

AN INSIDE LOOK AT

AL ALBANO



by Tami Kamin-Meyer

“A stable environment is the single most important aspect of preserving artwork in cultural perpetuity,” says Al Albano, executive director of the Intermuseum Conservation Association (ICA) located in Cleveland. “I say that a lot,” he says affably.

And when Albano speaks of preserving and restoring art, the world of art listens.

As executive director of the ICA for the last eight years, Albano oversees a staff of 17 as well as grant and programming for the organization. Not only does the ICA preserve and restore art in its numerous forms, it also builds specialty frames that are “uniquely designed works for unusual works of art,” he says.

A native New Yorker, Albano earned both his undergraduate and graduate degrees in art-related fields in his home state. He also received an Advanced Study Certificate in Art Conservation from the Cooperstown Graduate Program. He apprenticed at the Guggenheim Museum and was an Andrew Mellon Fellow at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He was promoted to Associate Conservator for that institution, a post he held for five years. Albano then served as Senior Conservator for Manhattan’s Museum of Modern Art for six years until being named Director of Conservation at Delaware’s Winterthur Museum in 1989. He is a Fellow with both the International Institute for Conservation and the American Institution for Conservation.

When established in 1952 in Oberlin, Ohio, by the directors of six major Midwest museums, the ICA was the nation’s first not-for-profit preservation organization. Today, 32 Midwest museums comprise the ICA’s membership list. The ICA has also since spawned the establishment of 12 other regional art conservation centers across the country. And, says Albano, several of the original six, such as the Cleveland Museum of Art, have since created their own in-house art preservation and conservation departments. “That’s an acknowledgement of the importance of cultural material,” says Albano.

According to Albano, the ICA’s mission is threefold, both for artists and the community-at-large: “preserve, conserve, and educate.” In the late 1990s, the burgeoning organization realized it needed a larger space to accommodate its ever-expanding list of clients and inventory. So, in 2001, the ICA purchased the former showroom of Vitrolite Company, a Chicago-based architectural glass manufacturer, located in Cleveland’s Ohio City neighborhood, a slowly gentrifying area just west of downtown. The structure is the last Vitrolite showroom in the country, says Albano. Built at a cost of \$100,000 in 1926, the ICA purchased the 18,000 square-foot building for \$340,000, a steal considering a smaller structure across the street sold for more than four times as much, he says.

ICA Lab before restoration

CLEVELAND'S INTERMUSEUM CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

PERPETUAL PRESERVER



The organization made the move to Cleveland for several reasons. The first was all about practicality. "We simply outgrew our space. We were storing materials in the hallways," says Albano. The ICA also wanted to be nearer to the heart of a vibrant cultural community. Moreover, the ICA works on prints, drawings, and paintings owned by the Cleveland Public Library, and closer headquarters ease the burden of transporting objects from one site to the other. An incredibly important consideration, says Albano, is, "We wanted to continue to attract high quality staff," which became increasingly difficult in out-of-the-way Oberlin. Egress routes for transporting artwork were also important considerations, and Cleveland's accessibility by planes, trains, and automobiles sealed the deal.

Renovations on the building began in 2002 and are on-going. With the most important updates completed, the ICA officially moved into its new home in February 2003. In order to ensure a stable environment for housing art entrusted to the association, whether for restoration or simply for storage, a new, highly sophisticated and efficient HVAC system was installed. It allows for the digital control of the ideal environment for fine arts and historic materials, no matter the external weather conditions, says Albano. The 70-ton unit cost over \$150,000, plus installation. It maintains 45-55 percent relative humidity in the building at a constant temperature between 65 and 68 degrees.

