

Preserving Scrapbooks for Exhibition at Sir George Grey Special Collections: a case study of *The big OE*

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Abstract

An exhibition titled *The big OE* was held at Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, from March-June 2015. This article describes the preservation of the scrapbooks displayed in one cabinet and is derived from a case study of the exhibition. The case study gathered evidence during the process of exhibition preparation and display, and included audience and staff surveying. This data was analysed for themes, and these were discussed in relation to interpretation and preservation of material artefacts in the exhibition. As this research was at a very specific intersection of concerns, and was partly motivated by a lack of documentation of some exhibition processes at SGGSC, the findings illuminated many pathways for further examination and a brief list of recommended areas for ongoing research concludes the report.

Keywords: Preservation, Conservation, Scrapbooks, Archives, Special Collections, Exhibitions

Introduction

From the assessment of the exhibition planning and presentation process, the museum gains new and more intimate knowledge of its own inner workings, and its strengths and weaknesses. By carefully examining and applying knowledge about how things get done in an organization, improvements can almost certainly be made.¹

Sir George Grey Special Collections (SGGSC) is the name of a heritage collection held at Auckland Libraries' Central Library. SGGSC includes historic maps, photographs, ephemera, manuscripts and printed books, including many rare and private press items. SGGSC presents three exhibitions per year in its purpose-designed exhibition space. A virtual exhibition is usually published alongside this physical exhibition. From March to June 2015, an exhibition entitled *The big OE* was held at SGGSC. This exhibition was on the theme of the OE or 'overseas experience', which is typically (or stereotypically) defined as "a two-to-three year



Left – Figure 1: Elizabeth Jackson. “Spain”, (1962), Auckland Libraries NZMS 1715. *Photographer: Annette Hay, 2015.*



Right – Figure 2: Elizabeth Jackson. “Bangkok and Hong Kong”, (1962), Auckland Libraries NZMS1715. *Photographer: Annette Hay, 2015.*

working holiday, during which young New Zealanders live and work in London and travel extensively in Europe”.² It also may be understood more broadly as travel undertaken by New Zealanders to work, volunteer, be educated or immerse themselves in another culture for some months or years, and this was the broad definition adopted for the exhibition. The exhibition largely featured material from the manuscripts, ephemera and photographic collections, materials which we refer to as ‘archival’ at SGGSC in order to differentiate them from printed book collections.

One cabinet of the fifteen comprising the exhibition displayed the scrapbooks of Elizabeth Tarrant Jackson (1904-1994). SGGSC holds sixty-four travel scrapbooks created by Jackson in its collection. These scrapbooks contain a mix of ephemera such as tickets and flyers, typewritten memoirs, handwritten annotations of photographs, pictures cut out from National Geographic magazines, and printed maps. Collected together, these items generate impressionistic travel narratives of the diverse destinations visited by Jackson on two long trips taken in the 1960s. Selected images of these scrapbooks displayed in *The big OE* were also featured in the accompanying virtual exhibition.

Creating exhibitions such as *The big OE* which feature archival materials, requires the specialist expertise and collaboration of many Auckland Libraries heritage and research librarians, preservation unit staff, as well as marketing and digital services teams. At the time of this research, Auckland Libraries was in the process of reviewing its exhibition planning and presentation processes for possible improvement. This exploratory case study of *The big OE* used the example of preserving Jackson's scrapbooks for exhibition in order to discuss and analyse some of the issues around exhibiting archival materials in our institutional context, in doing so, gathering intimate knowledge of its inner workings to enable examination for improvement. While a wide range of data was collected and analysed as part of the larger research project "Preserving scrapbooks for exhibition at Sir George Grey Special Collections: a case study of *The big OE*"³ this article focusses specifically on one aspect of the larger case study; the process of preserving scrapbooks for exhibition.

