

SHARP Summerschool: First Aid Conservation for Historical Collections (17 September 2014)

Marijn de Valk
Tom Deneire

10.30 uur General introduction (Tom / 5 min)

Ladies and gentlemen, goodmorning.

Before we start, I'd like to introduce the five of us and our specific role within this summerschool session about *First Aid Conservation for Historical Collections*. The lady to my left is Marijn de Valk, a professional book restorer from Middelburg (The Netherlands) who has been a trusted source of expertise for the Flemish Heritage Libraries in all things concerning conservation and restoration. She'll be assisted by two students of restoration and conservation techniques, namely Emmy De Smet and Katrijn Vervloet, who were part of our First Aid project, and by our reading room assistant, Elisabeth Zeuwts, who specializes in conservation issues at our department.

As for myself, I must confess I have received almost no training in conservation or restauration. My own background is in humanist Latin and book history. But I guess this happens all the time: special collection curators are only rarely experts in conservation, yet still they need to set up and maintain a conscientious policy for that aspect of the library. The aim of our session today is to show you how this was possible for our library through the First Aid project – a project where part of our collection received a basic conservation treatment.

We'll be doing this in several steps:

1. First, Marijn will show us a couple of concrete examples of the issue at hand: some types of damage that occur, some poorly restored books, and so on.
2. Then, she will go on with the history of the First Aid project, which goes back further than its realisation here at the Special Collections in Antwerp.
3. Third, we will show you a short video about the First Aid-project in Bruges, where you'll be able to see the project from start to finish.
4. After that, I myself will try to give a more general introduction into the issue of conservation of collections, and the points of interest for a curator such as myself.

5. Next, we will demonstrate the different steps of the First Aid program, so that you get a really practical idea of what kinds of actions are involved in this.
6. Then you will be asked to have a look at some book damage yourself, using a specially designed form for such registration.
7. After that, Marijn will offer some dos and don'ts that we were able to formulate from experience: what went right and what might be a possible pitfall.
8. And finally, I myself will try to offer some conclusions on the project, both from a practical and financial standpoint, and policy-wise.

10.35 uur Examples (Marijn / 10 min)

SLIDE 1

Good Morning, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, let me thank you all for being here – your presence shows your warm support for our project. My goal today is to express the enthusiasm we have for our work.

I am very happy to be working with Tom Deniere. I think that the key to the success of this first aid project is in the cooperation between the curator and the conservator. Only then does a project gain 'hands and feet'. It is, in short, the link between form and content.

Allow me to apologise about my English – it is far from perfect. During my work, I generally do not talk so much, and certainly not in English. Please let me know if I'm not clear. Tom can certainly help.

Ok – let's get going.

SLIDE 2

The basic principle of the first aid project is each book receives a maximum of half an hour's attention. Any book requiring more time, will be set aside for later restoration and in the meantime will get a protective box. This is possible thanks to the following principles:

- . Setting priorities and*
- . work sharing*

SLIDE 3

I noticed that the workshop was announced as being 'a speed course in First Aid'.

I understand that the organiser of the Summer School thought that when half an hour is needed to restore each book, then we would be able to handle several books. This is good for the library and educational for you.

I would love to work with you in the hope that you go home today with enthusiasm for this activity. But it is not that simple. Unfortunately, you don't have enough experience and we cannot explain everything in two hours.

However, primary-preservation is based on a number of proven principles, which in themselves are very simple. These simple actions make up a deliberate complete process. This is what we want to show you today.

SLIDE 4

But first I want to start with an introduction to conservation, restoration and the developments of the last 25 years.

SLIDE 5 & SHOW EXAMPLE

For centuries, maintaining broken, worn books involved rebinding a book in a new binding according to the taste of the time. The old binding was thrown away.

What we now call restoration is based on a vision that was developed in the 1980s.

SLIDE 6 & SHOW EXAMPLE

The idea was that a book binding is an expression of its time.

Book restorers did their best to recreate a 'historical' binding by studying the original materials and techniques and then simulating these. Meanwhile, the old damaged bindings were still being thrown away! These books were "irreparably improved".

