

The condition of our ‘hidden’ rare book collections

A conservation survey at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Abstract

From 2004 to 2005 the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Conservation Unit undertook a conservation needs survey of the Rare Book and Special Collections Library’s backlog of uncatalogued rare book materials. The survey evaluated the binding structure; level of physical, biological and chemical damage; and unique features of more than 4,000 randomly sampled pieces from the collection. The aim was to gather information to aid in planning for the integration of immediate preservation actions with future cataloguing projects, and to better direct future conservation efforts. This paper details the development of the survey, interprets select results and suggests methodologies for assessing other rare collections and approaches to integrating the identified immediate preservation needs with cataloguing and processing projects.

Introduction

Starting in 2001, the Association for Research Libraries (ARL) in the United States acknowledged a pervasive challenge in many of the major research libraries in North America – the need to address the problems of unprocessed and under-processed backlogs, which were coined ‘hidden’ collections, as they are ostensibly hidden to scholars and other potential users. In response, the ARL’s Special Collections Task Force began exploring the challenge of enumerating the dimensions of the problem and providing access to uncatalogued and unprocessed

archival, special collections and rare book materials. The Task Force acknowledged that these 'hidden' collections are widespread in research libraries across the nation, and pose significant cataloguing, storage and preservation/conservation challenges to the libraries that hold them. In September 2003 the ARL hosted the *Exposing Hidden Collections* Working Conference, where attendees were encouraged to outline the problems, potential strategies and solutions to this extensive dilemma. At its close, the conference highlighted several plans of action, including support for "inter-institutional strategies to expand access to hidden collections including blending arrears reduction efforts with preservation and retrospective conversion approaches, leveraging digitisation efforts, and the sharing of expertise across and between libraries and archives" (Dimunation 2003). The completed study discussed here provides one perspective for evaluating these hidden collections and sets a standard for other libraries to begin the assessment of their own hidden collections.

The Conservation Unit at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) began a condition and conservation needs analysis of one of the Library's hidden collections in February 2003. This survey was undertaken to help direct integration of preservation efforts with future cataloguing projects, as well as to begin a dialogue with the curators about prioritisation of future conservation treatments. The Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML) holds an estimated 80,000 uncatalogued items; of this an estimated 20,000 pieces are printed, bound materials from the 16th and 17th centuries. To help narrow the scope of the project, we selected these 20,000 uncatalogued rare book materials to focus on.

Typical of uncatalogued backlogs, these collections contain materials in a variety of conditions, including many items that were acquired by the RBML in disrepair. Sample surveys are not commonly performed on rare book collections due to the highly variable bindings and physical condition of the materials. However, because of the collection size, the urgency of the Library's needs in quantifying its hidden rare book holdings, and the ARL's current interest in such collections, the Conservation Librarian proposed a sample survey that would generate more generalised answers to questions on the material's preservation and conservation needs more rapidly than an item-level survey. This survey was planned to evaluate

with a relatively high degree of precision the condition and conservation needs of the 20,000 uncatalogued pieces.

Data generated from the findings would then be used for conservation planning and collection-wide preservation as well as supply necessary information to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library as it moves towards improved access and cataloguing of these materials. Additionally, since it is likely that many of the materials in uncatalogued backlogs in other research collections are in similar condition, the results of the survey can also be used to represent the needs of similar collections of unprocessed 16th and 17th century materials.

The current organisation and access to our hidden collection is sorted by size (octavo, quarto and folio) and filed by author. Miniature books are interfiled with the octavos and no elephant folios are present. These three categories accounted for approximately 35 books per shelf for 482 shelves (16,870) of octavos, approximately 15 books per shelf for 188 shelves (2,820) of quartos, and two books per shelf for 50 shelves (100) of folios. Each category is housed in a roughly continuous arrangement, though some breaks occur due to the layout of the shelving and space availability around the catalogued collections.

