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Preservation and conservation training in the French national library

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Abstract

The preservation of collections is an essential mission of the French national library. During the phase of study for a new national library in the nineties, a lack of training in preservation and conservation compelled the institution to create a specialized training unit for professional development in this field. This activity was integrated into the general training plan of the library.

Its key objectives are to heighten the employee preservation awareness, to train to the disaster plan, to develop theoretical and practical knowledge in preservation and conservation and to support experience sharing. After a few years of activity, the training courses have been opened to other French libraries which have a global partnership contract, and to the members of the French Committee of the Blue Shield for the management of disaster plans. Also the French national library organizes training courses in project management in preservation and conservation issues, and digitisation, to the benefit of foreign professionals. Lastly, students in preservation and conservation are received in the scientific laboratories and conservation workshops of the library for long duration practical training courses.

Any library is commissioned to give access to its collections for purposes of education, research, leisure, culture. This mission does not imply only the organization of the identification and communication of the library holdings, but also their safe preservation to avoid a too fast physical degradation which would ruin the conditions of the initial mission. Furthermore some libraries are in charge of the cultural heritage preservation. They have to maintain the conditions of this access for the longest time possible, ideally without any time limit. The French national library of France (Bibliothèque nationale de France, BnF), one of the largest and most prestigious libraries in the world, owns collections full of valuable materials, reflections of the intellectual and artistic production of all times and all continents. A great part represents a heritage to be preserved without any time limit, especially the old collections and the materials subjected to the French legal deposit, unceasingly entered since the 16th century until nowadays for the printed materials.

In the nineties, during the preparation phase of the new building of the French national library in Paris which holds the printed and audio-visual collections of the institution, it was possible to work out a preservation policy which takes account of the very large number of the holdings (approximately ten millions), the diversity of materials, the periods of origin and the uses, since part of the contemporary holdings are acquired to be set in free access in reading rooms, whereas old documents and holdings entered by legal deposit are preserved in stacks rooms for an authorized research work only. Finally the multiplicity of the interventions in an institution where 2.700 staff members works is a key point in the definition of the preservation policy. The scientific knowledge of the causes of degradation, of the conditions of preservation, the evaluation of the techniques for a safe preservation and conservation represent the base for this policy. However the professional education in France give little place to the preservation scientific context and to the study of the document as a material object subjected to evolution. Generally, apart from some specialists, the staff does not acquire skills in preservation during their student years. However the preservation is not only the business of the specialists, but of all staff members. Everyone who handles the materials or works in contact with the collections has to be aware of the consequences of his actions in the whole life of the document in the library. This is why the preservation department devotes resources to increase the skills in that field.

Staff training is within the competence of the human resources department which works out the general training plan of the library, but in some fields, a specialized unit which works in co-operation with the human resources departement has to set up the actions. Thus the preservation department created a training unit for this purpose in 1996. In 2006 this unit counts three members. The specialized training unit collects the needs from all the departments, works out the training courses with the trainers and evaluates the system which has to evolve constantly. Thus each training is evaluate by means of personnal forms. Forty internal and external trainers, selected according to their professional background, work together to achieve these training activities. If they want, they can find help in a teaching training course in order to acquire professional teaching skills and tools. Trainees receive a handbook during their training courses, which they can refer to afterwards. The curriculum is aimed at the library staff, but is also open to other organizations within the national and international co-operation policy of the BnF.

The key objectives are to heighten the staff preventive preservation awareness at all the stages : when the holdings enter the library, when they go through the initial physical treatment, during the storage, the access, the media transfer and so on. The homogenization of the practices is also required, because the BnF is a very big organization. The clear definition of the

risks and the causes of degradation of the collections, the knowledge of preventive and treatment measures, the handling of the materials during transport before consultation by the readers or photocopy, the initial treatment (opening of the parcels, call number and barcodes labels placing, light packaging), the evaluation of the material state of collections, the techniques of light repairs, are the main features of the training curriculum in order to increase everyone's responsibility on his own level.

Also the training to the library disaster plan takes part of the priorities. This training is made to increase the awareness of the whole staff which should be able to act in case of disaster without the panic and the errors brought by the stress situation, in a coordinated, effective and fast way. Ideally the training apply to the whole staff, but the size of the organization compels to mobilize only the voluntary people in a first stage. The training course makes the employees discover the various disasters which threaten the libraries, the prevention means and how to deal with disasters when they occur, as much as possible through practical works in order that trainees acquire useful competences. For example, the sorting of materials, the setting in boxes and the drying of the items touched by water are seen during a practical workshop.

