

PROFILI

From restoration to book conservation: an assessment fifty years after the Florentine flood

by Melania Zanetti

When the Arno River overflowed on the 4th of November 1966, a great mass of water, mud, and naphthainundated the halls of the National Central Library of Florence (BNCF), causing serious damage to over a million bibliographic units. This forced the library's management and staff to confront the disaster in the absence of any previous experience with events of this kind and, most importantly, without any solid principles of book and paper preservation. Most of the theoretical considerations and practices that would characterize the book conservation field in the years to come were born in Florence, and were thus influenced by the context of the Florentine flood.

Few disasters in the past had proven such a threat to the safekeeping of book heritage. Among them, the fire of the University Library of Turin in 1904, which had seen the intervention of Franz Ehrle, Head of the Vatican Library. He was the same one who, in 1898, had organised an international conference on manuscript preservation in the Swiss city of St. Gallen¹. This conference is often remembered as the official beginning of modern book conservation. However, it mostly promoted the practice of photographic documentation of manuscripts, and Ehrle himself could be considered a sort of forefather of modern digitization. Any actual considerations on conservation at St. Gallen had little resonance and no impact on the development of conservation theory.

Ehrle had asked the participants to present actual examples of damaged manuscripts to encourage a pragmatic discussion on the topic. First of all, he'd endeavored to tackle the issues relating to parchment manuscripts damaged by insects or iron-gall inks; secondly the problems with palimpsests, and finally the ones con-

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¹ Margit Smith, *Minutes of the St. Gall Conference*, «The Abbey Newsletter», 22 (1998), n.7-8, p. 96-99: p. 93; it can also be consulted at: <http://cool.conservation-us.org/byorg/abbey/an/an22/an22-7/an22-702.html>.

Franz Ehrle, *Die internationale Konferenz in St. Gallen am 30. September und 1. Oktober 1898 zur Beratung über die Erhaltung und Ausbesserung alter Handschriften*, «Centralblatt für Bibliothekswesen», 21 (1899) p. 27-51.



cerning paper manuscripts. Despite Ehrle's good intentions – he even suggested analysing the ink on manuscripts of different origin – the discussion didn't progress much past a general exchange of personal opinions on the treatments being conducted in a few of the twelve countries represented at St. Gallen². The end result was basically an acknowledgement of the state of the matter and a confirmation of the need for further studies on the different techniques of intervention.

There was also much uncertainty concerning the role of photographic documentation, which Ehrle suggested doing systematically, especially before beginning any conservation effort. The doubts were due both to the elevated cost of film and to the comments made by the eminent historian and epigraphist Theodor Mommsen, honorary president of the conference, who stressed the opportunity to limit the photography to cases that could be useful to research, avoiding decorative or sentimental motivations when deciding which items to reproduce³. A final aspect to consider is the Italian delegation's absence from the conference, apparently unjustified, which is especially relevant as the gathering was originally going to be hosted in Milan, probably at the Ambrosiana Library. This original plan was abandoned due to the social unrest that shook Milan in May of 1898, where a series of riots following the doubling of the price of bread prompted a violent crackdown conducted by the general Bava Beccaris. Even though four months had passed since these events, their echo must have been strong enough to discourage any organising of significant events in Milan, and certainly no moving about of library officials was advisable.

Getting back to the fire of 1904, Ehrle contributed to the salvaging of the University Library manuscripts both by immediately inspecting the damage personally and by appointing one of the top Vatican conservators to work in Turin.

Referencing this event is not arbitrary, as many of the actions taken to deal with it led to a change in perspective that was, *mutatis mutandis*, similar to the one following the 1966 flood. Because it was the University Library that had been affected, a few scientists, particularly the doctor Piero Giacosa and the chemist Icilio Guareschi, decided to cooperate with the librarians and most of all with the technical experts to help them gain more awareness and precision in their intervention efforts. Despite the fact that Positivism, as a philosophical current, was decidedly on the decline by that time, a certain trust in chemistry's capacity to aid in the conservation process prompted the inception of a new idea: that of 'scientific' restoration, whose guiding principles would be adopted from the natural sciences. This idea became the trend for most of the 20th century, and its influence can decidedly be seen in the creation of the Istituto di patologia del libro (Institute of Book Pathology), as well as in the establishment of the Istituto centrale del restauro (Central Institute of Conservation), albeit in a different field.