In this library some very handsome examples of this can be found. You will understand that a lot of information about the book and its history has been lost. As well as materials, maculature and membra disjecta. And don't forget the authentic 'feeling' and patina of the books.

Back then, book restorers were proud that they could apply these same old techniques and were looking for the old materials to make their replicas. These days, we find these bindings to be utterly meaningless.

SLIDE 7 + 8 & SHOW EXAMPLE

From the eighties, it became aware that not only the text but also the binding gives information about the book as a whole.

At present, the term 'restoration' has become outdated – instead we need to talk about 'conservation'. Briefly, this means preserving as much of the historical layers of a book. As a book conservator, you actually try to intervene and do as little as

possible. It involves preventing decay while searching for solutions to preserve the future use of the book.

Restoration must also be 'reversible': an intervention must be able to be 'undone'.

Adhesives must be removable and all procedures documented.

In this way, masterpieces have been and will be preserved. No doubt you will see wonderful examples of these at various exhibits at this time in the city.

SLIDE 9 + 10 & SHOW EXAMPLE

In historicizing, the original materials were used as much as possible. But today, modern materials allow the conservator to intervene as little as possible – what we call minimal intervention. For example, it may happen that a medieval manuscript doesn't get a new leather spine below the original leather. Instead, we place Tyvec, a super-thin and tear-proof material, under the original leather – with reversible adhesive and finished with Japanese paper in the right colour.

The result is a stronger, better intervention with a minimum of loss of the original material. Because it involves less work, it is also much cheaper!

Other restoration disciplines are much more accustomed to the use of modern materials – take ceramic restoration as an example. Book restorers are very conservative in this area!

SLIDE 11 + 12 & SHOW EXAMPLE

A final development that I want to mention is the shift of attention from a few masterpieces to a collection-wide approach.

SLIDE 12

Once again, the principles of minimal invention, reversibility and the use of modern materials are indispensable.

Here's a list of books that have had a primary-preservation.

I myself first heard of this collection-wide approach from Nicolas Pickwoad, a book restorer in England who works for the National Trust. In England, teams of trained volunteers are deployed to clean book collections.

SLIDE 13 + 14

This concept has been developed and expanded by a number of Dutch restorers.

There have been a number of large projects already completed. I myself, for example, have worked on the primary-preservation of the Jewish library in

Amsterdam 'Ets-Haïm'. This involved a team of 20 conservators handling 7,000

library books – all of which are now consultable again. Here, the work went beyond

just cleaning. Also all damages are repaired and the books were nicely finished. You can see that the concept has been extended.

SLIDE 15 + 16 + 17 + 18

In 2010, the first major project in Belgium was carried out in Bruges. We treated 1,200 books in 23 days with a group of trainee conservators. A film was made of this project, which we will show you shortly. During this project, all operations and the on-going progress were described in weekly newsletters.

SLIDE 19 + 20 + 21 + 22

So what exactly happened here in Antwerp? From March to October 2013 the University Library hosted its own version of the First Aid program for the old prints. The aim of this project was a basic conservation of the rare book collection, which, is in fact comprised of two different collections. First, there's the University's Special Collections department, the one Tom is curator of, which has historically evolved from a Jesuit library collection and which contains some 15,000 old prints, mainly in the areas of Jesuit literature, classics and Dutch drama. On the other hand, there's the Ruusbroec Institute – an independent research centre within the University, with a library collection that is still owned by the Jesuit community and which contains some 30,000 old prints, mainly in the areas of Jesuit spirituality, devotional literature and mysticism. Both collections, however, operate together as an *Acknowledged Heritage Library* and due to their close ties, it was only logical that both libraries would join the First Aid project together.

Over the course of the project, the books were taken from the shelves and one by one they were cleaned (dry cleaning), the damage was registered, the leather bindings were treated with a dressing, and simple first aid procedures were executed. The project was made possible through the financial support of a private sponsor, the M.E. Belpaire Society. During this time almost 1,500 old prints were treated, by a team of people composed from the library staff, volunteers with some experience in book restoration and students of the paper restoration course at the Artesis School in Antwerp. Now that the project has finished, the University, and especially the Special Collections department, maintain their efforts towards basic conservation of old prints. The department's staff and some volunteers continue with the registration of damage, cleaning the books and making book wraps. Other, more constructive or invasive procedures are not executed any more, unless under the supervision of a professional restorer.

