

The Conservation of Historic Documents in the Archive of Bogotá, Colombia

ABSTRACT

The historical Archive of Bogotá is a public institution charged with the conservation and preservation of historic documents pertaining to the city. It employs a team of conservators who are responsible for determining adequate conservation treatment, taking into account the economic situation of the country, and, of course, the economic restrictions of the Archive. They develop processes guided by conservation principles and the characteristics of the different kinds of materials and techniques of the documents received. They strive to search for materials available in the national market that can be adapted for the conservation of the documents, to seek out cultural interchange of knowledge to enlarge their treatment options, and always to preserve the original document.

THE ARCHIVE OF BOGOTÁ

The historical Archive of Bogotá is a public institution charged with the conservation and preservation of historic documents pertaining to the city. The Archive is part of the Historical Zone of the city of Bogotá D.C., and its building reflects the transformation of the historical downtown into a modern sector that offers a variety of entertainment. The construction was built on an ancient native commercial road, and it reflects a hybrid of historic preservation and modern, rigorous international parameters and standards for archive construction (figs. 1–2).

The Archive is the enforcing entity in charge of the District's Archive System. Its primary role is to formulate policies, plans, and programs needed to guarantee the conservation of the institutional memory of the Capital District. It also facilitate access in accordance with what is established by the National General Archive and the

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Archive District commission. Furthermore, it develops and promotes techniques for preservation and historic investigation of the city's documents.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

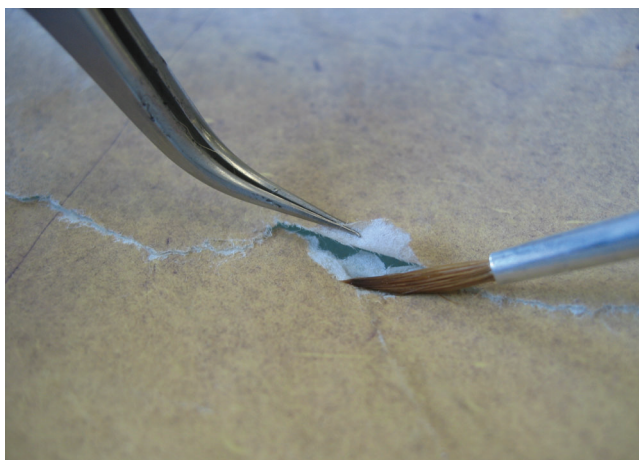


Fig. 3.

THE CONSERVATION, RESTORATION, AND REPROGRAPHY AREA

The Conservation, Restoration, and Reprography area is in charge of the policies, plans, and programs of preservation and conservation, overseeing the recovery of the written heritage of Bogotá D.C., Colombia.

The staff in Conservation, Restoration, and Reprography work in a space measuring 1,500 square meters, divided according to processes such as: coordination and diagnostics, interventions, storage, reprography, bookbinding, sanitation, and the physics, chemistry, and biological laboratory. Over time they have been provided with the appropriate furniture, equipment, tools, raw material, and supplies needed to approach the treatment of the historical documents transferred to the Archive by various District entities (fig. 3).

The staff has been consolidated into an interdisciplinary team of professionals in chemistry and physics, biology, restoration, and industrial design. Their main goal is to study and provide solutions for the protection and conservation of the documents in the custody of the Bogotá Archive and, at the same time, to standardize document preservation and conservation processes for the branches of the Archive System of the District's Administration (SAAD, in Spanish) (fig. 4). Hence the importance of the conservator's work for the institution: caring for the documents as well as the information they contain. Reformatting is one way to keep that valuable information alive for the public and also to ensure its availability without affecting the original document.

CONSERVATORS' CHALLENGE

In Colombia the conservation of patrimonial documents is a relatively new subject. In the last two decades the work of document restoration has focused on the treat-



Fig. 4.

ment of documents belonging to the colonial and Republican periods (sixteenth to early twentieth centuries).

Even though the Bogotá Archive has some documents from these periods, it has a greater percentage of items belonging to the twentieth century: the time of industrialization when paper production developed new cellulose supports like bond paper, opalina, linen, and transparent papers such as impregnated, vegetable, and drafting cloths. A wide variety of new calligraphy, drawing, print, and photo reproduction techniques were developed such as aniline, water, dry, and moist printing; blueprints, diazo, and diazo sepias; ferrogalic copies and more recently electrostatic photocopies and electrofax, among others.

In most cases the material of the supports are unknown in Colombia because they were imported from other countries, and they have not yet been studied. For that reason, it has been crucial to establish investigations to characterize the documents by their supports and techniques, analyzing these components to understand the mechanisms and indicators of deterioration.

The conservators evaluate the procedures used in daily practice so that they may have a basis to determine and to establish the processes as standard procedures. Constant evaluation allows them to develop appropriate conservation processes for the documents by taking into account



Fig. 5.

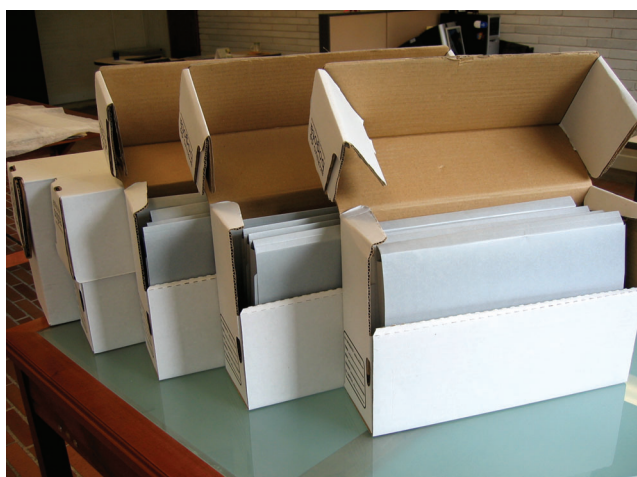


Fig. 6.

their quantity, variety, and historical condition. As a result, the team can define the processes and procedures for conservation and apply them en masse (figs. 5–6).

The interdisciplinary team has initiated a series of investigations to characterize the different reproduction techniques and papers. They will also study the different mechanisms and indicators of deterioration of materials, the design and manufacture of storage units, biodeterioration of cellulose papers, and collection and item-level sanitation and cleaning processes (figs. 7–8).

THE DAILY WORK

In Colombia, conservation practice follows two guidelines: first are conservation principles or general guidelines that apply to conservation processes; and second are individual criteria that may vary by object according to material, deterioration, and budget. Unfortunately, access to the proper conservation supplies is limited due to economic conditions. Colombian conservators have to look for alternative materials that can be found easily in the national market and must be creative during the conservation process. According to the economic limitations of each institution, the conservators have to be capable of finding viable materials and adapting them to achieve the best results they can.

Therefore, conservation levels established by the conservation department of the Archive are defined as preservation, first-aid conservation, and complex conservation. These levels are adjusted to accommodate large-scale projects, working schedules, and availability of suitable materials. The combination of these variables makes it possible for the conservator to develop good proposals and future treatments. Conservators have to devote themselves to cultural interchange to gain a variety of options and to have clarity at the time of intervention, in



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.

order to ensure the preservation of the physical documents as well as the information contained in them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the importance of preserving historic documents as unique and original artifacts requires the conservator to recover their historical, technical, and material value. For this reason, selecting the right criteria to guide the intervention is a great responsibility, because from these criteria adequate treatment can be determined to guarantee the preservation of the original document when it is microfilmed, preventing further deterioration (fig. 9).

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