In other words, the fire of the University Library of Turin, along with the Conference in St. Gallen, was a crucial milestone for the development of book conservation practice. In that occasion Ehrle promptly showcased the skills and understanding he had acquired working in the Vatican Library, for which he is rightly remembered as one of the time's leading figures in the field.

The events in Turin also influenced the science of archive preservation, and a few years later, in 1909, a Commission for research into the best preservation and

2 The countries who sent representatives to the Conference were, besides the Vatican with Father Ehrle, Baden, Bavaria, Belgium, England, France, Netherlands, Prussia, Saxony, Switzerland, Hungary and Württemberg.

3 M. Smith, *Minutes of the St. Gall Conference* cit., p.97.

PROFILI

conservation treatment methods for the ancient manuscripts in the State Archives was formed⁴. Particularly relevant was the Commission's makeup: Franz Ehrle, head of the Vatican Library, president; Ignazio Giorgi, head of the Casanatense Library; Icilio Guareschi, full professor of chemistry at the University of Turin (even after five years, the memory of the conservation efforts following the Turin fire was still very much alive), and Luigi Schiaparelli, full professor of paleography in Florence. With the exception of the chemist and the paleographer, the other members were librarians, and this fact alone sheds significant light on the relationship between the archives and the practice of preservation, which was almost entirely delegated to scholars-from other fields.

The establishment in Rome of the Istituto di patologia del libro in 1938 almost certainly has its fundamental roots in the contributions of Giacosa and Guareschi to the conservation field following the Turin fire. Although in its practical incarnation their involvement turned out to be of little relevance, it was however critical in the development of conservation methodology, as evidenced by the creation of this new ministerial body founded by Alfonso Gallo, which clearly institutionalized the relationship between book preservation and the natural sciences.

Without a doubt Alfonso Gallo's intuition represents a sort of 'premature leap' on the international scene, followed only many years later by a few other European countries.

In a different context it would certainly be interesting to analyze the different aspects of the Institute's seventy year experience (1938-2007⁵). However, in accordance with the scope of this article, where any reference to historical events is functional to painting the backdrop for what happened in Florence, we aim to discuss only a few important features of the exchanges between the Roman institute and the BNFC following the flood of 1966, and to look closely at the new meanings that book conservation acquired because of it.

Much has been said and written about the Florentine flood and the events that left their mark on the years 1966-1970, a time dominated by the role of Emanuele Casamassima, director of the BNFC from 1965 until 1970. The fact that Casamassima was and is to this day considered, even internationally, 'the hero of the flood', aptly expresses the part he played in the unfolding of events, despite the considerable difficulties encountered due to the mutual feelings of disesteem and the resulting tension between him and the ministerial bureaucracy, as confirmed by Francesco Barberi⁶, his friend and librarian colleague, in those years inspector of the Ministero della pubblica istruzione (Ministry of Public Education).

⁴ Centro di fotocoproduzione, legatoria e restauro degli Archivi di Stato, *Il restauro nei lavori della Commissione istituita nel 1909/10: materiale per una storia della teoria del restauro documentario*, a cura di Cecilia Prosperi. Roma: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Dipartimento per la ricerca, l'innovazione e l'organizzazione, 2006.

⁵ In 2007 the Istituto centrale di patologia del libro (Central Institute of Book Pathology) and the Centro di fotocoproduzione, legatoria e restauro degli Archivi di Stato (Center for the Reprography, Binding, and Conservation of the State Archives) were abolished, and the Istituto centrale per il restauro e la conservazione del patrimonio archivistico e librario (Central Institute for the Conservation and Preservation of Book and Archival Heritage) was born in their place.