SLIDE 23 + 24 + 25 + 26 + 27

A very different project that I was involved in after this was the cleaning of a monastery library in Bornem, near Antwerp. The project consisted of 50,000 mouldy books in the library of a deserted monastery. The town's local archivist gathered 80 volunteers to clean, photograph and package the books for relocation. This was a very special project with very enthusiastic participants.

SLIDE 28 + 29

I think that it is important to make clear to you that first aid projects must be always customized. Every project is different. The first aid does not exist. There will always be a choice of actions performed depending on the skill of the people involved as well as the time and financial resources available.

Therefore, 'first aid' is a general term used for many different types of work. To be honest, I'm currently a bit afraid of misunderstanding, because projects can never be compared.

10.45 uur *Ask the participants (Marijn and Tom / 5 min)*

Who has experience with this type of work?

10.50 uur *introduction Tom*

Of course, our time is too limited today to show you what the First Aid project can accomplish if it is allowed to run its course over several weeks, even months. What we can do, however, is show you a video that was commissioned by the *Erfgoedcel Brugge* – in Flanders, an *Erfgoedcel* is a local organisation that promotes heritage management in a certain city or region under the general sponsorship of the Flemish Government. The video was made by *Mad Monkey Studios* and documents the 2012 First Aid project of the Bruges Public Library. By kind permission of the *Erfgoedcel Brugge* we were allowed to subtitle this video for today and to offer it to you via a wetransfer download-link.

10.55 uur *Video (15 min)*

11.00 uur Collections and conservation (Tom / 15 min)

The format of this SHARP summerschool is that of a *workshop*, so we have tried to be quite 'hands-on' in our exposé and will continue along this line in the next sections. However, before doing so I want to shed some light on the more general ideas behind this project.

I started this workshop by pointing out that I myself am not a trained expert in book conservation and restoration. As said, many curators of special collections will share this starting position with me¹, and therefore be confronted with a major issue: how to care for a collection, indeed how to decide on a conservation and restoration policy for a collection, when you are not an expert yourself? Of course, there are a number of basic steps that can be taken when it comes to preservation and building conditions, but that does not take care of existing damage in the collection. Which books do you restore? What kinds of damage are more pressing? Which methods are reliable? How much of the budget can be spent – if any – on conservation? These are difficult questions for any curator, even for those with a solid training in the physical treatment of books.

Now, before the First Aid project, there were already some basic preservational and conservational measures in place at the University of Antwerp. The Special Collections department carefully monitored temperature and humidity levels in its collection, had been using specially designed PYXIS-conservation boxes for several years, and also had a digitization program, which helps alleviate usage stress on the collection. The Ruusbroec Library had its climatized book vault for manuscripts and *incunabula*, and had been working on a policy for packing manuscripts and prints in acid-free material. Still, both libraries were also still looking for a more general approach towards the physical care of the collection, especially how to register damage and how to go about basic procedures of conservation.

This attention came not only from the libraries' own awareness about the physical dangers that threaten the collection², but was further stimulated by the fact that in recent years the heritage scene in Flanders has witnessed a growing awareness of matters of preservation and restoration. Under the impulse of *FARO*, the *Flemish interface centre for cultural heritage* and local *Erfgoedcellen*, curators have been paying more and more attention to collections, not only

¹ Cp. *Wet van de remmende achterstand*, pp. 42-43.

