Book Conservation and Digitization: The Challenges of Dialogue and Collaboration ed. by Alberto Campagnolo (review)

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Reviews

Alberto Campagnolo, ed. *Book Conservation and Digitization: The Challenges of Dialogue and Collaboration*. Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2020. €109. ISBN: 9781641890533.

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The J. Paul Getty Museum

Despite the closure of major libraries and the curtailment of air travel that occurred during the global pandemic of 2020–21, decades-long efforts to digitize rare books and manuscripts have provided humanities researchers with vast resources that have enabled virtual access and opportunities for research. The timely publication of a volume of essays edited by Alberto Campagnolo provides a veritable master class in the work required to make these digital assets readily accessible online to scholars around the world.

Alberto Campagnolo is that uncommon individual whose expertise combines the interdisciplinary fields of rare book and manuscript conservation and digital humanities. For this volume, he has brought together a number of his former tutors, project collaborators, and other colleagues to share their individual personal digitization experiences from various libraries, archives, and museums. Organized into three sections, the book includes contributions authored by over a dozen eminent conservators, library heritage preservation experts, and specialists in digitization and imaging.

The key words in the volume's title—*dialogue* and *collaboration*—are emblematic of the book's support for the central role of book conservators at the outset of any digitization project, no matter how large or small. Campagnolo's introduction and first section, entitled "Books as Objects and Their Digitization," along with the nine case studies given in Section 2,

make compelling arguments for how collaborative digitization projects ought to be structured and why the involvement of conservators needs to be front and center at all stages. For some institutions this may seem self-evident. But when funding resources are short and pressures mount to get more books online, digitization can compete with conservation when the mandate to digitize is given priority over more time-consuming condition surveys and conservation treatments. There is an urgency to this book's advocacy, for it cannot be denied that digitization can and does cause material damage. The remedy is to involve conservators and to embed their active participation into the digitization workflow to prevent material loss.

Campagnolo's two long-form chapters in Section 1 make explicit the premise of the book: in "Understanding the Artifactual Value of Books," and "Conservation and Digitization: A Difficult Balance?," Campagnolo argues for the need to document by digitization (and associated metadata, such as object descriptions) an object's "untransferrable features"—that is, the physical aspects of manuscripts not made apparent in a two-dimensional page scan (74). These features often include the physical details and material qualities of historical bindings, parchment, paper, ink, pigment, and so on, and the three-dimensional structure of the codex as a whole. With his extended articulation of what constitutes "artifactual value," Campagnolo makes clear that the conservator's role is not limited to preservation and treatment, but also includes unique knowledge and understanding of materials and features, the description and documentation of which require standardized vocabularies (17–48). To this first section must be added Athanasios Velios and Nicholas Pickwood's collaborative contribution (grouped among the "Case Studies"), which outlines the seminal resource of the *Language of Bindings Thesaurus*, a project of the Ligatus Research Centre; their essay provides a roadmap to how those observations ought to be expressed and linked using structured vocabularies. Together these three essays articulate and model ways of thinking about books as objects, arising out of the collaborative endeavors to catalogue, conserve, and digitize rare books and manuscripts.

The case studies in Section 2, "Conservation and Digitization in Practice," showcase the collaborative digitization projects at the Vatican Library, the National Archives at Kew, the British Library, the Wellcome Library,

the Herzog August Bibliothek, the London Municipal Archives, the Library of Congress, and Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt. As models, these essays are rich with insights and recommendations. For instance, Almuth Corbach's review of available book-cradle equipment is helpful to anyone beginning a digitization project for their collection or institution, and her concise single-page assessment checklist with its straightforward "yes/no" tick boxes has facilitated rapid decision-making at the shelf level by conservators at the Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel. Angela Nuñez Gaitán's account of the "Pharaonic undertaking" (90) to digitize 82,000 manuscripts in the Vatican's Apostolic Library stresses the institution's firm commitment to start the process in the conservation laboratory, so that conservation is never "accessory" or "optional" (95). Her candid statement that "the first obstacle that needed to be overcome was that of our own biases" (92) highlights how conservators' protective impulses can and do run up against the photographer's/digitizer's aim to get the best image possible; thus, a mutual understanding of each other's workflows and requirements becomes key to creating a collaborative working environment built on mutual respect. The National Archives (UK) built this kind of trust by moving the digitization conservators (a newly created title and position within TNA) directly adjacent to the workspace of the commercial digitization team, as outlined by Catt Thompson-Baum. Likewise, the benefits of having staff conservators do this work is forcefully advocated by Stefania Signorello, who demonstrates how the benefits of their pre-digitization surveys and participation throughout the entirety of the digitization process at the Wellcome Institute Library have helped initiate new rehousing projects and long-term conservation planning and treatments. By contrast, Abigail Quandt's preference for hiring contract conservators allowed her team to focus on conducting condition surveys and digitization-related treatments, thus preventing any interruptions to the imaging workflow at the Walters Art Museum, an approach similar to the digitization conservators at the National Archives and at the British Library/Qatar Foundation project, the latter described by Flavio Marzo.

