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Arts Trade Association Dinner: Speech Research (1963-1967): Book Chapter 01

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ON EDUCATION IN ART CONSERVATION¹

by Sheldon Keck

"Ars longa—vita brevis," this succinct slogan from Rome's Madison Avenue has sold many an art historian, collector and curator the idea that, barring physical violence of the most drastic kind—wars, earthquakes, fires and flood—art is imperishable. At times this seems true. Witness the contents of Egyptian tombs, where objects of delicate organic materials have been preserved against the action of light, dampness, insects and man. We can learn something about conservation from studying this phenomenon. But while these examples of the funerary arts of Egypt survive, the masterpieces of Apelles, or of any great Greek painter, have long since disappeared, victims of time and the stupidity of man.

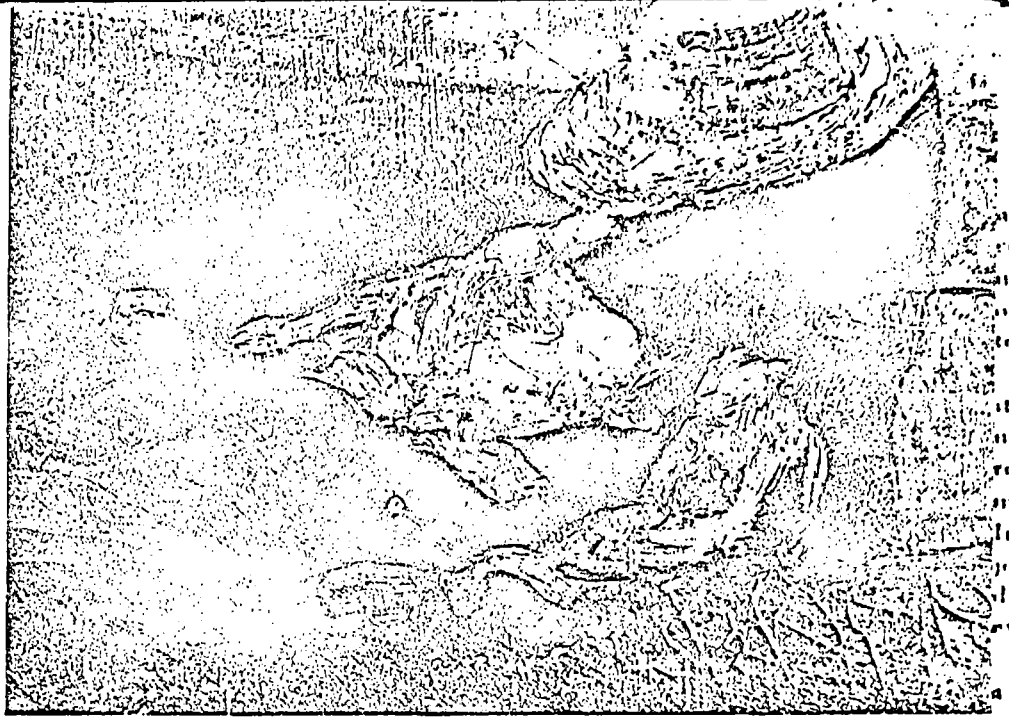
The philosophy of museums and galleries, particularly in this country, has been to collect, catalog, publish and exhibit. These activities have been considered primary functions of an art museum by trustees, directors and curators. Protecting collections from outdoor weather and from vandalism by housing and guarding them has been considered sufficient for their conservation. But deterioration takes place inside a museum as well as outside—even if more slowly. This fact has been almost completely brushed aside in the training of museum personnel. Some time ago, the Fogg Museum, as a result of a questionnaire sent to art museums and galleries throughout the country decided that it would be a mistake to establish a program for training conservators, because most of the directors and curators did not feel any need for conservation. Their museums had little or no funds available for it and they were quite unconscious of any problems of conservation. If such problems did arise from time to time, someone usually could be found to take care of them. The Fogg decided, rightly I believe, not to train conservators for a world that could not absorb them. But this "head in the ground" attitude on the part of museums cannot go on much longer.

Perhaps now is the time to distinguish between "restoration" and "conservation" and to examine the necessity for conservation of our art holdings as well as the need for educating individuals to understand and practice conservation. I propose to describe what we mean by "conservation," "curator" and "conservator" and, in the course of this, to demonstrate the part which the university could play as a much needed ally of the museum.

What is Conservation?

