

CASE STUDY

Preservation of Mixed-Format Archival Collections: A Case Study of the Ann Getty Fashion Collection at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising

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Abstract

As archival collections incorporate wider varieties of materials, the complexity of preserving them increases proportionately. Juxtapositions of mixed-format materials create artifactual and intrinsic value that is lost if the materials are separated for format-specific preservation. This paper examines the Ann Getty Fashion Collection, a collection of designer materials at the Library at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising, and discusses challenges and options for its preservation. Physical condition, usage, and resources are considered in arriving at the most efficient balance of preservation actions.

Introduction

Archives can comprise a variety of materials. Correspondence, photographs, and ephemera are but a few of the common document types found in archival collections. Each of these document types has particular preservation needs. Photographs, for example, often have different preservation needs than paper documents. Many archival collections are not limited to a single format and can

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include examples of a wide variety of media. Collections like this can sometimes be easily organized into series by format, allowing the preservation needs of the photographic materials, for example, to be addressed separately from those of paper documents.

All too often, however, a collection requires preservation as a whole, without physically separating documents of varying formats. Photographs arrive glued into scrapbooks, newspaper clippings stapled to letters, flowers pressed between book pages, and fabric swatches taped to artistic drawings. In many collections of this type, the juxtapositions of the various materials create intrinsic value. The placement of the documents creates context and meaning for the materials. The original order of such an archival collection should not be disturbed. Yet the combination of disparate documents also creates significant long-term preservation concerns. How, then, do archivists address the preservation challenge of a mixed-format collection while retaining its intrinsic value and original order?

Nowhere is this challenge more significant than in the area of fashion and costume. A case study of the Ann Getty Fashion Collection at the Library at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising (FIDM) demonstrates common challenges of mixed-format collections and offers examples and suggestions for preservation solutions. This case study investigates a variety of preservation options for mixed-format fashion and costume collections considering budget and other resources. While this collection does not contain every possible juxtaposition of formats, it contains common document types, such as paper documents, photographs, newspaper clippings, and artists' drawings, as well as more challenging materials such as fabric swatches. This collection may be fashion-centric, but the strategies and techniques discussed here may be applicable to many other mixed-format collections.

Description of the Library

The FIDM library serves the school's students, faculty, and staff, as well as alumni and industry professionals.¹ The library consists of four branches, one at each campus in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Orange County, and San Diego, California. Approximate total collection size of the combined branches is 50,000 with a strong 8 to 9 percent growth rate. The library serves approximately 7,500 full- and part-time undergraduate students, 500 faculty, and 750 staff members. The main library, located on the Los Angeles campus, houses the special collections, which are available to all library patrons upon request. The library employs a staff of twenty-three (five professional) of which 1.5 full-time-equivalent (FTE) employees are dedicated to the special collections. Generally, the library's

¹ See the website at <http://www.fidm.com/resources/library/index.html>, accessed 30 October 2008.

special collections handles paper and related materials, while the FIDM museum department handles costumes, garments, and other realia.

Description of the Collection

The Ann Getty Fashion Collection at the Library at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in Los Angeles, California, is a collection of materials compiled and donated to the school by Ann Getty in June 1993. Fashion designers commonly send look books (publications containing photographs or illustrations of a designer's newest collections for a given season²), runway photos, technical drawings, specification sheets, and other materials to potential clients for evaluation and possible purchase. As a prominent and fashionable social figure, Ann Getty received many of these materials between 1973 and 1994. She donated examples from Joseph Abboud, Pierre Balmain, Pierre Cardin, Frederic Castet, Galanos, Betsey Johnson, Donna Karan, Anne Klein, Calvin Klein, Christian Lacroix, Lapidus, Guy Laroche, Serge Lepage, Hanae Mori, Per Spook, Nina Ricci, Jean-Louis Scherrer, Mila Schon, Valentino, and Philippe Venet. The materials from Christian Dior, Givenchy, Yves Saint Laurent, and Emanuel Ungaro are particularly noteworthy in both amount and diversity of document types, including numerous sample fabric swatches. Originally, the donation also included videocassettes of runway shows and garment collections. Upon its arrival in Los Angeles, the collection consisted of approximately twelve linear feet of material, not including videocassettes.

When the collection was donated to FIDM's San Francisco campus in 1993, the library staff divided it into two parts: the videocassettes, which were kept with other audiovisual materials, and the manuscript materials. The library staff punched holes in each of the papers and related documents and placed them in three-ring binders according to designer. Many of the photographs and papers were stamped with the library's name.