² Cp. *Wet van de remmende achterstand*, p. 46.

individual master pieces, and to issues of functionality, i.e. future usage of the collection, not only its static preservation.³ In this way, the last five years have seen libraries more and more gearing their policy towards, among other things, damage registration, collection-surveys, and the symbiosis between digitization and conservation-preservation – as cited in the 2012 report *Wet van de remmende achterstand* by the *Flemish Heritage Library*. This goes hand in hand with recent developments in the collaboration between heritage library curators and restorers, who are willing to rethink their restoration practice from object to collection, and the different conservation-restoration training programs, who are willing to adapt to the sector's changing needs.⁴ Finally, the same report also cites the dire need of most heritage libraries in Flanders for a full-fledged conservation plan and policy⁵, and for operational support in setting up conservation procedures.⁶

The First Aid project was designed specifically to tackle such questions, especially damage registration and collection-survey. Rather than singling out certain, perhaps extremely valuable, pieces for restoration, it is geared much more towards the collection as a whole than towards individual objects. This has two, very important effects.

First, it is an exercise in cost-efficiency: it maximizes the benefits of a limited budget by spreading funds over a larger volume of books, rather than spending them on the restoration of a couple. In our present day and age, such financial savvy is of extreme importance for curators of historical collections, who – let's be honest – will never get the budget they really need. Second, as the project operates on the collection-level, rather than the object-level, it implies reflecting on the priorities of conservation and restoration issues. Before any such project can start, the collection curator and book restorer will have to think long and hard about prioritizing certain parts of the collection, certain types of damage, certain conservation actions, certain operational decisions, and so forth. In other words: the First Aid project, if done correctly, will almost automatically yield a larger conservation policy for the collection – one that anticipates much more than merely the results of the First Aid project itself.

³ Based on Ludo Vandamme, 'Naar een eerstelijnszorg voor bibliotheekcollecties', *faro. Tijdschrift over cultureel erfgoed*, 3/2 (June, 2010), p. 23.

⁴ Cf. *Wet van de remmende achterstand*, p. 25-26. See also Vandamme, 'Naar een eerstelijnszorg voor bibliotheekcollecties', p. 24.

⁵ *Wet van de remmende achterstand*, p. 26 and p. 45.

⁶ *Wet van de remmende achterstand*, p. 47.

Of course, some might be critical of this kind approach. Working with non-specialists and volunteers, for instance, was criticized at the start of the First Aid concept – especially by professional book restorers, who thought this was too much of a risk to take with one's valuable collections. In response to such criticism, we can say several things. Let's first remember that the First Aid project is geared towards conservation, not restoration. Participants are trained to perform some simple actions that help conserve the books for future storage and usage; they are not trying to fix each and every problem they occur. All damage is registered in the project, some only to be restored by experts at a later date. Also, the above cited report *Wet van de remmende achterstand* shows that many heritage libraries in Flanders use this technique to get the necessary staff for preservation-conservation, and with good results.⁷ Moreover, the participants are always supervised by a professional, who will be quick to point out how far one can go in First Aid conservation. As Elisabeth once said: "First Aid for books is no different from First Aid for people: I'm trained in medical First Aid as well, but that doesn't mean I'm a doctor, does it?". Finally, through a careful evaluation of the First Aid project, it appears that motivation and careful attention are at least as important as knowledge and training, when it comes to avoiding mistakes and causing more damage in the conservation process.

Another important consideration are the costs involved in this project. We have to be honest: it's not cheap. Contracting a professional book restorer to be present at all times during the project, acquiring the necessary equipment and materials, freeing up staff and – if necessary – hiring temporary extras, ... these things cost thousands of Euros. And obviously, not every Special Collections department has the budget for this kind of thing. I'll show you more detailed numbers at the end of the workshop, but generally speaking one can say that administering First Aid to a thousand books costs about ten thousand Euros. However, to put matters in perspective: having one book professionally restored will cost, on average, about one thousand Euros. So the question is: do we want to restore ten books at a thousand Euros a piece, or do a First Aid conservation of a thousand books for the same amount of money?

⁷ *Wet van de remmende achterstand*, p. 30.

11. 25 uur Demonstration (Katrijn/Emmy/Elisabeth / 30 min)

Eerstelijnsconservering in de praktijk: demonstraties door de studenten. Speciale aandacht voor de discussie rond leerconservering.

Elisabeth: demonstratie droogreinigen + vertellen over schimmelmonsters (5 min.)

Marijn of Katrijn: leerdressing (5 min.)

