

2016

Review of Preserving Our Heritage: Perspectives from Antiquity to the Digital Age

Christina Thomas

Brigham Young University, christina_thomas@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thomas, Christina (2016) "Review of Preserving Our Heritage: Perspectives from Antiquity to the Digital Age," *Journal of Western Archives: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1* , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives/vol7/iss1/3>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Western Archives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



Review of *Preserving Our Heritage: Perspectives from Antiquity to the Digital Age*

By Michèle Valerie Cloonan, ed. Chicago: American Library Association, 2015. 736 pp. Softcover. \$98.00. ISBN 978-1-55570-937-2

Keeping up with all the preservation literature is a daunting task! I have made attempts over the years to collect articles pertinent to my work as a bookbinder, conservator, and preservation advocate in a university library. My handful of semi-organized binders and file folders, plus a few reference books, is all I have to show. Our Conservation Department reference collection, full of important preservation information in books and journals, is another hugely helpful resource I am lucky to have access to; even more preservation literature—especially more current writings—can be accessed online and from other libraries. Indeed, it is a daunting task to take in and glean from all this information. Writings are spread far and wide, published in multiple disciplines, and in varying states of accessibility. Where to begin?

Thanks to Michèle Valerie Cloonan and the advisory board that assisted in compiling *Preserving Our Heritage*, professionals and students alike working in and studying about archives, museums, libraries, and historic preservation now have a clear and compelling place to either begin or continue a review of the literature that should inform their everyday work. This hefty anthology helpfully consolidates some of the key literature that charts the evolution of perspectives on preserving our cultural heritage and establishes valuable context and purpose for the field.

Currently, Michèle V. Cloonan is dean emerita and professor of the School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College in Boston and editor in chief of *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture*. Earlier in her career Michèle studied bookbinding in Shaftsbury, Vermont, Trinity College in Dublin, and in Chicago. She developed a brittle books program at Chicago's Newberry Library, served as Preservation Librarian at Brown University, and was a faculty member at the UCLA Library School. She has published over 50 articles, chapters, and books on topics such as preservation ethics and philosophy, digital preservation, preservation librarianship, bookbinding and conservation, and rare book librarianship. It is clear that the breadth of her experience has well qualified her to spearhead efforts in compiling an anthology of preservation literature. To select the readings, Cloonan worked closely with an advisory board whose members included professionals from the library, archives, museum studies, and historic preservation fields.

The work of this board, with Cloonan leading the way, presents some of the best efforts to date of addressing the following questions: What are we trying to preserve? Why are we trying to preserve it? Who will preserve it? How will we preserve it, and

how will it be funded? Where will we preserve it? For whom will we preserve it? How will we make the preserved materials available? To whom? (66o). The number of publications addressing these issues is overwhelming (articles pertaining to digital preservation, alone, number in the thousands); and because preservation is not yet its own distinct academic field, the literature has been broadly published across disciplines. To narrow the field, Cloonan used these four criteria: 1) “*historical* writings that form the basis of contemporary thinking and practices,” 2) *multi-disciplinary* writings primarily focused on the preservation of cultural heritage,” 3) readings in *new areas*, such as sustainability, 4) publications that are rare, out of print, or *difficult to access* (xvii, emphasis mine). The articles were also selected to fit into these eleven subject areas: early perspectives on preservation; definition and discussion of cultural heritage; overlapping and unique preservation issues faced by libraries, museums, archives, and in the preservation of historic buildings; collection development and management; risk management; conservation; digital preservation; policymaking; ethics and values; multi-cultural perspectives; and sustainability. Cloonan introduces all the chapters (except for the “Time-Based Media” section in Chapter 4) by summarizing the main points covered by the articles within the chapter and the significance of their contribution to the literature. She also notes other significant literature that could not be included in the chapter but should be considered.

A key feature of this volume preceding the chapters is a 14-page historical reference timeline spanning from 750 BC to 2013. The timeline is my favorite part of this publication because it affords easy-access context. One can easily see the relationships among different preservation events and issues along with the social, economic, political, and technological events that impact preservation. The timeline, alone, is an invaluable resource.