Key Terms

There is an important basic distinction between conservation and preservation. "Conservation generally refers to the physical treatment of individual library materials, while preservation refers to the care of library materials in the aggregate (for example, by monitoring environmental conditions)".⁴ Scrapbooks can be defined as consisting "...of several components: a cover or binding; a textblock of bound-in pages; and a unique collection of memorabilia of one or many formats that is attached to the pages of the book".⁵ Many examples of scrapbooks in our collecting institutions feature a plethora of ephemera. Young defines ephemera as "anything that is printed and isn't bound in a traditional book format."⁶ Ephemera is often produced for commercial purposes such as advertising (brochures, posters), communication (postcards), or exchange for goods or services (vouchers, tickets). A physical exhibition in the context of this research refers to the objects displayed in cabinets in an exhibition space. In this case, this was the exhibition room at SGGSC at the Auckland Libraries' Central Library.

Research Design

The research questions in the broader case study included the following:

- How was preservation managed for Jackson's scrapbooks in an exhibition context?
- What implications could this have for interpretation and description of the items?

- How are multiple-volume, multifaceted archival objects like scrapbooks interpreted for display?

The format of this research utilised a single case study design.⁷ A case study is usually associated with “a location, such as a community or organisation”.⁸ In this instance, the case study was *The big OE* exhibition at SGGSC, and the cabinet displaying the Jackson scrapbooks, the main vehicle for data collection. Auckland Libraries staff were interviewed including the SGGSC curatorial team, staff from departments such as the preservation unit, and the website team. Staff were selected for interview based on knowledge of the exhibition process. Due to my role, I was well positioned to conduct research as a “minimally participating observer” that is, someone who “observes but participates minimally in the group’s core activities” and who “interacts with group members”.⁹ After the exhibition opened, attendees were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. This interview data was collected at set times throughout one month of the exhibition. This article describes a subset of the total data collected for this research project.

Review of the Literature

Teper notes that “[v]ery little has been written on the subject of scrapbooks, and even less has been directed towards the critical audience of archivists”.¹⁰ Scrapbooks are frequently written about in terms of their challenges for preservation and conservation, and the objective of much of this literature is to provide a solution to the documented ‘problems’ that scrapbooks cause for conservators. Their composite nature, not to mention their inherent vice as a format, creates many issues. They are often constructed from materials that deteriorate quickly, Teper refers to the “low-grade wood pulp paper”¹¹ and Ogden notes that many scrapbooks have “been mass-produced out of inexpensive materials so that the books would be affordable by the general public”. Moreover “enclosures are frequently made of inexpensive and poor quality materials which deteriorate rapidly”.¹² However it is Zucker who most comprehensively describes the problems of scrapbooks:

Album and scrapbook pages are almost universally made of poor quality paper that deteriorates rapidly and may become stained and embrittled with time. The binding structure of albums is usually unable to adjust to the bulge caused by the materials the albums contain. Plastics used in modern photograph albums and scrapbooks are often unstable and, therefore, damaging. Items are frequently attached to the pages of

scrapbooks and albums with harmful tapes or adhesives. Multi-paged letters or pamphlets may be fastened only by the last sheet; documents may be folded...¹³

Despite the underlying assumption that scrapbooks are potentially challenging or time-consuming to preserve and conserve, both Ogden (1991) and Teper (2008) discuss the importance of assessing and factoring in a scrapbooks' potential both for artifactual and for informational value when making preservation decisions. Feather states "[t]he balance between the significance of the artefact and the significance of its information content effectively determines whether preservation activity is to focus on the former or the latter",¹⁴ Others have articulated this balance as being more complex, with the artefact manifesting information content in its materiality. In terms of scrapbooks, Dever's articulation of the idea as "paper relations", where "one might engage with the manuscript *mise en page* as a work of physical and not simply intellectual composition",¹⁵ is particularly apt.

