

Conservation of the *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*: results of a survey and treatments

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Summary

The preservation and conservation of the *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* (JAIC) is perhaps one of the most vexing and complex problems in all of conservation. Three times a year, these journals arrive with bent corners, torn covers, water damage and, in one case, fire damage. Today's successful conservator in private practice must be image conscious – after all, what respectable lawyer has his shelves adorned with tattered paper covers? Gold-stamped leather spines mean something. They mean power and money and wealth and fame, all the things conservators secretly crave while spending all day surface cleaning some ruined, worthless, meaningless piece of paper. But I digress. I have lost more than one client, running from my studio, clutching their priceless Victorian Bible after merely glancing at the condition of my JAIC collection. I felt I might not be alone in dealing with this problem, therefore humbly decided to publish the results of this survey and some of the treatments I performed in an attempt to deal with this important, difficult problem.

Introduction

The urge to preserve, is, perhaps, as old as the urge to eliminate. Freud aside, these impulses often run to the extreme for many involved in the preservation of cultural heritage. These issues, however, will not be discussed in this paper. This paper will address one of the most worrisome problems in conservation – how best to preserve and treat the *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* (JAIC). This problem is visible to even those outside the field of conservation.

One client asked why I had so many “messed up” journals on my bookshelves. I remained silent, burning with shame, and that shame fueled me with the resolve to find an answer.

Invariably, the JAIC arrives bent, torn, sometimes wet and in one case burned to a crisp, Figures 1 and 2. Clients tended to notice this when they entered my studio, and most of my treatment proposals were

greeted with an “Err, well, that’s rather expensive given the state of things around here”, rather than a grateful acceptance of my heartfelt proposal to preserve their precious piece of our cultural heritage. During one particularly long ‘dry-spell’, I decided to address the problem. But before any survey or treatment was undertaken, it was deemed necessary to establish some background information on the nature of these journals.



Figure 1. Detail of some typical damage.



Figure 2. A ‘well-done’ issue of the journal before conservation

Philosophical concerns

The first question to address was if these journals were actually damaged. Were these tattered journals intended to look this way? Was it some cruel joke on the part of a secretive board of directors of AIC? Was this type of damage an important historical documentation of the state of the United States Postal System in the early twenty-first century?¹ Were these creases and tears evidence of the journey, or of this artifact's use, and therefore of some importance to its cultural significance? Is someone out there trying to sabotage my career? What can these journals tell us about themselves, and conversely, what can they tell us about ourselves? To answer these radical questions, I chose a radical course – to contact the editor and president of JAIC and ask them directly.

Rather surprisingly, and suspiciously, both the president of AIC and the Journal Editor had exactly the same answer to my query if

¹ To date, I have no knowledge of the Royal Canadian Mounted Postal System. I would appreciate any information others might have on the condition of these journals in Canada or elsewhere in the world.

the journals were intended to arrive damaged. It was a simple “No.” I found this rather suspect, since all this damage could have been prevented by simply inserting some cardboard with the shrink-wrapped journal. But upon further reflection, the estimated cost of doing it would be simply untenable. Perhaps, five cents extra for each journal, and out of an average US\$150 per person for annual membership dues, would be a whopping 0.0003% of the total, most likely enough to bankrupt the organization. And after all, what does the producer of an artifact know about it, compared to a conservator. While all these unanswerable questions were still looming, my backlog was getting precariously tiny.

Many a minimal interventionist-minded conservator should heed the wise words of Tom Sawyer, “When in doubt, do it.” Enough philosophy, I decided, it now seemed time to organize and execute a survey and start treatment, although not necessarily in that order.

Goals of the survey and treatment

Make the journals look better.

Methodology of the survey

Due to the overwhelming number of items to be surveyed, approximately 43, it was necessary to hire three additional staff members; myself, as project director, a manager, a supervisor, and a highly trained technician actually to conduct the survey. Even with this cracker-jack team, the technician simply felt overwhelmed by the amount of work, so it was decided to conduct the survey by fractional analysis. Figure 3 shows the survey form.

