

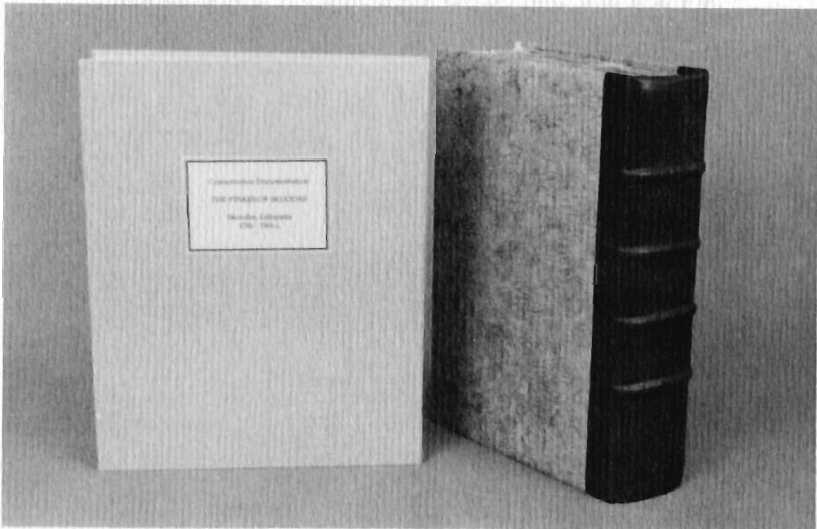
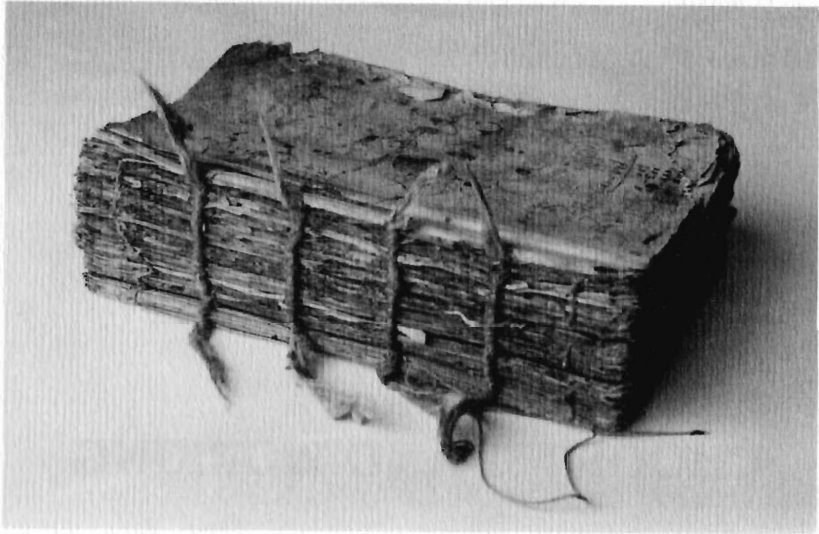


**CHOOSING AND  
WORKING WITH A  
CONSERVATOR**

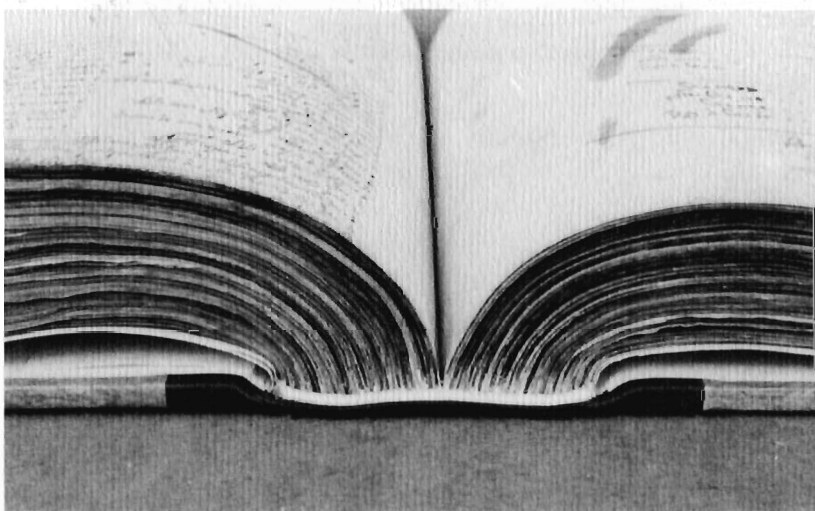
**Jan Paris**

**SOLINET  
Preservation  
Publication**

**CHOOSING AND WORKING  
WITH A CONSERVATOR**



This deteriorated and damaged manuscript required extensive conservation treatment so it could be consulted without risking further damage. Top photo shows item before treatment, and lower photo is after treatment. Because the original binding had been lost, the textblock was treated and the volume was rebound in a style sympathetic with the period of the book's production. The fragments of the original sewing and all written and photographic documentation were housed with the volume in a custom-made box. *Photos: Jan Paris*



