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THE LEIDEN CHARTER PROJECT: DEVELOPING A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH FOR THE CONSERVATION OF THOUSANDS OF CHARTERS

Résumé

Le souhait de numériser, de conserver et de reloger 10 000 chartes de parchemin a demandé une approche systématique. L'ancien stockage d'enveloppes placé verticalement n'était pas souhaitable et devait être remplacé. Une nouvelle méthode de stockage sans acide a été choisie. Peu de temps après le début des travaux sur les premières archives, une approche systématique possible est devenue claire. Une méthode de documentation efficace avec des bandes de papier de couleur attachées aux anciennes enveloppes, indiquant chacune un processus différent, a été développée. Quatre cartes d'instruction A4 plastifiées ont été conçues pour l'instruction d'internes ou de techniciens en conservation. La restauration des sceaux de parchemin et de cire et l'aplatissement général des chartes ne devaient être effectués que par un restaurateur formé et expérimenté.

Keywords: Conservation, Parchment, Flattening, Storage, Instruction Cards

Introduction

The wish to digitize, conserve and rehouse 10,000 parchment charters required a systematic approach. Essential criteria for digitization were a clear view of the text and the wax seals. These criteria were met by cleaning and flattening the parchment and cleaning and repairing the wax seals if needed. The old, vertical envelop storage system was undesirable and had to be replaced. Because this project would take many years a systematic and consistent work method needed to be developed.

Many lessons were learned from a pilot project covering the restoration and storage of approximately 60 charters from the oldest part of the Leiden City Archive. A new acid-free method of storage was chosen, and a different archive, with documents, related to the monasteries, was selected, because of the many exceptions and restorations needed in the pilot archive. Soon after starting the work on this archive, a possible systematic approach became clear. Within this archive the documents were more or less the same in size and, their physical condition was relatively good.

An efficient documentation method with coloured paper strips attached to the old envelops, each indicating a different process, was developed. Describing the different processes was necessary for future reference. Four laminated A4 instruction

cards were designed for the instruction of interns and conservation technicians. The restoration of parchment and wax seals and the overall flattening of the charters were only to be performed by a trained and experienced conservator-restorer.

The project workflow

The project starts with the documentation of the charter (appearance and material) and the treatment necessary. The latter is visibly indicated with coloured strips, which are attached to the envelope with a clothes peg. Each coloured strip indicates a different kind of treatment, for example, dry cleaning of the charter and the wax seal (white), flattening of the seal tags (light green), overall flattening of the charter (dark green), parchment restoration (orange), restoration of the wax seal (yellow). With these coloured strips, it is immediately visible which treatments are needed and which charters should be treated by which person within the workflow, either the conservation technician or the conservator-restorer.

Generally, flattening of the twisted seal tags and cleaning of the charter and the wax seals are the most common treatment procedures. These procedures are executed by the conservation technician or a 2nd-year Cultural Heritage (Reinwardt Academy – Amsterdam) intern. The procedures are explained to the intern by the conservator-restorer with the help of instruction cards specially developed for this project.

Flattening of the seal tags

Moistening of the parchment seal tags is done with the help of a mini-moisture chamber[1] which consists of a piece of Hollytex®, a piece of moist synthetic needle felt and a plastic zip bag. The moistened parchment seal tags are put between strips of absorbent paper and acid free cardboard strips,

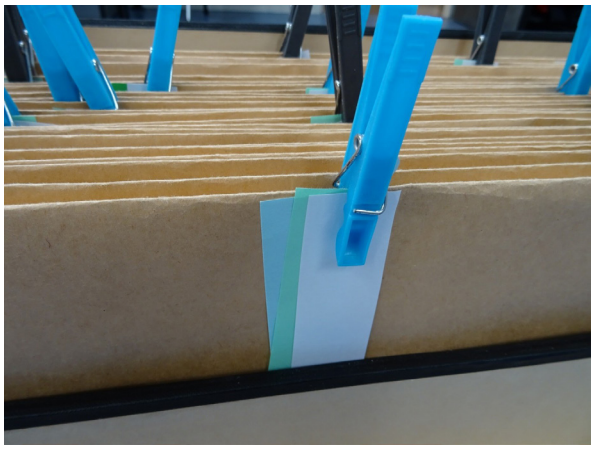

Fig. 1: Coloured strips indicating which treatment a charter needs

held together by bulldog-clips. They are left to dry on wooden boards which are placed in a catering tray collecting trolley for a minimum of 48 hours.

