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**Hands-on research : Its place in conservation training, in practice and the need for us to write about it.**

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**Citation**

Scheper, C. H. (2018). Hands-on research : Its place in conservation training, in practice and the need for us to write about it. *Journal Of Paperconservation : Iada Reports - Mitteilungen Der Iada*, 18(3), 109-115. doi:10.1080/18680860.2017.1417772

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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To cite this article: Karin Scheper (2017) Hands-on Research, Journal of Paper Conservation, 18:3, 109-115, DOI: [10.1080/18680860.2017.1417772](https://doi.org/10.1080/18680860.2017.1417772)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/18680860.2017.1417772>



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Published online: 11 Jun 2018.



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# Hands-on Research

## Its Place in Conservation Training, in Practice, and the Need for us to Write about it

Karin Scheper

**Keywords:** Academic writing, Conservation research, Conservation training, Publication, Education, Craft-based knowledge

Dissemination of our professional knowledge is an important theme that concerns every conservator, and it concerns us at every stage of our careers. Information can be shared orally, at different levels of formality, and in written form, which usually has a more formal character. A published article has an obvious advantage: the knowledge is searchable and can be retrieved virtually everywhere and always. Its writing however necessitates time and effort, and possibly some courage or conviction that others may actually be interested. Other obstacles could be to find or select the right platform for a certain topic or a specific group of readers. Developments in education programmes, such as internationalization and the increased role of the natural sciences, and expectations of what a conservator does or should do are also factors of influence. Yet, how do these changes affect our ways in reaching out?

### Various means of sharing knowledge

The year 2017 happened to be an anniversary year for two important organizations in our field, IADA and ICOM-CC. They both marked the occasion with a conference focusing on professional development, education, and sharing knowledge [1]. It was not difficult to find consensus on the importance of the topic nor was it a problem to find a sufficient number of contributors. Speakers for conferences never seem to be scarce; in other settings too, there always seems to be a surplus of proposals. When it comes to publishing, however, offers for contributions are not so readily available.

In more informal media on the other hand, an increase of conservation-based publications can be observed. It is difficult to say how many conservation blogs exist and whether they have a regular feed of content, but such avenues provide a platform for presenting information in a different format. Some of

these blogs are owned by individuals, others by professional institutions such as libraries or universities; usually, these contributions aim to inform and connect with a wider, more general audience, yet may contain innovative methods and be of interest to colleagues otherwise. As records of interesting findings or reports of noteworthy treatments, they are definitely important additions to our field, but this does not change the need for professional contributions with a more formal character or in-depth approach.

### The conservator's unique position and obligation

In a talk delivered in 2018, I quoted a 30-year-old yet still valid observation by Mirjam Foot:

Conservators and binders who have studied medieval and post-medieval book structures [...] have made an invaluable contribution to the knowledge of librarians and binding historians. Their daily practical work increases their experience in a way that leaves 'theoretical' historians gasping with envy. Any binder, any restorer, any conservator has one tremendous advantage over any librarian or book historian [2].

The part of the sentence that I left out, since the statement was sufficiently clear, is:

[...] and who have written and lectured in great detail on various aspects of the book and its constituent parts, [...].

At the time, the audience was a mixed group of colleagues, friends and more generally interested book lovers [3]. However, when using the quote again in this professional platform, the defining adjective clause deserves our full attention. It stresses the huge responsibility wrapped up in Foot's statement: it means we have an obligation to communicate what

we do, not only to our peers but also to colleagues in a wider field of book scholars. They do not have the same possibility of access to a book's material composition and lack the very specific technical and tacit, tactile knowledge through which a conservator observes and understands the construction and materials that a book is made of. Therefore, we can and should act as a kind of material translator between object and scholar.

