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Broadening Perspectives

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Integrating Materials Conservation into the Preservation Mission

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In his 1792 “Plan of Washington,” Pierre L’Enfant designated a site in our new nation’s capital for a “great church for national purposes.” Today that site is occupied by the Old Patent Building (1850), recently restored to house the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) and the National Portrait Gallery. Although neither could be mistaken for a church, a conservator visiting the institutions’ jointly administered Lunder Conservation Center might have the notion she or he had truly found the Promised Land. With its floor-to-ceiling glass walls looking into 10,200 square feet of labs and studios fully equipped to treat paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, sculptures, folk

held in its museums, libraries, historical societies, historic sites, and other collection stewards, is seriously endangered by a lack of funds and planning.

In the landmark 2005 report *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America’s Collections*, a joint project of Heritage Preservation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), half of the collecting institutions in the United States admitted to not having a written, long-range plan for the care of their collections. And the report estimated that, of the 4.8 billion collection items in the United States, more than 820 million are in need of urgent care—but that was only an estimate

AMERICA’S CULTURAL HERITAGE, displayed and held in its museums, libraries, historical societies, historic sites, and other collection stewards, is seriously endangered by a lack of funds and planning.

because one-third of the institutions admitted to not knowing the condition of all the items in their collections.

art objects, decorative arts, and frames, the Lunder Conservation Center is an answer to a prayer—a means of getting the job done while educating the public on just how vital that job is. And therein lies an important national purpose, increasingly recognized as urgent by the preservation community.

An element of spiritual fervor definitely pervades that community these days, as the realization grows that America’s cultural heritage, displayed and

However, with the encouraging example and (often free) resources and guidance provided by the Lunder Conservation Center, by regional preservation centers such as the Intermuseum Conservation Association (ICA), and by others, directors of small- and medium-sized institutions and organizations need not be hesitant about suggesting to their governing boards that conservation be a line item in next year’s budget. The resources are there to at least make a start. And the



The Intermuseum Conservation Association (ICA) offers a variety of training programs for conservation specialists, professionals involved with collections, and the public. "Photographic Processes: History and Identification" was presented in April 2008.

PHOTO BY NICOLE HAYES, ICA

best way to start is by recognizing that problems present opportunities.

FOCUSING PUBLIC ATTENTION

The Lunder Conservation Center was the brainchild of Elizabeth Broun, director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and her colleagues, the result of a promise to the federal government during a major renovation of the art museum and portrait gallery a few years ago that the entire building would be made available to the public.

Broun soon realized that putting conservators in a different building would mean having them at too great a distance from the galleries. "So then we thought, 'Maybe the conservation labs should be part of the public experience.' And while we were considering that possibility, the Taliban destroyed Afghanistan's 2,000-year-old stone Buddhas. That was a huge shock to the art world and to the cultural heritage world, as well."

Though it was not directly related to

Broun's deliberations about the labs, "it made us think about how we could play a role in focusing public attention on the importance of caring for the things that matter; how we could use the opportunity presented by the building's renovation to make people think about conservation and heritage. So, these two ideas—public access and public awareness—came together in a very serendipitous way."

When the Lunder Conservation Center, funded by the Lunder Foundation, opened in 2006, it was "the first time an art museum in this country had put its conservation labs permanently on view," according to Julie Heath, the center's coordinator at the time. "Sharing what it means to take care of a collection is an integral part of our work."

Engaging the public is a major component of what Heath views as good stewardship, a stewardship Heath wants the public to be a part of, even though she estimates "75 percent of our visitors have never heard

of conservation. So we're starting from scratch and building on that, because you can't be connected to a cause you don't know about."

Speaking in June of this year at an IMLS conference ("Stewardship of America's Legacy: Answering the Call to Action") that addressed the conservation needs of small- and medium-sized institutions, Heath pointed out that one of the best ways to help the public understand what's at stake is by explaining the problems inherent "in preserving objects and, at the same time, providing access to those objects." Something like keeping the cake and eating it, too.

