

Active, Supportive, and Flexible

The evolving role of book conservation in digitisation projects

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BRITISH
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Digitisation is increasingly a priority for our cultural institutions. The important role played by conservation and preservation professionals within digitisation projects is now widely recognised. This poster describes how in a well-planned project, based on a collaborative approach – where treatments and procedures are customised to meet the special requirements of mass digitisation – conservators can support both productivity and best practice, while still leaving room for creativity.

The British Library Qatar Foundation Partnership Digitisation Project

Over the last three years, a dedicated team of curators, cataloguers, conservators, and digitisation experts at the British Library has been working in partnership with the Qatar Foundation and Qatar National Library to develop an online, bilingual portal, known as the *Qatar Digital Library*. The portal makes the modern history and culture of the Gulf and wider region available through vividly documented personal and official archives, photographs, maps, and sound recordings held at the British Library. The Partnership has now been extended into a second phase, until December 2018.

Active, Supportive, and Flexible Conservation within the BLQFP

Conservation activities within the BLQFP can be divided into four key areas: **Assessing, Treating, Supporting, and Communicating.**

Assessing

Colour coding of items based on their condition is used as a communication tool across the different strands of the project. Following conservation assessment, items are colour coded as follows:

- **Green**
Items which do not require conservation treatment prior to digitisation.



Volumes that open flat.



Volumes that open easily to more than 100°.

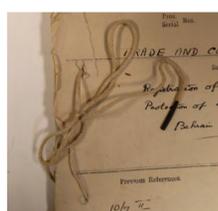


Loose sheets with no significant damage.

- **Yellow**
Damaged items which require minimal conservation treatment (up to 5 hours) in order to be digitised safely.



Tears and creases within the text/image area or, where their extent/severity impairs safe handling.



Metal fastenings, treasury tags, or other fastenings which pose a handling risk/obscure text/image.



Unique material with text/image rendered illegible by the binding structure (disbinding is indicated if more than 3 characters of a word are lost in the gutter).

- **Orange**
Damaged or fragile items that require very careful handling, or specialist equipment, in order to be digitised safely.



Volumes with loose or detached folios, restricted opening, weak/brittle bindings, or items with vulnerable media.

Large fold-outs which require flattening.

- **Red**
An item that requires more than 5 hours (or exceptionally, 10 hours) of conservation treatment will be considered out of scope unless it has previously been identified as being a unique, irreplaceable, or iconic item.

Treating

Treatments are carried out on items following standardised procedures and materials based on the principles of minimal intervention, retreatability and the 'fit for purpose' approach. Items with vulnerable sewing or fragile bindings and items which have been disbound are housed in new custom made boxes and folders.



Large tears are repaired but, in general, losses are not infilled.

Out of scope treatments

As previously mentioned, items requiring more than 5 hours of treatment are considered out of scope unless identified as being unique, irreplaceable or iconic. During the first phase of the project a number of these items were selected to receive more extensive conservation treatment and in-depth analysis that, for some, developed into articles and a video for the QDL portal.



A specially designed label is added when an item has been disbound.



Custom enclosure for a fragile binding.



Before treatment
MS IO Islamic 461 is one of four Arabic manuscripts which received full conservation treatment during Phase I.



Before and after treatment of Maps X/3630, a large volume of maps which was disbound and the maps housed separately in folders.

Flexible Magnets



In-situ paper repairs are carried out with the help of magnets to speed up the drying process.

Supporting

As conservators, we consider that our role within a digitisation project is to enable the production of high quality digital surrogates while minimising risks to the collection items. To this end, we considered each activity in the context of the digitisation workflow and produced detailed conservation policies and procedures for the project. The aim was to optimise the use of conservators' time and skills while facilitating the work of others.



Handling training is provided for all staff.



Custom cradle for the imaging of bound material.

Ongoing support:
Conservation
Emergency view
in SharePoint.



Communicating

To facilitate effective communication between the different workflow strands, all relevant conservation assessment and treatment information is documented and shared using SharePoint. We also engage with the wider profession and general public to share knowledge, ideas, and lessons learned. This is achieved through a variety of means including context articles and videos on the QDL portal, posts on the BL Collection Care Blog, presentations at professional conferences, and conservation studio visits.



The Conservation Assessment view in SharePoint

Mass-digitisation projects offer conservators the opportunity to gain a better understanding of whole collections, rather than focussing on the treatment of items in isolation. This enables conservators to act more holistically to prolong the life cycle of the collection. Within large cultural institutions, conservators and conservation managers must increasingly demonstrate how their input contributes to the fulfilment of institutional aims and wider strategic priorities. This project demonstrates how conservators can add value, not only by minimising risk to the collection, but also by facilitating productivity, and enriching the content through their unique professional perspective. The onus is on us as conservators to "sell ourselves" and this can only be achieved by effective communication.