Writing about our findings may seem easy, as we are used to documenting our work and writing reports. We may even conclude that, when this basic documentation is theoretically accessible to a wider audience, we have already largely complied with our obligation. However, with our different mother tongues, we write in many languages, and to complicate matters, we may use terminology that does not always have identical meanings in different countries, or may not be understood by non-conservation specialists. As a consequence, such reports may not be as accessible and informative as we think. In addition, our conservation reports are often reduced to essentials; they contain a description of the object's condition, a list of the materials used and a professional account of what was done and why. The reports usually do not reflect a growing insight that may have occurred during the work that was conducted. The process of decision-making, the interventive measures that were considered — and rejected — whether based on knowledge gained through experience or trial and error, is not commonly documented. The final results are included, but the route we followed to get to our informed decisions is not necessarily part of the account. We may take notes, mentally or otherwise, but our improved understanding does not easily find a way out into the public arena. Of course, as practising professionals, we benefit ourselves and, subsequently, the books we treat thereafter are better off. With any luck, we discuss our findings with direct colleagues, transfer our knowledge to interns, and exchange experiences in the corridor chats during conferences or other informal gatherings. Yet, much of our accumulated knowledge goes unreported.

### Materiality of the book

Intervention-related studies, innovations in treatment options, and research into conservation materials are only part of our scholarly domain. The other focus of a book conservator's intellectual output is directed towards the materiality of the object. A book conservator examines and handles an enormous number of books over the years. All these volumes vary, whether in small details or to a larger extent, in construction

and material composition and in the way readers left their marks in them. Every item carries information about its origin and social and historical context. Accordingly, the book conservator builds an extensive reference frame and, while doing so, is bound to encounter remarkable, unknown, or uncommon features or binding techniques. As Mirjam Foot stated, book conservators have an exceptional chance to observe material characteristics, and in addition, their specialism allows them to objectively describe and then interpret such observations. Thus, they are able to provide information on books that is not easily acquired by the more theoretically orientated book scholars nor by book historians who study different physical features of the book.

It should be noted that indeed, the most important contributions in this field have been made by craft-based scholars, such as Christopher Clarkson, Nicholas Pickwoad, and János Szirmai [4]. Their work resulted from typical hands-on research and did not require high-tech laboratory analysis. Instead, they combined careful observations and meticulous registration of what was observed with an ability to relate the observations meaningfully to a framework of knowledge. This kind of examination is also integrated in our practice and should be imbedded in education programmes. However, the opportunity to conduct systematic assessments or time to reflect deeply on our observations is often lacking. Important observations may thus go unreported and may not be questioned in the right context. Given the fact that we constantly learn from the objects we work on, and that from almost any treatment we acquire experience and improve our abilities, it seems that a substantial part of the accumulated knowledge of conservators is not sufficiently shared with the wider group of users and scholars.

### Changed role of the conservator

Reaching out and making ourselves more visible serves another purpose besides sharing knowledge with our peers in conservation journals and trying to reach book historians and the likes through the professional journals in their own specific fields only. Traditionally, the experts who examined and described a book's material features were codicologists, palaeographers, and bibliographers; conservators kept the items accessible. When, for example, the Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies project was structured, this traditional work hierarchy was followed [5]. It was decided that the team of codicologists were to write the chapter on the making and composition of the codex. The team of conservators was to address

preservation issues and add information about the state of the art in their field. Though some conservators were arguably the ones who understood the material objects in greater detail, discussing this sensitive topic only led to small changes in the approach.

A related issue is a persistent, though erroneous, image of the general routine of book repair. Often enough statements can be encountered such as ‘Structural features [...] may only be apparent once a book is taken apart on the conservator’s bench’ [6], assuming that dismantling and reconstruction is at the core of our work, which supports the idea that conservators are partly to blame for the loss of historical information of objects. Conservators may shrug when they read that or think that this perspective will change with the next generation of codicologists, but it may well be that when such views are repeated often enough in full view of the next generation, and we do not refute it, things will not actually change so quickly. In order to have a congenial dialogue about our approach and contribution to book studies, a well-proportioned view of our *metier* is needed. Being more explicit about what we see, value, and aim to preserve will help correct this image.