The survey had as its primary focus the gathering of information to inform future treatment projects and the impact of any stabilisation efforts that could be integrated with future cataloguing projects. This means that while attention was paid to significant conservation treatment concerns, the survey focused on more general collections care interests, including age and cover materials, need for cleaning, presence of mould or insect infestations and appropriateness and necessity of protective enclosures and other means of stabilisation. The rationale behind this was to reduce the handling of materials by proposing simple, integrated stabilisation and cleaning steps alongside a cataloguing project, as well as aid future conservation planning by anticipating the types and levels of damage present in the collection, so that, as these materials become more accessible to researchers, their required conservation treatments can be better anticipated and planned for by conservation staff. Lastly, the survey addressed the preservation requirements often required by granting agencies, should the library propose a grant-funded cataloguing project.

Survey method and findings

A graduate assistant and I planned the survey tool to gather information about:

- Condition and usability.
- Bibliographic information: including author, title, general size (miniature, octavo, quarto or folio), date of publication, shelf location and book number.
- Condition: including binding style, cover materials, board and spine condition, cover-to-text attachment condition and overall cover and text-block condition (including observations for mould, water and insect damage, as well as others). Embrittlement was only gauged by visible indications and included no destructive testing.
- Previous repairs, enclosures or other methods of stabilisation.

The final section of the survey was an open-ended text section for notes on any observations not covered by the previous sections.

None of these sections were designed to go into great detail about the binding or condition of the materials. For instance, no attempt was made to record the exact dimensions of the books, the types of leather (except in rare cases where it affected the conservation needs of the pieces, such as badly splitting sheep leather), or the sewing structures of the text blocks. A copy of the survey form is given in Appendix 1.

Before the survey could begin, a random sample had to be identified from the 20,000 uncatalogued rare books. We selected a sample of approximately 4,000 items, or an estimated 20% of the collection, giving 99% confidence with a $\pm 1.8\%$ margin of error. We created a methodology for randomly selecting the items based on existing guidelines for random sampling of library and museum collections (Drott, 1969) and in consultation with the UIUC Survey Research Lab staff. Because the collection was physically distributed according to size, experts at the Survey Research Lab suggested that the sampling method also be stratified by size for the purpose of the survey.

A great deal can be learned about this hidden collection from some of the most basic information gathered. Table 1 shows the distribution of the dates of publication found in the collection. Over 97% of the books assessed date from between the years 1500 and 1700, indicating

<i>Date range</i>	<i>Number of items in sample</i>	<i>Per cent of sample</i>
1100–1199	1	0.02%
1200–1299	3	0.07%
1300–1399	1	0.02%
1400–1499	4	0.10%
1500–1599	1210	29.98%
1600–1699	2706	67.05%
1700–1799	33	0.82%
1800–1899	5	0.12%
1900–1999	35	0.87%
2000–present	0	0.00%
no date found	38	0.94%

Table 1. Identified dates of publication in assessed materials.

that this collection is fairly homogenous in its age and is composed of predominantly European publications, since few printing presses were established outside of Europe and Asia during those centuries. The oldest material found in the survey was a vellum manuscript dating from 1175. Although the survey indicates that 0.87% of the collection materials date from the 20th century, closer scrutiny indicates that these items are all reproductions (predominantly photostatic copies) of earlier publications. In addition to the dates of publication, results were also gathered on binding format, covering materials and author/title. However, this data will not be discussed here for sake of brevity.

One of the most basic pieces of data collected during the survey, and the most critical to projecting accessibility by future cataloguers and researchers, is the current damage level of the materials and the estimated usability of

each item in its present state. We chose to apply two scales ('damage' and 'usability') to each item assessed. Damage was assessed on a scale of 1–5 with 1 being the least damage; usability was assessed on a scale of 1–3 with 1 being the most usable. Most materials assessed fell in the range (damage/usability) of 2/1 (20.3%), 2/2 (12.6%), 2/3 (0.1%), 3/1 (3.4%) and 3/2 (32.9%). These results indicate that 69.3% of the collection, while showing definite signs of wear and tear, have incurred only moderate damage and can still be safely handled and used by patrons. An additional 5.2% of those assessed show

