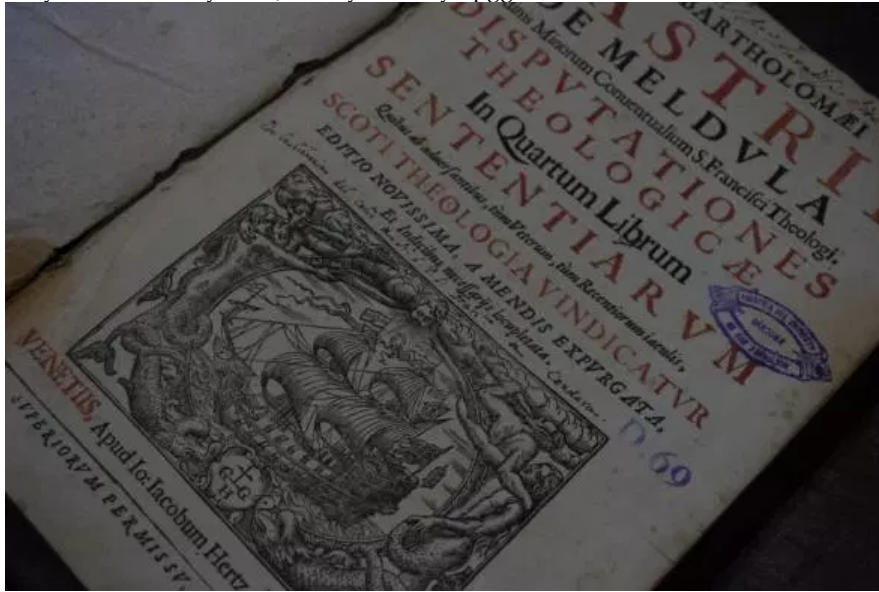




The Book & Paper Gathering

A sacred and challenging encounter

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Archivo Histórico Franciscano, one of the oldest and most important archives in Argentina

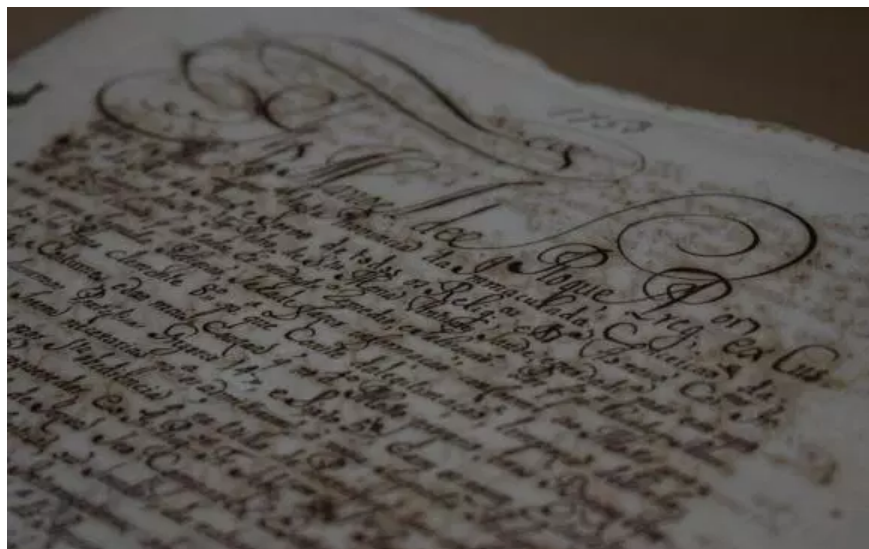
Last December, some colleagues and I had the opportunity to provide assistance and guidance to the professionals working in the Archivo Histórico Franciscano (Franciscan Archive) in Córdoba, the second-largest city in Argentina. The head of the archive had requested our services as qualified conservators in order to preserve their rare books and unique manuscript collections from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, material that is highly significant for our Argentine identity and history. Córdoba de la Nueva Andalucía (nowadays the city of Córdoba) was founded in 1573 by the Spanish conquistador Jerónimo Luis de Cabrera. This city shares with other places across Latin America (like Peru or Mexico) an incredibly theological and cultural past.

Like many libraries across the country, Córdoba's Franciscan Archive inherited its collections from Catholic institutions, which were influential and educational forces during the Spanish colonisation of the Americas. The earliest collection of our national library (Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno), consisted of works from the libraries of the Cabildo Eclesiástico, the Colegio San Carlos, the Jesuit library of Córdoba and the personal collections of Bishop Manuel Azamor y Ramírez and Bishop Rodrigo de Orellana.¹

The Franciscan Order is located in Córdoba's city centre, in an area surrounded by other religious orders like the Jesuits, who founded the oldest university in Argentina, the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (1613); the Mercedarians; and the Order of Preachers (well known as the Dominican Order). The Franciscan Archive is a primary-source collection that includes over 2,500 manuscripts that date from the founding of the order in Córdoba in 1575, and more than 10,000 books dating from the sixteenth century to the present. This collection is exceptional in its range of subjects, including Christian theology, philosophy, literature and history. The archive is situated inside the Monastery of Hermanos Franciscanos Menores and beside the main chapel that belongs to the Franciscan Block (Manzana Franciscana). The block was declared a National Historical Monument in 1971 and is just walking distance from another significant and sacred place: the Jesuit Block (Manzana Jesuítica), which received international status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000.

I work at Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Industrial (National Institute of Industrial Technology), a federal agency created in 1957 that supports the development of our nation's industrial technology. In 2014, the agency established the INTI-Restaurar Conservation Department, to bridge the gap between science and conservation/restoration in Argentina. The main services that our department provides are scientific analysis for art and cultural heritage (characterisation of materials, art expertise, X-ray radiography, paper fibres identification,

Raman spectroscopy, etc.) and a range of professional training and technical assistance to libraries, archives and museums in preserving their collections and cultural heritage. INTI-Restaurar is comprised of an interdisciplinary group of technicians and professionals, such as book and art conservators, librarians, bookbinders, chemists, biologists and architects.



Reconciling religious values with our professional ones

Dealing with religious heritage sometimes means dealing with a number of preconceptions. In our popular western culture, we occasionally prejudge ecclesiastical libraries and archives as obscure, hidden places holding top-secret information and forbidding access. Working at the archive, I was constantly reminded of Umberto Eco's debut novel, *The Name of the Rose*, set in an Italian medieval monastery and full of atrocious characters like the sinister librarian and his assistant. Religious heritage could be defined as the tangible and intangible cultural heritage that was created and preserved by the Church and its continuous use for religious worship, evangelisation and the dissemination of Catholic culture.

As conservators, we usually work with secular heritage, and we therefore ascribe values from a different perspective. Religious objects have a special "aura", a spiritual connection between the object and its religious tradition. A great challenge for us as conservators is to observe our contemporary standards while respecting that spiritual aura in cases where religious objects and communities are directly involved. We must find out what values are acknowledged by a religious community.

International guidance regarding the management of living religious heritage has focused on issues surrounding the concepts of living and dynamic sites and the limits of authenticity in restoration projects. The success of conservation depends on our ability to design treatments around those values. Nobuko Inaba (2005) argues that we ought to treat religious heritage in a holistic manner, "as an expression of their host culture, combining tangible (both immovable and movable) and intangible expressions of heritage together with the natural/cultural landscape". It is vital for the conservator to reflect and clarify the importance of the collection and to understand the purpose of an object and any of its spiritual dimensions. Dealing with religious heritage involves acknowledging a complex process of rational content and its perception. It is imperative to construct a complete profile of the object within its spiritual tradition, and then to elaborate a conservation plan to manage the entire collection in order to apply sensitive solutions.