SURVEY FORM FOR THE CONSERVATION OF THE JOURNAL OF
THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR CONSERVATION

Date: _____ Volume: _____ Number: _____

Spine Creased?	Yes	No	Maybe	Maybe Not	Don't Know	Don't Care
Tears?	Yes	No	Maybe	Maybe Not	Don't Know	Don't Care
Fire damage?	Yes	No	Maybe	Maybe Not	Don't Know	Don't Care
Water damage?	Yes	No	Maybe	Maybe Not	Don't Know	Don't Care
Urine Stains?	Yes	No	Maybe	Maybe Not	Don't Know	Don't Care
Unknown damage?	Yes	No	Maybe	Maybe Not	Don't Know	Don't Care
Looks bad?	Yes	No	Maybe	Maybe Not	Don't Know	Don't Care
Smells bad?	Yes	No	Maybe	Maybe Not	Don't Know	Don't Care

Figure 3. Form used for the survey

This clever little monkey devised a unique and highly innovative system for selection of the books. First she would raise her index finger, and point to the first journal. Then, she would raise her middle finger, and point to the next one. Each time she raised her middle finger, it indicated the book to be surveyed. This selection methodology proved unbiased, reasonably accurate² and extremely cost effective. Unfortunately, only later did we realize that due to a previous undisclosed injury, the aluminum splint on her middle finger precluded its closing. Nevertheless, once armed, well, fingered, with the scientific certitudes that a survey gives, we started to analyze this mountain of raw data.

Results of the survey

The results of the survey, of course, had no bearing on our plan for the course of treatments. They did, however confirm some of our worst expectations. More than 50% of the journals suffered some type of damage, the most severe being a volume that had burns and losses to almost three-quarters of the journal, and a volume that had previously been wet and the coated paper had stuck together. One journal had what

² I think, one time she lost her place, but I didn't want to say anything. She was very sensitive.

our technician identified by smell to be some sort of animal urine.³ 42% of the journals had severe damage to the head and tail of the spine, which was especially distressing since this was the area exposed to prospective clients' scrutiny. The enormity of the task ahead of us weighed heavy in our hearts, minds and those of us who had a soul, until a few happy-hour beers and monkey treats gave us the courage to proceed.

The treatments

Given our newfound courage, for some unknown reason, it seemed like a good idea to begin the treatments immediately. The treatment decisions seemed to break down into three major groups: the journals with tears and creases, the burned volume, and the wet one. We divided up the labor and started to kick some conservation ass.

Group A: the creased and torn volumes

54% of the books had severe creases and distortions, often concentrated near the head and tail of the spine. These were no ordinary dog-eared corners, these were indicative of

³ She lingered over this particular journal for an inordinate amount of time, with a perplexed look on her face.

extreme force, multiple folds extending through the entire textblock. The book with suspected urine damage also had this, which led to some speculation that our noble mail carrier possibly used this delicate tome as some sort of primitive weapon to flog a dog or cat. But these are merely speculations.

Still fortified with our happy hour libations, a reasonable solution seemed to be to construct a special hammer – a brass head with a horse-butt facing pad and quarter sawn white oak handle to verily smash these broken spines back into an erect position. After spending a couple of hours making this hammer, it quickly became apparent that it was too dinky. There was one obvious solution; we got a bigger hammer. The bent spines snapped to attention. I am not one to generalize, but getting a bigger hammer is almost always an effective solution, no matter what the problem, Figure 4.



Figure 4. Little, dinky hammer and nice, big hammer

The numerous small tears proved one of the worst problems. After countless web searches, international calls for papers and consultation with colleagues, it became apparent that there was no way to repair them. The project supervisor originally thought black electrical tape might be a sympathetic, cost-effective treatment, and indeed the texture and surface sheen is

remarkably similar to the JAIC cover stock, but this was roundly rejected, given that tape was priced at a whopping US\$2.49 per roll. For this many books, it might have taken half a roll. So these were left untreated.

