

Preservation Assessment:

Leather Archives & Museum

Chicago, IL

Assessed By:

Katie Gresham, Kent State University

Introduction

The Leather Archives and Museum (LA&M) was founded in 1991 by Chuck Renslow and Tony Deblase. It is located in Chicago, IL, in a primarily residential neighborhood. On one side of the building are residential buildings. On the other side is a gas station, a grocery store, and other businesses, as well as a significant road. It consists of a museum, a non-circulating library, and an archive which focus on the history of Leather, kink, and fetish culture. It is one of very few institutions focused on this subculture. The library and the museum are open to the public (age 18+), but the archives are not. However, researchers can request to view materials from the archives. There is a fee to enter the museum, but visiting the library or using archival materials is free.

The organization has two full time staff members: the Executive Director and the Archivist and Collections Librarian. There is also a volunteer Board of Directors which makes decisions about the budget, strategic planning and whatever other support the Executive Director may need. LA&M's operating budget comes primarily from donations from the community, supplemented by occasional grants. They are currently in the planning stages of a major renovation project which it is hoped will happen in 2024-2025, as long as the necessary funds are raised.

Yearly Budget: ~\$260,000

Staff:

- 3.25 FTE Staff
 - Full-Time Staff:
 - Gary Wasdin- Executive Director
 - Mel Leverich- Archivist and Collections Librarian

- Part-Time Staff:
 - Leslie Anderson- Leather Preservation Specialist
 - Additional part-time staff
- 20+ volunteers: 2-4 FTE, depending on the week.

Methodology

This information was compiled in a series of three visits to the Leather Archives and Museum in July and August 2022 which included conversations with the archivist, Mel Leverich, and the leather preservation specialist, Leslie Anderson.

Preservation Management

A preservation plan helps institutions to prioritize preservation actions, as well as to standardize how preservation actions are done. It outlines who has which responsibilities. It also helps guide decisions about preservation.

- There is no formal written preservation plan.
- Mel and Leslie are the staff primarily responsible for preservation actions.
 - Leslie takes care of all leather items, and display items.
 - Mel takes care of everything else, with support from volunteers.
- Regular preservation actions:
 - Climate control, reboxing, encapsulating, basic cleaning, etc.
- There are some items that could use specialists with skills and knowledge that neither Mel or Leslie have the skills to preserve.
- LA&M was recently awarded a grant to digitize some of their video materials.
 - Grants such as this are necessary to do work that requires more expertise.

- There is a collections policy which can guide preservation decisions, though it does need to be updated. Mel has been working on updating the policy.

Recommendations:

- Create a written preservation plan.
 - Include the usual upkeep tasks, as well as laying out which materials might need extra work, and which merit hiring a skilled preservation specialist.
- This plan should also include details about cleaning: schedules and supplies used, etc.

Building Environment

Climate Control:

Controlling the environment in which collections are stored or displayed is one of the most important tools for preservation. Temperature and relative humidity both have a significant effect on the deterioration of all kinds of materials. Keeping a relatively cool, dry environment will help preserve the whole collection.

- Temperature is set between 67-70°, relative humidity less than 50%
- HVAC system
 - 4 areas:
 - 2 on the top floor:
 - Auditorium
 - Library
 - 2 on the bottom floor
 - Museum
 - Archives
 - Serviced quarterly

- Dehumidifiers throughout the building
 - They are set to turn on when the relative humidity is above 50%.
 - Replaced when needed.
- Monitoring:
 - Checked daily:
 - Temperature according to thermostats on HVACs
 - Humidity according to dehumidifiers
 - Temperature and humidity is not logged unless there are issues
 - There have previously been problems, but the climate is currently well controlled, and generally temperature and humidity are within the determined parameters.

Recommendations:

- More documentation of environmental conditions.
- Get some data loggers, which will automate the process.
- Acquire tools for measuring temperature and humidity that are separate from the HVAC system and the dehumidifiers.

