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MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES TO
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APPLYING ARCHIVES PRESERVATION MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES TO NUMISMATIC COLLECTIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a number of archives have invested resources in preservation needs, assessment, systematic planning and priority setting, and the prevention of damage and deterioration as opposed to remediation thereof. Archives in which this management approach to preserving their holdings has succeeded have both improved their capacity to protect whole collections as well as realized savings by obviating the need for resource intensive conservation treatment.

What makes this approach different from traditional preservation and collections conservation? Traditionally, major archives have invested the bulk of their preservation resources in conservation treatment - the physical stabilization of individual collection items - and reformatting. And I believe that many major museums have likewise invested heavily in conservation treatment and less in collections care.

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of this approach to preservation and to explore its value and applicability to numismatic collections. My goal is to inform you about preservation management and to make a convincing case for its application in museum settings through informal cost/benefit analysis and other evidence.

Specifically, this paper will address the following ideas and practices:

- the concept of responsible custody, a series of policies and practices applied to all collections and aimed at preventing damage and deterioration. Elements of responsible custody include environmental control, damage control (disaster preparedness and staff/user education), and holdings maintenance (protective housing);
- systematic assessment of collection risks and needs to insure that preservation decisions are informed by fact and actions taken are responsive and effective; and
- systematic planning and priority setting to insure that preservation resources are allocated appropriately, cost effectively, and in keeping with organizational mission and goals.

Why consider applying this approach to the preservation of numismatic collections? Why might it work? There are several reasons, and they

represent similarities between archives and numismatic collections, including the following:

- the high volume of like formats present in holdings,
- relatively high artifactual, informational, and/or historic value of collections,
- relatively low aesthetic value of collections,
- other reasons?

What this boils down to is numismatic collections and archives hold materials which can be dealt with in the aggregate and whose needs can be met by common approaches. Further, the relative infrequency of collections possessing aesthetic value means smaller need for conservation treatment than art collections. Organizationally, archives and numismatic collections share two fundamental goals in common - the preservation of and access to collections. The balance and interplay between these two goals may differ – in archives access needs drive preservation decisions - but the fact remains that enhanced preservation and access are what we commonly strive for in our work.

2. RESPONSIBLE CUSTODY

A preservation program should encompass planning and implementing policies, procedures, and practices aimed at meeting two needs:

1. preventing damage and deterioration,
2. providing remedial activities to aim at improving physical access to collections through conservation and reformatting.

I presented these needs in priority order; preventing damage and deterioration is top priority. Remedial actions are of secondary importance.

Many archives are now concentrating their preservation resources on preventing damage and deterioration. How? By striving to practice responsible custody, a series of policies and practices aimed at preventing damage and deterioration. The term responsible custody was invented a few years ago by Paul Conway, preservation librarian at Yale and past director of the preservation office at the Society of American Archivists.

Responsible custody refers to an approach that insures basic preservation of and access to all collections. The three elements of responsible custody are:

1. environmental control: providing a storage environment that is stable and that meets the needs of stored formats. For most paper-based collections the recommended temperature and RH levels are 65-70°F and 35-45% RH.

2. damage control: reducing the risk of immediate and short term damage to collections by educating staff and users in proper handling by disaster preparedness planning and disaster prevention, and by providing adequate security.
3. holdings maintenance: protecting collections in storage and during use through the application of appropriate and adequate storage materials and methods.

The other pieces of preservation programs in major archival repositories are conservation and reformatting. These components are desirable in many institutions, but not essential. These are the remedial actions that I gave secondary importance to, a moment ago. Conservation and reformatting are expensive, and do not benefit whole collections or large parts thereof, the way practising responsible custody does. Just consider the futility of conserving selected materials, only to return them to inadequate storage conditions or to see them destroyed in a disaster that could have been prevented.

Practising responsible custody is a cost-effective approach. It is relatively low cost and very effective at extending the useful life of collections.

3. NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Repositories that do not provide the basic level of care prescribed by responsible custody should concentrate on improving their program and filling the gaps. How do you know where the gaps are? Where is your program inadequate? You need to collect data about your program and your collection! Needs assessment is a basic and critical tenet of effective preservation management, and, along with planning, should always precede action.