The third section is intended to put "Conservators and Digitization Experts in Dialogue," and consists of two contributions: Abigail Quandt's essay on the digitization projects at the Walters Art Museum is followed by

Melissa Terras's paper from the perspective of an expert in digital interfaces and computation sciences. Yet Quandt's article seems a bit misplaced here, as it would have been better situated among the "Case Studies" of the prior section. Moreover, the two contributions pertaining to multispectral imaging likewise do not fit so comfortably within "Case Studies": Fenella France's essay describes the Library of Congress's use of advanced spectral imaging and other analytical methods for conservation documentation, yet she omits mention of what role conservators play other than as end users; and Michael Toth's description of the various multi- and hyperspectral imaging projects that have revealed palimpsest texts seems weighted toward arguing that all digital imaging projects are ultimately provisional, given the rapid improvement of camera resolution and spectral imaging methods over time.

For Section 3, the more satisfying dialogue would have been between Melissa Terras's contribution alongside the essay by conservators Caroline De Stefani and Philippa Smith, for these two articles provide different points of view and experiences pertaining to "The Great Parchment Book" project. A collaboration between the London Metropolitan Archive and University College London, this project beautifully exemplifies the productive interchange between conservators and the advanced imaging and computational specialists who together helped make readable a manuscript so severely burned and water-damaged that no one has dared study or touch it for over two centuries. The minimally invasive (yet no less courageous) conservation treatment, described by De Stefani and Smith, improved text legibility prior to the book's digitization, to which photogrammetry techniques were applied as outlined by Terras. The resulting three-dimensional digital reconstruction of The Great Parchment Book—as a "digital cultural object," to use Campagnolo's term—truly surpasses the previously undecipherable original physical object, and it has facilitated a full transcription of the text for the first time. Together, the two essays featuring this project provide the reader with an inspiring model—especially since the holy grail of digitization is clearly moving toward such enhanced digital cultural objects that can help "restore" the three-dimensional, the unseen (i.e., nonsurface), and even the haptic qualities of rare books and manuscripts.

Ultimately, all knowledge (images/data/metadata) about a specific object—whether the knowledge of conservators, cultural heritage scientists, curators/cataloguers, imaging specialists, and computational scientists—must be linked and incorporated into the ever-evolving digital cultural object. At present, this information is often stored across proprietary databases and in paper files, institutional hard drives, and print publications, thus separated from the digital surrogate available online. Only once all the accrued object data are aggregated into a linked interface or platform will the fullness of the digital cultural object be truly accessible and function "in tandem with the original," as Campagnolo envisions, eventually to surpass the physical object by recording all the otherwise "untransferrable features" so that its valuable materiality might "help construct a better history of the book" (81).

Although the volume would have benefited from a good copy editor as well as greater scrutiny of some of its content (such as Toth's misleading statement about accrued UV exposure during display, since museum and library standards mitigate UV), the exceedingly useful web links given for the majority of citations in the volume's extensive bibliography will be especially useful for readers of the e-book version (available on the De Gruyter website). The volume complements such recent publications as L. W. C. van Lit, *Among Digitized Manuscripts* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), which provides thought-provoking philosophical and detailed technical essays while concentrating on Islamic codices; Bill Endres, *Digitizing Medieval Manuscripts: The St. Chad Gospels, Materiality, Recoveries, and Representations in 2D and 3D* (Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2019), which offers a proof-of-concept case study for digitization beyond two dimensions; and Domenico Fiormonte, Teresa Numerico, and Francesca Tomasi, *Digital Humanist: A Critical Inquiry* (New York: Punctum Books, 2015), which critiques digital humanities as a field with regard to equity, access, and the biases inherent in digital media. These publications, along with the anticipated publication by Elaine Treharne, *The Phenomenal Book*, are evidence of the deep maturation of manuscript digitization and digital humanities. Yet unlike these other publications, Campagnolo's stands alone for bringing the voices of practicing conservators into dialogue with advanced digitization specialists, thus bridging these fields and demonstrating the value of this collaborative discourse for the future.