

RUNNING HEAD: SHERYL'S PRESERVATION PHILOSOPHY

Sheryl's Preservation Philosophy

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LI 827 Preservation Strategies

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Introduction

My personal preservation philosophy has undergone spectrum shifts over my lifetime. When I was a teenager, I preferred to keep things simple by avoiding what I thought was clutter. However, in my late twenties, I started to appreciate the sentimental value of antiquities. The academic growth I experienced in my thirties has created the scholarly understanding to reach for the middle ground in the preservation spectrum. Nowadays, I am starting to learn that it takes more than past preservation experiences to create a serious spectrum shift. It also takes the development of passion for the discovery found in research and conservation as well.

Personal Preservation Experiences

Looking back at my past, it is ironic that I am even interested in archiving. As a teen I embraced a “unless it has monetary or significant sentimental value just toss it” mentality. Whether it was teen rebellion or an adolescent desire for control, the packrat mess created by my parents just drove me nuts. I just did not understand the need to keep stacks of *Astronomy* magazines, broken record players and chaotic sewing remnants so that they could get musty, moldy and buggy in the basement (Baber, 1980-1983).

Such an attitude made me the odd girl in the family. My parents were shocked when I gave away my baby dolls and toys after my 13th birthday, started cleaning my room weekly, and took on the enormous task of cleaning out the basement so I could have a place to hang out with my friends. Needless to say, this last endeavor was met with resistance. I had made the naive mistake of assuming that they did not care what I did to the basement and was more than surprised when my dad suddenly became adamant that I cannot “just throw his stuff away.” He made it quite clear that he still wants his

broken model car, the dining stool with the cracked red vinyl cover and stacks of moldy Hustlers. Apparently, I was not supposed to find these. (According to my mom, my dad was not suppose to find them either). After repeated attempts to create a cool hangout, I gave up. Every time I tried to clean a space, it was suddenly filled with new junk (Baber, 1980-1983).

While my parents' basement brings me to tears every time I visit, I am starting to realize that I have learned a lot from their neglect. Like the Biological Hazards portion of *A Litany of Terrible, No Good, Very Bad Things* by Randy Silverman (Sept. 2004), it did not take much for me to realize that the mold experiment taking place in their basement could easily spread into other areas in the house through the transit of boxes and clothes. Thus when something went down, it stayed down.

I also learned that there is a big difference between keeping an artifact and being responsible for an artifact. My grandmother Ruby was a prime example of using responsible and respectful preservation methods. I spent a good deal of time at her place when I was in my 20's and she was very careful about placing wet things such drinks, plants and vases on the antique library table and secretary. She was very willing to take the time to be responsible for these items and if she could not take care of them any longer she would sell them (Baber Evans, 1991-1998). In *Selection for Preservation* (p. 206), Carolyn Harris mentions how "it is always difficult to determine what materials will be needed in the future...and no one institution will have the funds to preserve everything." I think Ruby understood this and was willing to do her best to preserve what was important.

Ruby did have one big preservation flaw. She did not store old pictures properly and was especially biased against pictures of people she did not particularly care for. For example, her mother-in-law's photos were delegated to an old trunk in the basement. Unfortunately, as Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler mentions in *Preservation of Photographic Materials* (p. 94) this improper storage of photos caused further deterioration.

Now at 30-something, married to a packrat (go figure) and the mother of two children, I often keep my parents' toxic basement in mind when I attempt to take preventative measures. I do not store photos in the basement, I keep books at least 4 inches off of the floor, use a dehumidifier and chase off the bugs with a vacuum cleaner (Evans, 1998-2006). These preventative measures seem to reflect the use of common sense housekeeping practices found in the NEDCC manual (Section 3, Leaflet 1), yet as a family we still seem to be missing the idealistic standards of knowing what should be kept and how to keep them properly. However, no one said ideals were realistic.

