

A CONSERVATION INSTITUTE: A PERSONAL CONCEPT*

R. M. Organ

A Conservation Institute adequate to serve a nation should, so the present author believes, be designed while recognizing the following considerations.

1. It should be concerned about all of the nation's conservation, namely: of artifacts excavated, collected, or created by Americans. This group includes every variety of object and material, from primitive to space age.
2. There is a grave shortage of trained conservators: a survey indicates that there will be openings for 370 during the next decade.
3. Despite this present shortage, any new Institute must be practicing all of the innumerable procedures required for all kinds of artifacts if it is to command respect.
4. Conservators who may wish to use an Institute are not all alike. All trained conservators make more or less use of three skills, namely: first, practical work upon the artifact (Buck's 'practical conservator'); second, recognition of the materials present and the nature of their deterioration - a scientific function that Buck names 'the technical conservator'; third, a curatorial concern for the well-being of the artifact because of its place in the development of civilization, history or art (Buck's 'administrator'). In a small museum the conservator will need all three skills constantly. In a large museum he will not: curators in various disciplines will be on staff and able to initiate treatment and to provide data; scientific assistance in analysis can probably be organized if it is not already available. Such support will enable the conservator to concentrate on practical work.
5. Only the time that a conservator spends in contact with artifacts is directly productive of deterioration-preventive treatment that so many of them need.

The above considerations are recognized in the following plan for a National Institute.

A. Let each conservator remain at work in his own chosen place, doing the work that his Museum Director or employers need done, and writing the reports required by his A. I. C. Code of Ethics.

* Inadvertently omitted from 1974 Bulletin Volume 14, No. 1

B. Let the Institute help the conservator: by making his value to the community more apparent; by functioning to obtain for him enough space and time to enable him to accept an occasional, very temporary, apprentice.

C. Let the Institute employ a camera-team regularly to record specific elements of conservation procedures for subsequent educational use.

D. Let the Institute register a complying person as an Institute-Conservator or an Institute Conservation-Scientist, with the agreement of his employer(s). A certificate of this will serve as one indication of his value to the community.

E. Let the Institute install in his laboratory or shop a data-terminal. This might be initially a facsimile machine ('telex') but should ultimately be a TV monitor and teletype keyboard. This 'hardware', in regular use, will also indicate his status in the community.

F. Let each Institute-person transmit his completed report (shorn of confidential material irrelevant to technical matters) via his terminal to the Institute's data-bank. At the Institute an abstract of all the technicalities will be prepared and referred back for verification and signature. This signed and dated material should be paid for by the Institute and inserted into its computerized storage.

G. Let an Institute-person faced with a new problem initially call the data-bank for possible solutions. He should be presented on his terminal with a range of answers which will lead him to ask for particular abstracts. If any of these answer his questions then he may wish to ask for complete reports. If one of these still presents a difficulty then he can discuss it directly with its author, who will have been identified at all stages. The person's final report will naturally include his own resolution of the difficulty he encountered and this will be available to later enquirers.

H. Let a conservator who finds himself in need of some specific technique ask for a film or slide-sequence that describes it (ref 3, above). If, after study and practice, this is still found to present difficulties, then let him arrange privately a brief apprenticeship with a conservator who does have the skills. This expert's identity will be discoverable from the data-bank. After so much orientation from visual aids, probably only a few hours of valuable conservator-time will be needed.

The plan described above has become practicable within recent years with the development of computer programs. It recognizes that there are not enough conservators or conservation-scientists available to do urgently-needed work, let alone to be spared for teaching or for other peripheral

activities, important though they be. It also recognizes that in many areas just one trained conservator is a key man, doing much with such help as he can acquire, and that if removed into a more central place his area will lose both his skill and the support he was able to direct. The present plan seeks to strengthen the conservator who is geographically isolated from his peers, not only by providing data and education on demand but by helping him to feel part of a nation-wide organization. It furnishes material on demand because that is the moment of greatest receptivity, when the need has been defined and when energy is poised to use it: exactly the same data received at any other time could be considered irrelevant to the needs of that time and would be ignored.

Not least among the attributes of the plan is that the location of such an Institute would favor no particular region. It would be present at every terminal - wherever an Institute-person developed his own expertise and reported it and wherever one asked questions. The faculty would consist of the entire membership. All would be equal. Their work would be judged by those of their peers who tried to benefit by it. The variety of artifacts treated within the Institute would be limited only by the variety reported. The quality of work done could rise rapidly because every self-improvement reported becomes the base for some other's advance. Every working member automatically receives credit for authorship. Even if an Institute-person happened to perform only one single operation unceasingly (I know no conservator who does!) then the data-bank would have a record of this and he would be recognized as THE expert to whom enquirers would flock.

The plan described above has been treated more fully and submitted for publication in Studies in Conservation. It has also been introduced in testimony to a special sub-committee chaired by Senator Claiborne Pell, published as: Joint Hearings before the Special Sub-Committee on Arts and Humanities, "Museum Services", 93rd Congress, on S 796 and S 2137 of July 18 and 19, 1973, pp 516, 522, 523, 513, 512, 526, 527, 509, 508, 530. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C.