

The Library's Healers

DOROTHEA ("THEA") BURNS is hunched over a table holding a scalpel. Ever so gently she teases off fragments of a thick, rigid, cardboard mat that was glued, probably in the late nineteenth century, to the back of the work on paper that she now wishes to conserve. The mat is acidic. It has discolored and become brittle and could stain and fracture the work it was originally intended to protect. It has become potentially an agent of destruction.

Before wielding her knife, Burns has softened a square inch or so of the mat by moistening it with a poultice of methyl cellulose, a cellulose ether, in deionized water. Such poultices are good for removing stains, old adhesives, and other accretions. The ingress of water into the work can be highly controlled so that poultices can be used safely even when the work to be conserved contains water-soluble materials, such as the water-based inks and watercolors of this one. Burns guesses she will need 30 hours to remove the mat.

On request, she carefully turns the mat over to show and tell. Stuck to it is the earliest printed map of Cambridge, England, by Richard Lyne, published in London in 1574. One of only two known extant copies, it was found in 1894 pasted into the back of an atlas and is now part of the Harvard Map Collection in Pusey Library, along with some 400,000 other maps on paper. For the time being, however, its home is on the eighth floor of Holyoke Center in the Weissman Preservation Center, a haven staffed by a band of saviors with funding from various sources and operating under the banner of the Harvard University Library, the coordinating body for the more than 90 separate libraries that comprise the Harvard library system.

Burns, the scalpel wielder, is the first Glaser conservator, the senior paper con-



Top: Karen Walter examines a hand-colored plate from Edward Lear's *The Family of Psittacidae (or Parrots)*, 1832, from the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, Houghton Library. An accomplished natural history painter, Lear is perhaps best known as the popularizer of the limerick and author of "The Owl and the Pussycat." **Bottom left:** Across the table from Walter is *Histoire d'Angleterre*, a jigsaw puzzle depicting the kings and queens of England through Victoria, made in Paris in the nineteenth century, from the Manuscript Department, Houghton Library. **Bottom right:** Dorothea Burns working under the stereo-binocular microscope to remove an unsatisfactory window mat and cardboard backing board from a printed, hand-colored *Plan of Cambridge* dated 1574, from the Harvard Map Collection.

servator responsible for the care of rare materials in special collections throughout the College Library, a group of 11 major libraries. As a staff member of the Weissman center, she is part of a collaborative team of professionals who work together in the same facility, thereby leveraging their several special skills to mutual advantage to provide life-sustaining services to objects from any of Harvard's libraries. By September 2005, the center will move to a new home at 90 Mount Auburn Street, a four-story, office and retail building now being constructed by the University on the site of the former Harvard Provision Com-

pany ("Rethinking 90 Mount Auburn," July-August 2002, page 76).

Some members of the Weissman team have sophisticated chemistry backgrounds. One is a pigment consolidation expert, who can with surgical precision lift a flaking piece of the beautiful blue pigment of a medieval illuminated manuscript, apply adhesive beneath the flake, and securely reattach it. Most have formal graduate training as conservators. Burns, for example, earned a bachelor's degree in fine arts from McGill University in Montreal, a master's in art conservation from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario,

JOHN HARVARD'S JOURNAL



Far left: Not everything being rescued and made usable is an antiquity, viz. this 1952 "Tribal Map of India" from the Tozzer Library. Printed on the flimsiest of paper, it had long since cracked and torn and came to the Weissman Preservation Center plastered with tape. A conservator removed all the tape with a heated spatula and reinstated in their proper position many fragments of paper from various parts of the map, a jigsaw puzzle in itself. Left: At work on a volume of songs, duets, and choruses from the comic opera *The Siege of Belgrade*, by J. Cobb and S. Storace, London, 1791, from the Loeb Music Library. Below: Priscilla Anderson attends to a book from the Kress Collection at Baker Library at the Business School, *Summa de Tratos y Contratos*, by Thomas de Mercado, Seville, 1571. She adds new cords to reattach the binding, then paints the cords with watercolors so that they blend with the parchment.



and a Ph.D. in the department of conservation and technology at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. She joined the team in 2002.

At another work table, book-and-paper conservator Sarah Reidell cleans a collection of watercolor drawings of fish made by Jacques Burckhardt during an 1865-66 Louis Agassiz expedition to the Amazon.

Another worker "stabilizes" a Gershwin score, a new acquisition so fragile that it couldn't be cataloged because it couldn't be handled.

And here's a letter from Queen Elizabeth I that at some point in the centuries was badly repaired. A conservator removes old patching material and replaces it with a strong Japanese tissue paper that becomes almost invisible when adhered with a paste of wheat starch cooked in deionized water and applied with a small, sable, watercolor brush.

When Charlotte and Branwell Brontë were children, they produced a series of miniature books, written in ink in the tiniest hand. Nine of the books had been attached with glassine hinges to a board for display, much like hinging stamps into an album, a display/safety/storage solution thought appropriate at the time it was employed, perhaps in the early twentieth century. Now the little books are unhinged, and the conservator in charge is pondering a better way to display them.

Similarly, a large jigsaw puzzle showing the kings and queens of England through Victoria (with hunks of two pieces missing) has dwelt insecurely in an inadequate box; a better box will be built.

"Each conservation project presents its

own challenge, its own puzzle to be solved," says Malloy-Rabinowitz preservation librarian Jan Merrill-Oldham, who directs the activities of the center. "Goals are often in conflict. The conservator must map out a strategy for reducing the cumulative effects of aging, use, and environmental damage while at the same time minimizing the disruption of historical evidence. Our objective is to restore materials to usable condition and protect them from further damage without intervening more than is necessary." An 1809 portfolio of engravings from the Fine Arts Library, for example, has been attacked by red rot. "Instead of replacing the damaged housing with a beautiful new structure," says Merrill-Oldham, "the conservator is reconstructing the portfolio. She is rebuilding its spine, now in an advanced state of deterioration, using a sturdy cotton and paper laminate toned to match the dirty

red color of the original leather that covers the boards."

The center is not only concerned with the preservation of individual objects in special collections. It offers numerous advisory services—on disaster preparedness, for instance—and is much involved in reformatting projects. "On the same day that our chief conservator researches methods for treating Houghton Library's collection of papyri," says Merrill-Oldham, "our preservation librarian for digital initiatives may be drafting a contract to digitize a deteriorating archive of unique recordings of major American poets, or collaborating on the development of a technical standard for preserving digital images."

The preservation office had its beginnings in 1989 and in 2000 was renamed in thanks for a gift from Paul Weissman '52 and Harriet (Levine) Weissman. "Harvard was late in developing a conservation program," says Merrill-Oldham. "Many great libraries and museums established modern conservation programs much earlier in the twentieth century. We face years of work simply to address our most significant problems. But we are advantaged in not having performed once highly regarded treatments that today we know to be inadequate, or even destructive. Our conservators, all relatively new to Harvard, are slowly becoming familiar with the University's vast collections. Working with curators, they are identifying rare and unique materials that are both of great scholarly value and in danger of being lost to physical and chemical deterioration. Hard choices and fancy footwork will be required of us over the next several decades."