

IU Obscure: Paper conservation in Bloomington

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The E. Lingle Craig Preservation Lab

“You never know what’s going to come into this lab.”

Doug Sanders rips a Post-It note and smears it with a wheat starch mixture to simulate repairing a damaged manuscript. “A paper conservator develops an eye and a love for the qualities of paper,” Doug said, as he gingerly laid a thin strip of paper on top of the slit and laughed. “I get paper cuts all the time.”

A paper conservator at the E. Lingle Craig Preservation Lab, Doug created the position when he arrived in 2007. Originally a Chemical Engineering major at Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Fine Arts at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, he realized his strong arts background was pulling him to the arts school and changed direction.

“It’s a combination of a chemistry lab and an art studio here,” Doug said. Conservators use a mix of artists’ and technical tools, ranging from scalpels and tweezers to brushes. They use humidifiers to make manuscripts more flexible and less prone to breakage.

“It’s kind of a small world,” Sanders said. The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works cites the number of manuscripts in need of conservation in the hundreds of millions. There is no shortage of work, as Doug estimated the University houses around seven million bound volumes — and many more unbound manuscripts, with which he mostly works.

As for the process of conservation itself, he said: “We do take a methodical approach.” Conservators assess the current condition of the media before formulating a proposed approach. This proposition needs to be approved by the librarian or curator of the artifact’s collection, as they are more familiar with the stipulations of the material, and how much exposure the artifact will get — whether it is set for exhibition or is often requested in a reading room.

Finally, the course of action agreed upon to “prevent or slow down the chemical deterioration of that item.” Doug said the lab works with all libraries and collections on campus, though the most frequent jobs come from the Government Information, Maps and Microform Services (GIMMS) department at Wells Library, the University’s various archives, and the Lilly Library.

“Manuscripts by nature are unique,” Cherry Williams, curator of manuscripts at the Lilly, said. “We have approximately eight million items in the manuscript collection.”

She said the level of interest during her time at the library had stayed consistent and added the digitization of many items in the collection makes research and casual viewing much simpler.

Doug agrees scans are helpful in preserving artifacts, but it is not the same experience: “So much is not available in a scan.” He explained a viewer loses the essential detail of the medium itself such as the smell and texture of the paper.

Often, ethical questions are raised concerning what does and does not get saved. “Our ethics change from decade to decade,” Doug said. “It’s not our job to consider what needs to be saved. We address things through preventative measures and remedial measures.”

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