Cleaning of the charter and the wax seals

After sufficient drying of the flattened seal tags, the charters are cleaned with a smoke-sponge.[2] The wax seals are cleaned with a dry brush and eventually with a slightly wet brush and dabbed with paper tissue. They are then placed in their new acid-free storage according to the order of inventory numbers (determined during the documentation stage by the conservator restorer).

Storage and digitization

Preparations for the mounting of the charters with Melinex® strips within their storage are made. The charters are transported to the photography department in their new storage, partially fastened with the Melinex® strips for safer transportation. The photographer digitizes the front of the charter and the back if there is any text on that side. The seals are also photographed separately, mostly front only.

Restoration

The restoration of parchment and wax seals and the overall flattening of the charters

1 The mini-moisture chamber is developed by Edith Greuter, book and paper conservator at Erfgoed Leiden – The Netherlands.

2 Also called "wallmaster" it is a natural rubber sponge and was originally designed to remove soot after fires. It takes up dust and dirt without crumbling. order number 22301 at www.gmw-shop.de (Gabi Kleindorfer).

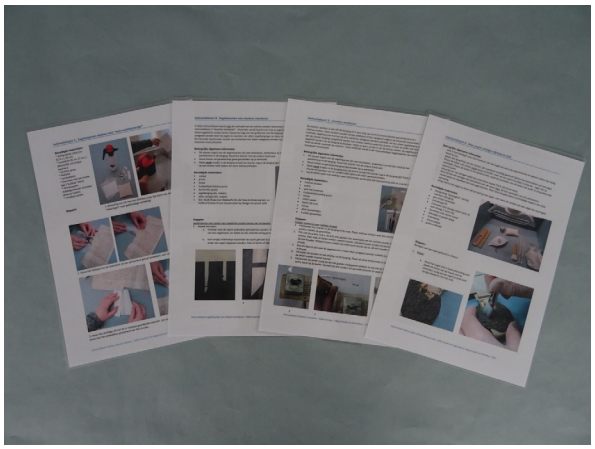

Fig. 2: The four laminated instruction cards

are only executed by a trained and experienced conservator-restorer. These kinds of treatment procedures are exceptions, and the charters it concerned are temporarily taken out of the systematic workflow and are treated separately by the conservator restorer. After treatment, they are placed in their new storage and subsequently returned to the systematic workflow of the overall project.

Instruction Cards

The project consists of many different conservation procedures. Describing these was necessary for future reference, not only for documentation purposes but also to secure a certain degree of consistency in approach and execution quality, without depending on specific individuals. This has been found to be very important.

The instruction cards were only made for procedures which could be executed by a conservation technician, a conservation intern or perhaps a talented volunteer. Together with a verbal explanation by the conservator-restorer, the instruction cards are used to explain the different procedures and workflow. Later the instruction cards can be used as a reminder during the work process.

Four instruction cards were made for the following conservation procedures:

Fig. 3: Charters mounted with Melinex® strips in their final new acid-free storage

1. Moistening and flattening of parchment seal tags,
2. Cleaning of wax seals,
3. Mounting the charters in the tray,
4. Mounting the seal tags and seals in the tray.

Storage

The chosen acid-free storage consists of stackable corrugated cardboard trays[3] intended for the mounting and storage of charters (with wax seals) and other three-dimensional objects. A maximum of three trays can be placed in standard corrugated cardboard drop-spine boxes (clamshell).

From the three available tray sizes, we generally use the middle and occasionally the largest. Generally, two charters fit in one tray. The order of inventory numbers is important and is maintained as far as possible in the placing of the charters in the trays and boxes.

3 The 3D-tray is developed by Hoogduin Paper Restorers in Delft - The Netherlands.

The charters are mounted on the trays by means of, generally, two Melinex® strips. These strips are threaded through cuts made in the cardboard, using a pattern which locks the strips in place, so no pressure-sensitive tape is needed. The seal tags are secured under a strip or flap created by separating the thin top layer of the board from its corrugated centre. Fragile seals are protected by placing them in a synthetic needle felt cover, other seals are placed on a synthetic needle felt disc.

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