Group B: the burned book

This volume, since approximately 80% was burned it was given top priority. (Figures 2 and 5) It was restored in the regular way, and overall the appearance was slightly improved.

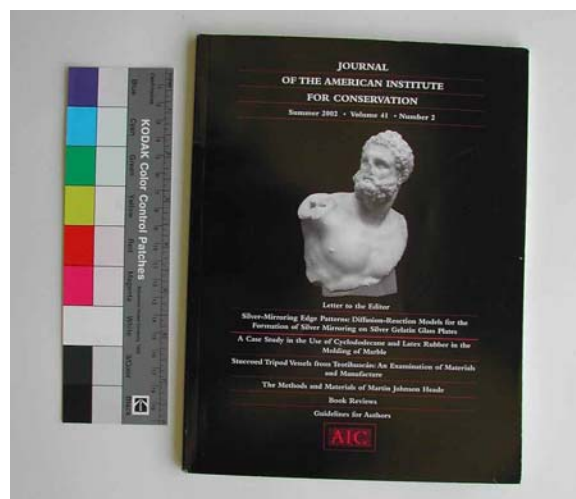


Figure 5. The burned volume after conservation

Group C: the wet volume

When wet coated paper dries and sticks together, it is notoriously difficult to separate. I agonized over this problem for many long sleepless nights, until one day, while reading a rather obscure text on nineteenth-century veneer making, the answer came to me in a flash – use a chisel to separate the pages! To be more specific, the dream told me to use a 24mm Iyoro chisel, hardened to Rc 65, with hand hammered hoops. After some experimentation on a more valuable item, and I dare say a modicum of hand skills, it proved quite easy to place the chisel in the

page, and cut thickness of ink from each side of the page and replace it back on the appropriate page. WARNING: Sharp chisels can be dangerous, particularly in contact with fingers or other bodily tissues. By page 34 I was able to do it one handed (Figures 6 and 7). In the spirit of full disclosure, I must admit that on p. 76 of Vol. 67, I accidentally sliced into the paper fibers 0.4 mm from the right edge, 3.6 mm from the bottom edge, and cut into the fibers totaling a distance of 0.6mm.

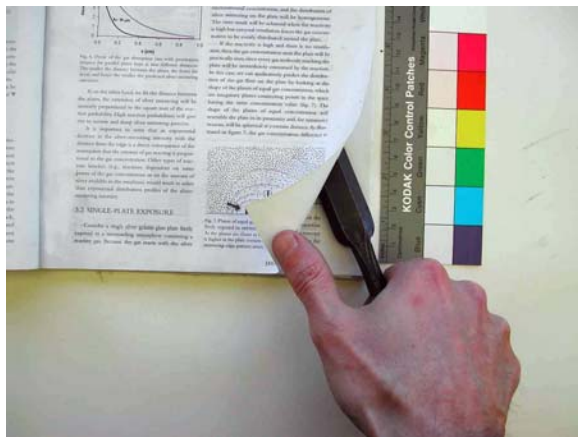


Figure 6. During page separation of the wet volume.



Figure 7. The wet volume after conservation.

More treatment

The initial goals of the treatment, to improve the appearance of these books, were now in serious jeopardy. The books did not look that much better. In fact, most of them looked worse; much worse; much, much worse. A technical term might be ‘terrible’. After several staff meetings, we decided to scan the spines of the journal, touch them up in Photoshop, print it out using Epson Druo-Brite Inks, then glue this to a piece of binder’s board, and discard the journals.

A little bit more treatment

After a number of the most frustrating days of my life, I realized that Photoshop was impossible to learn, except by a so called ‘computer geek’. We then thought a color photocopy might be a solution; unfortunately, once again its high cost (US\$ 0.99) dissuaded us from this option. A black and white photocopy was made, infilled and colored using traditional methods. This ‘digital preservation’ or ‘reformatting’ proved extremely successful, and the overall effect was, in my own opinion, stupendous, Figure 8. Perhaps with grant funding,⁴ I could preserve my entire reference library in this manner, or learn 5% of Photoshop.