In 2007, the San Francisco campus librarian decided that the mixed-format manuscript collection needed preservation and sent it to be housed in the library's special collections department on the Los Angeles campus. The videos did not accompany the manuscript elements, and we believe that the video material was split among FIDM campuses. No documentation accompanied the materials, leaving no way to determine exactly which videos belonged to the collection. There was no deed of gift and the collection was never inventoried or cataloged. Because the collection's acquisition predated the library's conversion to an automated system, no record ever appeared in the OPAC.

The collection arrived in the three-ring binders and its contents were torn, wrinkled, and abused. Our inspection revealed that some photographs and

² Michelle Granger, *Fashion: The Industry and Its Careers* (New York: Fairchild, 2007).

swatches were missing. We don't know how much use the collection received in San Francisco, but it appears to have been consulted fairly frequently. These materials have research and marketing value to the school as well as significant historical value in the fashion world. The potential use and artifactual value of the collection called for appropriate preservation.

Literature Review

More has been written about preservation of individual, distinct formats than about preservation of collections that combine materials of varying formats. Many books and articles discuss best practices for preservation of paper, photographs, or fabric. Format-specific preservation resources abound, such as the National Park Service's *Conservograms*,³ which offer detailed information on format-specific preservation, yet very little exists on how to handle format juxtaposition. While needs of each format can and should be researched separately, this knowledge resolves only part of the problem. More challenges arise when the materials are combined, not only because of the possible differences in preservation treatment and handling, but also because methods of adhesion (including but not limited to glue, tape, and staples) are known to cause additional preservation problems.⁴ Interaction among materials, such as acid migration among papers and adhesives,⁵ or other chemical interactions between materials and nearby objects, also contributes to deterioration.

Resources that address the mixed-format fashion collection are especially sparse. The most recent articles on the preservation of mixed paper and textile collections appeared in the mid-1990s. Textile conservators, rather than library or archival managers, created most of these resources, and all are found in conference reports and proceedings rather than in journals. These resources focus heavily on scientific and chemical preservation treatments of textiles and paper, rather than on preservation at the collection level. The Textile Specialty Subgroup of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works addresses the common ground between paper and textile conservation, including the similarities in chemical makeup between paper and textiles, and how to apply conservation techniques for one format to the other. It does not discuss treating objects or collections comprised of both paper and textiles.⁶

³ See http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/publications/conservogram/cons_toc.html, accessed 10 October 2008.

⁴ Northeast Document Conservation Center, *Surface Cleaning of Paper*, Preservation Leaflet (2007), available at http://www.nedcc.org/resources/leaflets/7Conservation_Procedures/02SurfaceCleaning.php, accessed 5 December 2007.

⁵ National Library of Australia, *Library Preservation Glossary* (2007), available at <http://www.nla.gov.au/chg/gloss.html>, accessed 5 August 2008.

⁶ Kathleen Kiefer, "Interdisciplinary Philosophies: Textiles and Paper: A Common Ground," in *Textile Specialty Group Postprints: Papers Delivered at the Textile Subgroup Session* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute for Conservation, 1994), 7–15.

A compilation of case studies covers conservation of textile sample books at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (V&A).⁷ This resource begins to address the problems faced when textiles and paper are found together, which are similar to those seen in the Ann Getty Fashion Collection: brittle paper, decaying edges, glues and other adhesives, rust from pins, buckling, and discoloration. However, the samples from the V&A are much older (mid-eighteenth to early twentieth centuries) than the Ann Getty Fashion Collection, which dates from the late 1970s to the 1990s. The materials at the V&A are also used much more frequently. The historical value and high usage of the sample books prompted the museum, with a complete conservation department available, to perform in-depth chemical cleaning, restoration, and strengthening of these materials. Researchers used sample books so heavily that the museum arranged with Thames and Hudson to publish a facsimile in book form.⁸

Another case study of sample books, from the Textile Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York, examines a variety of preservation options.⁹ The museum conducted a roundtable discussion among various disciplines to exchange ideas: textile curators and conservators, paper and book conservators, and librarians. The session expanded its focus beyond physical preservation methods to consider management issues such as cost-effectiveness and access. A survey of one specific sample book collection offered concrete suggestions for preservation.¹⁰

Two years later, the Textile Museum at FIT planned to digitize 1,300 sample books and 250,000 mounted fabric swatches and make them available on CD-ROM.¹¹ Accessibility motivated this project, of course, not preservation. Designed for use by museum members, designers, and industry professionals, the digital representations were also intended to support preservation by reducing handling of the original items. While the museum offers bibliographies and other resources regarding textile preservation, including contact information for conservation labs, textile storage techniques, and informational articles, most of these resources consider individual objects, rather than inseparable juxtapositions of mixed-media materials.