This preservation/access conundrum is at the heart of every institution's operations, whether a major city's museum or a small community's historical society or heritage site, and in finding the balance institutions can engender a direct link in the public's mind between the absolute necessity to preserve and the resulting necessity to fund that preservation.

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At the Lunder Conservation Center, Heath used storytelling to effectively engage her audience. "All you need is a 'before' photograph of an object and the compelling story of how that object is being conserved. Or you can talk about how conservators are also documentarians, documenting the condition of an object and how that examination is done. Most people really don't understand what being a conservator entails, the code of ethics conservators adhere to, the training they receive. Telling that story connects your audience with

the objects they see and with preserving those objects, and from there you can draw people into the cause for preserving other objects—our cultural legacy."

The storytelling extends to a series of kiosks that introduce each lab and studio and use video clips and before-and-after photographs to show the process and results of treatments. In addition, there is a 40-foot media wall where visitors can hear from 16 experts talking about their projects and training.

For its innovative approach and outreach to the public, including its online resources, the Lunder Conservation Center was awarded the prestigious Keck Award by the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works in 2008.

REACHING OUT TO COLLECTING INSTITUTIONS

The Intermuseum Conservation Association, the first nonprofit preservation center in the U.S. when it was created 60 years

ago and now one of 11 such centers nationwide, is committed, in the words of its director, Albert Albano, to "raising the bar

of awareness of the importance of cultural materials preservation and about how that's accomplished."

Working out of a National Historic Register building in downtown Cleveland, Ohio, the ICA has developed multifaceted educational programming offered at different levels geared to three constituencies: specialists in the conservation/preservation arena, institutional professionals involved with collections, and the general public.

"We're very committed to taking our message to as broad an audience as pos-



At a "Reading the Book" symposium offered by ICA in September 2007, participants applied information gained in a lecture on 19th-century printing to try to determine the print dates of old books.

PHOTO BY JOHN T. SEYFRIED, ICA

sible," says Albano, "and especially to the general public. The public is key. We cannot just be talking to ourselves."

Part of taking this message to the public is having open lab areas, where visitors are invited to join ICA conservators at the table as the conservators work on items as diverse as an Alexander Calder mobile or an 1863 Confederate regiment battle flag.

Albano sees this "open experience" as a way that "visitors can see a wide variety of objects and, by talking to our conservators, can understand better how one approaches a particular item and decides on the proper criteria for that item's responsible and thoughtful conservation."

As valuable as this outreach to the general public obviously is, ICA's most important contribution to the preservation community may be its outreach to specialists and to institutional professionals.

In her three years as ICA's director of education and external relations, Nicole Hayes has presented 25 programs, all open to the public (though "the majority of those who attend our programs are museum and library folks"), as well as given talks to groups who invite her to their facilities. Most of these programs are one-day events, a few multiple-day, and about half are free. "If we charge a fee, it's usually because we're bringing in an outside expert, and the fee covers that cost."

Hayes' programs, which are usually filled to capacity, are exactly the kind of

fact-filled, hands-on activities members of smaller collection institutions find the most helpful. "We had a three-day disaster response program taught by two experts in the field that was terrific. The participants broke into teams. On the first day, they took a collection of items we had glommed together from places like the local thrift shop and submerged them in baby pools full of water. On the third day, they had to pull the objects that had been soaking for two days out of the pools and learn the actual process of how you would salvage a painting, a photograph, a textile from that condition. They had to act as a team and triage, deciding which objects were most at risk and how to rescue them. It was a wonderful experience for everyone."

These programs are in keeping with ICA's mission of providing support for institutions that cannot afford, and don't really need, a full-time conservator on staff. Along with the educational programs offered by Hayes, ICA staff might give advice on an exhibit design and how lighting and other aspects of the physical environment will impact the objects on display. Or ICA may be called upon to provide expertise that an institution's on-staff conservator doesn't have. "We act as an adjunct staff," says Albano, citing the work currently being done by ICA's textile conservator Jane Hammond for Spiegel Grove, the home of President Rutherford B. Hayes.