Preservation techniques ranging from conservator repair through to reformatting are discussed in Ogden (1991), Teper (2008) and Zucker (1984), but these all assume scrapbooks will mostly be stored, only occasionally handled by library patrons, not displayed or exhibited. When original paper items must be exhibited, Glaser provides general (though practical) advice. These items "must be protected from light, air, and touching by the public. Sealed frames or cases with preservation-quality components are essential as is control of light, temperature, and relative humidity (RH) in the exhibit area."¹⁶

In general, Jackson's scrapbooks typify most physical characteristics of scrapbooks. They are spiral bound volumes, a binding which allows easy expansion of the text block. The carrier paper is high-lignin wood pulp with a variety of ephemera adhered to the pages. Some of the ephemera are becoming increasingly detached as adhesives fail and stain the supports. Some of the staples are rusted and the books tend to bulge. The literature reviewed prior to this research confirmed that current storage and handling practices at the Library with regard to scrapbook as manuscript, meet accepted best practice. However, there is very little in the literature that discusses preservation of scrapbooks in the exhibition context, nor do they engage thoroughly with reformatting, digitisation or web exhibition as access strategies for such items. There was clearly scope for this case study to contribute detailed information to this conversation.

Exhibition Process

Evidence of creation and change are part of the history of a record, and the past and present choices of creators and custodians may have a significant impact on the future interpretation of the record.¹⁸

Many of the preservation decisions affecting the longer-term stability of exhibition items have been made before the commencement of the curatorial process. The SGGSC exhibition space maintains environmental conditions that conform to best practices for the management and exhibition of documentary heritage including closed glass doors, air-conditioning, monitored temperature and humidity, and adjustable track lighting. The findings outlined in this article focus on the intervention based conservation treatments that may affect future interpretation of the record, and on the preservation processes that support display of an item for exhibition and by extension the curatorial interpretation.

Preservation work on the exhibition objects was carried out prior to the opening of *The big OE*, and most work done on the materials occurred in parallel with curatorial processes. Data collected for this research, including interviews and observation, suggested that although preservation involved technical expertise, decision-making was also involved in terms of collaboration with curatorial staff, throughout the process of preparation and treatments.

The pre-exhibition preservation processes involved the following stages:

- Conservator assessment of items for suitability for display, and nominating appropriate interventive conservation treatments
- The conservator then determines the kind of supports the items will need to display items as the curator intends
- Conservation technicians create supports according to the specifications determined by the conservator
- Installing the exhibition in collaboration with the curatorial staff
- Monitoring the environmental conditions of the exhibition space through the display period, e.g., checking to make sure that the pages of items do not move or turn

Assessing Suitable Items for Display

The exhibition room at SGGSC was designed with adjustable lighting and regulated humidity and temperature; this ensures that curatorial staff will not be limited in terms of environment when making object choices for exhibition, though the scope will always be potentially limited by

conservator-determined ability of an item to withstand light. Physical conditions were only one of the many factors contributing to decision-making in selection. Items are always displayed in the exhibition space's vitrines: lockable glass-topped cabinets, thus there are certain limitations in terms of the dimensions of items that may be placed in the cabinet.



Figure 3. Scrapbooks in their initial placement inside the case. *Photographer: David Ashman, 2015.*

The cabinet selected for Jackson's scrapbook was 1600mm wide by 800mm on the vertical axis by 990mm high, of which 160mm is the display area and 830mm is the platform. The arrangement of the scrapbooks within this case was limited and determined by dimensions of the display case they were allocated to. Using an acid-free matt board, already cut to the dimensions of the case, I tested the arrangement of the scrapbooks.

At approximately 500mm wide, there was room for two open scrapbooks, the scrapbooks measured 260x380mm when closed. Preservation staff generally enable the use of any selected collection item for exhibition; however there can be a compromise between exhibition needs and preservation values. The conservation technician stated "the degree of compromise is deemed able to be minimised by our conservation work, or conversely, our requirements sometimes require a compromise to the curatorial vision" (email)

After curatorial selection, a meeting between the SGGSC curator and conservator was scheduled. These meetings enable compromises to be negotiated, the conservation technician interviewed for this study commenting that "the forum of this meeting means we are all able to communicate our ideas directly".¹⁹ During these meetings, a reference photograph of the case layout was taken (Figure 3) by the conservator and a conservation worksheet completed. This worksheet provided a reference for conservation technicians who would be preparing the item



Figure 4: Bulging scrapbooks with torn perforations. *Photograph by the author, 2015.*

for exhibition, and listed and described what treatments were needed and what kinds of supports needed to be made.