<i>Damage type – cosmetic</i>	<i>Number of items in sample</i>	<i>Per cent of sample</i>
Dirt	3,928	97.32%
Discoloured	3,858	95.59%
Stained	3,418	84.69%
Ink transfer	2,330	57.73%
Foxed	1,671	41.40%
Water damage	1,382	34.24%
Creased	5	0.12%
Surface deposits	4	0.10%
Gouged	3	0.07%
<i>Damage type – structural</i>		
Cockled	2,989	74.06%
Torn	1,898	47.03%
Insect damage	1,719	42.59%
Mould	480	11.89%
Detached pages	436	10.80%
Brittle	129	3.20%
Losses	8	0.20%
Burned	5	0.12%
Pages adhered	4	0.10%
Active infestation	4	0.10%

Table 2. Cosmetic and structural text-block damage noted.

minor damage, leaving 25.3% of the collection in poor enough condition to offer challenges for processing and patron use.

Four categories of damage were noted in the survey: 'text-block damage'; 'cover damage'; 'damage to board attachment', referring to the

<i>Damage type – cosmetic</i>	<i>Number of items in sample</i>	<i>Per cent of sample</i>
Abraded	3269	81.00%
Dirt	3197	79.21%
Discoloured	3051	75.59%
Leather dry	2093	51.86%
Torn	1830	45.34%
Stained	1570	38.90%
Insect damage	840	20.81%
Faded	342	8.47%
Spew	264	6.54%
Mould	184	4.56%
No damage	106	2.63%
Water damage	81	2.01%
Gouged	13	0.32%
Sticky	8	0.20%
<i>Damage type – structural</i>		
Cockled	707	17.52%
Boards splayed or drummed	651	16.13%
No binding	518	12.83%
Brittle	93	2.30%
Missing portions	14	0.35%
Covering unattached	8	0.20%
Misshapen	6	0.15%
Active infestation	0	0.05%

Table 3. Types of cover damage noted.

<i>Damage type</i>	<i>Number of items in sample</i>	<i>Per cent of sample</i>
Both internal hinges broken	237	5.87%
One internal hinge broken	15	0.37%
One broken and one weak hinge	338	8.37%
Weak hinges	1,809	44.82%
No damage	1,637	40.56%

Table 4. Recorded damage to cover-to-text attachment.

complete or partial separation one or both boards from the rest of the book; and 'damage to cover-to-text attachment', involving compromised integrity of the internal connection between the cover and the text block. The separation or loss of any pieces of the cover were recorded only as 'board attachment' and 'cover-to-text attachment', whereas 'cover damage' recorded only that damage evident on any remaining covering materials, except where no binding remained. Overall, text-block damage was predominantly cosmetic as opposed to structural. While nearly all (97.32%) of the collection showed evidence of surface dirt, staining and/or discoloration on at least some of its pages, a much smaller percentage of those assessed exhibited more severe damage, as shown in Table 2. The most common structural damage found was cockling of the text block (which impeded full opening), tears and insect damage, while other damage such as mould, detached pages, visible paper embrittlement and losses were noted less often.

Similarly, much of the most frequently noted damage to covers was cosmetic, while a relatively small percentage of cover damage was structural or severe (see Table 3). Overall, at least 81% of the collection showed evidence of use through abrasion (81.0%), dirt (79.2%), and discolouration (75.6%). More critical types of damage were noted at much lower rates, including brittleness (2.3%), portions of a board or spine missing (0.3%), and covering unattached (delaminating leather or separating cloth) (0.2%). The occurrence of mould (4.6%), spew (6.5%), cockled covers (17.5%), and splayed or drummed boards (16.1%) point towards improper storage

environments in the past or present. These findings only reinforce known problems with occasionally large fluctuations in both temperature and relative humidity in the RBML storage areas that must be remedied. Only 2.6% of the items assessed showed no signs of damage to their cover. Both the data for board attachment and the data for cover-to-text attachment support the assumption that there is significant binding damage present in the collection surveyed. Over 18% of the items surveyed had one or both boards detached or missing.