Physical damage, mould and the odd catalogue

The main damage to the Franciscan Archive's collection included mould, rust from metal staples and paper acidity, compounded by the absence of an accurate archival description. Most of the books and manuscripts had been manufactured with handmade rag-pulp paper. However, some documents from the 1940s and 1950s had become yellowed, fragile and highly acidic due to the poor quality of the paper, which was made of groundwood pulp. Acidity in the paper causes discoloration and breaks down the fibres. In order to preserve the information within these documents, it was proposed to digitise the collection after removing any metal clips and staples.

Just 5% percent of the books were damaged by mould. Damp conditions encourage mould growth, but in this case humidity was not the problem. Despite Córdoba's humid subtropical climate, the Franciscan Archive's environment was quite stable, without the temperature and humidity fluctuations that are potentially unsafe for a collection of this type. The average temperature was 21-23°C and relative humidity was 35-40%. I was initially confused by the presence of mould, but then I discovered it was mainly because the material had been transferred in the 1990s from the Franciscan Archive storage facility in Buenos Aires, where environmental conditions were damp. When these books had arrived in Córdoba without condition checking, they had been immediately mixed in with the existing, well-preserved collection. It was proposed to remove this mouldy material from the shelves and brush it outside the storage space, in a well-ventilated area. Since mould is harmful to human health, and mycelium and spores cause allergic reactions, staff were required to wear masks with an FFP2 or FFP3 rating,² vinyl or nitrile gloves and safety glasses during the manipulation of this mouldy material and the cleaning process.³ This safety recommendation was also suggested because of the absence of a proper suction table. In some cases, it was also recommended to freeze the material in order to deactivate fungi.⁴

As previously mentioned, the collection had never been catalogued; the only descriptions of the books and archival documents had been hand written in a notebook. A searchable online catalogue allows users to explore a collection in a way that minimises unnecessary handling and, therefore, the risk of physical and chemical damage. Nowadays in our country, many archives still have no proper description of records according to the ISAD (g) standard.⁵ In the near future, the Franciscan Archive intends to describe their collections properly.

Conclusion

Cultural and religious significance both have an impact on conservation treatments and are important considerations in our profession. It is vital to respect the "aura" that these objects once held – or still hold. Miriam Clavir emphasises: "Cultural significance is tied not only to the time period that created its original meaning, but to today, and the future". It can be difficult to understand this religious significance – certainly, it was for me a great challenge to balance these values with my professional background when treating the Franciscan Archive. We are dealing with objects and social constructs behind their materiality, as religious forces are based on belief systems within society. Moreover, we are dealing with ourselves and with our traditions.

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<https://www.inti.gov.ar/celulosaypapel/boletin/boletinConservacionyPapel.pdf>
(<https://www.inti.gov.ar/celulosaypapel/boletin/boletinConservacionyPapel.pdf>)

Footnotes

¹ "Most of the national libraries in Latin America had their origins in collections of the Jesuits, the order expelled from the Spanish colonies in 1767. These collections later became the bases for the first public libraries of the region." World Encyclopedia of Library and Information Services (1993:80).

² FFP, or Filtering Facepieces, offer protection in three classes: against aqueous oily aerosols, smoke and fine particles. Their protective function conforms to the British Standard BS EN 149:2001+A1:2009, "Respiratory protective devices. Filtering half masks to protect against particles. Requirements, testing, marking". A respirator mask covers both the mouth and nose and is constructed of various filter materials and the mask itself.

³ Child, R.E. (2004). Mould. London: British Library (Preservation Advisory Centre).
https://www.bl.uk/aboutus/stratpolprog/collectioncare/publications/booklets/mould_outbreaks_in%20library_and_archive_collections.pdf
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⁴ According to Astrid Michaelsen (2013): "Although it cannot be considered a disinfecting treatment, freeze-drying is still the most effective method known for the physical, chemical, and biological stabilization of water-damaged archival and library materials, especially when large quantities are involved and time is of the essence" (Schmidt, 1985; McCleary, 1987; Walsh, 1988; Parker, 1989; Florian, 1990).

⁵ ISAD, or International Standard Archival Description, sets out a list of elements which are considered necessary for an archival description as well as rules that should be followed when writing a description.

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