Setting Up a Conservation Workstation

Ann Carroll Kearney
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What Type of Work Will You Be Doing?

One determining factor in the selection of a workspace and the type of equipment to obtain is the type of work you will be expected to do. If you will be performing paper mends and minor book repairs, most of your tasks can easily be accomplished with hand tools. If you will be expected to construct protective enclosures* you will need larger equipment, i.e., board shears and a paper cutter, to accomplish your goals.

First of all, consider the type of library or archive you represent. Ask yourself (and your supervisors) what level and type of care is needed for the collections, and is expected (and will be supported) by the library’s administration. From this information you should be able to determine the types of conservation responsibilities you will have. Is this an assignment that has been given to you, or is this a need that you have observed and know should be addressed? In both cases, identify the specific expectations of the undertaking—Administrative work? Minor mending? Intermediate/advanced-level book repair?—to determine what you will need room to do and what tools and supplies you will need to do it.

Realistically assess the situation as well as what you want the situation to be in the next five to ten years.

Whatever the answers are, you will need a workspace that meets certain criteria. Depending on your responsibilities, you will need particular types of equipment, tools and materials. Let’s look at all these areas.

Room/Space Selection

The space you occupy is important. While it does not need to be a separate room, it should be a large enough and separate enough from other operations to work in comfortably—roughly 8’ by 12’ or larger. (You can “make do” with a smaller, less private space if you absolutely have to, but the work you can perform will be very limited. However, the point is to get started, so start wherever you can.) You should have space for a desk, a work surface, shelf storage and additional space for a book truck.

Lighting

Good lighting is absolutely necessary—use natural light when possible; make sure overhead lighting is in working order. A good work light is an significant important addition to your space. Several styles are available from various vendors; when you are looking, find one that provides both fluorescent and incandescent lighting options.

Flooring

The floor should be easy to clean and should not be carpeted.
Other factors

The space itself should be clean and dry and have a temperature level maintained at 74 degrees or less. (Attic and especially basement areas can be problematic in terms of heat, humidity and possible exposure to flooding)

Furniture

Working at a small scale, your most important piece of equipment will be your work surface. This can be any sturdy table (libraries, archives and historical society usually have plenty of extra desks, table and shelving). It should measure roughly 3’ x 6’, with a height of either 36” (standard table height) or 40” (standard counter heights—conservation work is traditionally and most accurately performed while standing).

The work table should have enough room on it to provide you with drying space for in-process items. If you have enough room in your workspace for an additional table for drying, get one and use it.

A desk for record keeping, a bookshelf for tool and material storage, and room for a book truck for materials being processed round out the list of basic furnishing for a conservation workspace.

Not really a piece of equipment, not really a tool...

The first item you will need after furnishing a work area is a 24” x 36” self-healing mat. These can be purchased through conservation suppliers or at local art and craft stores (See Supply list)

Tools

Useful tools to have on hand for the completion of basic conservation repairs for general collections items include:

- Olfa knives (small) or scalpels
- Bone folders (Teflon is a more expensive variety)
- Paste brushes (various sizes)
- Soft round brushes (small)
- Microspatulas
- Scissors (small and large) (please note—not included in toolkit)
- Erasers
- Rulers

Weights and boards

Most weights can easily be made. 1” x 1” clean small bathroom tiles are the perfect size and weight for small paper repairs. Standard tile, small and large bricks can be covered with book cloth for use when heavier weights are required. Both small and large weights can also be purchased from conservation suppliers.

We will be using boards with weights in our construction of portfolios. Boards provide a flat, uniform top surface for the drying process. Start with four boards; an ideal size is 9” x 12”. Boards can be made by cross-laminating two pieces of ½” plywood, sanding thoroughly and
coating with about 5 coats (sanding between coats) with marine-grade polyurethane. Boards can also be purchased from bookbinding and conservation suppliers.

**Material Storage**

We have already discussed materials and the selection process; here we are considering storage and access.

Map cases provide ideal storage for large, flat sheets of paper. Since these are not often available to a start-up conservation operation, alternatives can be utilized. Paper storage modules that can be set up under a workstation table can be purchased from Gaylord. These can also be used for lightweight board storage.

Bookcloth rolls can be stored in a bookcase with removable shelving. Conservation and office suppliers offer stand-up cardboard units for roll storage that can stand within (with several shelves removed) or alongside a bookcase. Middle and upper bookshelves can be used for adhesive storage. Weights and boards, because of their heaviness, should be stored on the lower shelves.

**Larger Equipment (for larger quantities of work/bigger spaces/larger budgets)**

While most basic conservation procedures can be performed without major equipment, access to good quality, well-maintained board shears and paper cutters simplify and can expedite the completion of some types of work, particularly large quantities of enclosure work.

- **Board shears**
  Jacques shears are the profession standard. Used and new shears are available from bookbinding suppliers (see suppliers list in back of handout packet). The accuracy—the square of the cut and the sharpness of the blade—needs to be carefully maintained for an acceptable result. Regular servicing of the shears and sharpening of the blade (also keeping an extra blade on hand when blade #1 is being sharpened) will assure this result. Again, consult Suppliers list in back for names of vendors for service.

- **Paper cutters**
  Many paper cutters are available—from standard scrapbooking cutters to floor models. If you are going to use a paper cutter for conservation work it should be accurate (as with board shears, square and sharp) and large—repair situations that require small pieces of paper are usually addressed with hand processes). Floor-mounted models also tend to be more stable.