The leaves of this manuscript were treated so that they could be bound and handled safely. Because of the archival nature of the volume, no attempt was made to reduce the staining or patterns of soiling on the leaves. The top photo shows item before treatment, and lower photo is after treatment. These photographs are representative of the kind of before-and-after treatment documentation that a client may expect from a conservator.

*Volume pictured is "Pinks of Skuodas" (Lithuania, 17th-19th c.) in the collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York City. Photos: Jan Paris.*

# **CHOOSING AND WORKING WITH A CONSERVATOR**

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# CHOOSING AND WORKING WITH A CONSERVATOR

*"The preserver, restorer, conserver is the indispensable, the primary living link in the human chain that connects yesterday's accomplishments with tomorrow's possibilities."*

*-- James H. Billington,  
Librarian of Congress,  
"The Moral Imperative of Conservation"*

## INTRODUCTION

Collections in our libraries, archives, and historical societies are comprised of diverse records materials that differ in type, size, and format. They are stored under varying environmental conditions, housed in a variety of boxes and enclosures, and used for various purposes and to different extents. The net result of these factors is that the records in our collections range in condition from pristine to severely deteriorated. Some of these items need conservation attention, and institutions without a conservator on staff must entrust precious materials to the care of an individual outside of the institution. Choosing a conservator is an important first step in providing responsible conservation.

To assist in that process, this publication explores some of the issues related to selecting a conservator. It addresses the nature of conservation, the qualifications and background of a conservator, and how to find, work with, and what to expect from the conservator. The focus is on factors relevant to conservation treatment of special collections materials -- that is, those materials that are significant as artifacts because of their age, rarity, beauty, monetary value, or



historical or bibliographic importance.<sup>1</sup> These factors are also relevant for those items whose physical features (e.g., color illustrations, folding maps or charts) necessitate preservation of the physical artifact. That is, even if the item's intrinsic value may not demand conservation, treatment may be the option of choice if the physical features preclude reformatting or other alternatives.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of this concept, see Paul Banks' *The Preservation of Library Materials* and Barclay Ogden's *On the Preservation of Books and Documents in Original Form*, both cited in the "Further Readings" section.

## CONSERVATION AND THE PROFESSIONAL CONSERVATOR

Certain items in a collection are so significant to the public and to an institution that they warrant conservation attention. Conservation of such items is especially appropriate when the materials cannot withstand use -- even careful use -- without being damaged, when they are physically or chemically unstable, or when they have received inappropriate treatment in the past.<sup>2</sup>

Conservation treatment is the application of techniques and materials to chemically stabilize and physically strengthen items in the collection. The aim of conservation treatment for materials with artifactual value is to assure the items' longevity and continued availability for use, while altering their physical characteristics as little as possible. Conservation also includes the decisions involved in identifying items needing treatment and determining appropriate treatments.

Conservation treatment of special collections materials requires the judgment and experience of a qualified conservator. A professional conservator is a highly trained individual with a broad theoretical and practical knowledge in the following areas:

- the history, science, and aesthetics of the materials and techniques of records materials;
- the causes of deterioration or damage to these materials;
- the range of methods and materials that can be used in conservation treatment; and
- the implications of any proposed treatment.

A conservator also demonstrates throughout every aspect of work a commitment to high standards of practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Some examples of inappropriate treatments include the use of poorly designed and acidic pamphlet binders that cause damage and discoloration to the leaves of the pamphlet, and the use of pressure-sensitive tapes that become yellow or brittle, cause bleeding of inks, or leave a damaging and disfiguring adhesive residue in the paper.

Conservation is a relatively new field that over the last ten years has experienced a period of rapid growth and increasing specialization, especially in the areas of library and archives conservation. As yet, however, the field has no educational accreditation system, professional certification process, or national professional standards.

As a result, it may sometimes be difficult to locate and choose a conservator who is trained and qualified to provide the treatment services required. In evaluating prospective conservators, consider the individual's conservation training, length and extent of practical experience, and professional affiliations. In addition, contact client and peer references to insure that you are making the best, informed choice.

