

Duels or Dialogues?

The Relationship Between Archivists and Conservators

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Given the small number of archival institutions in Canada which employ conservators, one might wonder if the relationship is worth examining. In fact, the relationship is more far-ranging than one might assume. Whether or not they have the luxury of working with a staff conservator, most archivists have had some, if only indirect, exposure to conservators. Reflecting on both personal experience and the opinions of conservators and archivists regarding each other, the author would like to look at the nature of the contact between our professions, some of the types of conflict which may arise, and to express some ideas on how to resolve these disagreements.

Some archivists have contact with conservators only by attending workshops, and they may think that conservation chiefly means flattening and encapsulation. Others may get periodic visits from mobile laboratories, and think of conservators as the people who pop in occasionally to do humidity readings and to take away a few items for treatment. Archival Studies students at the University of British Columbia have an entire curriculum course devoted to conservation, so that they are exposed to quite a wide range of issues and techniques, and perhaps graduate with some idea of how conservators think. Other archivists may only talk to a conservator on the telephone when they need help with a specific problem, so that they may think of the conservator as the person who can tell them what kind of envelopes to order. Someone in a remote location might get all of their information from newsletters and technical bulletins, and thereby get the impression that conservation is a list of rigid standards which must be met. It seems that many archivists have encountered only one or two aspects of conservation and remain unaware of the rest.

Please don't get the impression that conservators are misunderstood by archivists. One reason why we don't always understand each other is the nature of the training we have had. We come to archives from totally different directions. You may find that the conservators to whom you talk are not aware of all the problems that an archivist faces. Certainly, unless they trained overseas or on the job, they may not have learned about how archives run and what their priorities are. Only recently have conservation schools in North America focused specifically on the treatment of collections within archives. In Canada, Queen's University has introduced a separate

stream for training paper conservators, teaching book repair and other library and archival techniques as well as treatments for fine art on paper. In the United States, Columbia University now has a one-year course devoted to library and archives conservation. As a result, in the future you will be seeing more conservators who are familiar with archives, but there are still a lot of us who were not trained that way. In the past, most conservators were trained with a museum or gallery perspective, which emphasizes display techniques and the treatment of individual objects. In a museum, quick access to items in storage is not usually a priority, and public access is extremely limited. In theory, each object is supposed to be treated to the highest standards; assigning priorities is a matter of deciding what to treat first. When someone with that background is hired at an archives, where archivists want storage systems that provide easy retrieval, where the sheer volume of material means that some collections will never get more than minimum care, and where archivists keep giving original documents to the public, a major shift in approach is required.

There is a parallel with the training of archivists, most of whom were trained to consider the historical and organizational aspects of archives, and who may not be used to working conservation into their plans. The average archivist, trained in history, and hired at an institution without a conservator, probably never had many opportunities to think about conservation. This is changing. There are more workshops, seminars, and publications available; there is conservation training for student archivists; the archives councils are starting to address conservation problems; and there is easier access to information via computer networking.¹ There are many more opportunities to interact, which one hopes will lead to a better mutual understanding.

Even with improved and increased training, we are still going to have our disagreements, and some of these should be examined. Probably the most common conflict between conservators and archivists can be summed up as access versus preservation. Archivists want easy access to the collections for their own use, preferring to have them physically kept together, and they also often require public access to originals. Conservators, on the other hand, tend to view preservation as the prime concern, and keep separating collections according to medium and size, making more work for the archivists, who have to scramble to maintain intellectual control over these physically separated collections. In the matter of public access, conservators can give the impression that they would be happy if no one ever touched any of the collection, and that every last scrap of paper should be on microfilm.

It is misleading to divide this issue into two opposing expressions of opinion because access and preservation are concerns that we share, and we should both be working to find an acceptable balance between them. The very first principle printed in the code of ethics for Canadian conservators reads as follows:

It is the responsibility of the conservator, acting alone or with others, to strive constantly to maintain a balance between the need of society to use a cultural property and the preservation of that cultural property.²

Conservators have already formally recognized that access and preservation are concepts which are essentially at odds, and that a compromise must be made. How do we help each other make this compromise? How can archivists reduce access to originals while still properly serving the public, and how can conservators increase access to information without increasing the danger to the collection?

One simple method is judicious encapsulation, and this requires cooperation. At the City of Vancouver Archives, we do not have the time, money, or storage space to allow us to do extensive encapsulation, so that it is necessary to rely on the archivists to report that there are documents which are heavily used, but which are unsuitable for microfilming. This way, if the originals must be used, at least they get some protection from handling.