Nominating Appropriate Interventive Conservation Treatments

Jackson's scrapbooks are approximately A3 sized, with metal spiral binding and the boards are a heavy card, colour-printed on one side with the manufacturer's branding. The text block is approximately one centimeter thick, and comprised of a light newsprint wood pulp paper stock. Pages have a range of materials adhered to them with unidentified glues and clear adhesive tapes. The range of items includes clippings from colour-printed glossy magazines and brochures and handwritten journaling, postcards and other items. The addition of these extra items has caused the scrapbooks to bulge, resulting in some stress on the binding, manifesting as tearing of some of the paper pages at the perforation holding the metal spiral. Additionally, yellowing of the paper indicates the inherent vice of the wood pulp papers. I observed mould staining on some pages but was assured by conservation technicians that this would have been historical, and arrested by storage conditions.

The donor had affixed a piece of paper with their handwritten contact details to the front cover of selected scrapbooks. One of these had to be removed because the cover was to be visible on display. Not only did this donor label obscure some of the collage made by Jackson, but it also revealed current personal details and therefore was unsuitable for display for privacy reasons.



Above – Figure 5: Teflon folder used for lifting sellotape. *Photograph by the author, 2015.*

Below – Figure 6: Hairdryer being applied to the tape. *Photograph by the author, 2015.*



The photo on previous page shows the preservation technician removing sellotape from the cover of the scrapbook with a hairdryer. In this method, heat is directed onto to the sellotape only, and a teflon folder is used to lift the sellotape. This was the only interventive treatment received by any of the scrapbooks in the case. Although sellotape can potentially cause damage, often there may not be the time or resources to remove adhesives not directly affecting the display. The conservation technicians also need to be sure that they are not removing something vital to understanding the item.

We'd like to take sellotape off anyway, as that would create issues with acidity and creeping of the adhesive, but particularly with scrapbooks, we need your expertise to know what can be taken off.²⁰

This is a process which Rekrut refers to as 'archival mediation', deciding "which information within the records has value, and which physical characteristics and evidence to retain or alter".²¹ This piece of paper is important to our understanding the item as it shows chain of custody. The donor was not Jackson herself, but the person who had inherited the scrapbooks. Therefore, once removed, the note was placed in an archival paper envelope and kept in the storage container with the scrapbook. The conservation technician again noted the importance of being aware of context when altering the physical item in any way, especially by removing loose items from the supports

The huge part of scrapbooking is that it's kind of personal to the creator in the aesthetic of where they put it and how they put it in place, I wouldn't just want to [just put it anywhere]...if I couldn't identify exactly how it was put back in I'd be more inclined to put it in an envelope.²²

The conservation technician later commented on the treatment employed in removing adhesives, showing understanding of the importance material integrity of the item being preserved:

from the conceptual standpoint the whole idea of scrapbooking... sellotaping is kind of part and parcel of that, so from that point of view it's kind of like, it starts to lose a part of itself if you start to be really...archival.²³

As Rekrut notes of material use in record creation “[t]he range of choice available to a creator may be great or small, more or less proscribed, but is ultimately controlled by personal inclination, informed by the individual’s socio-cultural context – technology, tradition, and function.”²⁴ Jackson’s decision to use sellotape rather than more ‘archival’ adhesives is part of the legible material information of the record.

Determining the kind of supports the items will need to display them as the curator intends

An important curatorial aim was to showcase the content of the scrapbooks, as well as the material features of this collection. I achieved showcasing the content of the scrapbooks by displaying two of them open. Another display strategy to show the material features was the creation of a stack of scrapbooks, to give a sense of their volume and uniformity.