In terms of cover-to-text attachment, 5.9% of books assessed displayed two broken internal hinge attachments (while still having boards attached to the cover spine), 8.8% had one broken internal hinge, and 44.8% of items were assessed to have weakened hinges (see Table 4).

A small number of books assessed showed clear evidence of previous repairs to the binding or the text block. To the best of our knowledge, all of these repairs were made before the acquisition of the items by the RBML. Over 16% of the items possessed at least one previous paper mend, most frequently to the first few pages of the volume. Binding repairs, however, were noted much less often, as shown in Table 5. Only 7.88% of items exhibit spine replacements, 0.12% show evidence of cover-to-text repairs, 8.05% display other types of cover repairs and a very low 0.87% of the collection was completely rebound. The observed quality of the repairs varies considerably, ranging from harmful, amateur repairs on paper and covers to skillful leather rebacks and rebinds completed by trained craftsmen. While the quantities found for spine replacements and cover

<i>Repair type</i>	<i>Number of items in sample</i>	<i>Per cent of sample</i>
Paper repairs	651	16.13%
Cover repairs	325	8.05%
Spine replacement	318	7.88%
Rebound	35	0.87%
Cover to text attachment	5	0.12%

Table 5. Previous repairs found.

<i>Repair type</i>	<i>Number of items in sample</i>	<i>Per cent of sample</i>
Brown paper envelope	332	8.23%
Library pamphlet folder	319	7.90%
Other enclosures	49	1.21%
Clamshell	24	0.59%
Slipcase	20	0.50%
Paper wrapper	2	0.05%
Phase box	1	0.02%
Mylar jacket	1	0.02%
Encapsulated	1	0.02%

Table 6. Enclosures found.

repairs are roughly accurate, the estimation of less than 1% rebound books is likely to be very low. This is due to the fact that the graduate assistant performing the survey was not asked to evaluate whether the binding was contemporary to the printing date of the item unless it was extremely obvious that it had been rebound. However, many of the bindings were noted to be in limp vellum (15%) or tight-back leather (40.9%), which does indicate a high percentage of original bindings.

Although less permanent than repairs, almost 40% of the collection has received some level of basic stabilisation either previous to receipt by the RBML, or since its acquisition. More than 20% of the collection has been tied with varying qualities and ages of cotton twill tape, much of which was replaced during the survey. As is shown in Table 6, a fairly high percentage of the collection, 8.2%, is stored in brown paper envelopes. These envelopes, while providing a certain amount of structural support to the items they hold, also present several conservation dilemmas. The primary concern is their acidity level. Most of the envelopes and some of the older pamphlet binders observed are not constructed of preservation-quality materials and the resulting high acidity levels are damaging to the collection materials they hold. Even more distressing is the number of these envelopes with gummed flaps that have been tucked inside

the envelope, often in direct contact with the artifact. This practice has resulted in a number of items becoming soundly adhered to the envelope they are stored in (4.2% of those items in envelopes, or 0.35% of the total population). Finally, an additional 10.46% of the sample was observed to have more permanent and appropriate enclosures, mostly consisting of proper pamphlet binders or folders, clamshell boxes and slipcases.

Preservation planning

Although the data produced by this survey are interesting as an examination of the physical condition of a specific uncatalogued backlog of 16th and 17th century books, the challenge to us has been to dovetail the needs identified through the survey with future cataloguing or inventorying projects to make the best use of staff time and reduce handling of these sometimes fragile materials. To be useful to a broader audience, these recommendations must also be applicable to other institutions with backlogs of material from a similar time period.