Conclusions

The solutions found for this particular collection may not be applicable to every collection, but I doubt it. The effect on my clients was astounding. Not one failed to comment on the beautiful set of journals. Since this successful treatment, gross revenue has increased 167%. The appearance of these journals has inspired

⁴ Suggestions for sources of funding are appreciated, if the application forms are not too long, and don’t require me asking the same three people for letters of recommendation.

such fantastic business, that the minor loss of their information is of little consequence, and I probably would not have time to read them anyway at this point, anyway.

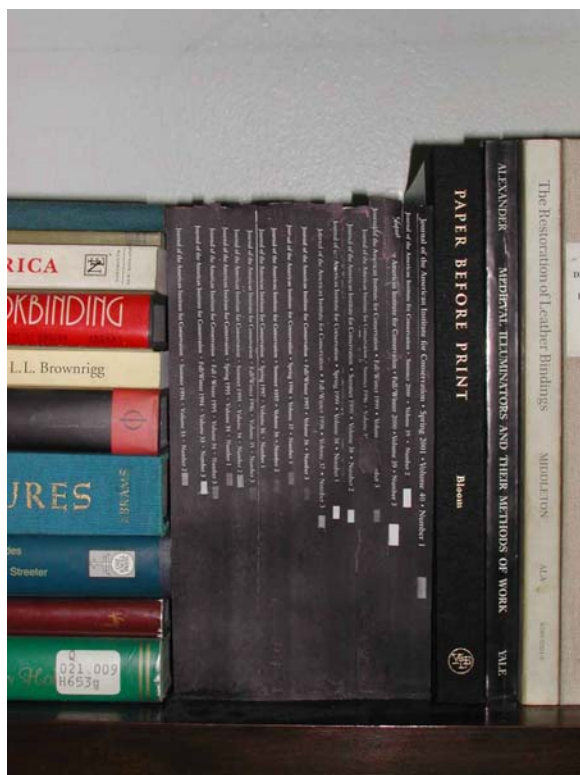


Figure 8. The successful treatment results.

One unintended benefit of this treatment is a remarkable reduction in cleaning time – one pass with a ‘one-wipe’ is all it takes. Moving costs are also greatly reduced. After the treatment, an esteemed colleague recommended that reproducing the volumes, at say 75%, would create a lot more shelf space. I considered this for my collection of *The Paper Conservator*, but much to my surprise found them all in excellent condition, despite being shipped from England, perhaps due to the sturdy paper wrapper in which they are shipped. I found it to be an excellent suggestion, nevertheless, and intend to reformat next year’s JAIC at 25-30%. Imagine the appearance of a micro-conservation-research-library at your tweezer-tips!

In retrospect, however, like most conservators, I feel that I failed to adhere to the principals of maximal intervention. Perhaps constructing a series of leather and gold-tooled spines would have been a better approach. Then again, I’m no lawyer. But we all learn from treatments as we work through them. Was it foolhardy to attempt merely to repair these volumes at the beginning? Perhaps, as I fear that the volume of conservation literature increases, quite possibly at an exponential rate. Let me say for the record, that I will continue to fight this problem as long as I feel like it.

Suppliers

1. Iyori chisels are available from: <http://toolsforworkingwood.com>
2. Electrical tape is available from most hardware stores. Be warned, however, it is quite expensive.

Biography

Jeffrey S. Peachey is a book conservator in private practice in New York City. He trained in conservation at Columbia University. It is hoped, despite the lack of a national health care system, that citizens of the United States can maintain a healthy sense of humor. In his spare time, he makes knives, which he sells to book conservators, paper conservators and residents of the various New York State Penitentiaries. An on-line catalog is available at: <http://www.philobiblon.com/peacheycatalog.pdf>