## Conservator Training

Competent conservators are trained in one of two ways: through completion of an academic graduate program that leads to a master's degree or through a lengthy apprenticeship. The six graduate training programs in North America offer two to three years of academic course work covering the history and science of records materials, the cultural context of their production, and conservation treatment practices.<sup>3</sup> A final year is spent obtaining intensive practical experience under the direction of a respected conservator in an established conservation laboratory. Graduates often undertake an additional year of advanced internship or pursue further study or research opportunities through existing fellowship programs.

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<sup>3</sup> Training program addresses can be found in the "Conservation Training Programs" section. Only the Columbia University program currently offers training specifically oriented to collections in libraries and archives. However, as of this writing, the Columbia program is expected either to close or to move to another university by the fall of 1992. Current information on the status of the Columbia program should be available from the organizations listed in the "Information Resources" section.

Some individuals choose not to attend a graduate training program because of the program's cost, because its focus does not match their own interests, or for other reasons. Training through apprenticeship offers a viable alternative for such people. The success of any apprenticeship program relies on the resourcefulness of the individual to obtain broad theoretical and practical knowledge through sustained internships in respected conservation laboratories; attendance at workshops, seminars, and selected academic courses; and independent reading and study. Apprenticeship training is especially common in and can provide very good preparation for book conservation, where formal academic training opportunities are extremely limited. Since apprenticeship training strategies differ considerably from one another and may vary in quality as a result, it becomes very important to evaluate each individual carefully.

Bear in mind that a trained bookbinder is not necessarily a book conservator. While he or she may possess many of the necessary manual skills, a bookbinder may not have the broader knowledge required to evaluate, propose, and carry out the most appropriate treatment from a conservation standpoint. Similarly, professional framing studios may include "paper restoration" in their list of services, but framers may not have the knowledge required to make conservation decisions.

Regardless of their educational training, all conservators specialize in treatment of particular types of materials and can provide only general advice about storage, housing, or maintenance of other materials. For example, a responsible book conservator will not provide technical consultation or treatment for works of art or furniture since they are outside the realm of his or her expertise.

## **Professional Organizations for Conservators**

Membership and active involvement in one of the field's professional organizations indicates a conservator's interest in keeping abreast of technical and scientific developments, in exchanging information, and in strengthening professional contacts. To achieve these goals, many professional conservators belong to organizations such as the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), the International Institute for Conservation (IIC), and regional

conservation guilds. While not a guarantee of a conservator's knowledge, competence, or ethics, membership in a professional organization is an important indicator of professional involvement, without which it is almost impossible to keep up with developments in the field.

Categories of membership may provide some indication of the conservator's experience. In particular, "Fellow" or "Professional Associate" membership in AIC is conferred after a specified number of years in the field, based on a peer review process. These membership categories indicate that the conservator has agreed to abide by the AIC Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. The AIC Code and Standards are designed to "guide the conservator in the ethical practice of his profession" and call for "unswerving respect for the aesthetic, historical, and physical integrity of the object."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice," *The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works Directory*, 1989-90 or most current. Available from the AIC, whose address is provided in the "Information Resources" section.

## HOW TO FIND A CONSERVATOR

Finding a qualified conservator may require ingenuity and perseverance, since conservation expertise (especially in book conservation) is not available in all areas of the country and many conservators do not advertise.

Begin by developing a list of potential conservators. Contact conservation departments in nearby libraries, museums, and archives. The staff is often a good source of general information and advice. They may be able to recommend conservators in private practice in a nearby area or regional centers that offer treatment and broader preservation services. In some cases, conservators employed by an institution may accept private work outside of their institutional commitments.

In addition, contact people who work in the special collections departments of libraries, state archives, large historical societies, and major museums to obtain the names of conservators who have worked for them on a regular basis. In all cases, find out whether the recommendation is based on direct experience with the conservator or on secondary information.

Also, call or write to the American Institute for Conservation and the SOLINET Preservation Program for additional referrals. The Conservation Services Referral System of the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation (FAIC) will provide the names of professionals who practice in your area or who specialize in the treatment of particular types of artifacts. The FAIC does not endorse individual conservators or the quality of their work, but the Referral System does provide some general information to explain what a consumer of conservation services should expect from the conservator. SOLINET will also provide referral to reputable conservators who specialize in the treatment of particular types of artifacts. Like the FAIC, SOLINET does not endorse individual conservators.