Lastly, in an era in which digital copies of books become more and more widely available at an increasing speed, it is essential that we explain what we do and why in several ways. The necessity for the prolonged usability of the physical book may be questioned when a digital copy can replace it and the role of conservation in digitization programmes is not always well understood, but the awareness of conservation issues and the increased value of the physical artefact *after* a book is digitized is often even smaller. It would be good if we tried to become more visible and one way to do so is to publish about what we find and how such findings contribute to other studies or add to the understanding and the value of a specific item or a collection as a whole.

### Changed landscape of training and education

Meanwhile, the manner in which conservators are trained has changed significantly over the past decades. In many European countries, conservation training programmes are now being taught at an academic level, and professional organizations such as ECCO and ENCoRE promote this development [7]. In the document ‘The Conservator-Restorer: a Definition of the Profession’ (1984), ICOM-CC does not specifically relate the level of training to a Masters’ degree, though the extensive list of topics which are expected to be included in a professional training programme (under 5.3) clearly points to a high level of education [8]. The American Institute

of Conservation (AIC) specifies a minimum of an undergraduate level, yet assumes additions to such a programme [9]. This illustrates that it is generally acknowledged that the profession of conservator requires specific higher education, in which theory and practice need to be combined, as well-balanced as is possible within the academic situation.

Instead of entering the field from a craft-based position, conservators nowadays are likely to develop their manual skills in the setting of their Masters’ programme and subsequent internships. As a consequence, their acquaintance with the material properties, as well as the characteristics of the objects are also mastered through a preservation perspective, regardless of which discipline the student-conservator chooses. Between the various disciplines, however, differences exist in how the specific necessary skills should be acquired.

The field of book conservation is characterized by a certain tension between the usage of the objects and their value as historic artefacts; the conservator constantly weighs his choices accordingly. Though this is not unique to the field, it does define it. Another critical factor is the number of books present throughout the cultural heritage field. The uniqueness of these items vary; yet, there is a growing awareness that printed books from the period of the handprint press and even the early industrial period can still be considered unique objects with individual characteristics. Book conservators therefore bear in mind that the sheer number of objects often requires or dictates a pragmatic approach — if not for the books themselves and the organization of the work, then because of the need for institutional support — while they try to protect their professional values. Despite the information books carry beyond their content, only a few exceptional books warrant unlimited treatment or research time. The average book can be repaired and made ready for use with relatively easily available materials and techniques, requiring a few hours or a few days at most (items with extensive paper damage or other particularities excepted).

This affects the training programme and the book conservator’s learning curve; the student should be able to treat more objects than a painting or furniture conservator. However, since most academic training programmes have combined courses for the various disciplines, and because subjects such as natural sciences, documentation, sample taking, analytical techniques, and getting acquainted with the wide range of research instruments, as well as art and cultural history need to find a place in the few training years, in the end, it appears that students in book conservation have had only a glimpse of the various book types and construction methods that were used over the centuries. The variety in actual treatment options

included in the actual training schedule may have been even smaller.

From discussions with students and young professionals, I have learned that this perhaps unavoidable deficiency in their training leads to insecurity when it comes to decision-making and remedial treatment. They feel that much more time and work experience, preferably under the guidance of a senior conservator, is needed before a stage can be reached where they feel confident and have an adequate grip on what they do [10]. It also follows that these young professionals usually feel too inexperienced to contribute to the field in writing about conservation treatments. It is not that they lack the skills of scholarly writing; during their training they have learned how to analyse and use sources, and they have practised writing through multiple assignments and a final thesis. But to feel confident in writing about treatment requires a good sense of what is common or has been done before, and what is innovative. In other words, the examination skills of young professionals may be well developed and they are quite capable of academic writing, but they may not yet trust their judgement concerning the material assessment of the object and its possible treatment.

### Obstacles in our working environments

Writing takes time and does not easily fit into our daily schedule; administrative tasks and advisory responsibilities already compete with practical work and we need the precious hours at the bench, both for the objects as well as for keeping up our hands-on experience. As a consequence, the intellectual effort of describing and analysing our work is something that usually has to be done outside office hours. This is also due to the fact that in most institutions, conservators are expected to support the use of objects and make them accessible, while they are not expected to study the objects themselves, let alone spend time on writing and publishing about such studies. On the contrary, with the increased workload of pressing exhibition schedules and digitization programmes, targets are set at a different kind of productiveness.

Conservators in private practice may not have to deal with the same kind of restrictions, but it is not likely that clients are willing to pay for time spent on research. What a conservator gains from the intellectual investment is therefore increased knowledge, professional growth, and pleasure, for it is a stimulating activity; publications are not paid for and even presenting at a conference does not guarantee a partial waiving of the fee, whereas the costs for particularly the private conservator when participating in such

events is obvious. As a result, conservators — whether working privately or in an institution — will conduct the necessary research for a particular treatment but may decide to only use the results directly and not share them with their colleagues or wider audience by translating those results into a professional publication.

The hybrid position of conservators is a key issue in the development of our profession. Despite being trained at an academic level and being supposed to work and think at an academic level, we usually are not paid as such. Our employers do also not expect us to deliver scholarly contributions, and they usually do not stimulate it either. Though we may be pleased that we do not have to deal with the increasing pressure to publish which so many scholars find exhausting and counter-effective, writing about our hands-on research activities should be regarded as an inextricable part of our profession.

My recent study of the Islamic manuscript collections in the Leiden University Library is a case in point. When I first started with the treatment of a few manuscripts in Arabic script with original bindings, I poorly understood the structure. This specific book culture had not been part of my conservation training, so I had to learn by practice and by reading all the literature that I could find about these manuscripts as artefacts. It then appeared that some fundamental misunderstanding of the traditional bookbinding structures had had huge consequences for these objects, and made me start to doubt accepted conservation treatments. The initial purpose of the survey I conducted was therefore to find evidence for what I thought to be the essence of the structure; the treatments would have to be adapted accordingly. However, the assessment taught me much more, about the developments of this bookbinding culture throughout the centuries and the various regions. So much interesting information came to light that I realized these findings were important to a wider field of book historians, such as aspects that could help to establish a manuscript's provenance. In addition, the evidence would change the depreciative perception of these book structures as functional objects, which would likely contribute to a different approach of these objects. Had I focussed on presenting my findings in conservation literature only, it would obviously have been more difficult to reach the wider audience and ultimately I would probably not have elaborated on the interesting historical evidence related to provenance in such detail. Also, since the authoritative publications denoted these structures as relatively weak, I felt it was necessary to challenge the existing perception of these bookbinding structures in the field of codicologists, in order to achieve acceptance of a different conservation approach. This would support

my plea to not alter the original structure and respect the material composition.

It is illustrative that I was not granted time to work on this project during my working hours. It was felt that my competence as a conservator sufficed for treating the oriental collections too, and that such research projects were a personal interest that should be conducted in my own time. Fortunately, the collection's curator, Arnoud Vrolijk, recognized the importance of the project and supported me accordingly. Only after the significance of the study's results became clear did the library become aware of the impact of the work, and by extension, of the value of the material aspects of its Arabic manuscript collections.

### Internationalization

Many universities now provide courses in conservation in the English language. A similar development can be seen in the landscape of conservation journals and conferences. This certainly has advantages, and one of the arguments to hush voiced concerns is that the transition period unavoidably has difficulties; our grip of the English language will improve and problems are partly related to differences between generations. While this is partly true, some disadvantages of this 'one-language-fits-all' approach are likely to remain. They cannot all be discussed within the scope of this paper, but its influence on our written output needs to be mentioned.

Fortunately, in our field of book and paper conservation, a lot of work has been done on glossaries in English. This eases the use of the language for those who have other mother tongues; still, the exact translations of such terminologies need a lot of work. And the need for the non-native English speakers to use their own language will remain, since many interactions between conservators and their clientele will take place in their native tongues. From experience, I can say that writing in English does become easier with practice, but for many of us, it will never equal the ease with which one writes one's native language. In addition, we need our own help desks for proofreading, since many journals cannot offer much assistance with translating and extensive editing; editors often are colleagues offering their time unremunerated.

Sometimes, it may be difficult to distinguish between knowledge that is useful for one's own profession and what would be welcomed by a larger group. Some findings may seem isolated or too small to result in an article or presentation. Interesting features or material issues can be part of otherwise unremarkable treatments or objects. It may be hard to find coherence in such findings and the information value may then not seem substantial enough for an article in its own

right. Also, the non-academically trained practitioners may feel a barrier when thinking about writing for one of the international conservation journals, which developed along with the professionalization of our field, aiming for peer-reviewed contributions and 'original' material. Complicating matters further, some of the low-profile journals in languages other than English that welcomed contributions with a more experimental, personal, or practical approach, or published careful hypotheses have disappeared in the process. Though blog posts offer the possibility to deliver a short text and less fully researched information, the medium is not exactly an alternative since the context and its impact is rather different.

### Some suggestions for a way ahead

One of the changes in our profession pointed out by Helen Lindsay at the IADA conference in Oslo is how the writing of a conservation publication evolved from an individual, isolated process to a social process in which we confer with colleagues and have the work in that sense peer reviewed before submitting it [11]. This development makes it easier to verify the originality of a certain work, and it also seems a good way to overcome concerns in terms of language and quality of the content. Since we all gain from shared information, we should all welcome the opportunity to play a supportive role in these processes.

In order to make it easier to find one's way in the various media in search of interesting and useful contributions or simply to keep up with what is happening in the field, it would be very helpful to get an overview of the various platforms where conservators leave their contributions or develop a manner to keep track of what has been published. The somewhat old-fashioned but solid concept of a professional bibliography could be part of the solution. For our purpose, a chronological bibliography would be needed [12]. In short, it means we collect our professional output ourselves and list the titles, per year, in a structured way in an accessible place. There could be a number of ways to organize it; do it by country and have the lists stored at websites of a national body of education or other institute, or house the bibliography with one of the international organizations for conservation [13]. What matters is that the information can be found by anyone looking for it, conservators and other scholars alike.

When everything that is published, regardless of the publication format or language, is assembled on a yearly basis starting now — and it would be the duty of all authors to make sure the bibliographic data are sent to the appropriate place — we would have a full coverage of our output. When it is also possible to work retrospectively on the past few years and

then further back, it would increase insight in what is published and in what kind of journals and other platforms. The retrospective work could perhaps be included in academic programmes; for students, this could be a stimulating and educational experience. Of course, it will take an effort to get such a bibliography installed and small editorial groups will be needed [14]. However, it would be a great resource to have yearly overviews of published book conservation-related information, for us and everyone using the objects we work with.

What we achieve through practice is a very valuable kind of understanding, something not easily gained through theoretical study nor by analysis in the laboratory. It makes a strong argument for the incorporation of more practical treatments in the education of conservators. In addition, it is also vital to share our hands-on research results with librarians, binding historians, codicologists, and text scholars. They can build further on our work and may in turn provide valuable information for the field of conservation. In all probability, this cross-pollination has an added value; it could lead to more cooperative projects and enhance acknowledgement of our profession. We should be aware that, ultimately, we demonstrate professionalism and help enforce respect when we communicate about our often unique expertise and enhance our visibility. It would be great if the institutions who hire or employ us would recognize too that our research skills are an asset and accept that research and reporting about it is an integral part of our job.

## Acknowledgements

It has been stimulating to talk to several colleagues about this topic, and I would like to thank Helen Lindsay and Herre de Vries for sharing their thoughts. Erik Geleijns, being a librarian at heart, suggested the option of a professional bibliography as a useful tool and in addition exerted his editorial skills. Gabriëlle Beentjes and Femke Prinsen have helped shaping my thoughts, as usual.