More specialized trainings are also provided, for example for particular materials like the photographs or the history of the binding.

In addition to the practical or specialized training courses, the library offers a basic training course, called "Library holdings preservation", which represents the prerequisite knowledges to any action in the field. It is intended to the preservation staff in all departments of the library. It provides the knowledges about the risks and the causes of materials degradation, the physical evaluation of the collections, the evaluation of the climatic environment, the evaluation of the buildings, the preservation supplies, the choice among the preventive measures and their implementation, how to set out a preservation policy suitable for the available means and the mass and state of the holdings. The risks inventory and the collections evaluation allow the collections managers to work out short term or longer term projects, which meet the financial and human means. Indeed all problems cannot be treated most of the time. This training gives the tools to make this type of choice. In addition a training course on the preservation project management is set out for the foreign professionals. It is suitable for the situation of the less advanced countries. This training course is made in co-operation with the French public records administration (les archives nationales) and the French Ministry for foreign affairs. Also the BnF organizes another training course on digital libraries project management with the Bibliothèque publique d'information (BPI), Centre Beaubourg - George Pompidou in Paris.

The training unit staff is also able to meet non recurring specific needs, through specialized training courses as on the graphic items conservation or the features of the binding in the Renaissance period from the point of view of their preservation during an exhibition.

The BnF owns several conservation laboratories, in Tolbiac and Richelieu districts in Paris, in Bussy-Saint-George in the Paris metropolitan area and in Sablé-sur-Sarthe, in the West of France. They are in charge of various materials. An annual meeting is offered to all conservators as an opportunity to share knowledges and skills between the distant laboratories. The meeting is also open to external conservators during this one day conference. In addition the various laboratories receive some staff members from the others BnF laboratories who need to acquire new competences from their fellow workers. This individualized training concerns less than ten people a year for one or two weeks.

The conservation is a field which evolves according to the historical, technical and scientific knowledges. Training courses concerning particular subjects are organized from time to time with the cooperation of external specialists, such as the adhesives or the repairing techniques with Japanese paper. In addition the scientific laboratories take part in international research programs, for example on iron gall nut inks. The results of this research are gradually integrated in the training. It allows an update in moving fields.

In 2005, 32 training courses met 206 BnF staff members, 125 staff members of other libraries which belong to the national co-operation network, 125 trainees from the French section of the Blue Shield for the management of disaster plans and from other training organizations, and finally 61 foreign trainees with international co-operations. The unit offered a 130 days curriculum for 392 people.

More largely the BnF contributes to the training in the field of preservation in France through specific interventions of its staff as trainers in training organizations. Also the BnF receives many external trainees for whom the BnF represents a reference centre in library management, preservation and conservation. Thus the various conservation laboratories and the two scientific laboratories receive French or foreign students for practical training periods as part of their education curriculum, from one week to three months (in 2005, 31 students).

Thus the library staff is compelled to maintain a high level of awareness in preservation, conservation and all material procedures. That experience is also shared with a part of the French library community and in some cases with foreign colleagues who can find answers to some questions.

2006 curriculum

“Holdings preparation : complete line for the initial treatment”, 1,5 day

“Use of the microforms reading devices ”, 1/2 day

“Consultation and preservation : handling and photocopy”, 1/2 day

“The disaster plan”, 1 day

“The disaster plan : the team manager's role”, 1,5 day

“The disaster plan : the unit manager's role ”, 1,5 day

“The binding : principles and techniques”, 1 day

“History and technique of the binding”, 3 days

“Material evaluation of the printed collections”, 1 day

“Minor repairs for printed holding”, 2 days

“Identification and preservation of the photographs”, 2 days

“Recognition and preservation of the photomechanical and photographic processes, 2 days

“The old bindings”, 36 days over 18 months

“Library holdings preservation ”, 6 days

“Preservation : a first approach”, 2 days

“International training course, preservation project management”, in co-operation with the French public records (les Archives nationales), 3 weeks

“International training course, digital ressources project management ”, in co-operation with the Bibliothèque publique d'information (centre Beaubourg Georges Pompidou), 2 weeks