These contacts should provide the names of several potential conservators. However, these referrals are not necessarily an indicator of quality. Comparison shopping is always a sound principle, even when seeking conservation services. A series of informed questions, outlined in the following sections, can provide a framework for evaluating a conservator's capabilities.

You may also find that some of the conservators on your list are not able to provide the kind of treatment you require because a particular problem lies outside their expertise or because they are unable to accommodate your artifacts in their lab. Others may have a large backlog of work and may not be able to treat your item as quickly as you would like.

Be wary of a conservator who too casually offers to do a quick and inexpensive job for you. Conservation treatment is usually time-consuming and expensive. A waiting period and the expense of competent services are small prices to pay when compared to the risk that an artifact may be irreparably lost or damaged through inadequate or inappropriate treatment.

If you are located in an area of the country with few conservators, do not hesitate to obtain referrals from a broad geographic area. Many conservators are accustomed to dealing with clients located at a great distance and can offer guidance for safely packing and transporting fragile materials. They should also be able to provide you with information about shipping and courier services that can provide insurance, special handling, and security for valuable materials during transit.

If you want to do a collection survey to help you evaluate your overall conservation needs, consider retaining a conservation consultant. A collection survey is designed to assess the overall conditions of a collection and the environment in which it is housed. The survey results in recommendations that can help an institution develop a long-range plan for the care of its collections. Such recommendations might include suggestions for environmental improvements, procedural changes, staff education, rehousing projects, and the conservation treatment of selected materials. This approach is especially useful for institutions that do not have adequate expertise or experience in assessing conservation needs.

The referral strategy outlined above will help you identify those who may be qualified to do a conservation survey. Several of the organizations listed in the "Information Resources" and "Regional Conservation Centers" sections also provide consultation and survey services.



## CONTACTING A CONSERVATOR

### What the Conservator Will Ask You

To ensure that your collections receive appropriate treatment, it is essential to develop a collaborative working relationship with a conservator from the beginning, so that treatment decisions reflect a balance between curatorial and conservation priorities. When you have obtained the name of a conservator, call and arrange a time and location to discuss your conservation needs. Some conservators will come to an institution, while others will request that you bring the item to them. If you are located at a great distance, arrangements will need to be made for shipping the item for examination, after preliminary discussion by telephone.

To facilitate this interaction at the outset, be prepared to provide the conservator with the following:

- the nature of the item (e.g., book, manuscript, art on paper)
- the component materials (e.g., paper, leather, parchment)
- the media (e.g., writing, typing, printing ink)
- the nature of the problem (e.g., tears, physical distortion, brittleness, a combination of factors)
- the type and extent of anticipated use (e.g., extensive or limited research use, exhibition)
- environmental conditions (e.g., winter heating only, stable conditions with temperature and humidity control)
- housing systems (e.g., upright or flat shelving, boxes or other protective enclosures)
- the desired outcome of treatment (e.g., basic stabilization or protection, improved appearance, prevention of loss of information)

This information is critical for the conservator to judge whether or not he or she can work on the item. It is also critical information if the conservator is to develop a treatment proposal that adequately addresses both the condition of the item and your institutional requirements.

Also, decide in advance when you would like the work completed and determine if there are any deadlines that must be met. Finally, know the amount of money that is available, as this may dictate the level of treatment you can afford. Valuable time and effort will be saved if you are clear with the conservator from the outset.

At this point, a conservator may make general suggestions about different treatment approaches and techniques that might be suitable for your items. However, do not expect the conservator to offer concrete treatment proposals or cost estimates until he or she has had a chance to examine the items fully.

## What You Should Ask the Conservator

From the outset, ask questions that will help you evaluate a conservator's qualifications and ability to treat the items in your collection. Bearing in mind the discussion above concerning the education, training, and professional development of conservators, your questions should address:

- training
- length of practice
- scope of practice
- membership in professional organizations
- references
- whether a portfolio of work or treatment reports is available

Determine how the conservator estimates costs (by the hour, day, or project), and whether or not the cost estimate is binding if treatment requires more or less time than had been projected. Ask if there are separate fees for the preliminary examination and estimate -- a time-consuming but vital part of conservation treatment. It is not unusual for a conservator to charge between \$45 and \$75 per hour, with a flat fee for the preliminary examination and estimate, payable whether or not the client decides to proceed with treatment. At this point, clarify any questions about fees for insurance, shipping, or other separate charges that may be part of the final bill. Costs will vary from one area of the country to another and may also depend upon the nature of a particular conservator's practice specialty.