The open scrapbooks required cradles to support them and make them readable. A ‘Level V’ cradle was chosen, as this supports the spine and holds the book open at a readable angle. Due to the flexibility of the spiral binding, the scrapbooks could be laid open to almost 180 degrees without stress being caused to the binding, but the angle chosen was 125 degrees.

The scrapbooks in the centre of the case were layered with a thin piece of foam, which acted as a protective cushion and barrier between each book. This prevented abrasion damage caused by contact between uneven, collaged surface of the covers. As the scrapbooks are generally stored horizontally stacked in boxes, weight pressure was not considered to be a factor for conservation concern for these materials.

Creating the supports according to the specifications determined by the conservator

The conservation technician noted that he had been trained ‘on the job’ to create book supports, and had recently begun documenting the process that he had developed, based on the basic principles of his training. To construct a ‘level V’²⁵ book cradle the scrapbook was placed on a cushion behind a piece of vertical Perspex with a piece of Mylar film attached to it (Figure 7). It was opened at the approximate angle listed on the conservator’s worksheet. The conservation technician then set dividers at the angle prescribed by the conservation worksheet, and places this against the Perspex (Figure 8). Lines are drawn on the Mylar to reflect the length of the tail of the scrapbook. This Mylar trace is then



Above – Figure 7: Measuring the book's opening angle. *Photograph by author, 2015.*

Below – Figure 8: Preparing to create the book support cradles. *Photograph by author, 2015.*



used as a guide for angling and gluing the acid-free card which is cut to the dimensions of the scrapbook.

Installing the Exhibition in Collaboration with the Curatorial Staff

In order to minimise light exposure, the display items' installation was planned to be very close to the exhibition opening date. Once installed



Above – Figure 9: Measuring the light exposure with a lux meter. *Photograph by the author.*

Left – Figure 10: the track lighting with positional lamps. *Photograph by the author.*

in their case, the lighting had to be adjusted to suit the paper. The aim is to have the 50 lux of illumination. The lighting was turned on, off, dimmed and brightened from a centralised control panel. When the item is in the case, conservation technicians measured the light to ensure that lighting met standards using a lux meter, (Figure 9). Once on display, the lights were only switched on during the day, with the materials in the dark outside exhibition opening hours.

The display remained static throughout the exhibition; the pages were not turned. Though spreading light exposure through the item would be easier on the entire manuscript, it is not practical for an exhibition where a particular page has been chosen for the purposes of illustrating a theme within a cabinet within an exhibition and acceptable in the three-month exhibition period.

Conclusions

The big OE was extended to an online exhibition, and some additional images of the scrapbooks were taken for surfacing content through this online channel. While this did not occur within the timeframe of the case study, and was therefore beyond the reach of analysis, there is perhaps room to explore further whether the display of books open at one page is felt to be a limitation by viewers, and whether this may be remedied by making available additional images of the object in a virtual exhibition or other online form.

This study of *The big OE* showed that curatorial decision making around display must take into account the preservation needs of the item for exhibition. Decision-making by conservation technicians managing the preservation of items of exhibition also takes into account the curatorial interpretation of the item. The preservation and interpretation of scrapbooks for exhibition was thus a collaborative process.

Both curatorial and preservation staff demonstrated material literacy in dealing with Jackson's scrapbooks. By engaging with the meaning of the material as well as the informational content of the scrapbooks, they showed an understanding that "[t]he physical properties of records are a tangible site for interpretation of information from the many elements present – text, images, appearance, texture, smell, and historical context."²⁶ The aspects of scrapbooks considered problematic in much of the preservation literature reviewed prior to the study, such as the extensive use of acidic adhesives, was understood in this case as being a meaningful non-textual aspect of the record. In the mediated context of an exhibition, where an archival object is put on static display, it may well be that increased engagement with the material information of the object allows for more nuanced interpretations of records.

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