

Book review: Historical Perspectives in the Conservation of Works of Art on Paper.

Margaret Holbein Ellis editor

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Book reviewed Jane E Klinger, Chief Conservator, US Holocaust Memorial Museum
The Getty Conservation Institute. 2014. 608 pages, ISBN 978-1-60606-432-0

The history of paper has received considerable attention, and there are some excellent references regarding the history of the conservation of cultural heritage. The recently published volume *Historical Perspectives in the Conservation of Works of Art on Paper* represents a significant leap towards developing the historiography of paper conservation that may serve as a template for historiographies of other conservation specialties. The book comprises readings drawn from historical and contemporary texts arranged around themes ranging from paper itself, its use as substrate for various media, the interplay between media and the paper, through the impact and marks of time, to the position and role of the conservator. Throughout the volume, Margaret Holbein Ellis explores the complex relationship between the work at hand and broader patterns of social and cultural change. The book moves beyond the simply material world of paper and media to offer a multi-layered analysis, bringing in topics and sources not normally associated with conservation, in order to show the ideas and conditions that have shaped the course of the conservation profession.

Ellis is uniquely suited to produce a volume of this type. She is an experienced paper conservator and since 1987 has served as the Sherman Fairchild Chairman of the Conservation Centre, Institute of Fine Art, New York University. Her role as the Eugene Thaw Professor of Paper Conservation and the technical connoisseurship seminars she teaches have also greatly informed the book. Her students are graciously acknowledged, along with professional colleagues and advisors, for their reviews and comments on readings proposed for inclusion in the work.

The book contains ninety-six readings divided into eight parts. An overview begins each part, or theme, followed by the relevant readings, each with their own brief introduction. Both the overviews and short introductions are an invaluable part of fully understanding the themes and breadth of the book. The overviews provide definition to the themes and reference different points of views and sources. The introductions include brief biographies of the writers and provide context for the quoted text. Readers should be aware that not all readings are printed in full. The text makes clear where a reading has been edited for length and corrections or editorial additions have been made. While readings within each part are not necessarily arranged chronologically, there is a logical progression to the order in which they appear. A list of further readings is included which is helpful for those who would do more research into the themes and topics covered.

Some attention must be given to the title of the book. A strict reading places the book as having

only artworks as its focus. However, as the author herself writes in the preface, “The items under discussion here are variously described as works of art on paper, paper-based material culture, documents, artifacts, and so on, but, physically, all are simply marks on paper. Thus, the line between library and archive conservation and paper conservation in this volume, at least, is a fine one” (p. xvi). The point is that the intended audience is not just conservators of fine art on paper, but paper conservators working on all types of paper-based media. Peppered throughout the text is information specific to the paper conservator. For example, the introduction to Reading 24 in Part III cautioning the conservator against assumptions regarding the condition of the paper based on the date of the print (p. 98). However, conservators of any specialty, as well as curators, historians of art and of material art history, and students of the aforementioned disciplines would benefit from reading this highly researched and well written book