Of greater importance is the fundamental issue of archivist-researcher relations. Archivists and research room staff, who have the most contact with researchers, can educate them on the handling of documents and can monitor their work habits so that we can minimize the damage that the public can do to originals. Archivists can also prescreen researchers to some extent, so that some prized or delicate collections are off limits to all but the most serious researchers. This may offend some archivists if they think that public collections should be egalitarian, but it seems a common practice. For instance, the City of Vancouver Archives' art collection is available on colour slides to most people, who are just interested in scanning the images, but we do bring out originals for people who want to study more subtle aesthetics. Also, our map and atlas collection is available on fiche, but because we are only using black and white fiche, we still have to bring out the originals of our colour-coded maps. We are continuing to look for ways to limit the access to originals only to those researchers who really need them. Soon, we will be using colour fiche for our maps, so that in theory we will not need to bring out any originals, but we do realize that researchers sometimes need more than just a fiche copy. Even a great fiche will just give textual information. One cannot admire the artistry and technique of cartography, or the texture and colour of the paper, or smell the leather in the atlas binding. Just as it is important for archivists to help limit access to originals in the name of preservation, conservators should realize that researchers sometimes need more than "just the facts."

Another issue which can put us into opposing corners is that of historical fact gathering versus preserving the integrity of the document, or, to put it another way, seeing the document as an artifact rather than just a source of information. An example of this is the problem of a glass negative of a street scene. The photographer had masked off all of the buildings except the one he wanted to feature in his print. Unfortunately, we did not have a photographic record of the other buildings, and we wanted to be able to print the entire negative to get one. This dilemma does not have one correct solution; it depends upon the situation. If one regards that photograph as art, one would not want to tamper with the original intentions of the photographer, or to remove any original material which showed his working methods, and so you would therefore leave the masking in place. Most conservators would probably agree. If, on the other hand, the photograph is seen as a documentary record of the streetscape, one would want to get as much information from it as possible, especially if it were a unique image. This course of action would be the inclination of some archivists. In this particular case, the photographer was unknown and, in the judgment of the photo archivist, the entire collection was only of documentary interest. It was decided to compromise by printing the photograph masked, making a written record of what had been masked, and then removing the masking. The information was revealed and the photographer's intent was preserved in some format, if not on the original negative.

Another related example is the issue of stamping individual items with the name of the archives to which they belong, usually with indelible ink. Is this preservation, because it is deterring theft and saving the document, or is it mutilation, because it is irreversibly altering the original? Advocates for both sides can argue that they are preserving the document. In the first case, it is being preserved so that the information does not disappear; in the second, it is being preserved in its original state.

Conservators have also examined this issue, and their conclusion has always been the same: the professions have to work together to decide on a course of action. In 1984, the International Council of Museums adopted a document outlining the basic purposes, principles and requirements of the conservation profession.

3.3 Because the risk of harmful manipulation or transformation of the object is inherent in any measure of conservation or restoration, the conservator must work in the *closest cooperation* with the curator or other relevant scholar. Together they must distinguish between the necessary and the superfluous, the possible and the impossible, the intervention that enhances the qualities of the object and that which is detrimental to its integrity.³

Harmonious collaboration is a wonderful ideal which seldom occurs in the real world. One of the factors which can inhibit our relationship in a larger institution is political inequality. If conservators and archivists are at different levels of authority within an institution, that difference can create a serious rift in communication. If conservation is reduced to the status of a service department which is merely assigned work by archivists, the result is frustration and resentment, which can even encourage conservators to take a more combative stance in their dealings with archivists to try to compensate for this difference. Having conservation just as a service department also implies that the conservators are left out of the long-range planning of the institution, and means that the archives is not making the best use of its own conservation resources.

Conversely, if the conservators have more authority (not a common situation, but worth considering), then they could propose systems, rules, and standards which are theoretically important for preservation, but difficult to put into practice. For instance, the technical bulletins which give ideal standards for humidity, temperature, and storage enclosures may appear to archivists to be laughably unrealistic, and, in fact, anyone trying for strict adherence to their recommendations would find it financially impossible. Although it is true that the people issuing those standards do not always work with collections themselves, and so may not realize all the difficulties in putting their suggestions into practice, it does not mean that their guidelines are useless. If they are taken in perspective and used simply as guidelines rather than as arbitrary imperatives, then they can be useful even to the smallest institution.