Pollution:

- Pollution is definitely a concern since it is located in a major city.
- HVAC system filters particulates
 - Filters replaced regularly, when serviced.
- There is no smoking in the building

Light:

Light can cause damage to items and increase deterioration rates. UV light should be filtered out as much as possible and the amount of light collections are exposed to should be limited.

- Natural light:
 - Two windows in the library.
 - These windows have UV filters over them. UV light levels have been measured as 0 since the filters were added. Before these filters were added, the library was the only space where there was any measurable amount of UV light.
 - The blinds in these windows are always closed.
 - One window each in the two stairwells.
 - These windows do not have filters, but they are made of glass bricks which diffuse light.
 - There are a few collection items in the stairwells, mainly cloth and leather banners.
- Artificial light:
 - There is a mix of LED and fluorescent lighting.
 - Some are shielded, but they likely need to be replaced.
- Lights are turned off in the archives when no one is in the room. There are some smaller storage rooms in the archives, including the leather storage room, which are equipped with motion-sensor lights that only turn on when someone is in the room.
- Lights in the museum and library are turned off when they are closed.

- Archival materials are mostly boxed or enclosed and only exposed to light when in use, or when on display. Some larger items, such as some framed art pieces, are not boxed and will have more light exposure.

Recommendations:

- Replace filters on all fluorescent lighting. Document when this is done, and when the filters should be replaced next.
- Make sure items on display are monitored for any damage due to light and rotated regularly in order to limit their exposure to light.
- Rotate which books are on display on top of the shelves; being shelved between other books helps to limit light exposure.

Pests:

- Pests have not generally been a problem.
 - There were recently some ants in the entryway area where visitors pay for entry to the museum and there is some merchandise for sale. This was attributed to candy that is often left on the counter for visitors to grab. The ants were quickly taken care of with glue traps within a week of being noticed, and have not returned. They were not in any collection areas, and did not affect any collection items.
- Food is not allowed in the museum, library, or archives spaces. There is a kitchen for staff use which is the only place food is allowed. There are occasional events with food, and it is cleaned up and trash is taken out afterwards.

Recommendations:

- The rules and precautions that are in place appear to be effective. Continue to enforce these.

- Pest control should definitely be considered as part of renovation planning.
 - If collections are to be stored elsewhere for a time, be aware of any problems with pests at that site.
 - If changes in the environment due to renovations cause pests to become a problem, be ready to institute a plan for integrated pest control.

Storage

Proper storage of collections can promote their longevity. Inadequate storage can do the opposite. Practices such as encasement, create a microenvironment which can help to reduce effects from changes in the larger environment. It can also help protect against light exposure. Choosing the correct display furniture for exhibitions can help alleviate the negative effects of display.

Library:

- Books are shelved on wooden shelves.
- Oversized books are either shelved binding side down, or stacked horizontally.
- Rare books are in a locked cabinet with glass doors, which must be opened by a staff member.
 - Rare books do not have labels. Neither does the pulp fiction collection.

Museum:

- Display furniture is mostly made of metal with glass, though there are a couple wooden shelves, and there are some displays which are not behind glass.
- Pins and patches are in plastic sleeves in binders.
- Exhibits are changed out every so often.

Archives:

- There are rows of metal shelves for boxes.
 - Processed materials are stored in acid-free, archival boxes.
 - Un-processed materials are stored in standard banker's boxes.
- There are also large flat file cabinets for oversized materials.
- Framed art work is stored vertically on top of some of the cabinets.
- All items are off the ground.
- There is not much space for more materials, and some of the tops of cabinets are being used for storage, which prevents them from being helpful for handling large objects properly.
- Leather room:
 - Most things are hanging: jackets, vest sashes.
 - This is not the ideal storage method, since heavy leather objects can be stretched if they are hanging, but there is not enough space to do otherwise.
 - Boots are filled with supports so they keep their shape.
 - Belts and other small leather items are in boxes.

Recommendations:

- More off-site storage
 - For materials that are volatile, or have multiple copies, etc.
 - Evaluate the cost of cold-storage, and whether there are enough materials to merit having some cold-storage offsite.
 - Perhaps could combine resources with the Gerber/Hart LGBTQ Archives.

- Replace wooden shelves in the library, especially the rare books shelves.

Handling

Handling is one of the most common ways items are damaged. It is important that staff and volunteers, as well as any visitors, know how to handle materials properly in order to prevent damage from occurring.

- There is no uniform training for volunteers or staff.
 - The archivist, Mel, provides verbal instruction to volunteers and researchers.
 - This instruction covers only those materials that are being used.
- There are signs around the building with some information about handling, especially in the library.
- There are no copiers in the building, but there are scanners which are used by staff and volunteers. Researchers are allowed to take pictures.
- There is one large table and one smaller table in the library which researchers can use when using materials.
 - However, the large table also has a couple large sketch pads and assorted markers for visitors to use. Visitors do regularly use these and leave messages or art for others to see, and some of this art is hung outside of the library.

Recommendations:

- Create or find documentation about how to handle different materials that can be shared and referred to by researchers and volunteers.
- Remove pens from the library; have pencils available for researchers.
- Post signs about handling books in the library.

- Make it clear that the markers are only to be used for the sketch pads. Also make sure any materials, either books from the library or archival materials, are separated from the sketch pads and markers, just to make sure no ink gets transferred. This could be by

Disaster Planning

Disasters happen, and are generally out of our control. It is important to be prepared for disaster to be able to respond quickly so that damage to collections can be kept as little as possible.

- LA&M does have a written disaster plan, which was last updated in 2019.
 - Contact information for potential vendors is not current.
- There is a disaster kit of supplies, but it has been used and needs restocking.
- The most recent major disaster was the collapse of the roof after a rainstorm, which led to major flooding in the building.
 - The auditorium was the main area affected. Fortunately, no collections were damaged.
 - There was some minimal mold growth due to the flooding, but they were able to remove it and prevent it from spreading.
 - The roof has since been replaced.

Recommendations:

- Make sure to restock disaster supplies.
- Update disaster plan
 - Make sure info on vendors is up to date.
 - Make sure to include plans for restocking disaster supplies.

- Have clear roles and information about which volunteers may be able to help in case of disaster.

Renovations

As the Leather Archives are in the process of planning renovations, this gives them an opportunity to focus on preservation needs that may be difficult to accomplish otherwise. It is also important to consider preservation of the collections as renovations are happening. Certain collections may need to be temporarily relocated. Renovations may also affect environmental conditions in the building. There is also always the potential for a disaster occurring as changes are being made, such as accidentally hitting a water pipe and causing flooding. It is important to be prepared for these possibilities so that the collections can continue to be cared for.

Recommendations:

- Keep preservation in mind as planning is happening
- Hire a preservationist who specializes in renovations to help create a plan for taking care of materials while renovations are happening.
- One important change would be to have a larger workspace for Leslie. The current workspace is very small and does not have enough space for proper handling of the items.
- Adding more storage space would be helpful as well. Some of the storage decisions which are not ideal are due to the lack of space.

Conclusion

The staff at the Leather Archives and Museum are doing well with limited resources. The planned renovations should help with some problems, such as lack of space. They are still limited by the number of staff and the budget, but preservation is a priority for this organization. My main recommendations are about documentation of policies etc., which can help to keep

preservation a priority for the organization. Continuing to apply for grants for projects such as the recent grant they received for video digitization is also highly recommended.