⁷ Gillian Owens, "The Conservation of Various Sample Books," in *Paper and Textiles: The Common Ground: Preprints of the Conference Held at the Burrell Collection*, ed. F. Butterfield and L. Eaton (Glasgow: Scottish Society for Conservation & Restoration, 1991), 83–90.

⁸ Natalie Rothstein et al., *A Lady of Fashion: Barbara Johnson's Album of Styles and Fabrics* (London, U.K.: Thames and Hudson, 1987).

⁹ Lucy Commoner, "Doing Something When Nothing Seems Possible: An Approach to Problem Solving through an Interdisciplinary Roundtable Discussion on Sample Books," in *Textile Conservation Group 2nd Bi-Annual Symposium: The Treatment and Handling of Textiles with Associated Problematic Materials*, ed. D. Montegut (New York: Textile Conservation Group, 1994), 99–102.

¹⁰ Cecily Bloomfield, "Doing Something When Nothing Seems Possible: Conservation Options for the Crown Mills Sample Book Collection," in *Textile Conservation Group 2nd Bi-Annual Symposium*, 95–97.

¹¹ Allegra Holch, "FIT: Putting Its Swatches on CD-ROM," *Women's Wear Daily*, 24 September 1996, available at <http://www.wwd.com>, accessed 5 November 2007.

Preservation Considerations

Many issues demand attention in addressing the preservation needs of any mixed-format collection. Carolyn Harris discusses many selection criteria for collection preservation.¹² The types of materials in the collection, its original order and intrinsic value, and budget and resources available for preservation are some of the areas to be examined. Also, preservation of any particular collection should consider and reflect overall preservation plans and policies of the parent institution. Preservation begins at the repository level not only in terms of policy but also in terms of physical storage, as the ability to provide proper environmental control is the most fundamental consideration of collection preservation.¹³

Physical Materials

Preservation of the Ann Getty Fashion Collection had to accommodate varied types of materials. The collection includes instances of the following materials:

- typed and handwritten paper documents
- color and black-and-white sketches (both originals and reproductions)
- black-and-white and color photographs
- fabric swatches
- catalogs
- videocassettes

The different materials in the collection are juxtaposed in a variety of ways. We received the collection arranged by designer, and designers utilize a variety of methods of presentation. (See cover photographs.) Some simply combine varied materials loosely in a folder, while others present a particular fashion design by attaching a fabric swatch and a photograph to a drawing with staples, glue, or tape. Adhesives pose preservation issues of their own, and the variety of adhesives encountered in this collection easily doubled or tripled the challenge.

Unfortunately, successful preservation is not simply a matter of separating materials and removing adhesives, following the standard recommended practice.¹⁴ These materials were placed together for a reason—the attached photographs and fabric swatches illustrate the physical manifestation of each garment design. To separate them would sacrifice this relationship and context. Herein lies the paradox: the adhesive connection of these materials will slowly

¹² Carolyn Harris, "Selection for Preservation," in *Preservation: Issues and Planning*, ed. P. Banks and R. Pilette (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000).

¹³ Paul N. Banks, "Environment and Building Design," in *Preservation: Issues and Planning*.

¹⁴ Northeast Document Conservation Center, *Surface Cleaning of Paper*.

erode them, but the separation of the materials would essentially eliminate the intrinsic value they hold together.

Of course, preservationists might carefully separate these different documents, treat them individually, and then reunite the parts of the whole so as to retain the collection's original order. Many of these techniques can be performed safely only by professional conservators, which is not a feasible option for many libraries. Many institutions, FIDM included, do not have a conservator on staff. Professional archivists or librarians and other technical library staff may lack the knowledge or special training needed to address this type of preservation; any who are adequately trained may lack the time to dedicate to such a project.

Reformatting and reproduction present additional options, especially where a primary goal is to offer access. Reformatting or reproduction can reduce handling of original materials and prevent further damage. However, alternative formatting detracts from artifactual value, which is especially critical in the case of materials like fabric swatches, where texture and fiber are important characteristics.