Those in the field of conservation are beginning to realize that preservation is a constant battle against the ravages of time. Paintings are continually deteriorating, chemically, because of oxidation and the action of light; and physically, as a result of variations in the atmosphere and attacks by living

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Cupping or curling of the paint along the edges of age-cracks has resulted in cleavage between ground layer and canvas in this 19th-century oil painting. Small chips of paint have already flaked away. The cracks are caused by expansion and contraction of the original canvas with atmospheric changes of humidity. Shrinkage of the upper surface of the paint

together with compressive forces in the edges have caused curling and chipping. Unless this condition is noticed, considerable flaking will occur if the painting is handled, moved, or shipped. Conservation treatment is indicated at the first sign of these symptoms. *Detail of Children at the Beach by Winslow Homer, Brooklyn Museum.*

organisms, not the least of which is man. Conservation includes a knowledge of the agents that cause deterioration and of the methods available to detect their action. Where possible, conservation is the active prevention of deterioration and damage, as well as treatment to repair damage after it has occurred. Specifically, it means good housekeeping all the time, periodic examination by trained persons, a recording of these examinations, maximum security in financing, control of humidity fluctuations in galleries, protection against deterioration, impurities in the air, careful handling, hanging and packing by trained persons.

The term "conservation" has been selected to replace "restoration" for this reason: restoration can imply simply a beauty treatment which temporarily makes the object look like new, but has done nothing to rehabilitate its deteriorated structure. In the past, and even at present too, many curators have been satisfied with restoration, largely because they have not been aware of the processes of deterioration and the possibilities of forestalling them. Or deterioration has not disturbed them because its actions are so slow that physical changes in an object remain unobserved and undetected. The eye and human memory alone are not critical enough to record these changes.

For this reason, methods of measuring accurately the progress of deterioration are part of conservation. Various kinds of photography under controlled light conditions can form a basis for future comparison. Devices are available for measuring color changes and differences in reflectance. The dated record of an object's condition can constitute a valuable aid in estimating its rate of deterioration.

These all define conservation today, but there is much to be done to make it more precise and more effective. We need research to develop new protective materials and methods. At present, in our entire country, there is just one research fellow whose specific duty is the development of new materials and methods for conservation: Dr. Robert Feller, Fellow of the Mellon Research Institute and the National Gallery, Washington. He is doing an outstanding job. Two or three other chemists or physicists in museum employ have other duties and their research, though of great importance, is limited largely to examination and analysis of materials found in art objects.

Research in the field of conservation could be rewarding and satisfying to a graduate student; it would offer him, under the guidance of those familiar with its problems, an opportunity to make an original contribution. For this reason, conservation can be important to students of art history.

What is a Curator?

A curator is the one who in most museums keeps the collection. In England he is called "keeper." He catalogs it, he publishes it, he exhibits it and, as his name implies, he is responsible for its care. Some European countries give him the name "conservateur" or "konservator." There can be no doubt from his title that he is primarily there to take care.

In America, a curator may be an art historian, in charge of a college gallery, but his primary duty may be teaching. He may, in a historic house, be custodian of the building. He may, in a small art center, be a "volunteer" from the social register. He may, in a large museum, be specialized in one particular field of art history. In other words, he may be an amateur or a distinguished professional—but invariably he is a rank amateur as far as conservation is concerned. Although he is responsible for the care, handling, crating, hanging, framing and general protection of the art in his museum, he has no more than a nodding acquaintance with the technology of the materials composing his treasures or their reaction to air, light, heat, dampness. He has NOT been trained to look for or to see the symptoms of deterioration or to know the methods used in correcting them.

We are all familiar with the traveling exhibition. The American Federation of Art had 80 traveling exhibitions in the USA last year with 292 showings. In addition the Museum of Modern Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Smithsonian Institution circulate exhibitions. Usually these are shown in

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small museums or art centers with small staffs and small collections. Often exhibitions are sent to college museums where they form an essential part of the Fine Arts program. The staff in many of these museums is composed of a lady curator, a decrepit custodian and perhaps some enthusiastic students who must unpack, hang the exhibition, dismantle and repack it for the next leg of its journey. Most insurance claims result from damage during travel. Much deterioration which appears months or years later may be related to improper handling or packing—or merely vibrations caused when a painting is moved about. A knowledge of conservation, therefore, may be important even to art historians who are teaching in colleges.