A scholarly example lacking a base in reality is Baker's article *Double Fold* (2001). Baker's ideals reflect his personal spectrum of keeping everything with a potential historical or cultural value. While making excellent points about the poor quality of microfilm and the inevitable obsolescence of digital hardware, he leaves out the realities of library storage space. Baker also fails to realize how much time and energy it takes to organize, store and file paper artifacts in a library.

Baker's apparent lack of understanding regarding the realities of storage and organizational issues brings up an important question: Why is it that no one tells you fresh out of high school that there is a difference between important papers and unimportant papers, what that difference is and where are those papers supposed to go?

Without any real guidance, the future homeowner or librarian is left with the daunting aspect of choosing a path in the so-called preservation spectrum. At one end of the spectrum is my parents' indifferent habit of throwing nothing away, the frustrating middle spectrum of deciding what to keep versus what to get rid of and finally the preservation spectrum approach the British Library took by saving the information in alternative media and tossing the originals.

Discovery

During my first semester as a SLIM graduate student, I discovered a secret passion in the conservation and organization of cultural artifacts. I was taking a daunting course called the Organization of Information that required a research paper focusing on how a scholarly institution organizes information. I felt overwhelmed but my interest in the topic motivated me into looking into the way art museums catalog, store and display art.

I was pleasantly surprised when my research turned up more than cataloging and storage. A. R. Choudhury (1963) wrote the best archiving standards book called *Art museum documentation and practical handling*. Published in India, this compilation revealed the detailed steps involved from acquisition to exhibition. The philosophical content still has relevance to this day. Choudhury discusses the same organizational concepts that are consistent with current texts and articles in the documentation field. Examples of archival documentation include copies of invoices, provenance notations, scientific measurements and useful photographs illustrating storing practices, packaging and display preparation. The text is technologically outdated, but Choudhury's message

was not. "Museums, like libraries, are depositories of human knowledge in which objects are preserved, displayed and studied (p. 4)."

My research did not stop there. The Getty Conservation Institute was an excellent resource with an active website. It revealed digitally archived newsletters that discuss everything from preservation issues to archiving digitized photos and records, a link to its subject heading database AAT (Art & Archeology Thesaurus) and a recommendation to read *The conservation of wall paintings* (Cather, S., ed.).

Published in 1991, the Getty Conservation Institute recorded a symposium vested in wall painting conservation projects. Many of the works of art included the Frescos of Michelangelo on the vault of the Sistine Chapel and reliefs in Queen Nefertari's tomb. Each site went through a detailed program encompassing scientific analysis, emergency stabilization and a preservation plan. Sketches, photos and notes document the knowledgeable observations concerning the variety of deterioration that occurs over time due to extreme climates, pollution, biological disturbances like salt and manmade damages. This informative symposium was designed for a postgraduate training course in wall painting preservation and serves as a valuable resource for any museum preservationist.

Always willing to share research results, the Smithsonian Institution Press published *The art of the conservator* (Oddy, ed.) in 1992. This text is a mesmerizing overview of preservation techniques, study and climate control. Respect for the basic rules and principles are discussed to ensure the integrity of each artifact. How restoration is reversible and every step of the restoration process is thoroughly recorded, illustrated and photographed. While this text is not designed to be a teaching tool, it serves as an

excellent training resource for artists interested in “preserving the man-made material remains of the past (p. 7).”

Conclusion

Realistically, I am a middle of the road preservationist. I am always having to turn the humidifier back on in the basement (a.k.a. TV room), my two-year-old does not care about the antiques and my husband leaves important papers laying around because he thinks I am in charge of organizing the whole house. Ideally, I am a middle of the road preservationist. I try to clean my basement and house on a regular basis, respect my antiques and keep my papers organized. Philosophically, I am a middle of the road preservationist. I like the idea of protecting the books in the basement from bugs and mold. I also want to learn how to properly preserve antiques and gain the scholarly ability to know what is important and how to preserve it in a library setting.

Resources

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