

# **Book review: William Berwick: paper conservation in the United States and Western Europe, 1800-1935. Reviewed by Karl Buchberg**

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The first sentence of Christine A. Smith's Introduction clearly states the overall goal of this volume: "This book interweaves two related histories: the professional biography of William Berwick (1848-1920), who was the preeminent manuscript restorer in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and an exploration of the world of paper conservation in the U.S. and Western Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." The author, who received an A.B. from Vassar College and then an M.S. in art conservation from the Winterthur Museum-University of Delaware, runs Conservation of Art on Paper, Inc., a private paper conservation concern in Virginia. Between 1998-2003 Smith conserved both George Washington's and Martha Washington's Last Will and Testament, two documents of U.S. national importance which had been treated by William Berwick eighty years earlier. This treatment was the inspiration for the biography of the man who had done the treatment and the professional world in which he lived and worked.

Berwick, who was born in the U.K. in 1848, emigrated to Canada and then subsequently to the United States, worked at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C. from 1899 to 1920, establishing a national and international reputation. In thirteen elegantly written and meticulously researched chapters, Smith portrays the field of archives and library restoration/conservation, its relationship to the management of these institutions and the techniques used by restorers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This volume is targeted at various constituencies. Paper conservators, especially those working in archives and libraries or dealing with archival documents, will be fascinated with Berwick's career at the Library of Congress while also working privately for other major institutions in the United States. Equally, archivists and librarians would profit greatly from a deeper understanding of the history of the care of collections and the role that their administrative predecessors played.

Chapter 3, Collegial Exchange, details early library and archive conferences in the U.S. and Europe. The interdependence of top institutional management and restorers at this early period in the history of conservation is instructive. Smith discusses Berwick's 1902 and 1905 trips to Europe to expand his treatment options and source supplies, interestingly with varying results.

One of the great strengths of this volume is the description of historic paper repair techniques from technical, scientific, aesthetic as well as financial points of view. Berwick was most closely associated with the archival restoration technique silking; the adhesive application of a gossamer thin layer of fabric to each side of a document needing structural support. Berwick used this

technique on the two Washington documents and it is this technique which author Smith reversed in her subsequent treatments. In Chapter 4, Silking and its Antecedents and Chapter 5, Experiments with Synthetic Coatings, Smith discusses the historical alternatives to silk as a support material: western paper, Japanese paper, thin copy paper, natural resin varnishes, cellulose nitrates, and cellulose acetate.

Chapter 6, Environmental Concerns, deals with issues still relevant today in archives, libraries and also museums. Seen from an earlier perspective, some issues are more of historic interest such as gaslight and arc lamp illumination. Others, however, still concern all custodians of historic collections: heating, fire and flooding to list just a few.

Chapter 7, Working Methods, the longest chapter at 147 pages, deals with the entire scope of the treatment process: starting with examination and documentation, photographic documentation, then removing mold, foxing, wax, oil, grease, onto washing and bleaching through to fills of various sorts, lining and backing and finally mounting and storage. Conservators today continue to deal with each of these treatment options. Smith elegantly contrasts historic techniques with contemporary variations. Of particular value is Smith's detailed knowledge of historic materials and recipes which she lists, translates into current terminology where necessary, cites historic costs and translates into current dollar amounts, and discusses their original effectiveness, aging, and reversibility. Smith's voice is always instructive and sympathetic, understanding past working practices from an historic point of view with hindsight but not criticism.

Chapter 13, The Decline of Silking, the Rise of Cellulose Acetate Lamination, deals with the transition in the late 1930's away from silking and the introduction of cellulose acetate lamination as promoted by William James Barrow. Replaced in the 1970's by mylar encapsulation, cellulose acetate lamination is surely a technique encountered by all who work in archives and libraries.

Following the main text are six Appendices including Miscellaneous Interesting Recipes and the Library of Congress Conservation Bibliography of 1924. The excellent Glossary will be a useful reference to both collection care managers and conservators: materials, both historic and current, are clearly described. Smith's extensive research is highlighted by her extraordinary Endnotes, which follows. An extensive Bibliography and Index round out the text sections. The Legacy Press has designed and produced a volume that is physically a pleasure to read.

Smith's closing words are a well-stated guide as to the importance of understanding the early history of paper conservation. "No subject of human endeavor achieves consummation: Its practitioners live in a brief moment and can only work in the most careful way that their time allows. In addition, good work in any discipline is built on the efforts of earlier colleagues and reaches toward those who will follow...We who follow them, in whatever field, can be guided by their dedication as our work makes a bridge to those who will follow. We are better for those who have shown us the way." We are indebted to the author for this groundbreaking, extraordinarily well-researched and readable book.