Colleges have been educating art historians for many years. Art historians usually become museum directors, curators or educators in art. Some universities in their graduate schools offer courses in museum training. Are the universities training professionals as well prepared for their responsibilities as lawyers, dentists and architects are for theirs? Unlike the latter professions, there are no minimum requirements nor standards of education for curator work in an art museum.

People who are being trained as art historians and for museum work should be given instruction in the structure and behavior of the materials found in art, in methods of handling, packing and display and in the methods used in examination and preservation. There is a great deal of authoritative material which has already been published on all these subjects and more to be learned in laboratory research. I venture to propose that universities which are training future museum curators introduce and require at least one full course dealing with these matters. This is not to train students to perform conservation treatment but to make them aware of the problems involved and to prepare them in the full sense of the word to be curators—able to care for the well-being of the objects for which they are responsible. All museums, large and small, need trained as well as conscientious personnel on all levels. We need completely trained curators and directors to train and supervise those who are handling works of art and to oversee those who are entrusted with the actual conservation treatment.

This is why I think a knowledge of conservation is important to all students of art, curators and collectors.

What is a Conservator?

A few years ago a conservator was called a restorer, and before that he was either a framer, whose clients had asked him to freshen up their paintings, or he was a disappointed artist who could not make a living at his art. Magic formulas, magic hands and magic eyes were among the nostrums of his secret craft. Prior to the 18th century, artists really had to know the materials of their craft, learned by long years of apprenticeship. Then they were probably better

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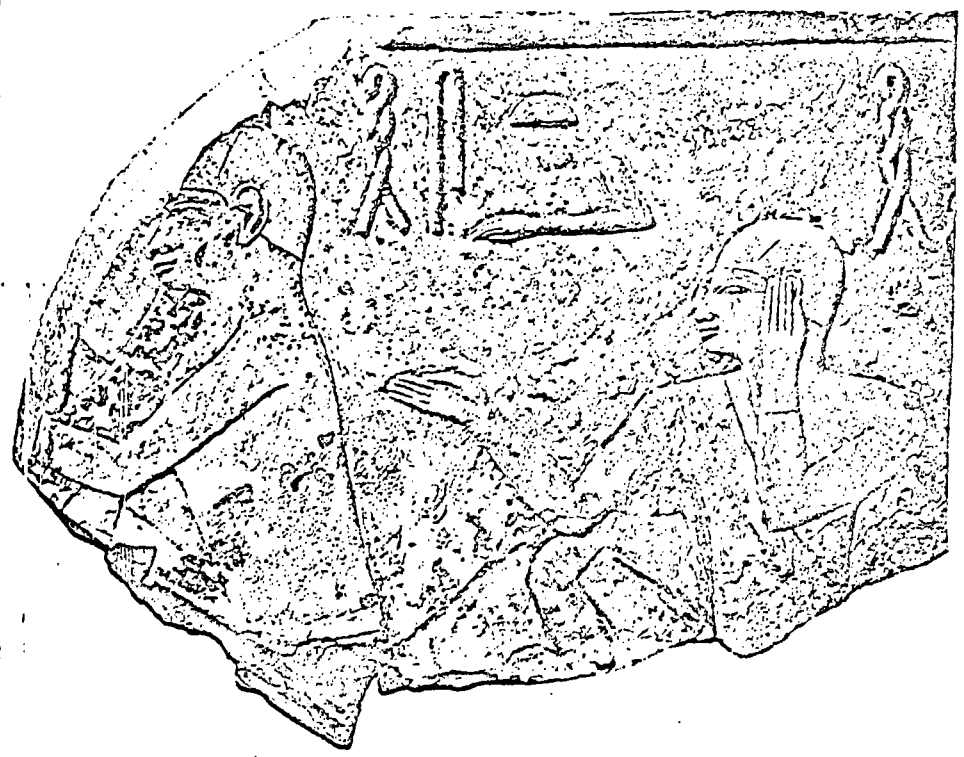
qualified than anyone else to treat paintings and repair damages, even though they often took extensive liberties with the subject matter and style of the original painter—of course always “improving” it and bringing it up to date. But with the introduction of academies and art schools, the craft of painting was more and more disregarded in favor of the art of creativity. At present, an artist, unless he has made a special and prolonged study of the materials of painting and the technology of conservation, is about as qualified to treat a deteriorated painting as a mother is to remove an appendix from a child.