⁶ Elisadi Renzo, *Una biblioteca, un' alluvione: il 4 novembre 1966 alla Nazionale di Firenze: storia di un' emergenza*. Roma: AIB, 2009, p. 68.

The flood of the Arno River in Florence had the unexpected effect of sparking international concern for the fate of the damaged cultural artefacts. More specifically, it prompted not only a great coming together of young volunteers and professionals to help salvage the affected books under the request of the director Casamassima, but also a great investment of funds by different entities, such as the United States government, the Australian government, the Nordic Center, and the Swiss and German Committee, all of which went into establishing the BNCF's Conservation Center.

«The most important and specific task assigned to the British group was the organisation of a complete and working conservation 'system'⁷: a systematic intervention to be conducted on a great number of volumes that had all been damaged due to the combined effect of dirty water drenching them and the unwanted consequences of the emergency drying methods employed in the immediate aftermath of the flood:

People at the moment of the flood doing things that they immediately thought were useful like removing the cover, but gave no thought to identifying the cover, no thought to marking it so we've got many unrelated fragments which will be very difficult to relocate⁸.

The first result of this operation was a change in the very purpose of the intervention.

Until then, book repairing in Italy had been limited to volumes of renowned historical and artistic value, due in part to the requests of the antiques market. The development of treatment processes in terms of materials and techniques had therefore been informed by the goal of restoring books to their original form as much as possible, reinstating both their functional and aesthetic qualities⁹.

In antithesis, the flood made it so that the aim of the intervention shifted to being mainly practical, with the ultimate goal of making volumes usable again after providing them with new sturdy and functional binding. It was this goal that guided the choice of treatment materials and techniques, in a way that was fundamentally different from the general *modus operandi* of the time.

Several personalities were responsible for the development of this new context, which proved fertile ground for the impetus that would change, or rather revolutionise, the field of book preservation and conservation in Italy. Alongside the figure of Casamassima, always carefully outlined, less emphasis is often placed on pro-

⁷ Luigi Crocetti; Anthony Cains, *Un'esperienza di cooperazione*. In: *La cooperazione internazionale per la conservazione del libro: incontro di studi organizzatodalla Biblioteca nazionale centrale di Firenze, sotto gli auspici dell' Unescoe del Ministero della pubblica istruzione, Firenze, 12-13-14 marzo 1970*, «Bollettino dell'Istituto di patologia del libro Alfonso Gallo», 29 (1970), p. 27-57: p. 30.

Peter Waters, Roger Powell, Anthony Cains e Christopher Clarkson were part of the British group and became leading figures in the field of bookbinding and book conservation.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 54.

⁹ Historically, the term 'restoration' refers to any intervention that aims to return an object to its original form, absurdly trying to negate the effect of time and the changes that occur to an artefact's material composition and structure. The term restoration was given a negative connotation by the English art critic John Ruskin, who contributed extensively to the debate surrounding interventions on historical monuments during the 19th century.

PROFILI

filing Luigi Crocetti, despite his role of primary importance in the history of Italian libraries¹⁰. And yet, he took on crucial responsibilities in the management of the conservation efforts in Florence at least until 1972, as supervisor of the BNCF's conservation center, with the support of the experienced English bookbinder Anthony Cains to oversee the work.

It was Crocetti and Cains who expressed a new awareness of the need for cooperation between librarians and technicians every step of the way, from the analysis of the volumes' conditions to the planning of treatments necessary for their recovery:

We don't believe that a single person can possess all the knowledge required for an accurate description of the book's conditions and an exact set of instructions for what needs to be done. Teamwork is paramount¹¹.

They also made precise remarks on the fact that «librarians were to be responsible for the 'final' instructions», stating that «all instructions, but especially the 'final' ones, are to be decided through close collaboration between librarians and technicians, who will work

together»¹². The final phase of intervention, relating to the choice of appropriate binding for the recovered books, was evidently considered of crucial importance¹³.