Contact the conservator's references and, if possible, speak to the person who worked directly with the conservator. Ask each reference if the treatment was completed satisfactorily, in accord with the signed agreement, and on time. Inquire about the adequacy of photographic and written documentation (see "Course Of Treatment" below). Ask if the conservator maintained communication as necessary during treatment – whether, for example, unexpected developments and proposed changes in treatment were adequately discussed. Remember that different clients contract for treatment services for different reasons, and therefore may have different standards or criteria for judging the work that was done. Bear in mind that a client may not always be able to determine if a treatment is technically flawed, especially when the client must base that evaluation simply on appearance.

Evaluate all the information that you receive from former or current clients as well as from the conservator. Listen carefully to what the conservator says and to the kinds of questions that he or she asks. For example, did he or she ask about the kind and level of anticipated use, or about the environment in which the item will be stored? These and other questions may reveal the way the conservator thinks about the broader issues and implications of conservation treatment.

## **THE COURSE OF TREATMENT: WHAT TO EXPECT**

### **Preliminary Examination and Treatment Proposal**

Once you have chosen a conservator and have established that he or she is available to work with you, you should expect to interact at several different points. Although the conservator may have provided preliminary recommendations in the initial contact, more detailed examination must now take place. The item should be taken or sent to the conservator, who will examine it and prepare a written condition report describing these features:

- materials, structure, and method of fabrication of the item
- location and extent of physical damage, chemical deterioration, or previous repairs

Along with this report, the conservator prepares a treatment proposal containing these elements:

- where appropriate, different options for correcting the conservation problems
- for each option, an outline of the procedures to be used and a description of the condition(s) they are intended to correct
- an estimate of the time required to complete the treatment
- an estimate of the cost

The proposal should clearly reflect the conservator's intention to retain the original character of the item to the greatest extent possible. All proposed procedures should be designed to allow, insofar as possible, subsequent removal of materials added during treatment. When more than one treatment option is included in the proposal, the conservator should explain the benefits and implications of each.

Read the treatment proposal carefully, and do not hesitate to ask questions if you need clarification on technical aspects of the proposal. Consider suggestions that the conservator may offer for a less involved treatment than you originally envisioned. For example, when proposing treatment for a book with an early original binding that has become weak but is still serviceable, a conservator may

recommend that the book be placed in a box rather than treated with more elaborate procedures. This recommendation may be based on the desire to retain intact as much of the original binding as possible. Boxing is especially appropriate if the volume receives limited use.

Once you agree to a specific proposed treatment, the conservator will ask you to sign the proposal and return it before any treatment begins. During the course of treatment, the conservator may discover that the proposed treatment must be changed, for any of a variety of reasons. In that event, he or she should contact you to discuss the revision.

## Treatment Report and Evaluation

After the treatment is complete, the conservator should prepare and submit a final report to you. Treatment reports vary in format and length, but all reports should include descriptions of the following:

- techniques used during the course of treatment
- exact materials used in correcting conservation problems
- photographs documenting the condition before and after treatment, with dates
- any photographs or diagrams necessary to clarify procedures that were used

The conservator may also make recommendations for special handling or use of the item, when this information is essential to its continued maintenance.

It is important that the institution permanently retain the treatment report, for it may be needed in the future by bibliographic scholars or conservators doing additional work on the item. The report may be kept with the item itself (perhaps housed with it) or easily accessible with other records concerning items in the collection.

When reviewing completed work, keep in mind that it is difficult to evaluate technical aspects of a treatment. A good rule of thumb is that all repairs should be discernable to a trained eye, but should not clash aesthetically or historically with the item. No attempt

should be made to obscure the treatment. This is important so that people consulting the materials in the future will not be misled. Remember that the nature and severity of damage or deterioration will influence the degree to which the item can be stabilized, strengthened, and aesthetically improved through treatment.

## SUMMARY

Selecting a conservator is a serious proposition, but it need not be daunting. It is important to exercise caution and not rashly entrust our cultural treasures to a person whose judgment and skills are not commensurate with the task.

By asking careful questions, contacting references, and working with the conservator before and during treatment, you can obtain competent conservation services. In this way, the sometimes delicate chain linking the past and the future will not be broken, and these important cultural resources will remain available to researchers now and in the future.