So what constitutes a conservator at the present time? There are no educational requirements, no professional standards of ethics or practice. Anyone who wishes may hang out a shingle and call himself a conservator or restorer. There are some 60 listed in the yellow pages of the Manhattan telephone book, of which 30 are individuals and 30 are corporations or firms. I can name at least 20 more who are not listed. Only 10 of these 80 are Fellows or Associates of the International Institute for the Conservation of Museum Objects. The Fellows

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This Egyptian limestone relief could survive intact for thousands of years in a tomb where the humidity never varied. Upon removal to a climate where temperature and humidity were continuously changing, water-soluble

salts within the structure of the stone have worked their way outward causing fractures, irregularities and flaking. These salts can be discovered and removed before damage occurs as well as after it has started.



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are conservators, often of disparate education and experience, who have distinguished themselves by showing a scientific or objective approach, a willingness to make systematic records of procedures used on objects they have treated and to exchange information. This is evident through their publications in the field. They are also more interested in the preservation of the object of art than they are in what they are paid for preserving it. This attitude, perhaps, distinguishes the professional conservator from the commercial one.

A man came to see me last week seeking instruction in the art of restoration. He had answered an advertisement involving the sale of a frame shop and restoration business. The proprietor of the shop assured him that if he bought the business, the proprietor could teach him all he needed to know about restoration in two weeks. The owner further asserted that it was not necessary at all to have any education—artistic or otherwise—since he himself had been entirely self-taught. I need only add that he was selling out a successful business because of old age. When my visitor asked me where he could go really to learn about conservation, I had to tell him there were no schools of instruction in the country. One restorer of paintings listed in the yellow pages of the telephone book has done a considerable amount of work for public museums and private collections. He insists, even when working in a museum, that his work be done behind closed doors—often in a closet—and he reveals nothing of what he has done except the final result. This is not at all unique—there are many like him who continue a medieval tradition of secrecy which somehow was fostered and grew during the 19th century, in spite of strides made by a few more scientifically inclined.

At present a "laissez-faire" attitude towards education and standards in the field of conservation prevails. Artists are creating paintings, museums are acquiring more and more masterpieces, colleges are grinding out art historians and curators. But all must entrust themselves and their works of art to men who have had to pick up their "know-how" in a "catch as catch can" way—often through experiment on treasures belonging to their clients. Of all the hundreds of museums, art centers, historical associations and college galleries in the United States which have collections or hold art exhibitions, I can find no more than 40 that include a full-time or part-time conservator on their staff.

I hope I have stated reasons enough why conservation should be important to students, curators, collectors and art historians. I think it is time that the universities assumed some responsibility in training both curators and conservators for professional practice. Many of the courses are already at hand. Certain specialized courses would have to be introduced: courses in the materials and techniques of art, in the chemical and physical behavior of these materials, in the methods of technical examination and in the various procedures for the preservation of art. I believe a series of courses could be organized on a graduate level for training conservators, on completion of which a certificate of practice

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Cleavage, blistering and flaking of oil paint from a 19th-century painting on canvas. This condition resulted from excessive shrinkage of the glue-paste mixture used in mounting

the original canvas on a new one. Correction of this deterioration is possible by removing the added canvas and adhesive followed by reattachment of the paint to the surface.

essional accomplishment or perhaps a degree could be given. Completion of the introductory course could also be required of graduate art historians to provide them with the technical background needed for curatorial work.

A course in the "Fundamentals of Painting Conservation" has just been completed at the Brooklyn Museum for the second year. The course is designed primarily for art historians and serves as an introduction to or a review of the field for conservators. Attending the course, which was oversubscribed, were 3 practicing conservators, a curator from another museum, a fine arts insurance adjuster, 3 museum registrars, 1 museum superintendent, 5 persons who are planning to become conservators and 10 graduate students in the history of art from New York University and Columbia University. The course included discussions of all the fields just mentioned. I believe this kind of course should be given at a university, preferably one with a gallery and a conservation laboratory. In the 1930s the Fogg Museum at Harvard, with Edward Forhes and George Stout, made a great contribution to our technical knowledge and in addition trained conservators whose attitude is professional and not commercial. The primary aims of a university are teaching, research and publication. In a museum, the conservator's primary duty is the preservation of art, not teaching.

Only when the universities assume their responsibilities towards conservation, will standards of education, ethics and practice become formulated and generally accepted. And then real progress will be made in the preservation of our heritage.

FOOTNOTE:

1. This paper entitled "University Responsibility for Education in Conservation" was given at the annual meeting of the College Art Association in Washington, D.C., February 1, 1958.