As for the profession of restorer, emphasis was placed on going beyond the traditional 'comprehensive restorer', the craftsman conducting the wholerestoration process on his own: «We think that such a figure is destined to disappear [...] in favour of organised systems, where the prerogatives and duties typical of the traditional restorer will be split between the actual conservator and 'specialised restorers'»¹⁴, in other words, technicians. It is obvious that the term 'comprehensive' was intended in a negative way, and that Crocetti and Cains were proposing a complete separation between the competences of the 'conservator' – in the Florentine context this role was given to the librarian – and those of the 'specialised restorers'. This highly touted specialisation *de facto* produced an artificial overly-simplistic subdivision of the various steps of the conservation effort into single tasks (i.e. collation, disbinding, wet treatments, mending, sewing and rebinding) each assigned to a dedicated department in the Center.

This labour division was principally due to two factors specific to the Florentine situation. The first was productivity: because the work was organised by a cooperative (Coop LAT) external to the library, it needed to give workers a living wage; to this end, the work was organised on the basis of Taylorism, so as to ensure the completion of all interventions. The second factor relates to the absence of a professional

10 Crocetti's role as supervisor of the BNCF's conservation center is detailed clearly in *Le biblioteche di Luigi Crocetti: saggi, recensioni, paperoles 1963-2007*, a cura di Laura Desideri e Alberto Petruciani. Roma: AIB, 2014, where a notable 70 pages are dedicated to his interventions in the conservation field.

11 L. Crocetti; A. Cains, *Un'esperienza di cooperazione* cit., p. 44.

12 *Ivi*, p. 46.

13 One of the librarian's responsibilities was to consider whether in certain cases it was appropriate and possible to re-use the original cover. However, this was the case for only a small fraction of the books in the flood, and most books were handed over to the English bookbinders that rushed to Florence.

14 L. Crocetti; A. Cains, *Un'esperienza di cooperazione* cit., p. 47.

figure capable of managing the conservation process on the whole. This was also due to the fact that the training of restorers was usually entirely based on the development of practical skills in the absence of a consolidated theoretical framework to work with. Even in Florence, technicians could not be entrusted with the actual planning of the intervention and could not be expected to hold a complete view of the damaged items' recovery process, if not for the technical director Anthony Cains, working side-by-side with the real *dominus* of the conservation, who formally was the librarian Luigi Crocetti. The emergency itself made it necessary to limit personnel training to one of the many phases of the intervention. Thus, for years, there were workers entirely devoted to washing, others to mending paper, others still to bookbinding.

Regardless of the views espoused by Crocetti, Cains, and many of their international collaborators, all of whom considered each book as an *unicum* whose specificities were to be carefully pondered in the scope of a conservation intervention, the actual approach turned out to be quite different. The sheer number of volumes needing radical intervention due to the pulling process necessary for their drying after being salvaged from the water, prompted the ideation and then realisation of standardised 'conservation binding', which required basic technical skills to be completed and could endow the book with significant sturdiness. Such a choice meant forgoing any attempt to give the volume an individual binding closely matched to its original. Casamassima himself was aware of this option, as he had written a few years before:

In the case of rebinding, in opposition to the principle of "trying to use models that resemble the ones used in the time, place, and for the type of book you're trying to bind" there's another principle [...]: the creation of a purely functional binding; such binding satisfies the need to preserve the volume, but has no artistic merit, no beauty¹⁵.

The decisive evolution of book conservation in Italy was however propelled by other events, and it was neither technical nor theoretical in nature, but rather political.

The constant conflict between Casamassima and the Roman ministerial bureaucracy – which also involved Crocetti, considered the director's *alter ego* in the conservation department – ended only when they left the State libraries. A second conflict was with Coop LAT. The cooperative had hired most of the volunteers involved in the recovery of the Library's heritage and subsequently been handed the management of the BNCF's conservation efforts by Casamassima and Crocetti, and it went on until 1975. That was the year that Giovanni Spadolini, originally from Florence, founded the Ministry of Cultural Heritage; one of the many compromises involved in the creation of the Ministry was the entry, basically by law, of the entire Coop LAT workforce operating in the BNCF.