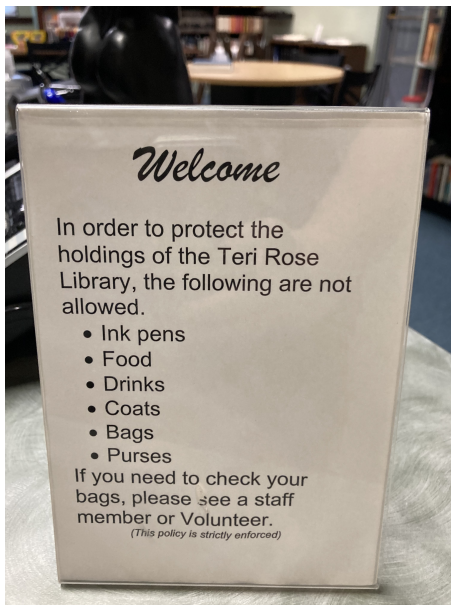


Fig. 1: Sign in the library



Fig. 2: The library at LA&M



Fig. 3: Rare Books Cabinet



Fig. 4: Sketch pads and art supplies for visitors

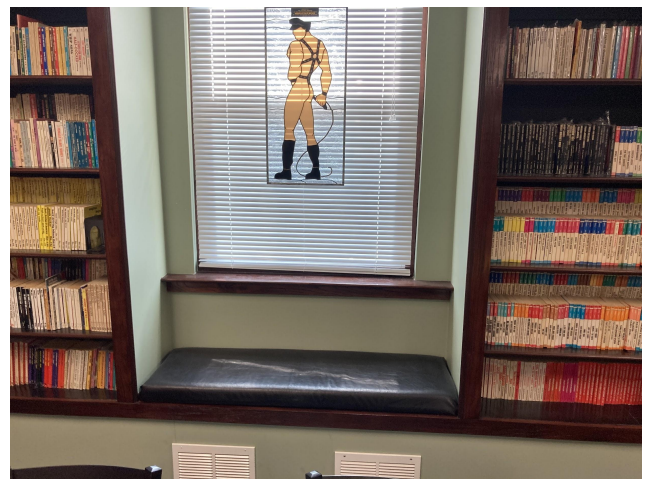


Fig. 5: Library window



Fig. 6: Auditorium



Fig. 7: Exhibit Shelving



Fig. 8: Exhibit Shelving



Fig. 9: Patch Binder



Fig. 10: Binders with Patches on top, Binders with Pins on Bottom



Fig. 11: Archives



Fig. 12: Large Flat Storage



Fig. 13: Running out of Space



Fig. 14: The Leather Room

Resources

Preservation Planning- Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts

<https://ccaaha.org/resources/preservation-planning>

This site gives a quick overview of how to write a preservation plan and which things should be included.

Monitoring Temperature and Relative Humidity- NEDCC Preservation Leaflet 2.2

https://www.nedcc.org/assets/media/documents/Preservation%20Leaflets/2_2_TempRH_2022_Print.pdf

This leaflet gives information about why temperature and relative humidity should be monitored, as well as a guide to different equipment to use for monitoring.

Agent of Deterioration: Light, Ultraviolet and Infrared

<https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/agents-deterioration/light.html>

This goes into detail about how light can damage materials and how that damage can be lessened, including a few different strategies that can be used, and some examples of exhibits.

Storage Furniture: A Brief Overview of Current Options- NEDCC Preservation leaflets 4.3

<https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/4.-storage-and-handling/4.2-storage-furniture-a-brief-review-of-current-options>

This leaflet discusses different types of storage furniture and explains why wooden shelving should not be used.

Object Handling Procedures, from Guidelines and Procedures for Preventive Conservation at Winterthur Museum, Chapter 4: Handling of Objects

http://www.connectingtocollections.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Handling_Winterthur.pdf

This is a basic guide to handling objects of all kinds. It is a useful example for what documentation of procedures for handling objects can look like, and what sort of things should be included.

Emergency Preparedness and Response- California Preservation Program

https://calpreservation.org/information_resources/emergency-prep-and-response/

This is a whole list of resources which are helpful for preparing a disaster plan, as well as for learning about how to salvage materials, and how to train for disasters.

Protecting Collections During Renovation- NEDCC Preservation Leaflet 3.9

<https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/3.-emergency-management/3.9-protecting-collections-during-renovation>

This leaflet goes over the potential problems that can occur during renovations that can threaten collections. This can help to make a plan for collection care during the planned renovations.