are ongoing.

Last, the conservation unit will aim to keep up with and evaluate current scholarship's use of language and terms. The lab intends to shift away from the terms *Islamic paper* and *Islamic bindings* to *Islamicate* or *paper/bindings from the Islamic world*, both because staff believe the shift is currently appropriate and staff try to stay concurrent with not only conservation but other related fields.

SUGGESTIONS FOR BROADER ACTION

Through this local review of documentation, conservation staff learned not only where descriptive practices could be more inclusive but also how reflection on description processes, transparency around practices, self-education, and research fuel process improvement. From this experience, the authors recommend that conservators develop internal glossaries, support research and education in anti-racist practice, and be mindful of subjectivity in description practices.

But a move toward more inclusive and respectful documentation requires more than local review of practices in labs and studios. Substantive change needs support and action in the profession at large, including increased opportunity for education on bindings and papers from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East at the graduate and postgraduate levels and continued development of shared terminology lists and wikis. Through combined efforts at the local and wider professional level, moving the conservation field toward more inclusive and anti-racist practices is possible.

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APPENDIX. COLLEAGUE INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Stanford Libraries Conservation Services Anti-Racist Conservation Terminology Project Questions for Interviewees

Thank you for agreeing to discuss these questions with us.

We began our inquiries into this area when we started examining our own documentation practices. We found ourselves questioning our use of terms like *Western paper* and *non-Western paper* in our documentation forms. As we got more involved with linked data work and were selecting conservation terminology and definitions, our dissatisfaction grew looking at scope notes for terms as straightforward as *manuscript* and *recto and verso*, which struck us as Eurocentric and exclusionary. Along with examining our practices, we decided to see how others are considering these issues to see if your work could help us resolve questions we still have.

We have more questions than we have time, so we have put the questions **in bold** that we would like to prioritize in our conversation. We are including other questions should we have time and to let you know our particular areas of reflection. We would welcome written feedback after our call if you would like to share additional thoughts.

General

1. **Have you had or are there currently any projects to evaluate/address terminology or creating in-house guidelines at your lab or even institution in general (for example, in your curatorial, cataloging, or metadata departments?)**
2. **Do you feel it is a subject that is worth evaluating at your lab, institution, or within the book/paper conservation field?**
3. **Have you noticed or are you aware of shifts in the terms that are being used in your lab?**
4. **Do you have/keep a list of preferred terms for your documentation?**
5. Have you heard of or do you know of any similar projects occurring at other institutions or among other conservators?
6. How greatly do catalog/registrars records determine or influence terminology within the lab?
7. Do you use existing vocabularies/thesauri for your documentation? AAT? RBMS vocabularies? Other?

Book and Paper

8. **What are your current practices in describing historical papers/bindings from different parts of the world? What terms are used and when? (e.g., *Western paper*, *Eastern paper*, *Islamic paper*, etc.). Does that vary from how you describe contemporary papers/bindings?**

9. Do you ever use terminology beyond general categories of “Western,” “European,” “East Asian,” and so forth, such as “French,” “Korean,” “Vietnamese,” “Persian”? If so, when do you use these terms? If not, why don’t you use more specific terms (lack of knowledge, time for identification, lack of available information on these materials, etc.)?

10. What is the primary factor in identification terminology for a complex book or paper item? Is it based on structural, material, geographic, cultural, or temporal qualities? Do the qualities you name shift for items from different parts of the world? Examples could include:

- a. **an Armenian text bound in a standard 19th-century Persian binding**
- b. **a Qur’an written in Arabic produced in Nigeria with a leather satchel binding**
- c. **a four-hole sewn binding from China that has been rebound into a library binding**
- d. **a contemporary paper made with kozo fibers using traditional Japanese techniques but manufactured in the United States.**

11. In your area of expertise, do you find how other conservators describe items lacking, incomplete, inaccurate, or otherwise problematic?

12. Do you describe signs of use as damage? Does the geographic, cultural, temporal context of the item change your description?

13. Is the term *Islamic*, *Muslim*, *Arab*, *Middle Eastern* paper/book used? If so, when and why?

14. What are your current terminology practices for describing books and paper from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa?

15. When you use a date range in a description for a material or process, is that based on a Western historical timeline?

Paper

16. Do you use a broad term for pounded/pressed fiber leaves such as *amate* and *tapa*? For example, *proto-papers*?

Book

17. What are your current practices in describing books from different parts of the world? What terms are used and when?

18. How do you describe opening or text orientation for books from around the world?

Final Questions

19. **Are there specific conservation terms that you find limiting, inappropriate, uncomfortable, Eurocentric, etc.? Do you still use these terms? If so, why? No other option, lack of knowledge, no consensus or discussion for a better term, etc.?**

NOTES

1. For further reading on descriptive language reviews and the movement toward more inclusive description in libraries, archives, and related organizations, please see the Tufts University Digital Collections and Archives bibliography *Additional Reading: Potentially Harmful Language in Archival Description* at <https://dca.tufts.edu/about/policies/Additional-Reading-Potentially-Harmful-Language-in-Archival-Description/>. The Digital Library Federation Cultural Assessment Working Group posts project updates from their Inclusive Metadata Task Force to their wiki at https://wiki.diglib.org/Assessment:Cultural_Assessment/. The Association for Computers and the Humanities published an online terminology guide that they will update with terms as contributed at <https://ach.org/toward-anti-racist-technical-terminology/>.

2. Thesauri, glossaries, and other terminology sources with conservation content that are available as linked open data include *Art & Architecture Thesaurus Online* (J. Paul Getty Trust 2017) and *the Language of Bindings Thesaurus* (University of the Arts London, n.d.) For the terminology sprint, second-tier choices included a broader range of sources that are structured so that only moderate effort would be needed to make them available for use as linked data. These include the *AIC Conservation Wiki*, *CAMEO: Conservation and Art Materials Encyclopedia Online*, *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books* by Etherington and Roberts, and Rare Books and Manuscripts Section: *Controlled Vocabularies*.

3. The authors interviewed conservation staff at the following institutions: the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the British Library; Dartmouth College; Duke University; the Getty; the Library of Congress; and Yale University. Our subject experts were Michaëlle Biddle, University of Hamburg; Kazuko Hioki, University of Hawaii; Evyn Kropf, University of Michigan; Radha Pandey, artist, papermaker, and letterpress printer; and Karin Scheper, Leiden University.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

RICHENDA BRIM

Associate Director, Preservation
Stanford Libraries
Stanford, CA
rbrim@stanford.edu

KRISTEN ST. JOHN

Head, Conservation Services
Stanford Libraries
Stanford, CA
kstjohn@stanford.edu

AISHA WAHAB

Paper Conservator
Stanford Libraries
Stanford, CA
awahab@stanford.edu