

Archival Preservation of Antique Books

Post by “Joshua” of May 22, 2021 at 2:21 PM

T. L U C R E T I I

Sensit, & hunc propter ferrum celare ministro
Aspectuque suo lacrymas effundere civeis :
Muta metu terram genibus summissa perebat :
Nec miseræ prodesse in tali tempore quibat,
Quod patri princeps donarat nomine regem.
Nam sublata virum manibus tremebundaque ad
Deducta est, non ut, solenni more sacrorum
Perfecto, posset claro comitari Hymenæo :
Sed casta incestu nubendi tempore in ipso
Hostia concideret maeratu moesta parentis,
Exitus ut classi felix faustusque daretur.
Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.
Tutemet à nobis jam quovis tempore, vatium
Terriloquis victus dictis desciscere quares
Quippe etenim quam multa tibi
Somnia

Quap
Nobis
Qua fia
In terr
Unde a
Et quæ
Terrific
Cernere
Morte o
Nec me
Difficile
Multa no
Propter

Keys to Preservation

Preserving rare or antique papers, manuscripts and books requires care and discipline, but the fundamentals of the practice are rather simple; if we can identify the factors that cause problems, we can establish a practice that incorporates their solutions. This essay will use the example of one antique book, and the solution arrived at for its continuous display.

Why Physical Texts Decay

Professor Stephen Greenblatt has surveyed the problem through the lens of metaphor—he describes the factors involved in the degradation of physical texts as "The Teeth of Time".

We shall focus on those "teeth" that are within the compass of the amateur collector. The key factors, in brief and in no particular order, are these:

- Mold
- Insects
- Sunfading
- Acidic Corrosion
- Water Damage
- Dessication
- Stressed Bindings
- Rough Handling
- Neglect

How to Protect Your Books

To outline the solutions to these problems, this essay will borrow the nomenclature of Workplace Safety. In that field, life-saving solutions are categorized according to their implementation.

Engineering Controls involve making changes to the work environment, *i.e.* with guardrails, hazard signs, safety paint, and the like.

Personal Protective Equipment can be worn by the workers, to place a barrier between them and the materials in the workplace.

Best Practices are behavioral standards implemented to get the job done safely.

Engineering Controls

When it comes to protecting books and papers, the most important step to take is to protect them in storage. An antique book will spend a tiny fraction of its life in the hands of a reader or admirer. It will be left sitting silently for months and years; the condition that the book is in when the reader returns to it will depend considerably on how it was stored.

Our example specimen is a Latin Edition of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, printed in Cambridge, England in 1675.



The volume is beautifully preserved—we certainly want to keep it that way. But we also want to see and appreciate old texts; we want to let them speak to us. So while tucking it away in an archival box is an option, what we'll be looking for is a clear display case. An archival, museum quality display case should be specifically engineered to safeguard the specimen against the "teeth of time"—those decay factors in the list above. It should have;

- Museum glass or acrylic, designed to reduce glare and severely restrict the passage of UV light

- Active or Passive humidity control

- A combination hygrometer/thermometer

- Inert materials, to prevent off-gassing and corrosion

A book storage solution does *not* need to be airtight, and in fact *should not be airtight* unless it incorporates active humidity control. Putting paper in airtight storage without controls is like locking the door when the enemy is inside with you!

In addition to the above, the storage solution should protect against variable temperature swings. A modern climate-controlled house will likely be sufficient—but don't put the case by a window or a radiator, or under a hot lamp, or in a cold basement or hot attic, or next to an exterior wall.

In Part II, we'll find a display/storage solution for Lucretius, and also consider the use and theory of Personal Protective Equipment (i.e. inert cotton gloves) and the implementation of Best Practices in handling the book itself—to include a note on legacy, and how to pass the book on to others when our time is done.

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[Part II]