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Using a Survey Tool to Establish Preservation Priorities: Results from the Historical Folio Collection Survey at the Cushing/Whitney Medical Library, Yale University

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Objectives

To reveal the preservation needs of a unique collection of rare medical historical folios and oversized anatomical atlases.

Secondary objectives of the preservation survey included:

- Collaborating with the curator to identify value and begin to set priorities for conservation
- Re-housing the collection
- Producing an accurate inventory
- Identifying errors in the online library catalog

The objectives listed above could not be met prior to 2008 because two trained staff members were needed to conduct the survey. With the presence of the National Library of Medicine Associate Fellow, survey plans could finally be implemented.

Fig. 1: Folios prior to the survey

Methodology

Before the survey began, a database was created using FileMaker Pro software to record the following information:

- Dimensions (recorded for the purposes of ordering enclosures)
- External status (condition of boards, spine, cover)
- Internal status (cover-to-text attachment, paper)
- Attributes (covering material, binding type, inclusions, bookplate owner, decoration)
- Value/damage (estimated value to the collection, damage summary, desired treatment)
- Photographs (recorded for insurance purposes and to inform conservation decisions)

A preservation vocabulary was written collaboratively by preservation librarians working at Yale between January and March 2008. The vocabulary informed the table and field names in the database and also the descriptive headers on data-entry pages. A standardized vocabulary increased usability of the survey database tool for other collections and, further, allowed for cross-collection comparisons. The use of *Basecamp*, a web-based project management tool, enabled cross-campus work on the vocabulary list.

The item-level preservation survey was conducted by two librarians over five months, between March and August 2008, to coincide with a re-shelving project. A few hours each week were dedicated to surveying the items (see Fig. 2) and transporting them to new shelving space. The two projects were coupled to reduce handling of fragile materials. One librarian would handle and inspect the item for damage, while the other recorded information in the database survey tool (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 2: Surveying a folio for damage

Introduction to Preservation Surveys

A literature search revealed the considered importance of assessment for preservation management (Brown, 2006; Gregory, 2007; Matthews, 1995; Starmer, McGough & Leverette, 2005; Voeks, 1955; Walker, 1989).

Sample surveys, with assessments conducted on a representative percentage of library holdings, offered a convenient method of capturing the preservation needs of large collections (Baird & Schaffner, 2003; Isenberg, 1994; Sobucki, 1949; Swift, 1993; Teper, 2006; Walker, 1985), but time-consuming, item-level surveys were far more rare (Evans, 1993). Further, while preservation needs of large folios were identified in the case of two Hamzanama folios (Hillcoat-Imanishi, 1999), evidence could not be found of an item-level survey of a folio collection.

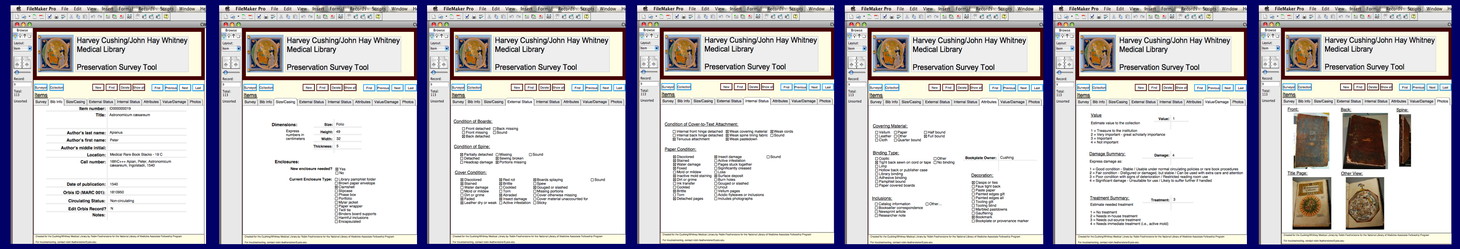

Fig. 3: Data entry pages from the survey tool

Results

Survey data revealed vital information for determining preservation priorities and making collection decisions. Information recorded about the Medical Historical Folio Collection included the following:

- Estimated damage levels (Chart A)
- Approximated value of damaged items relative to the entire collection (Chart B)

A simple query of the survey tool allowed the preservation librarian to identify which items were the most significantly damaged and which, of those damaged items, were the most valuable to the collection.

The survey also revealed which items required immediate treatment for concerns such as active mold that threatened the security of neighboring materials. The surveyors recorded attributes of interest to historians and researchers (provenance, unusual binding, the presence of hand-painted illustrations, etc...) which were used to identify items for exhibits. Special handling instructions were also assigned to fragile items to prevent future damage. Finally, the folio survey resulted in a proof-of-concept for other item-level surveys of valuable collections.

Once conducted, the survey prevented further handling of rare materials and resulted in concrete information needed to make preservation decisions.

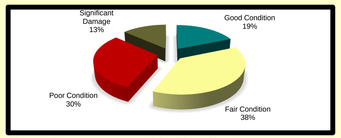

Chart A: Damage summary of the folio collection

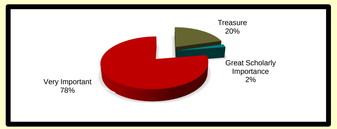

Chart B: Estimated value of items with either significant damage or in very poor condition

Conclusions

Item-level surveys, such as the one conducted at the Cushing/Whitney Medical Library in 2008, allow librarians tasked with preservation responsibilities to record vital information about the status of historically important collections.

While initially time-consuming, the survey identifies preservation priorities and enables quick decisions regarding the allocation of limited library funds. A survey, when coupled with a re-shelving project (see Fig. 4), allows for the collecting of vital preservation information and maximizes the opportunity to handle fragile materials. Further, preservation information recorded in the survey reduces the need to re-examine objects at a later date.

Information collected during the survey also contributes to knowledge about the unique preservation needs of over-sized folios and anatomical atlases.

Future plans include surveying additional historical collections at the Cushing/Whitney Library and using the information gathered to seek funding for identified conservation needs. Other possibilities include publishing the database to the Internet to allow simultaneous access to the survey tool, and sharing the survey design with the greater library community.

Fig. 4: The re-housed Medical Historical Folio Collection

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