The Role of Conservation in Preparing the Vail Collection for Cataloging

Preservation & Conservation Services
Wunsch Conservation Laboratory
Vail Technician Bexx Caswell, Conservator Nancy Schrock, and North Bennet Street School Bookbinding Intern McKey Berkman
Conservation Goal: Physical Stabilization

• Cleaning so catalogers can work without transferring dirt to books

• Removal of extraneous materials that damage the book and place it at risk (acidic circulation pockets, acidic endpapers, side-stitched pamphlet binders)

• Enclosures for fragile items, which allow the materials to be taken too and from storage without being damaged

• Survey information for the most valuable books in the vault so that they can be called back to the lab and given full treatment over the coming years
12-14 cartons of Vail materials arrive from the Harvard Depository each week.
Each box is emptied and sorted by category and treatment type
2010 Statistics: Types of Materials

6584 items treated

- 2044 contemporary cloth bindings
- 491 leather bindings
- 159 paper bindings
- 304 unbound pamphlets
- 828 pamphlet bindings
- 2628 green rebindings
- 130 other rebindings
The first step is to clean every item. It begins with a HEPA vacuum used in the fume hood to keep dust and dirt from entering the lab.
Micro tools allow us to clean the exterior surfaces and penetrate small spaces.
Surface soil is removed with an Absorene sponge. The first pages are usually dirtiest.
Many of the items in the Vail Collection were rebound when received at MIT.
The materials used in the rebinding process were not always the best quality.
Note how the acid from the endpaper has transferred and discolored the title page.
During treatment, the acidic flyleaves are removed.
New folio endsheets of alkaline buffered paper are hinged on to protect the text from further deterioration.
Circulation pockets were also made of poor quality paper and are removed.
In order to get through such a large project, each treatment is done in batches of 10-12 items.
Some Vail pamphlets were side sewn into poor quality cloth and paper covers.
Their endpapers are made of even worse quality paper which crumbles to pieces.
The pamphlets are removed from their bindings. Note the old endpaper along edges.
These remnants are removed by placing the covers in di-ionized water.
Gentle manipulation with a Teflon folder lifts up the old paper.
The final step is to flatten the cover papers between felts under even pressure.
We place thick pamphlets and small books into a pre-fabricated portfolio with a four-flap wrapper. Note the Vail bookplate on the verso of the cover.
Pamphlets are also placed in slings and put in an envelope.
The collection includes 22 boxes of unbound pamphlets. These are arranged in groups by the catalogers who place them into folders by topic and language. The Conservation Team cleans and mends them, and returns them for final cataloging.
Many volumes are sturdy enough to go back to storage without further work, but some require protection. More extensive repair will wait until they are identified as treatment candidates through use.
Intact books with minor damage receive custom polyethylene covers.
The “CoLibri” machine allows us to heat seal the edges of the covers in a matter of minutes.
The final product is a book that can be handled without causing further damage.
Some books, however, cannot be handled, even with a polyethylene cover.
Light-weight volumes receive a custom four-flap enclosure made of 20 pt. archival folder stock.
We also produce custom-sized clamshell boxes of acid-free corrugated board.
2010 Statistics: Treatment

479 of 750 Vail boxes were retrieved from Harvard Depository. Of these, the Conservation Team:

- cleaned 6584 items
- made protective enclosures for 2157 items (corrugated clamshells, wrappers, envelopes, portfolios)

5037 treatments took 15 minutes or less

1540 treatments took 15 minutes – 2 hours

7 treatments took over 2 hours
In January we began surveying the Vail materials in the Archives vault.
Each volume is reviewed and described on a survey form.
Information from the forms are entered into a Filemaker database so that we can prioritize treatment and batch similar work such as boxing.
Cloth-covered clamshell boxes are among the treatments that vault items will receive during years 2 and 3 of the grant.
2011-2012 Goals

- Treat remaining Vail items at HD
- Treat remaining 19 boxes of pamphlets
- Survey Vail items in ASC and perform basic treatment
- Make protective enclosures for Vail vault items
- Prepare an exhibit of the Vail Collection in Maihaugen Gallery
- More extensive treatment for at risk items depending upon time and resources
All of the conservation treatments shown in this presentation were done in the Wunsch Conservation Laboratory in Hayden basement.

Visit us in 14-0513 or virtually on our website:

http://libraries.mit.edu/preservation/