

The Question:

The question put forward by the team taking responsibility for the contribution of ERC for the day of conservation was:

Why are conservators, especially those who take care of book conservation, still fighting for fair payment for their work in most countries?

The core answer is: because we do not do enough to make the public (and its political representatives) understand what we actually do.

Conservation is by definition understanding of the work of art, i.e. the item to be preserved in its historical and aesthetic dimension and its material, so that it can be brought to the future. However, many presentations on conservation issues focus on the repair aspect in conservation. We do not sufficiently explain the intellectual work coming before and into it.

If we manage to do so, this would “kill two birds at once”:

- provide a deeper understanding of what conservation really is, and
- make clear the borderline between our work and that of the bookbinders, which is not seen very clearly by the public at large, most probably because preserved books often do not look “new”.

So what is the difference in approach between book repair and book conservation? Bookbinding builds on tradition, conservation is based on the conservation theory. I can see that a “theory” is too often mistaken for a “theoretical”, i.e. verbal, explanation of a step-by-step procedure of practical conservation work. This is fundamentally wrong. A theory in the sense we mean it here is an exposition of terms, laws and principles of a defined field in research, arts or – in our case – conservation, which is the only means to make conservation into a field of human activity in its own right. Of course, any theory needs development and we are aware of the fact that any theory is a formalization of reality and as some things are not formalizable by their nature, or only formalizable to the great loss to them, a theory cannot cover it all.

Nevertheless, it can help us understand in this context. Theory is rooted in philosophy and is therefore also influenced by local perspective.

Bookbinding roots in tradition – as any craft does – and is progressively disappearing as a field in its own right with the proliferation of industrial bookbinding and printing on demand. However, bookbinders, who also do conservation are conservators, and those who stay traditional are also very welcome to help in conservation – for example, by manufacturing special protective boxes and other preservation means. Conservators, on the other hand, only get involved in very particular cases of bookbinding as a side activity of particular conservation projects.

However there are actually many more particular professional skills needed for preserving our written heritage in an appropriate manner – and why not co-operate in the proper way so that all of us benefit from it? In general all professionals involved in the field of preservation of old manuscripts and prints, i.e. conservators, historians, philologists, bookbinders, archivists, university teachers, chemists, librarians, philosophers, biologists, art historians, politicians, physicists and many others – as well as the owners of the artefacts – should try to focus on the wellbeing of our common heritage keeping in mind the responsibility we carry as a society to hand it down to our children and grandchildren. By doing so we would do the only proper thing at once and easily: that is, pull on the same end of the rope to make conservation-restoration and in particular book conservation as its sub-field – a mature discipline in its own right.

Sept. 2021, Patricia Engel