Katrijn: vertellen over constructie (vastzetten van ruggen) (5 min.)

Emmy: vertellen over papierrestauratie + wikkels maken (5 min.)

11.55 uur Book damage / praktische oefening / (15 min)

SLIDE 29

We have a practical exercise for you.

Just like the project in Bruges, the project in the library here involved selecting a number of damages that we wanted to record and, as much as possible, handle.

We have a book for everyone from the University collection.

We have translated this list into English for this workshop.

Because speed and efficiency are important in primary-preservation, normally the damages have not been registered – just the subsequent treatments.

But we have arranged for you an additional aid in the form of the first column.

Here, you can first list the damage, and then subsequently match the corresponding actions.

Please note any damage you see and the treatment required. You may work alone or confer with your neighbour.

I suggest that you fold the paper in half lengthwise and identify the damage of your book.

SLIDE 30

In the Netherlands, the archives damage atlas is published by Metamorfoze, the Netherlands 'National Program for the Preservation of Paper Heritage'. Today you will all receive a copy.

I am currently working on writing a damage atlas specifically for libraries. As this is due for publication in November, I cannot give you this yet. However, the atlas can be ordered from the Flanders Heritage Library.

I have, as much as possible, followed the damage atlas for libraries with respect to the types of damage. This explains why some damages require no action. An example of this is 'foxing' – the phenomenon of small brown spots on paper due to moisture and mould. Foxing can be bleached but such cosmetic treatment had absolutely no priority in this project. Therefore, you will see no treatment by 'foxing'.

SLIDE 31

Here, you can see a severely damaged book.

Books that are too badly damaged, do not fit in the concept of first aid.

It varies by project, but common practice is that when a book has more than five different types of damage, it is not classed as a 'first aid book', but rather a 'dead body on the shelf'. Elisabeth makes a neat acid free wrapping in anticipation of a possible restoration at a later date.

Hopefully, we have not given you a 'dead body', but a real 'first aid book'.

12.10 uur Conclusions - book restorer (Marijn / 10 min)

With the experience gained during the various projects, I can give you some tips if you remember while setting up a first aid project (dos and don'ts).

SLIDE

Success Points:

- . Basic concept is correct
- . Cooperation between curator and book conservator.
- . Motivation seen in a positive working atmosphere.
- . Beautiful objects deserve respect.

SLIDE

DO

- . Communicate clearly to what level you are working (prevents disappointments, because there are always things that you do not accomplish).

SLIDE

Permanent presence of a conservator (for monitoring quality and quantity).

SLIDE

Just one project organisator

Appoint one person responsible for the organization of the whole project.

SLIDE

A volunteers' good attitude is more important than knowledge.

A half day of work per person is ideal – a whole day can be boring.

SLIDE

A good basic course prededing the project

SLIDE

Make a weekly newsletter

SLIDE

IMPORTANT POINTS /Pitfalls

Cost: first aid is not an easy option

SLIDE

Embedding in the organization (Bornem)

SLIDE

The best conservation conditions must be reached and maintained (Bornem)

SLIDE

Consequences after project completion (Bruges / Antwerp)

SLIDE

Motivation of the empolyees (Brugge)

SLIDE

Timing of operations

Setting up and shutting down 'work place' takes time (Count on a whole day to set up and two days for shutting down and compiling results).

SLIDE

Transport of the books and logistics (Antwerpen)

SLIDE

Breaking 'classic' work pattern for restoration / conservation
(not done in one movement, but in phases)

SLIDE

Dissatisfaction – sometimes the book is not finished. Some people are more affected by this than others!

5 FINAL SLIDES

UPLA

Finally, I would like to mention one topic that is related to first aid. During first aid, a record is made of all damages of each individual book. This is useful to give insight to a practical plan of action to handle the conservation.

Last year, I was commissioned by Flanders Heritage Library to develop a damage registration method which collects data at a collection level. This method, UPLA; Procedure for the Universal Library Assessment provides insight into the state of a whole collection. For this purpose, 300 samples taken and on the basis of a statistical analysis, the entire collection was mapped. The data can be helpful when determining policy, raising awareness and necessary funds. In the information folder you will find a fact sheet with key information about this method.