An expert in textile conservation who worked on preserving materials damaged by Hurricane Katrina, Hammond sees a lot of wear and tear on materials occurring

especially in small museums and historical societies that have limited but treasured collections. "A fan on a table or a shawl draped across the back of a chair—many are in open display, and docents are often unable to keep the public from handling them. Add to that, damage done by dust and by non-rotation of objects, which leaves some of them exposed to the light, fluctuations of heat and cold, and humidity for years at a time. And many of these institutions, if forced to make a choice, will put their funds into further development of programs rather than conservation."

Being forced to make these choices is the lament of almost every director of any collecting institution, whatever its size, but these choices hit smaller institutions much harder. And this usually means delaying treatment.

SMALL STEPS, GIANT LEAPS

Because the 2005 *Heritage Health Index* was the first comprehensive survey to assess the condition and preservation needs of U.S. collections, its troubling findings resonated throughout the preservation community.

Four years later, collecting institu-

...and to encourage the fourth:

■ Individuals at all levels of government and in the private sector must assume responsibility for providing the support that will allow these collections to survive.

As challenging as even making a start at adopting these recommendations may be for large institutions, it is a major undertaking for small- and medium-sized museums, libraries, historical societies, and stewards of historic sites, who often are operating with a small staff and an already ambitious agenda. For institutions such as these, conservation is usually more a wish-list item than an immediate project—something that can only be accomplished incrementally, one step at a time.

The Indian Pueblo Conservation Center (IPCC) in Albuquerque, N.Mex., for instance, has only recently, for the first time in its history, contracted for the conservation of an item in its collection: a mural by Pablita Velarde called *The Herd Dance*. This first step was made possible by the generosity of a friend of the museum.

Founded in 1976 by the 19 Pueblos of New Mexico, the IPCC showcases the his-

tory and accomplishments of the Pueblo people from Pre-Columbian times to the

present. Its 15,000-square-foot museum includes a collection of pottery, jewelry, textiles, baskets, photographs, prints, paintings, and murals, both ancient and modern. The center offers extensive experiential education programming for schools, focused on its exhibits and murals, as well as a series of lectures and demonstrations by writers, scholars, and artists, plus weekly traditional dances throughout the year.

Working with a membership base of around 250, Interim Director Marth Beck-

APPRAISALS NEED TO BE CURRENT—and finding an appraiser for this type of art, and then insuring it, takes time. Then there's the process of finding a conservator...

tions continue the process of finding ways to implement three of the report's recommendations:

- Institutions must give priority to providing safe conditions for the collections they hold in trust.
- Every collecting institution must develop an emergency plan to protect its collections and train staff to carry it out.
- Every institution must assign responsibility for caring for collections to members of its staff.



Participants are shown how to properly roll a textile on a support tube in the ICA class "Textiles: From Household Goods to Museum Artifacts" (February 2008).

PHOTO BY NICOLE HAYES, ICA

tell and Collections Specialist and Curator Amy Johnson work wonders with a limited budget and a small staff. The conservation of the Velarde mural is a beginning, but both women are realistic about what is currently possible.

"It's a very expensive and laborious process," Becktell acknowledges. "Appraisals need to be current—and finding an appraiser for this type of art, and then insuring it, takes time. Then there's the process of finding a conservator...All this initial effort is tiny compared to the outcome, and to our having the opportunity to teach conservation as it is being done."

Johnson fully understands the consequences of not being able to devote more resources to the care of the collection. "We have 2,100 pieces in the collection, at least half of which are on display at any one time. The last few years we've removed quite a few of the textiles that have been in the same space for years, but we didn't rotate other textiles into those spots because I wasn't sure of the conditions in our cases. That's a situation I'm working to correct."