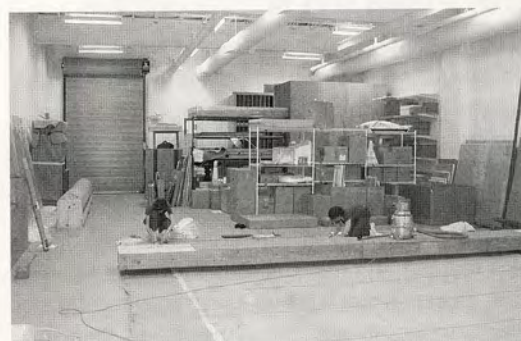
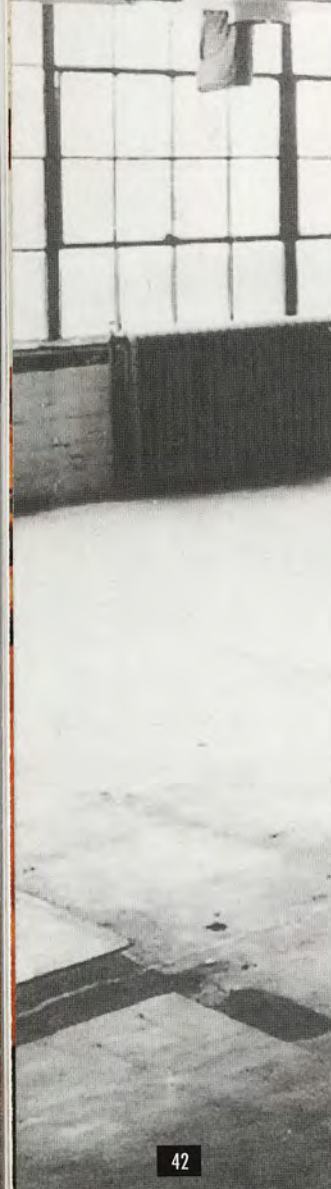
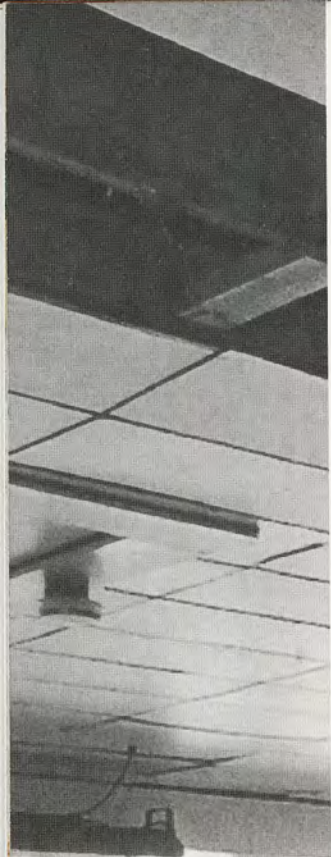
A hydraulic crane for transporting large works of art was also installed. It features hydraulic trap doors with a silent hoist capable of lifting over two tons between the first and second floors. It can wield "extremely large art pieces" that would otherwise require a gigantic freight elevator, says Albano. Not surprisingly, the facility is armed with state-of-the-art security, including an armed-response service.

Still left to complete are a reception area and a boardroom, both on the building's first floor. Albano and crew have already begun transforming Vitrolite's former showroom into the ICA's reception area by removing layers of paint hiding original, intricate Vitrolite glass tile designs on the walls and ceiling. A lavish parquet cork floor adorns the room's walking spaces. Gracious archways beautify the Italianate interior while the ornate ceiling stands 16 feet high.

Always the visionary, Albano foresees the boardroom as serving as more than merely a meeting place. "The facility will be equipped with state-of-the-art multi-media capabilities designed to serve the educational needs of both the ICA and other not-for-profit organizations in greater Cleveland," he says. To the ICA, that means the boardroom will double as an interactive center for distance learning. "We hope to create long distance learning relationships with the three conservation graduate training programs in the U.S.," he says. A major benefit

ICA Lab after restoration





of that would be an acceleration of the ICA's existing internship program.

Albano and his team wouldn't be content with refurbishing only the facility's interior, and, he says, "We plan to restore the building's façade to its original appearance in 1926. We are already involved with the City of Cleveland's Storefront Restoration Program that provides support for the restoration of the façade," he says. The former Vitrolite showroom is such a rare gem that the ICA is actively pursuing having the building, and particularly the showroom, named as a National

Historic Landmark. "We're in the process already. I'm very keen on seeking support to complete that restoration project," Albano says.

But first things first, says Albano. He's not only concerned about the renovation of his organization's buildings and the professional rendering of art restoration and preservation the ICA provides, but also about education, for artists and the general community.

"Art schools [at the collegiate level] aren't really teaching about artistic materials because they think it reduces art to a craft. There is a big gap in education as to how materials will react independently and interact together. The information is out there but in bits and pieces," he laments.

Albano thinks an Artist Materials Foundation would fill that void. "It would allow a repository of information coordinated professionally by someone who can gel this information into cohesive and coherent databases. I foresee a web-

Above: ICA Headquarters, before & after renovation

site where people could ask questions and find web links” about art and materials, he says, adding, “I would like to believe that my informed, professional colleagues would agree that more objective information [about materials] means a better informed artistic community. That would lead to educated decisions by artists and people teaching art.”