As a relatively new conservator and mentor to student conservation technicians, I am initially struck by this anthology’s usefulness in furthering not only my own study but that also of the students I teach. In fact, for students and young professionals in the field, *Preserving Our Heritage* seems an ideal place to start when seeking to develop a greater knowledge base and awareness of the evolution of significant preservation topics and debates. Christopher Clarkson’s “Minimum Intervention in Treatment of Books” and Paul N. Banks’ “The Laws of Conservation” are just two examples of basic conservation-specific readings that will orient students or the beginning archivist to major areas of thought that conservators and those who work with conservators should be aware of.

Many of the readings are also relevant to other aspects of the daily work and motivations of archivists, curators, collections managers and administrators. Articles in Chapters 2 and 3, for example, lay a multi-disciplinary theoretical foundation that should inform any archivist’s thinking as they are developing preservation programs, defining collection development policies and considering what is and is not of value and importance to preserve. Two such articles—Stanley Chodorow’s “To Represent Us Truly: The Job and Context of Preserving the Cultural Record,” and F. Gerald

Ham's "The Archival Edge"—advocate for interdisciplinary collaboration in identifying which materials truly define and represent the cultural heritage being preserved. Other articles in Chapter 3 include discussion of the changing nature of the materials being preserved. Digital materials, for example, and the complexities they bring are discussed broadly both by Michèle Cloonan in "The Preservation of Knowledge," and by Hazen, Horrell, and Merrill-Oldham in "Selecting Research Collections for Digitization."

Speaking of digital preservation, with eight articles spanning over one hundred pages in Chapter 7, "Frameworks for Digital Preservation," this subject alone makes up the second largest portion of the book. This is unsurprising as the digital preservation frontier is ever-changing, expanding, and rife with unknowns. Archives, museums, and libraries are increasingly in need of staff with expertise in collecting and managing born-digital materials, digitization processes, and policymaking. Many who are finding themselves stepping into the role of digital "expert" are in great need of further training. Chapter 7 also provides an accessible, centralized foundation of thought concerning digital preservation from the last fifteen or so years that one might (and ought to) make part of their further training. While articles such as Margaret Hedstrom's "Understanding Electronic Incunabular: A Framework for Research on Electronic Records" from 1991 are not the most current, they represent the important evolution of thought that forms the foundation upon which to add the most current thinking and writings—publications which are multiplying daily!

Readings from *Preserving Our Heritage* could also be a great starting point for archivists, preservation specialists, conservators, and administrators who all work within the same institution to come together for discussion. A joint reading of an article such as "Conservation and the Politics of Use and Value in Research Libraries" by Jan Paris might guide discussions and policies about how and what is valued in the collections and how to prioritize conservation treatment. Institutions may also find that some of the specific case studies included are relevant to issues they are facing or help increase their awareness of issues they had not previously considered. Miriam Clavir's "First Nations Perspectives on Preservation and Museums," in Chapter 10 "Multicultural Perspectives," helps raise this kind of awareness.

While *Preserving Our Heritage* does not and cannot include all the worthwhile extant preservation literature, it is a welcome, needed, superb resource to begin with. Thanks to Cloonan's adept introduction and chapter summaries, the contents of each chapter can be easily perused when looking for more specific information. The extensive Subject and Author/Title indexes also assist in specific searches. *Preserving Our Heritage* brings again to the surface significant early documents and articles as well as some of the most current issues and trends. Even though not all of the foundational or significant readings could be included, they are at least brought to readers' awareness so that they might search them out elsewhere. The cross-disciplinary approach of this anthology is immensely useful and revealing as to how professionals across disciplines have been thinking and talking about longevity, reversibility, enduring value, and authenticity, among other topics. Though this 700-

page volume, itself, may be daunting, it may just be the new best place to begin a survey of preservation literature.

Christina Thomas
*Conservator of Rare Books and
Manuscripts
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah*