HISTORY UNFOLDED
Conservation Treatment and Housing of 18th-Century Printed Paper Fans

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Introduction

Thirty-three folding paper fans were recently acquired by the Huntington Library’s curator of early printed books. These fans, all produced by fan manufacturers in England during the second half of the 18th century, share characteristics with bound collections—they contain significant amounts of printed text, represent a convenient method of storing reference information, and are three-dimensional, compact objects that were intended to be handled. The purpose of this paper is to describe the production, condition, treatment, and housing of these fans.

Background

Eighteenth-century paper fans were mass-produced and ephemeral in nature, allowing people from all levels of society to keep up with rapidly changing trends at little expense. Their printed text often functioned as memory aids and included almanacs, song lyrics, dance versus rules for parlor games, and the details of current and past events. Much more than fashion accessories, these fans serve as documents that shed light on the social and political history of the period.


Materials and Techniques

In the Huntington’s collection, the most typical fans design consists of a semi-circular leaf constructed from two sheets of thin, antique laid paper mounted to plain sticks made of bamboo wood. This leaf generally includes a stripe or stipple engraving with a strip of metallic paper along the top edge for reinforcement. More elaborate fans feature leaves with hand coloring in opaque water-based paint and strips of lace embossed with paint or faux jewels.

The process of fan making is illustrated in Diderot’s “Encyclopédie” of 1758 as seen below. First, workers stretched paired sheets of paper over a frame to prepare them for leaf-making (Plate I). Next, the leaf was hand-colored (Plate II) and scored prior to folding (Plate III). Finally, workers inserted the sticks. Trimmed the leaf, and reinforced the top edge of the fan (Plate IV).

condition and Treatment

Few paper fans from the 18th century have survived, but those represented in the Huntington’s collection are in good condition. It is clear that these fans were functional and not solely decorative objects. The inherent stresses of opening and closing the fans has presumably caused tears along both sides of the paper media; surface girt is present on the fans’ sticks and is evidence of handling. Other condition issues include the lack of presence of mending, broken sticks, staining, and extensive previous repairs which interfered with the mechanical action of the fans.

Treatment of the fans was complicated by the folded-nature of their supports and by the need to limit moisture to prevent warping, bleeding, and corrosion. For this reason, all treatments carried out were non-aqueous. Stick repair, the removal of non-conventional repairs from the paper leaf, mending, paint consolidation, and odor reduction were completed as appropriate.

Housing

Various housing options for the fans were considered. While an open position could lead to warping of the sticks and flattening of the leaf, a closed storage position would require additional mechanical stresses for viewing. Because the fans are structurally stable and have been digitized to reduce handling, the decision was made to store them closed in custom-made housing. The housing were designed by Paper Conservator Erin Jue and Technician-Asst. Yosiee. Rong Museum mat board, Solara polyethylene foam, and Tyvek were used to make a small, custom-fit box for each fan. Each tray has book cloth tabs for easy handling.

Selected References


Conclusion

The Huntington’s collection of 18th-century printed paper fans provides reference information and entertainment. Condition issues included damage from handling and many unusual previous repairs. Non-aqueous treatment techniques were chosen to prevent disruption of the folding paper supports and water-sensitive media. Conservation of the fans stablized them for future use, while a closed storage position protects the objects and reduces necessary storage space.

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