According to Albano, the National Gallery oversees testing of some artistic materials, but “the results are generally not communicated to the audience who needs it. Institutional work in research and testing is usually more available to the conservation community rather than to the artists creating art,” he says. Furthermore, the data is highly technical and needs to be interpreted by a preservationist so artists can understand and utilize the information.

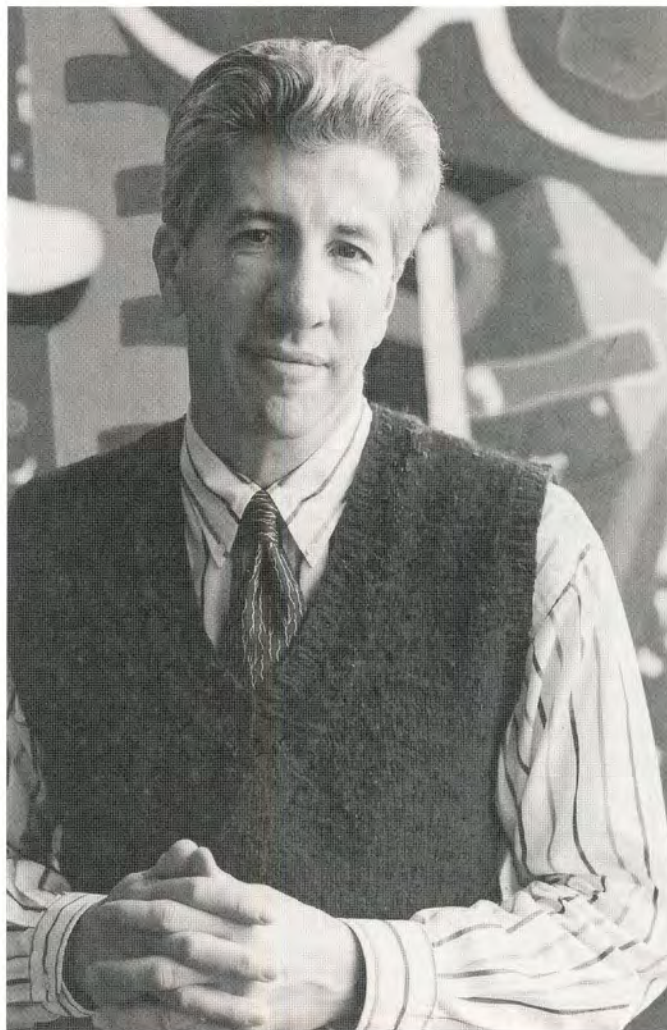
“Complete objectivity is needed in material testing,” states Albano, and when paint manufacturers test their own materials, the results can be misleading. Still, he says, “Some manufacturers are somewhat responsible in testing materials.” The problem, however, is that the scrupulous are few and far between. “It’s more than an issue of liability but also of professional responsibility, both for artists who use materials and for the companies who manufacture them,” he says.

Albano called two paint manufacturers “proactive in sharing information about their paints.” One is Mark Golden of Golden Paints in New York and the other Bob Gamblin of Portland, Oregon’s Gamblin Paints. Gamblin spoke at an October 2003 ICA symposium, “A Future of Painting Materials,” about how his background as a painter has proven invaluable now that he manufactures paints himself.

Other prominent members of the artistic community were also presenters, including Clarke Bedford, a conservator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Gardens in Washington, D.C., and Gregory Amenoff, an internationally recognized artist who teaches painting at Columbia University, whose undergraduate and graduate art programs are among the nation’s finest. Amenoff is also president of the National Academy of Design (NAD).

The ICA symposium proved so successful that the NAD asked Albano to coordinate a similar program for them. That all-day program, also entitled “A Future of Painting Materials,” will be held May 15 at the NAD on Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue. Albano says the target audience are people whom “make, teach, or collect art,” from artists and art educators at colleges and universities to collectors and preservationists. “We want to continue to build awareness,” he says.

To spend time with Al Albano is to make an instant friend. His warm, engaging personality is captivating and unassuming. Name a topic (or let him name one), and you’ll soon find yourself immersed and amused by his sage pronouncements. “We are all just visitors here,” he says, “and in these times of my life, being committed to perpetuating the best of the human spirit is life-affirming and represents a way of responding to all the negative things that go on every day.”



ICA Director Albert Albano