The newborn ministry had now over 200 book conservation employees between Rome and Florence, and thought it appropriate to start training courses with the goal of evening out and standardising their professional competence.

The first course was held at the Istituto centrale di patologia del libro (ICPL) in Rome, and included a conference on the relationship between paleography and con-

¹⁵ Emanuele Casamassima, *Nota sul restauro delle legature*, «Bollettino dell'Istituto di patologia del libro Alfonso Gallo», 21 (1962), n.1/2, p. 67-78: p.76.

PROFILI

servation held by Armando Petrucci, full professor of Paleography and Diplomatics at the University of Rome. It is important to note that, if the librarian was considered the *dominus minor* of the conservation process, the paleographer was actually its *dominus maior*, firstly on account of the fact that the conservation's main aim was to salvage the text and secondly because most important conservation efforts were reserved for medieval manuscripts. Petrucci seemed thus to be the ideal speaker when it came to intuiting the evolutionary direction of book preservation and conservation. He talked about his experience as library keeper at the Corsiniana Library in Rome; especially poignant were the words with which he closed his speech:

Each book conservator must take responsibility for his own culture, which is vast and consistent. He must avoid making it subordinate, freeing himself from this cultural subjugation that is way past its time and which must be exposed for what it is. If you'll allow me an overused expression: the king is naked! After all, I'm sure you've already noticed: day after day, in your work, when you ask questions or suggest certain choices and the other part – the counterpart – does not answer, wriggles away, fakes a knowledge it does not possess. It's true: to many of your questions, I have no answer¹⁶.

At first, the audience was bewildered both by this generous declaration of personal limitations and by the idea that book conservators had to rely on themselves without constantly asking for technical clarifications from paleographers, librarians, and archivists. From that moment, librarians in charge of historical collections and conservators slowly began looking at books in a different light, an apparently paradoxical one: as objects, 'archeological artefacts'¹⁷ whose text had only an auxiliary function in the conservation process compared to the techniques and materials of their manufacture.

In any case, the lack of awareness of the material aspect of books, which had been a feature of all previous studies on them, was and still is understandable. When we go to the library, we are looking for a 'text', not a 'book'; the book's material composition is always, on a psychological level, secondary to the text, whose importance is without question. Truthfully, it is the physical components – not the text – that are in need of preservation and conservation. They were the real objects of investigation and of historical contextualization; of course, the text remained a necessary historical compass, as the study of its many forms throughout the centuries boasted a long tradition, while book archeology was taking its first, wobbly steps.

Petrucci's conference took place in the autumn of 1976 and it would be four more years before the ideas outlined in that setting could actually develop. The occasion was given by Nazzareno Pisauri, a young librarian who, in June 1980, organised a seminar in Bologna on the methodology of book and paper preservation and conservation. An invitation to the seminar was extended to some protagonists of the Florentine flood: Emanuele Casamassima, Carlo Federici, Gisella Guasti, Claudio Montelatici and Libero Rossi. The following year, a volume yielding the results of that experience came out. Its title *Oltre il testo. Unità e strutture nella conservazione e*

16 *Lettere per Armando Petrucci*, a cura di Luisa Miglio. Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 2012, p. 5.

17 Antonio Maria Adoriso; Carlo Federici, *Un manufatto medievale poco noto: il codice*, «Archeologia medievale», 7 (1980), p. 483.

nel restauro dei libri e dei documenti was extremely eloquent: it was the first time that the bond between book archeology and conservation was clearly put into words¹⁸.

Such a relationship is the key to the revolution that swept the conservation world in the following decades, and from it developed the many meanings that book conservation has acquired in modern times. It went from being an intervention aimed at restoring volumes to their previous aesthetic and/or functional state to one aimed at slowing down the deterioration process that progressively compromises the possibility of a complete historical 'reading' of a book, with the utmost respect for its original structural elements.