## Notes

- [1] Sixty years after its founding, IADA also celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its first international conference with a symposium themed ‘From generation to generation – Sharing knowledge, connecting people’, which was held in Oslo, 3–5 May. ICOM-CC’s triennial conference theme, ‘Linking past and future’, celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 4–8 September, in Copenhagen.
- [2] Foot, M. 1987. Preserving books and their history, first published in *Bookbinder I*. pp. 5–8, reprinted in a collection of essays *Preserving the past* (1993), p. 434.
- [3] The occasion of the talk was the symposium ‘De studie van het boek als object’ (the study of the book as an artefact), organized by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences; the talk was published, edited, and expanded: Scheper, K., 2017. *De studie van het boek als object, de restaurator als onderzoeker, Jaarboek voor Nederlandse boekgeschiedenis*, 24:pp. 126–141.
- [4] This list is certainly not exhaustive, but giving a full overview is not my objective here.
- [5] The European project COMSt covered the years 2009–15. One of its end products, *The Handbook* (2015) is freely downloadable at <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/comst/publications/handbook.html> (last accessed 17 October 2017).
- [6] Pearson, D. 2014. *English Bookbinding Styles 1450–1800*. New Castle DE: Oak Knoll Press, p. 4
- [7] ‘Access to the profession begins at level 7 [which equates to a postgraduate academic Masters’ degree], and the Conservator-Restorer title is reserved for this level or above’, *ECCO* (European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers’ Organisation) *Competences for Access to the Conservation-Restoration Profession*, (2011), p. 7. [http://www.ecco-eu.org/fileadmin/assets/documents/publications/ECCO\\_Competences\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ecco-eu.org/fileadmin/assets/documents/publications/ECCO_Competences_EN.pdf) (last accessed 22 October 2017). The European Network for Conservation-Restoration Education (ENCoRE) elaborated on the development with the documents: *Clarification of Conservation/Restoration Education at University Level or Recognised Equivalent* (2001), 6–8, <http://www.encore-edu.org/ENCoRE-documents/cp.pdf> (last accessed 22 October 2017) and *On Practice in Conservation-Restoration Education* (approved by the ENCoRE GA 28 March 2014), <http://www.encore-edu.org/ENCoRE-documents/PracticePaper2014.pdf> (accessed 22 October 2017).
- [8] [http://www.icom-cc.org/47/about-icom-cc/definition-of-profession/#.V2a9m\\_mLShc](http://www.icom-cc.org/47/about-icom-cc/definition-of-profession/#.V2a9m_mLShc) (last accessed 22 October 2017).
- [9] “Beyond undergraduate education, it is assumed that the conservator will have had extensive theoretical and practical education and training relating to the field of conservation and to one or more specific areas of specialization”, in: ‘Defining the Conservator: Essential Competencies’, AIC (2003), p. 5. <http://www.conservation-us.org/docs/default-source/governance/defining-the-conservator-essential-competencies.pdf> (last accessed 22 October 2017).

- [10] This in itself is not new; when I first started working in a conservation workshop, I also felt insufficiently equipped when it came to treatment experience and having an overview of conservation problems. I do believe, however, that since then (1995), the range of subjects that students need to gain knowledge of has increased. Also, the list of required reading has grown substantially, and there are more materials, methods, and research techniques to choose from, which all need to be understood before one can actually choose.
- [11] Lindsay, H. 2017. *Conservation writing and research as a social activity. Finding the right conversation*, IADA conference Oslo 2017.
- [12] Bibliographies do exist; for example, the conservation wiki, supported by the AIC, already provides many references, but it is organized the other way around: the topic of interest leads to published titles, which is very useful but does not currently provide an overview of everything newly published. See: [http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Main_Page), [http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Book\\_%26\\_Paper](http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Book_%26_Paper), and [http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Book\\_Conservation\\_Wiki](http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Book_Conservation_Wiki) (last accessed 21 October 2017).
- [13] IADA could be the right place to host such a bibliography, but there are other options as well; institutions probably have technical restrictions as to who is authorized to add information to their website.
- [14] Editors could possibly be recruited from national conservation organizations or the work could be imbedded within national education systems and assigned to an MA student for one or two years, providing study credits in exchange for the work.

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