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# Taking care of paper

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AS COURSE titles go, Curatorial Care of Paper sounds a trifle rarefied. Surely there can't be much need for people to take care of the *paper* found in libraries, museums, art galleries and archives, a cynic might think.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

More than any other material, paper is the one on which cultural records have come down to us from ages past. Whether those records are illuminated manuscripts, Japanese scrolls, famous authors' letters, watercolor paintings or historic maps, they are, inevitably, on the road to ruin.

"Everything in library collections was deteriorating yesterday, is deteriorating today, and will continue to deteriorate tomorrow," a Harvard University archivist once said, with crushing finality.

Charles Brandt, who teaches Curatorial Care of Paper for the University of Victoria's cultural resource management program, agrees. Paper cannot be kept from deteriorating, he says, unless it is put "into a deep freeze in total darkness."

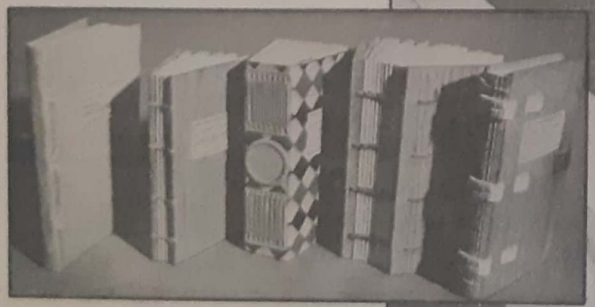
Fortunately, however, there are sensible ways to check decay. Brandt counsels preventive conservation — a set of simple measures which, when followed scrupulously, assures valuable documents a longer life.

"Moisture is always moving in and out of paper objects," says Brandt, stating a principle that would probably be self-evident to anyone giving it a moment's thought. "Paper objects try to establish an equilibrium with their environment."

Heat, which goes hand-in-hand with humidity, causes chemical reactions in paper. When a museum lowers the temperature of its storage area by 10° C., it doubles the life expectancy of its paper artifacts.

Relative humidity must also be controlled. For their pages to maintain a healthy eight-per-cent moisture content, books must be kept in a place where the relative humidity is 40 to 50 per cent.

In addition to temperature and humidity, light is a major concern. Brandt says that when visitors first enter the Musee des Beaux Arts in Montreal, "it's kind of hard to see." The light level there is 30 lux, although levels of up to 50 are permissible for works of art on paper. (Paintings on canvas will tolerate 100 lux; stone sculptures, perhaps 300.)



*Paper conservator Charles Brandt displays a 16th-century Oriental scroll he restored. Top: making paper by hand. Above: models for restoration binding*

John McKay photo

PAPER IS named for papyrus, a reed the ancient Egyptians sliced, pressed and wrote on. But the invention of paper, as we know it today, is attributed to China in the year 105 AD.

Until 1804, paper was largely made by hand. Early paper was made of plant fibres — mulberry, flax, straw, cotton — since they are rich in cellulose. Today almost all paper is made from wood fibres.

The best paper was made from the 12th to the 19th centuries. Today's paper contains rosin sizing, to prevent inks from feathering, and alum, which was introduced to harden the sizing. Since alum eventually breaks down, generating sulphuric acid, modern paper carries within it the seeds of its own destruction.

It has "an expected useful life of less than 50 years — not that long, if improperly stored," says Brandt, whose own history is at least as compelling as paper's.

He got interested in paper by way of bookbinding — a skill he learned as a monk.

Originally an Anglican priest, he had been drawn to Catholicism for seven years by 1955, when he went off to live at a Benedictine monastery in Oklahoma. He was received into the Catholic Church while at the monastery, which — furthering the Benedictines' long-standing commitment to humanism and culture — had a bindery.

Brandt studied bookbinding there, and later ran the bindery at a Cistercian abbey in Iowa. The craft satisfied an urge he remembered having had as a child: He once took his Boy Scout handbook apart, and put it back together, to earn a merit badge.

He came to Vancouver Island in 1965, a time when the heady climate of Vatican II was leading him and other monks to seek a reclusive, rather than a communal, existence. Though still a Catholic priest, he is now a hermit monk, as well. He built himself a hermitage in Black Creek, near Campbell River, and has recently added to it a paper-conservation laboratory.

Brandt studied flatwork — "maps, archival materials, works of art on paper" — at the New England Document Conservation Centre in Massachusetts. Then he spent a year in Europe, studying at places like the Munich Staatsbibliothek and the British Museum. Returning to Canada, he was hired as a paper conservator by the Canadian Conservation Institute; five years later, he became chief paper conservator with Manitoba's provincial archives.

UVic's paper course, which he is teaching for the fourth time, began Wednesday and runs for eight intensive days — quite a change, for an anchorite.

"We're not trying to teach people bookbinding, or fine-art-on-paper restoration," he explains. "The purpose is to sensitize people to the materials, so they can care for them."

Coinciding with Brandt's stay in Victoria and running until Oct. 13, a compact display on bookbinding has opened at UVic's McPherson Library. The show highlights the four types of bookbinding: fine binding, restoration binding, small-edition binding and a category called "the artist working in a book format."

Included in the last section are concertina-folded works by the New York artist-cum-bookbinder, Hedi Kyle. The pages spill out like a shower of linked petals — works of art between hard covers.