Book archeology studies the history of the techniques and materials used to produce both historical and modern volumes. While the codicologist focuses on the text, the book archeologist is more oriented towards exploring the history of techniques used in the production of paper, parchment, ink, but also wooden boards, leather etc. of medieval, modern, and contemporary books, in an effort to piece together the material background that the book-object comes from. The first studies in book archeology were conducted by paleographers and codicologists of the Franco-Belgian school, believing that it would aid any heuristic efforts to reconstruct the history of manuscripts. However, this kind of research involves technical expertise that the paleographers did not possess. The understanding of the physical object requires an entirely different training to the one needed in paleography, so it is understandable that the task was soon abandoned by those text experts. However, introducing book archeology to the paleographical field had as its first effect an increased attention to the material components of books, which had been completely ignored up to that point.

In 1985 a census of the medieval bookbindings held in Italian libraries was started¹⁹. For the first time, the project was not thought of and developed in a university setting, which is where all previous research into the history of manuscripts and printed books had been conducted, but in the Istituto centrale di patologia del libro, the institution whose very purpose was book preservation and conservation.

The project involved carefully noting the structural aspects of the medieval book and highlighted their importance for any research into their production, circulation, and use. It was also following the census of medieval bindings, that a reflection began taking place as to the impacts that unaware repair practices could have on the historical value of these artefacts. Granted that preservation only pertains to the material components of books, as the text itself, being immaterial, is easily preserved through reproduction, it becomes apparent that proper book conservation needs a solid historical foundation; this is the only way to recognise and decode the cultural value of the aged object.

On top of an understanding of the 'material culture' operating when the historical books and documents were made, conservation specifically needs scientific

18 Carlo Federici, *Archeologia del libro, conservazione, restauro ed altro: appunti per un dibattito*. In: *Oltre il testo: unità e strutture nella conservazione e nel restauro dei libri e dei documenti*, a cura di Rosaria Campioni. Bologna: Istituto per i beni artistici culturali naturali della regione Emilia Romagna, 1981, p. 13-20: p. 13.

19 Carlo Federici, *Un progetto di censimento informatizzato delle legature medievali italiane*, «*Gazette du livre médiéval*», 8 (1986), n.1, p. 10-13.
Id., *Dalla tecnologia antica al moderno restauro: il censimento delle legature medievali come paradigma di una nuova conservazione*, in: *Problemi del restauro in Italia. Atti del Convegno nazionale. Roma, 3-6 novembre 1986*. Udine: Campanotto, 1988, p. 91-96.

PROFILI

research, both for the identification of the original structural elements and their level of degradation and to find new materials, products, and techniques that could contribute to bettering conservation treatments by reducing their invasiveness and by increasing their reversibility. Finally, any conservation effort cannot be carried out without the practical ability to work directly with artefacts. The traditional book restorer (and the technicians working in Florence just after the flood) felt no need for this kind of interdisciplinary knowledge, but it becomes absolutely essential for book conservators so they can tailor the conservation intervention to every specific case.

It was the intertwining of conservation and book archeology that, quite tellingly from the eighties onwards in Italy, gave rise to the development of new, progressively less invasive intervention modalities, ones that would not interfere too much with the artefact's original structure²⁰. It also encouraged a general preference for *in situ* interventions instead of resorting to disbinding volumes, up until then a widespread practice. As already mentioned, the idea that each volume constitutes an *unicum* even when its text has many copies was already present in Florence, albeit as more of a theoretical principle when faced with the necessity of making volumes functional again. Even in cases where it is necessary to disbind volumes, we should take into account that the close links existing between the book's different components make it so that actions taken on single elements influence the balance of the end result: the mending of losses in the paper influences the sewing, and the latter conditions the distribution of mechanical forces every time that the volume is opened, consulted, and then closed; and so on. A conservation treatment cannot thus be reduced to a chain of operations working separately on single components without any awareness of the entire conservation project. The conservation intervention's complexity certainly justifies the fact that, for about ten years now, the training of conservators has involved a five-year degree course resulting in a certification equivalent to a master's degree²¹.