The survey shows the immediate preservation needs, ranging from basic stabilisation efforts and cleaning, through to some limited high-end conservation treatments, that must be addressed if the RBML staff is to begin handling the collection materials during cataloguing or inventory projects. While many items in this collection would benefit from item-level conservation treatment, we recommend that a more collection-wide approach first be taken to address the stabilisation needs of these items, and conservation treatment on individual items limited to those items deemed of high value or use potential.

Even basic stabilisation steps must be prioritised due to the overwhelming number of items in need. To recommend priorities for stabilisation, we first looked at the entire collection's needs and costs in both supplies and staff time. These figures, while specific to the RBML collection, represent the same process other institutions must face when prioritising similar collections. Although priorities for individual items will vary from collection to collection, the overall approach for stabilisation, minimal treatments and full conservation would apply to many other rare book backlogs.

A cleaning project for all items would be of great benefit to the collection.

An observed 4.6% of covers and 11.89% of text blocks exhibited at least minimal mould (a few exhibited substantial mould growth though no active mould was found during the survey), while an additional 6.5% of covers exhibited spew (exuded material, often fatty globules) or other surface accretions. While the presence of spew and efflorescence is predominantly an aesthetic issue, the presence of mould on these materials, even in small amounts, poses a significant threat to future outbreaks, especially given the history of unstable relative humidity in the RBML stacks. While complete mould remediation cannot be achieved without the use of more rigorous chemical treatments, the risks associated with the presence of inactive mold spores can be greatly reduced by thorough cleaning with a vacuum equipped with a HEPA (High Efficiency Particulate Air) filter. Using micro-tool attachments and a variable-suction HEPA filter vacuum to allow for the most gentle and precise cleaning possible, RBML staff or students could clean each item before processing to reduce the presence of inactive mold spores, as well as improve the appearance of items by removing other surface deposits and significant dust. Cleaning rare books, especially broken ones, requires more time than general collections materials, and previous cleaning projects in the RBML have required approximately two to three minutes per book for dusting and vacuuming. This would translate into at least an additional 667 hours to clean the entire 20,000 volume collection (approximately 13 hours per week for one year).

An estimated 78.4% of the collection – those with weak or broken internal hinge attachments plus those with one or more detached boards – would benefit from basic stabilisation treatments. However, less than half of this estimated population (39.7%) has received any stabilisation or enclosure. Treatments as simple as a clean, well-tied cotton twill tie for those items that do not already have an enclosure would greatly aid in stabilizing them as they are pulled from the shelf and handled for processing. For those items requiring slightly more support, the use of alkaline-buffered binder's board cut to the approximate size of the piece and tied to each side of the book with cotton twill tie would give structural support and protection. Lastly, for those thin items not presently in binders or envelopes and for those items in non-preservation-quality envelopes (8.2%), the purchase of buffered paper envelopes without gummed flaps

would offer enhanced protection and support during handling and while on the shelf. Based on the estimated populations from this survey, the supply costs for these basic stabilisation measures would be approximately \$386¹ in unbleached quarter-inch (6 mm) cotton twill tie (\$0.05 worth of cotton tie per book multiplied by 7,720), \$37.80–\$90.00 in alkaline-buffered binder's board with quarter-inch (6 mm) cotton twill tie (\$0.45 of board and cotton tie per book multiplied by 84 to 200 items missing bindings and/or requiring replacement of enclosures), and \$557.60 in replacement buffered paper envelopes (\$0.34 average cost per preservation-quality top-opening envelope).

Staff time for each method of stabilisation would be approximately 30 seconds for each item string tied, one minute for each item string tied with precut binder's board supports (assuming that the Conservation Unit precut the board: this time is not counted in the time estimate) and 30 seconds for each item placed in a preservation-quality envelope. These preservation efforts would result in an estimated 81.3 hours of additional staff time for the entire collection. Both the time and supply estimates are based on my previous experience in performing the same basic stabilisation methods on items being transferred to high-density storage. Time estimates do not include any marking of the enclosures beyond transfer of call numbers in pencil.