## INFORMATION RESOURCES

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC)  
Suite 340, 1400 16th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 232-6636

Institute of Museum Services (IMS)  
1100 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Suite 510  
Washington, DC 20506  
(202) 786-0539

The International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC)  
6 Buckingham Street  
London WC2N 6BA, England  
Tel: 01-839-5975

National Institute for Conservation of Cultural Property (NIC)  
Suite 403, 3299 K Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20007  
(202) 625-1495

SOLINET Preservation Program  
400 Colony Square, Plaza Level  
Atlanta, GA 30361-6301  
(800) 999-8558 or (404) 892-0943



## CONSERVATION TRAINING PROGRAMS

Buffalo State College  
Art Conservation Department  
230 Rockwell Hall  
1300 Elmwood Avenue  
Buffalo, NY 14222

Columbia University  
School of Library Service  
Conservation Education Programs  
516 Butler Library  
New York, NY 10027

Harvard University Art Museums  
Center for Conservation and Technical Studies  
32 Quincy Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138

New York University  
Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts  
14 East 78th Street  
New York, NY 10021

Queen's University  
Art Conservation Programme  
Kingston, Ontario K7L 3N6  
Canada

Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in the Conservation of  
Historic and Artistic Works  
301 Old College  
University of Delaware  
Newark, DE 19711

## REGIONAL CONSERVATION CENTERS

### Balboa Art Conservation Center

P.O. Box 3755  
San Diego, CA 92103  
(619) 236-9702

*Services:* Conservation of paintings, paper, polychrome sculpture, and selected other artifacts. Surveys, educational programs, and disaster assistance.

### Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts

264 South 23rd Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19103  
(215) 545-0613

*Services:* Conservation of paper, photographs, and library and archival materials. Surveys, educational programs, and disaster assistance.

### Center for Conservation and Technical Studies

Harvard University Art Museum  
32 Quincy Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
(617) 495-2392

*Services:* Conservation of paintings, paper, objects, and sculpture. Surveys and educational programs.

### Intermuseum Laboratory

Allen Art Building  
Oberlin, OH 44074  
(216) 775-7331

*Services:* Conservation of paintings, paper, furniture, and decorative art objects. Surveys and educational programs.

New York State Conservation Consultancy  
c/o Textile Conservation Workshop  
Main Street  
South Salem, NY 10590  
(914) 763-5805

*Services:* Conservation information and surveys (general, environmental, storage, exhibit, treatment) for libraries, archives, and historical societies.

Northeast Document Conservation Center  
100 Brickstone Square  
Andover, MA 01810-1428  
(508) 470-1010

*Services:* Conservation of library and archival materials, paper, and photographs. Surveys, educational programs, and disaster assistance.

Pacific Regional Conservation Center  
P. O. Box 19000-A  
Honolulu, HI 96819  
(808) 847-3511

*Services:* Conservation of objects, paintings, and paper. Surveys and educational programs.

Rocky Mountain Regional Conservation Center  
University of Denver  
2420 South University Boulevard  
Denver, CO 80208  
(303) 733-2712

*Services:* Conservation of paintings, paper, objects, and textiles. Surveys and educational programs.

Textile Conservation Center  
Museum of American Textile History  
800 Massachusetts Avenue  
North Andover, MA 01845  
(508) 686-0191

*Services:* Conservation of textiles and costumes. Surveys, educational programs, and disaster assistance.

Textile Conservation Workshop  
Main Street  
South Salem, NY 10590  
(914) 763-5805

*Services:* Conservation of textiles and costumes. Surveys and educational programs.

Upper Midwest Conservation Association  
c/o The Minneapolis Institute of Arts  
2400 Third Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55404  
(612) 870-3120

*Services:* Conservation of Oriental pictorial art, paintings, paper, ceramics, sculpture, and textiles. Surveys and educational programs.

Williamstown Regional Art Conservation Laboratory, Inc.  
225 South Street  
Williamstown, MA 01267  
(413) 458-5741

*Services:* Conservation of paintings, paper, furniture, objects, and sculpture. Surveys and educational programs.

## FURTHER READINGS

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## ABOUT SOLINET

**SOLINET**, a not-for-profit membership organization, was founded in 1973 to encourage and support resource sharing among all types of libraries, and now serves over 650 institutions in the ten southeastern states and the Caribbean. The SOLINET Preservation Program offers training, institutional consultation, disaster assistance, information and referral services, preservation microfilming, and support for statewide preservation planning. SOLINET is the largest regional network providing OCLC services and products to the library community, along with retrospective conversion, tape processing, database preparation services, member discounts, and workshops.

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