Videocassette materials bring specific preservation considerations of their own, which are only compounded in the context of a collection. Although the video materials were dealt with separately at FIDM, if this collection were to be considered as a whole, the preservation of the videocassettes would need to be taken into account.

Use

How much use a collection receives plays an important role in both how much preservation it may require as well as the resources an institution may invest in that preservation. The Barbara Johnson album, a heavily used document at the Victoria and Albert Museum, suffered damage from frequent handling, necessitating significant preservation action.¹⁵ Popularity of a collection should make it a strong candidate for preservation to prevent handling damage in future use.¹⁶ Evidence of previous handling of the Ann Getty Fashion Collection demonstrates the continuing usefulness of these materials and its clear importance to the field of fashion. Other fashion and costume institutions have collections of fashion designers' works, but most are small by comparison with the Ann Getty Collection, or they are limited to a single designer.

¹⁵ Owens, "Conservation of Various Sample Books."

¹⁶ Harris, "Selection for Preservation."

Current Deterioration

The condition and housing of a collection influences preservation needs. As the rate of deterioration increases, so does the need for preservation.¹⁷ Prior to its relocation, the Ann Getty Fashion Collection was stored in acidic and degrading materials in an unstable environment. The collection had also suffered some handling and age damage. Pages are wrinkled and torn, tape is yellowing and signs of acid migration are beginning to show, staples are leaving rust on both fabric and paper, and photographs are oily with fingerprints. However, the oldest materials in the collection are less than forty years old, so age deterioration and fragility are not as problematic as they might be for collections containing rare textiles from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Resources

Preservation decisions depend not only on the physical aspects of a particular collection, but also on the resources that can be devoted to it. Institutional resources of time, staff, and budget, all interlinked, are relevant. The amount of time an institution chooses to devote to preserving a particular collection depends in part on the value and usage of those materials. Collections with a demonstrated patron interest and use history merit more time and attention. Time is an extremely valuable commodity, and archival backlogs abound, so institutions need to see returns on time investments. Triage and prioritization help staff members to reach and justify these decisions. In addition, limiting preservation procedures to what is absolutely necessary can increase both processing efficiency and collection availability.¹⁸

Institutions must decide how much staff investment a collection needs in terms of hands-on time, but also in staff education and training. Preservation staff can range from specialized conservators to community volunteers. Some simple preservation measures, such as book boxing and interleaving of acid-free tissue, do not require any special education. Extensive preservation and treatment of older, fragile, or valuable collections may demand handling by specialists. The institution must decide, usually based on the value of the collection, how much specialized education and training staff members need to complete a project to the desired level of preservation.

Finally, no discussion of preservation issues would be complete without mentioning budget. The ideal preservation solution for a mixed-format collection may not be affordable or cost efficient given the use of the collection and

¹⁷ Harris, "Selection for Preservation."

¹⁸ Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68 (2005): 208–63.

PRESERVATION OF MIXED-FORMAT ARCHIVAL
COLLECTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF THE ANN
GETTY FASHION COLLECTION AT THE FASHION
INSTITUTE OF DESIGN AND MERCHANDISING



Designers or their agents suggested designs specifically for Ann Getty. This status had been indicated by a red dot sticker on the decaying plastic sleeves; as the sleeves were removed, a small notation was transferred to the document to preserve this information. Note the penciled “[red dot]” in the upper right corner. Original color photographs and fabric swatches are stapled to the page.

the investment level appropriate for the institution. The issue of budget and funds allocation will usually be as important a factor in preservation considerations as the needs of the materials themselves.

While not a top priority, such as cataloging new acquisitions or information literacy instruction, the preservation of the Ann Getty Fashion Collection was considered significant enough to devote enough resources to it to ensure the sustainability and future use of the materials. The collection was entrusted to one established library employee with a moderate amount of archival preservation training gained through several classes and workshops, who devoted about one-quarter time to the collection.

Preservation of the Ann Getty Fashion Collection

With such a wide variety of issues to consider, we had to choose among many options for preserving the mixed-format Ann Getty Fashion Collection. We considered a range—from carefully treating and restoring each individual piece to simply placing the documents in a controlled environment and leaving them alone. These considerations had to be carefully balanced to develop a preservation plan for this particular collection. Every collection has unique needs and considerations; we hope that some of the suggestions, techniques, and actions taken in this case will benefit other institutions as they consider how to deal with their own mixed-format collections.