Assuming that archivists and conservators are ready to talk to each other, what should they say? In every case, whether the discussion is with a staff conservator or an outside consultant, try to define all of the dimensions of the problem, rather than just picking a solution and hoping it will fit. As an illustration of this, the author was handed a folded, badly disintegrating map, one meter wide and two meters long, and told to "fix it, and make sure it fits back into a legal-size folder." Spending days treating a document that was going to be forced into a tiny folder

made little sense. This uneasy situation could have grown into an unpleasant conflict if the author had continued to feel pressure to perform a treatment which she felt was wrong.

As it turned out, we were able to discuss the problem rationally and discovered that the archivist's major worry was intellectual control: would that big map become separated from the rest of the collection? Unfortunately, this was communicated to the author as an arbitrary, unreasonable order.

When we discussed the difficulty, we discovered that it extended through the entire series. What we needed was a storage system for all these maps, not just one item. When we had finally defined the problem correctly, we came up with a storage system that allowed us to store these maps rolled up in a separate area, while still relating them on paper to the rest of the series.

Looking at the whole situation meant that we could take a problem-solving approach rather than an adversarial one. It would have been better to start the dialogue with "I'm worried about losing track of this map," rather than "Do it this way." This is especially true for those archivists whose only contact with a conservator is by letter or phone. Sometimes it is hard enough for a staff conservator to figure out what the problem really is; it would be even more confusing for someone else who has never seen your institution.

Under certain circumstances, the conservator should try to get archivists to suggest a solution, especially if a problem is a procedural one, that is, if it involves a change in the archivist's own working methods. For example, when our oversized documents were transported, they were just put on a regular library cart, which meant they would sag, bend in the middle, and extend over the edges of the cart, possibly getting battered en route. This was an obvious mishandling of documents, and set a poor example for our researchers when they saw it. Complaining about it, however, was unproductive. When asked, the archivists admitted that the idea for buying an oversized cart was not a workable solution. Apart from the expense, we knew that it would disappear into the stacks and that nobody would bother to search for it when they needed oversized transport, so they would revert to using the first cart they found. Together we came up with a lightweight, flat panel which attaches quickly and securely to any of our carts. It is sturdy enough to support our large atlases, but lightweight enough that it is easy to use. Had the device been designed entirely by a conservator, it might have been so awkward or heavy that it would not have been used.

That is a simple problem, with a very simple solution, but it shows, along with the previous example, that we should not try to force solutions onto each other since we both have to live with them.

If we agree that there should be continued communication between archivists and conservators, how can we encourage this? We can continue to publish information both in our professional journals and in books. There are not yet enough conservation books aimed at archivists, although the Society of American Archivists' manuals⁴ are good, and *An Ounce of Prevention*⁵ is an outstanding example. We can try to make publicly funded conservation services available to smaller institutions; in most provinces they are still on their own. A major step has been the formation

in Canada of the Archives Council Committee on Conservation, which will attempt to address the needs of the provinces, amongst other worthy projects. Members of both professions can make an effort to speak at each others' regional meetings on topics of mutual interest.

When archivists work directly with a conservator for the first time, they may be hesitant to discuss their problems because they are afraid we will want to introduce expensive, convoluted systems that would make more work for them. With time, as conservators and archivists become accustomed to each other, one hopes that archivists will realize that it is possible for a conservator to be practical and realistic. Both professions will discover that they cannot function independently and that cooperative solutions are the best ones.

Notes

- * This article is based on a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists at Fredericton, N.B., June 1989.
- 1 The largest selection of databases is found in the Conservation Information Network, which has been set up to provide international access to information on technical literature, conservation materials and suppliers, as well as having an electronic mail system. It has not been designed specifically to service archives; it includes information for all conservation disciplines. For more information, write to the Registration Section, Conservation Information Network, The Getty Conservation Institute, 4503 Glencoe Avenue, Marina del Rey, California 90292-6537, U.S.A. Telephone (213) 822-2299.
- 2 *Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice*, International Institute for Conservation — Canadian Group and Canadian Association of Professional Conservators, publishers, Ottawa, 1986.
- 3 International Council of Museums, "The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession," *Museum*, #156, 1987, pp. 231-33.
- 4 Society of American Archivists Basic Manuals Series. The volumes which deal in some way with conservation are: Timothy Walch, *Security*, 1976. Ralph E. Ehrenberg, *Maps and Architectural Drawings*, 1982. Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, *Conservation*, 1983. Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, Gerald J. Munoff and Margery S. Long, *Administration of Photographic Collections*, 1984.
- 5 John P. Barton and Johanna G. Wellheiser, editors, *An Ounce of Prevention*, Toronto Area Archivists Group, 1985.