Becktell points out that the museum's standards for environmental controls have improved considerably in the last few years, an improvement that is part of the ongoing conservation efforts that do fit into the budget. "The IPCC is in a period of expansion and growth, and part of that is managing those aspects of conservation that we can handle right now."

on the tightest budget can do to take that first step toward creating an ongoing and comprehensive conservation program:

- Check out the free information and guidelines available. See Resources at the end of this article. It is possible, also, to talk to and/or meet with an expert, often free of charge. The Lunder Conservation Center provides free monthly clinics, by appointment, where individuals and representatives of collecting institutions can meet with a conservator for advice on the care of an object. The Intermuseum Conservation Association provides a variety of free services, including helping an institution understand what its conservation priorities should be and how to proceed, basic assistance with grant writing, and general preservation advice. Check out these and other resources and then share/trade information with colleague institutions.
- Review the collection, understand exactly what it includes in terms of types and numbers of objects.
- Make changes in the environment of the housing and display areas, such as lighting, heat and cold, humidity, that can contribute immediately to the health of the collection items.
- Using available guidelines and resources, create an emergency preparedness plan first, followed by a five-year plan.
- Using those same guidelines, begin writing grant proposals to obtain funding for conservation needs.

TAKE ACTION

There is a great deal even the smallest of institutions

Yes, times are tough. For those directors struggling with limited budgets, with governing boards, with enthusiastic but overworked staffs, and with the uneasy feeling that a biblical plague is about the only problem not being dealt with at the moment (though one may turn up any time), last year's economic crash and the resulting recession may seem like the last straw when it comes to considering any kind of conservation program.

But, as Lawrence Reger, president of Heritage Preservation, pointed out at the IMLS conference, now is absolutely the right time for institutions to assess the state of their collections, formulate both disaster preparedness and five-year plans, and research and write grant proposals, "so you're ready when the economy picks up."

Deborah Hess Norris, chairperson of the Art and Conservation Department at the University of Delaware, concurred that readiness is all, adding that persistence and thorough research are elemental and go a long way toward guaranteeing success. Norris' excellent presentation, along with that of Julie Heath and others, is available online (see Resources at end) and provides invaluable information on finding the funds, building an audience, and creating an ongoing conservation program.

And keep in mind that large foundations are not the only sources of funding. Gifts from local and regional foundations and from individuals (as in the case of the Indian Pueblo Conservation Center's donor) can also make a difference. "Make a list of who you know," advises SAAM's Elizabeth Broun, "and structure your request so that they know their gift will make a difference. Don't hit them with a

giant number. Instead, explain that you're looking for this amount and asking 50 people to give a portion of it. Make them understand that they're integral to the success of your project."

The important thing is to make a start. Julie Heath, former director of the Lunder Conservation Center, spells it out very clearly: "Deterioration occurs with objects in a rather slow way. The damage may not be noticed within a couple of weeks or maybe even a couple of years, but it's there and it builds. It's like that cheeseburger and shake you have for lunch. It's not going to kill you tomorrow, but keep it up and it'll kill you eventually. We have to be good stewards with America's cultural heritage so it will be there for those coming after us. We need to set that example for them." **FJ**

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RESOURCES

Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Lunder Conservation Center <http://americanart.si.edu/conservation>, detailed conservation guidelines <http://americanart.si.edu>, videos highlighting work done in each of the center's labs.

Intermuseum Conservation Association www.ica-artconservation.org, e-newsletter with information about grant opportunities and educational opportunities.

Amien, <http://amien.org>, comprehensive guide to art materials and conservation.

Institute of Museum and Library Science www.imls.gov IMLS conference video, www.imls.gov/collections/tour/Bufallo.htm.

Heritage Preservation Heritage Health Index Results. www.heritagepreservation.org/hhi.

Heritage Emergency National Task Force (in cooperation with FEMA) www.heritagepreservation.org/PROGRAMS/TFResources.html, complete guide to preparing for and responding to natural disasters and other collections emergencies.

Preservation Books www.preservationbooks.org, *Housekeeping for Historic Homes and House Museums*, advice on cleaning and caring for historic homes and their contents.