The damage atlas that I mentioned earlier was also designed as a tool for UPLA. In the ideal situation of managing a collection, UPLA should precede first aid.

12. 20 uur Conclusions – curator (Tom / 10 min)

From my side of the story, the First Aid project has yielded a number of very beneficiary results for the Special Collections department, both in an immediate, tangible sense, and when it comes to the more long-term policy of the department regarding conservation and restoration.

First, the practical side. The First Aid project ran from 5 March to 8 October 2013 at the University of Antwerp, and resulted in the treatment of 1,487 books by a team of the library staff, volunteers and working students – in all, 13 different people (1 restorer, 6 library staff, 2 students, 4 volunteers), This equals 32 days of work (so 46 books a day) and with an average of 3 people working for a total of 576 hours (so 23 minutes per book).

Moreover, all books that passed through the First Aid process had there damage registered as light, moderate or serious. Each of these categories was assigned an average time for treatment, so that future treatment of existing problems can be anticipated both as time is concerned and what the costs will be. Over the course

of the project 753 books were treated for the Special Collections, for which 934 cases of damage were registered. 727 of those were treated (77%) and 207 (23%) are registered for future restoration. However, all urgent cases from the 1,487 were treated during the course of the project, so that at least there are no nasty surprises ('dead bodies') left in that part of the collection. For the Ruusbroecgenootschap 734 books were treated, for which 1,056 cases of damage were registered. (The RG books are generally in worse condition, because most of them were books designed to be heavily used, and because in the past there was little or no conservation). 765 of those were treated (73%) and 291 (28%) registered for future restoration. These percentages of 77% and 73% are really high, compared to Bruges where only 56% of damage cases were treated. This is telling for the group's expertise, which was a clear point of focus in this project.

Numbers: our version(!) of the project cost 17.226,85 in total, which is all costs except working students' and staff wages. This comes down to 11,5 Euros per book, 538 Euros per work day and about 30 Euros per hour. So the end verdict is about 11,5 Euros per book; a number that includes the initial investment to get the project up and running, so this number is definitely going to drop further down a bit, when the project is continued after its conclusion with the already acquired materials. 1,487 books is a good number, but then again represents only about 3% of the total collection (1,487/ca. 45,000).

When we leave the financial aspect aside and look at the total end result of the project, we see that much more can be gained from this project than just mere books that can be crossed off the list.

1. First of all, there is the knowledge transfer from the professional book restorer to the participants of the project, including the University staff. Whereas most of them were previously untrained in cleaning books, recognizing damage or mould, repairing minor constructional issues, etcetera, they now possess a good working knowledge of these procedures, which will obviously benefit the department in the future. Indeed, both the Special Collections department and the Ruusbroec Library continue up to this day some of the activities of the First Aid project. While not everything is possible anymore due to the absence of a professional restorer, the staff now disposes of the necessary skills to continue basic conservation and the curators now have much more insight in how to plan a well-considered conservation policy.
2. Second – and this helps future operations too –, thanks to the initial investment of the project, the department now disposes of a rather well-

equiped room for First Aid conservation, including a book vacuum cleaner, an incubator for mould samples, all sorts of conservation tools and materials, proper tables and chairs, etcetera. All of these are still used several times a week during our continuations of the First Aid program.

3. Third, since the First Aid program is a collaboration that connects the libraries with the world of professional restorers and different training programs in restoration technique, it has resulted in establishing an efficient network of expertise and personel for future conservation and restoration issues.
4. Fourth, thanks to the collaboration with volunteers and the large scale of the initiative, this project also has good PR-opportunities. During First Aid project news letters were written that chronicled the progress and the project received quite some media exposure, both within the university and in broader contexts. We all know that libraries and heritage projects benefit considerably from media exposure when it comes to acquiring additional funding or maintaining one's position within the sometimes critical university or library policies.
5. And finally, all collaborators have stressed the joy they have found in the project and the positive dynamic that it created in the department. An effect one should be careful not to underestimate in the perhaps somewhat solitary library world.

12.30 uur Questions?