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A New Lease on Life
Conserving Museum Collections

The word "conservation" has deep and significant meaning in the National Park Service. It is set in our mission and reflected in our Strategic Plan, and each day every employee's work helps conserve the natural and cultural heritage of our nation. This issue of *CRM* illustrates what one group of professionals, called conservators, and the professionals and students with whom they work, are doing to conserve collections in museums.

The profession of conservation, based on a scientific understanding of materials and deterioration is a fairly new field. This new, scientific approach to the deterioration of materials developed between WWI and WWII.[1] The first professional society (founded in the UK in 1950) was the International Institute for Conservation (IIC). The American Group of IIC separated in 1972 to become the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC). AIC has developed a Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice that is used to guide and evaluate the work of conservators. University-level training for conservators became available in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s and standards for experience and training of conservators are continually being upgraded. Conservators worldwide are currently discussing the need for professional certification standards.

These changes toward conservation as a separate profession from others that work in museums and historic preservation are reflected in the National Park Service. The 1941 *Field Manual for Museums,* by Ned J. Burns included a variety of techniques and materials that were recommended to all museum staff for treating objects in collections. The first NPS conservator, Elizabeth H. Jones, a paintings conservator, began work in 1951.[2] By 1976, Ralph Lewis in *Manual for Museums* was outlining a different approach in which day-to-day care and preservation of collections (collections management) is the responsibility of park staff, who request conservation assistance from conservators with particular specialized skills. Basic preventive care information for parks, as stated in the *Museum Handbook,* Part I, Museum Collections, is constantly being revised and updated to incorporate new information and practices. Most preventive care for NPS collections is done by park and center staff and their programs are the foundation of all collection preservation.

However, sometimes this preventive care is not enough. Objects are used and damaged before coming to museums. Disasters like floods or hurricanes strike even with the best risk management and planning. Some objects, made of unstable materials, begin deteriorating immediately upon creation. In these and many other cases, a conservator can treat an object to stabilize its chemical and physical structure and bring it back closer to an earlier condition.

But conservators do much more. Through their intimate knowledge of an object during treatment and analysis, new information about construction, materials, and techniques can be brought to light. Articles in this issue discuss treatments to objects as diverse as firearms, quilts, lighthouse lenses, and stone monuments where treatment or technical analysis added to the information we have about our collections. Conservators also bring new technologies and approaches to collections care by translating research done in a variety of scientific disciplines such as chemistry, physics, and engineering to the practicalities of collection care. Larry Bowers describes new lighting technologies that are less damaging to objects. Our treatment experiences give us a perspective on what kinds of preventive care practices have worked over the long-term and what hasn't so we can advise park staff. Authors writing about integrated pest management and object maintenance include practices improved by conservation research to insure that they work the way we want them to. Conservation science—science directed specifically toward preservation questions—helps improve treatments, procedures, and practices used to care for and preserve collections. Judy

Bischoff describes a new science lab that will directly support research and technical analysis of NPS collections. We also do training so that others develop skills to contribute to the preservation of our cultural heritage. This issue describes three very different training programs for audiences as diverse as tribes, museum staff, maintenance staff, archeologists, and conservation students.

Conservation is collaboration between the conservator and other professionals who work with the collections. Toby Raphael describes a new type of publication that promotes a new approach to exhibit design, incorporating a conservation ethic. Because there are so few conservators working for the NPS and many other federal agencies, much conservation is done by contractors throughout the country. Martin Burke shows how museums can ensure they get quality work done by qualified conservators. Two other articles illustrate successful projects done by contractors working with NPS staff.

Many of the choices that museums must make about conservation treatment are based on condition information for individual objects and collections of materials. It is imperative that we have good information with which to make decisions. The Museum Management Program, National Center for Cultural Resource Stewardship and Partnership Programs in the National Park Service has developed a *Strategy for Improving Condition Information and Conservation Resources* to collect this information for the NPS. This Strategy outlines a variety of projects that will take place over the next few years to support and improve the preservation of collections by:

- supplying park museum staff and NPS and contract conservators with additional tools to document condition and make good treatment decisions;
- evaluating current condition assessments and improving accuracy of documentation servicewide;
- promoting the use of information in collection condition survey reports to document and plan for collection needs;
- developing tools to aggregate object condition information and treatment cost estimates at cluster, regional, and servicewide levels.

The Museum Management Program will soon be presenting a web exhibit on conservation treatment projects done by NPS conservators on NPS collections. You will be able to see this exhibit, titled A New Lease on Life: Museum Conservation in the NPS at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/csd/>.

Conservators come from diverse backgrounds, each with a variety of training experiences and expertise. What they all have is an interest in materials and an assumed responsibility to future generations. This issue of *CRM* illustrates how conservators use all their skills to help preserve objects for the future.

Notes

1 Harold J. Plenderleith, "A History of Conservation" in *Studies in Conservation* 43 (1998), 129-143; Nicholas Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley, Jr. and Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro. *Historical and Philosophical Issues in Conservation of Cultural Heritage: Readings in Conservation,* (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1996).

2 Ralph H. Lewis, *Museum Curatorship in the National Park Service 1904-1982,* (Washington, DC: DOI, NPS, Curatorial Services Division, 1993), 343.

Jessica S. Johnson is a conservator, Museum Management Program, National Park Service, and guest editor of this issue of CRM.

Weblinks

Museum Management Program
http://www.cr.nps.gov/csd/

Conserve O Grams
http://www.cr.nps.gov/csd/publications/index.htm

Harpers Ferry Center Conservation
http://www.nps.gov/hfc/conservation/

American Institute for Conservation (AIC)
http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/aic/

International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works
http://www.iiconservation.org/

Conservation OnLine
http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/