It is clear that, when it comes to the treatment decision-making process, book conservators need the meaningful cooperation of archivists and librarians²².

Despite the increased consciousness of preservation topics, the Italian situation has become more complicated over time due to administrative chokeholds. The

20 Christopher Clarkson, *Minimum intervention in treatment of books*. In: *Preprint from the 9th International Congress of IADA, August 15 - 21, 1999*, p. 89-96: p. 89.

21 The cultural heritage conservator determines the state of conservation and then takes a series of direct and indirect actions aimed at limiting the degradation process of the artefact's materials and ensuring its preservation, thus protecting its cultural value. To this end [...] the conservator analyses the data relative to the artefact's material components, assembling technique, and state of preservation and he interprets them; he plans and manages the parts of the intervention in which he is competent; he directly carries out preservation and conservation treatments; he manages and coordinates the other technicians whose operations are complementary to the conservation effort. He conducts research, experiments and also teaches in the preservation and conservation fields. (Ministerial Decree 26 May 2009, n. 86).

22 Librarians and archivist are responsible for the preservation of historical collections/documents, and preservation in the *Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio* (decreto legislativo 22 gennaio 2004, n.42) should be «guaranteed via coherent, coordinated, and programmed actions aimed at studying, prevention, maintenance and conservation».

introduction of the so-called *Merloni law*²³ in 1994 has imposed considerable constraints on cultural heritage conservation by assuming a simplistic equivalence between interventions on historical artefacts and any other public works project (the repair of a road, for example). The law conceives entrustment modalities which in their real-world application are guided by the principle of driving-down prices with little or no consideration for planning quality. In the specific field of archival and book heritage conservation, this law led to the creation of a technical *Specification for the conservation of paper and books*²⁴.

In the light of the meaning acquired by the conservation intervention and the skillset required, the Specification's aims and results are difficult to understand and even more difficult to adhere to when considering both theory and methodology. The Specification seems to represent an attempt to compensate for a lack of proper training while minimising the responsibilities of librarians and archivists. Instead of being encouraged to actively participate in the conservation goal and decision-making process, they are simply directed to the rate calculation sheets and to the rigid timescale proposed in the Specification. This supposedly makes it easier to predict the cost of any conservation treatment on the basis of a description of the typical project, which includes an outline of all the different operations. The result is actually an increasing disinterest in a profession that has thus been emptied of all technical and scientific content, where on the one hand the specificities of each book are usually largely ignored and on the other the conservators' personal experiences and skills have no meaning.

From a methodological point of view, choosing the Specification as a guide inevitably implies an uncritical use of techniques and materials that does not take into account how the field evolves due to scientific research applied to cultural heritage conservation.

In conclusion, in the last decades the idea of conservation as a historical and critical operation has been put away in favour of an administrative 'procedure' that seems formally irreproachable only to the eyes of the bureaucracy that the civil servant Emanuele Casamassima had to strenuously fight in the libraries of the bygone twenty years of the last century.

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23 *Legge Merloni*, l. 11 febbraio 2004 n.109.

24 *Capitolato speciale tecnico tipo per il restauro con smontaggio dei libri antichi e dei documenti e relativo foglio per il calcolo dei tempi di intervento* written by a group appointed by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage (Biblioteca nazionale centrale di Firenze, Centro di fotoreproduzione legatoria e restauro degli archivi di Stato e Istituto centrale per la patologia del libro). The specifications give descriptions of the various intervention treatments along with the time supposed to be necessary to perform them.

The document can be found at the address: <http://www.icpal.beniculturali.it/allegati/Capitolato_Speciale_Tecnico_Tipo.pdf>.

PROFILI

Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali (Biblioteca nazionale centrale di Firenze, Centro di fotoreproduzione legatoria e restauro degli archivi di Stato e Istituto centrale per la patologia del libro) <http://www.icpal.beniculturali.it/allegati/Capitolato_Speciale_Tecnico_Tipo.pdf>.

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