Assessing the adequacy of your preservation program and practice of responsible custody does not require special expertise - you don't have to be a conservator or a preservation manager to determine whether responsible custody is practised. There are a number of sources of assistance in this area. The Conservation Assessment, A Tool for Planning, Implementing, and Fundraising published by the Getty and the National Institute for Conservation is an excellent bibliographic source of help and especially well suited for museum collections and institutional self study. Some types of assessments do require technical expertise: for example, the assessment of conservation treatment needs should be carried out by or in conjunction with a conservator. Outside funding of assessment activities is worth investigating; funding is available to US repositories from several federal granting agencies, such as the Institute of Museum Services and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Let me suggest the program areas on which to focus in assessing your practice of responsible custody, your ability to provide a basic level of protection for all collections, and some questions to ask in your review:

- Environmental control. Is the level of environmental control adequate? What's wrong with it? How do you know? Do you have data? If not, collect data. To accomplish this, you will need to set up a program to measure, monitor, and analyze environmental data (temperature and RH levels), and to report problems to your facilities manager. Environmental control is expensive and few repositories have perfect systems. You must have data and know your environmental conditions before you can improve them.
- Damage control. Do you have a disaster preparedness plan? Is there anything you should do, but haven't done, toward preventing a disaster? Have you educated staff in proper collections handling? Is security adequate? As part of your program assessment, you will need to identify the potential risks to your collections due to disaster, mishandling by staff and users, and theft, and then to manage them through disaster planning, staff and user education, and security.
- Holdings maintenance. Do you have the proper storage equipment for collections, for example, shelving and cabinets? Are collections afforded a basic level of protection by their enclosures? Are there discrete groups of materials that require special or improved housing to enhance their preservation and access?

4. PRIORITY SETTING

How do we set priorities for more advanced preservation action? How do you decide what items or parts of your collections warrant extra resources - better storage, conservation treatment, reformatting? The cost of conservation treatment, reformatting and special storage is prohibitive. Decisions regarding which items or discrete collections in which to invest extra resources must be made systematically and carefully, using uniform criteria that will allow you to rank projects according to urgency of need and benefit to be gained.

I'd like to suggest criteria to guide priority setting efforts. These criteria were proposed by the Commission on Preservation and Access Task Forces on Archival Selection in 1992 and have been used to good effect by several archives and museums, including the National Museum of American History and the National Park Service. What makes this methodology for priority setting different is the consideration of the value - historic, monetary, aesthetic - in the decision, along with risk, or preservation need. This makes sense - if the collection or item has limited value to the collection or does not support the mission or collecting policy of your institution, why bother investing the extra resources in it?

I'd like to give you a brief introduction to this methodology. For a more comprehensive discussion of the process and its genesis, I refer to the Commission on Preservation and Access Report of the Task Forces on Archival Selection, published in 1992.

The two principal criteria to consider in setting priorities for advanced preservation action are value and risk. The nature and degree of value need to be considered and identified. One can rank the value using the qualifiers high, medium, or low.

The assessment of risk, or preservation need is based on the condition of the item or collection as well as its level of vulnerability in storage and use. To assess the condition of an item, one needs to consider both damage and deterioration. Has the item been physically damaged through improper housing, mishandling, disaster? Has the item or collection deteriorated due to the use of unstable materials in its manufacture or storage in poor environmental conditions?

The level of vulnerability is informed by the extent of use of the item or collection and the adequacy of its housing. Is the item or collection heavily used by researchers or frequently exhibited? If so, its vulnerability is heightened, and perhaps it should be conserved or better protected. Is the housing adequate? If it's heavily used but inadequately housed, the collection may be a strong candidate for re-housing. Again, the level of risk can be qualified by use of high, medium, or low, and taken together, the risk and value assessments will indicate the level of need for preservation action. Obviously, a collection of high value, at high risk would be a high priority for preservation action.

5. PLANNING

Preservation planning combines the results of needs assessment and priority setting. Elements of an effective, practicable preservation plan include the following:

- identification of goals and activities; identification of responsibility and resources needed, including personnel, time, supplies and equipment;
- time frame or schedule; and
- statement of expected outcome.

6. THE CASE FOR APPLYING PRESERVATION MANAGEMENT IN MUSEUM SETTINGS

In closing, I'd like to argue in support of applying these principles and practices in the museum setting:

- This is a cost-effective approach. The benefits of responsible custody, needs assessment, systematic priority setting, and planning far outweigh the costs. These activities do not require special expertise, a lot of time, or other resources. Their benefit is far reaching and extends to the whole collection.
- More and more, this approach is gaining professional recognition and favour because it makes sense. Investing resources in preservation management has helped many institutions gain resources and support. Institutions with a sound, solid preservation program in which responsible custody is practised, priorities are systematically established, and resources are invested in planning have a better chance at getting grants, attracting good staff, and acquiring valuable collections than those that do not.