First, we decided to place the Ann Getty Fashion Collection materials in the special collections department and treat the materials as an archival collection. The materials were housed in a closed, climate-controlled storage room to provide control of temperature, relative humidity, light, and air quality, the most important factors in preservation.¹⁹ The collection is only available to patrons who request it at the reference desk. Because it was once directly accessible in the reading room, we inherited problems of missing drawings, photos, and swatches.

We retained the order of the collection materials received from the San Francisco campus, arranged alphabetically by designer. We removed materials from the three-ring binders, carefully extracting them from chemically unstable plastic sleeves, placing paper and textile materials in acid-free and lignin-free folders (sometimes multiple folders for each binder), placing photographic prints and negatives in Melinex sleeves, interleaving appropriate tissue paper between paper and fabric documents, and enclosing materials in protective boxes.

¹⁹ Sherelyn Ogden, "Temperature, Relative Humidity, Light, and Air Quality: Basic Guidelines for Preservation," *Technical Leaflet* Section 2, Leaflet 1 (Andover, Mass.: Northeast Document Conservation Center, 1999).

We separated some juxtaposed materials and left others together, removing photographs stapled, taped, or paper-clipped to drawings whenever possible. We sleeved the photographs and placed them next to the drawings in archival folders. Most of the documents already bore numerical markings from the design houses indicating order, but where none were present, we added them lightly in pencil. We transferred other notations if necessary, such as indications of designs specifically suggested for Ann Getty by the designers or their agents. This status had previously been indicated by a red dot sticker on the decaying plastic sleeves; as the sleeves were removed, a small notation was transferred to the document to preserve this context. (See photograph on page 193.)

The fabric swatches presented more of a challenge because of the imperative to retain their context in conjunction with the sketches of garments proposed to be made from them. We considered several ideas regarding their handling. The amount and nature of resources allotted to the project ruled out specialized treatment by a professional conservator. One suggestion was to encapsulate the drawings in archival Melinex to which an envelope containing the swatch(es) could be attached. Another solution, often used by museums and other institutions active in textile conservation, is to sew the corners of the swatches to the documents with silk thread. However, we eventually discarded both these ideas. The envelopes could not ensure retention of context, and the process of either encapsulation or sewn attachment required more time than we deemed worth investing. A more resource-efficient solution was needed.

Because of the relatively young age of the Ann Getty Fashion Collection, the predicted usage, and the resources allotted to the project, we decided to leave the swatches attached to the drawings. FIDM staff felt that, for the time being, preservation of the context and juxtaposition of the materials were more important than the physical form of each individual piece. This conclusion means that, yes, some adhesive tape and rusty staples are still holding together documents in the collection. We have scheduled regular surveys and spot-checking to monitor the collection, both for increased or decreased use, as well as for the onset of any problems that may require further preservation. Eliminating the binders and other unstable materials reduced the original twelve linear feet to seven (thirteen document boxes). We then placed the collection in the climate-controlled storage room dedicated to special collections materials.

The decision to minimize preservation procedures made the collection available in four months. Preservation, arrangement, and description of the collection used about one-quarter of a full-time employee's time or 160 hours of staff time, 13.3 hours/linear foot. The collection record is now listed in the online catalog²⁰ and supplemented by a printed finding aid in the library,

²⁰ See Ann Getty Fashion Collection at <http://meri.fidm.com>, accessed 23 January 2009.

offering access to interested parties on campus or off campus. Its availability would not have been possible had the collection been subject to more thorough preservation.

Conclusion

Preservation of any collection entails decisions based on a delicate balance of physical condition, usage patterns, and available resources. This principle is especially applicable to collections composed of mixed-format materials, which by their nature require more investment and work than more homogeneous collections. In the case of the Ann Getty Fashion Collection, library staff at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising chose compromises between ideal physical conservation treatment, patron usage requirements, and staff resources to ensure that the collection received adequate physical preservation and efficient physical processing. The collection is accessible to researchers, protected from handling and mistreatment, and not bogged down in a backlog.

Every collection and institution has unique preservation needs. Individual collections of mixed-format materials challenge librarians, curators, and archivists to weigh preservation options. Regardless of the preservation measures adopted, from professional conservation treatment to basic preservation strategies, the original order and context of mixed-material collections must be retained. This juxtaposition of materials creates meaning and value for such a collection.