As stated earlier, a limitation of this survey is that conservation treatment priorities cannot be definitively set using the results of a sample survey. Priorities for high-level conservation treatments such as leather rebacking, full rebinding or resewing must be set by the curator in consultation with the conservator. Due to the time necessary to perform such treatments, they must be undertaken only after careful consideration by the curator, or after a high level of use has been established.

Lower-level conservation treatments, such as minor paper repairs (47.0% of the collection, or an estimated 9,403 items), reattaching pages (10.8%, or an estimated 2,160), or minor leather hinge repairs (6.5% of the collection, or an estimated 1,300 items) may be completed in less time than the more major treatments. Treatments such as these may be

1 All prices are quoted in U.S. dollars.

completed in-house and could be planned for treatment after cataloguing, if warranted. Using the data collected from this survey and estimating one hour for each minor conservation treatment would project an estimated 12,863 hours of labour (one skilled conservation technician working full time for six and a half years).

Those items having no bindings or having missing or detached boards should be a high conservation priority because they are structurally unstable and present challenges to cataloguers, shelving staff and patrons. With an estimated 20.5% (4,100 items) of the collection missing entire covers or at least one board and 11.3% (2,260 items) of the collection having at least one detached board, priorities must be established so that those items of the greatest value will be treated first. As a broad estimation using the results of the survey, approximately 3% of materials would require resewing, 17% of the collection (an estimated 3,400) would require rebacking and 2% would require recasing. Priorities for treating these items should be established in close consultation with the curators of the collection. One potential avenue for setting these priorities would be assigning very general monetary and curatorial values as items are catalogued. Those items exhibiting a certain level of damage, such as no binding or missing boards, and having a high value assignment would be given top priority for conservation treatment from the uncatalogued collection. Even these priorities, however, must be balanced against the significant conservation needs of the catalogued collection.

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Author biography

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Rare Book Collection Condition Survey

Damage 1- not damaged or light damage 2- signs of wear, aging, etc 3- prevalent damage 4- significant damage - repair required 5- heavy damage Date Surveyed

Usability 1- can be used without mediatic 2- can be read with support 3- requires curator mediatic

Bibliographic Information

Author Name Size Location

Title Number

Date of publication

Condition

Binding Type

Tight Back sewn on cord/tape
 Limp
 Hollow back / Publisher Case
 Library Binding
 Pamphlet-Bound
 No Binding
 Other...

Covering Material

Vellum
 Leather
 Cloth
 Paper
 1/4 bound
 1/2 bound
 Full bound
 N/A
 Other...

Boards

Front detached
 Front missing
 Back detached
 Back missing
 Other...

Spine

Partially detached
 Detached
 Headcap damage
 Missing
 Sewing Broken
 Other...

Cover-to-Text Attachment

Internal hinge detached Front
 Internal hinge detached Back
 Tenuous attachment
 Weak
 covering material
 spine lining fabric
 pastedown
 cords
 Sound
 Other...

Cover Condition

Discolored
 Stained
 Water Damage
 Molded/Mildew
 Dirt / grime
 Faded
 Leather dry /weak
 Visibly Brittle
 Cockled
 Torn
 Abraded
 Insect Damage
 Active infestation
 Other...

Paper Condition

Discolored
 Stained
 Water Damage
 Foxed
 Molded/Mildew
 Dirt / grime
 Ink Transfer
 Cockled
 Visibly Brittle
 Torn
 Detached Pages
 Insect Damage
 Active infestation
 Other...

Decoration

Clasps/ties
 Faux tight back
 Paste paper
 Painted edges gilt
 Painted edges all
 Tooling gilt
 Tooling blind
 Marbled pastedowns
 Gauffering
 Bookmark
 Bookplate/provenance marker
 Other...

Previous Treatment

Inappropriate/Damaging
 Enclosure
 Library pamphlet folder
 Brown paper envelope
 Clamshell
 Cover repairs
 Spine replacement
 Paper repairs
 Twill tie
 Harmful inclusions
 Inappropriate labeling
 Other...

Other Notes

Appendix 1: Survey form (blank).