A testament to the interest and commitment of the conservation and restoration profession in furthering the understanding of the cleaning of paintings is surely that over 600 delegates not only attended the presentations during the week but also remained to participate in the two-hour panel discussion at the end of the conference. Delegates represented countries from around the world and the full gamut of working environments, from the national institution to private restorer, and the discussions brought together a wide spectrum of views and approaches.

The panel session was the instrument by which the delegates could respond to and debate the threads that had woven themselves through the lectures and poster session presentations. It was the opportunity to bring to the fore those conversations that happened outside the conference auditorium, those conversations that are frequently the true testing ground for an individual's understanding and their drive to shift or change an approach to practical conservation.

The panel comprised Marion Mecklenburg, Museum Conservation Institute, Smithsonian Institution, USA; Alan Phenix, Getty Conservation Institute, USA; Stephen Gritt, National Gallery, Canada; Paolo Cemonesi, Cesmar7, Italy; and Pilar Sedano, Museo del Prado, Spain. Their function was to build on and respond to the debate from the floor. The level of debate demonstrated a maturity of thinking within the field and the challenges posed by the complexities of balancing science and practice. It included a high level of self-analysis and reflection, and four key questions developed that served to summarize the conclusions that could be drawn.

1. **Why do we clean paintings: Is there ever a situation where aesthetics are the sole reason for choosing to undertake a restoration treatment?**

   There was a marked difference in stance around this subject with a strong sense among many that pure aesthetics is frequently the driver for cleaning a painting. As the conversation developed, it was clear that any differences primarily reflected where the conservator sat in the chain of decision making.

   It is unquestionably the case that every restoration has a context, but can it simply be based on aesthetics? It is hard to imagine a situation where a restoration takes place without the decision being made because of a bigger context, for example, in readiness for a planned upcoming exhibition, a loan, a potential buyer, or following stabilization of structural problems. Where conservation resources are in excess of demand, it might be
possible to see an aesthetic consideration being the primary driver for a treatment program, but such a situation is surely rare.

From the delegates’ response it was evident that the role of the conservator within the decision-making process that decides when a restoration is to be undertaken and varies significantly between nations, between galleries, and within the commercial world. Such variation also underlies the ability of individual conservators to influence and drive change to any approach to cleaning.

2. Is it desirable to have a standardized framework or methodology for the thinking process for approaching the cleaning of a painting?

The lectures throughout the week reflected thinking that supported both inward-looking solutions to conservation methods following local political contexts and personal knowledge and outward-looking approaches with conservators as part of an international framework or profession. The debate likewise reflected this range of viewpoints.

Where the point is that will allow differences in approach that are artwork specific to be in balance with similarities in approach that will underpin best practice is difficult to identify. Is it appropriate to have a profession with an international standard to cleaning that at the same time maintains pronounced national approaches to presentation and care or that fundamentally supports a difference between the commercial and noncommercial worlds?

Some delegates felt that a framework for cleaning was a set of rules that would prevent thinking or would provide a fail-safe answer or that would present cleaning solutions that were only viable with dedicated scientific support. It would seem that a standardized framework needs to balance these extremes and that it should provide guidance and direction for best practice, be a system that facilitates thinking and logic of thought, and offer a structure that supports conservators in whichever work environment they practice.

The question as to how far it is possible for the practicing conservator to bridge “the gap” between intuitive cleaning and scientific theory remained and is possibly the biggest barrier to a standardized framework. Our ability to bridge a perceived gap will depend on developing further a shared vocabulary that all can use. It is also essential that the value judgments that are perhaps given to these two approaches need to be removed from the equation. Intuitive cleaning is based on experience and past practice, practice and experience that was developed and underpinned by research and science. They are necessarily iterative in nature.

3. Is it appropriate to universally ban a cleaning agent?

Although not a question directly posed by the delegates, it was an undercurrent through many discussions. A simple answer “yes” was the feeling that seemed to be at the core of this question; however, this is surely predicated by the absence of a standardized cleaning “thinking” methodology. With such a methodology in place the banning of materials on grounds other than health and safety becomes less necessary; the thinking process to decide and make choices will be based on an array of factors, including the object, the materials it comprises, how these interact with the materials to be removed, and the aesthetic aim of the endeavor.

4. Should all conservators retain the right to state a painting is uncleanable?

The position of the conservator in the decision-making process of “whether to clean a painting or not” was variable. A sense that caution toward cleaning was highly desirable embodied much of the discussions. Similarly, it was very clear that here the view was that cleaning paintings would always take place regardless of any position taken by professional conservation bodies. A moratorium on cleaning therefore becomes self-defeating. The process of considered conservation treatment is the driver for future research and dissemination of information and understanding. Of far greater value, as demonstrated by this conference, is to support the drive and commitment of the profession to discuss, debate, and share research and experience. Individuals retain the right to state a painting is uncleanable within the context of contemporary understanding. In this spirit the challenge remains to ensure that research into cleaning is embedded as fully as possible into all corners of the field.