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The Library of Congress

Congressional Research Service

Washington, D.C. 20540

THE CONSERVATION OF OUR HERITAGE

[Draft statement prepared according to the instructions of
Honorable Claiborne Pell]

The attached has been prepared for the personal use of
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Kathryn Dorko
Education and Public Welfare Division
May 11, 1973

THE CONSERVATION OF OUR HERITAGE

The decade of the 1970's lends particular poignancy to the current attempts to preserve, restore and conserve our museum and library holdings. We are about to celebrate the 200th birthday of our Nation and yet some of the priceless treasures which came to this country during the founding of the Republic might not be with us for the celebration. Irreplaceable collections are being lost through neglect and ignorance and because there are not enough people trained in the scientific art of conservation to save them in time. Our museums and libraries are often inadequate protection against the air pollution which fouls and destroys pigments, metals, and finishes and corrodes marble architecture and sculpture. Many museums desperately needing renovation cannot sustain proper temperature control and warpage and discoloration occurs. Too much or too little humidity can rot, corrode, or warp wood, fabrics, leather and jewelry. Uncontrolled lighting can fade paintings, costumes, and other fragile items before anyone has realized the damage that is being done.

The study of museum and library conservation is a relatively new field in this country. Conservation, according to the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, consists of any action taken to determine the nature or properties of materials used in any kind of cultural holdings or in their housing, handling, or treatment; any action taken to understand and control the causes of deterioration and any action taken to better the conditions of such holdings. This definition provides a good idea of what conservation is in a general sense, although the various

techniques of conservation differ with the properties of the holdings themselves. Considerable study is needed to be able to determine the necessary techniques for preserving the rare books, maps, manuscripts and letters of a library and the techniques for preserving and restoring canvas, wood, metal, and other art objects contained in a museum's collection.

The vital importance of a basic and continuous program of museum and library conservation cannot be stressed too strongly. Already, numerous pieces of art and fine books have been damaged beyond repair and can never be replaced. Several interesting stories which illustrate the need for conservation practices are recounted by Caroline Keck, Graduate Program Administrator of the Cooperstown conservation program. In her book on the care of paintings, Mrs. Keck describes an incident which had been told to her by a renowned Italian collector. Years ago, the collector and his father heard by the grapevine that some peasants had discovered what was purported to be a masterpiece in an outbuilding of an old estate on which they labored. They were secreting it in the hope of a fortune. By a complicated series of messages and proposals, these gentlemen were allowed to visit the place, but no amount of argument permitted them to seek out the painting from where it had been concealed. The peasants insisted that the collector and his father stay outside the buildings and wait for the painting to be brought to them. So there they sat, on a bench in a cluttered farmyard watching until the farmer and his wife came from behind their house carrying between them a great wooden slab. Approaching the bench, the two peasants raised the panel

to a vertical position and for one wonderful moment there was a painting of a Madonna and Child with angels. Then the poor porters stood their find on the ground with a great thump and the jar sheered off the entire surface to a pile of brilliant dust on the bare earth, leaving still visible the broken inscription along the bottom edge "Vivarini," one of the great Venetian painters of the fifteenth century!

The painting had been left in a fallen down shack, exposed to wind and rain, but by some miracle it had lasted, fragile and vulnerable, until ignorant mishandling lost it forever.

But even without mishandling, tragedy occurs. Another story is told about a painting in Germany before the Second World War. A tiny exquisite Raphael was spirited away by its owners to Switzerland, before the war. On the strength of its great value a bank advanced money for the owners to take refuge in America, holding the painting as collateral in their vault. After the war was over, arrangements were made to sell the painting here in America and repay the loan. The Swiss bank sent the Raphael over with a personal representative. Amid a hushed assemblage of lawyers, bankers, and art lovers, the seals were broken, the forms were signed, and the treasured parcel unwrapped. As the last tissues were removed the onlookers gasped, for the paint lay in a pile of dry particles and the wooden support was quite naked. There had been no crude mishandling as with the Vivarini, no careless shock. The environment of the bank vault had not been the proper environment for this painting, and the wood had moved in protest and shed its glorious skin.

These stories are examples of masterpieces lost without intent, by misunderstanding and costly ignorance. Systematic exploration of the holdings of our museums and libraries is long overdue before neglect, time, misjudgement, or accidents can take a further toll. The artifacts we have in our museums, the books printed long ago and the paintings we cherish are mirrors of our history and belong to the heritage of all our children. The museum is not only a collection of precious objects or treasured wealth, or as Sam Johnson once said, "Repositories of learned curiosity". They are laboratories, workshops, and libraries as well. Their holdings are available to us, to share and to learn from, and these paintings, books, objets d'art are also our responsibility. We must care for them. And if we cannot personally be involved in caring for the objects we must help to train knowledgeable people to do so.

Conservation is currently needed in four general areas -- the conservation of monuments and historic buildings; museum objects; paintings -- consisting primarily of canvas conservation; and paper conservation. Much of the training in conservation being offered today appears to focus most attention on the preservation, restoration, and protection of paintings. Library materials appear to have been less emphasized over the years. Paintings have been considered to be unique, and most valuable because of this individuality. Books, printed in multiple copies, and maps, manuscripts and other paper artifacts, were not believed to deteriorate as rapidly. This actually has been the case in some countries where the climate is dry or where the paper is kept at a fairly constant temperature. Libraries in Great Britain

experience much more success in paper preservation due to the cool temperatures in which the books are stored. Even in libraries within private homes in Great Britain, the temperature is kept much cooler than in homes in our country and for many centuries homes had no steam heat but were heated by fireplaces. But we are coming now to realize that books and paper artifacts do deteriorate badly. Paper is easily damaged or destroyed by fire and water, and easily stained.

Our collections of books and paintings reflect man's struggle to develop himself and conquer his environment. They express the thoughts and achievements of centuries and they make up our most material heritage and trust to future generations.

Conservation of museum and library holdings is both a science and an art. Conservators today comprise a numerically small vocation and professional training in museum conservation is carried on by approximately three institutions in this country. This training, usually lasting three or four years, with periods of internship in museums, galleries, or libraries, prepares students to work with art objects and paper with sufficient knowledge of the materials that compose the objects so that the student can expertly select from all the means available the most apropos method of conserving the work. This choice must be based on a wide familiarity with the art and technology of the time for improving the condition of the work. The safekeeping of our collections is one of the most important responsibilities of museums and libraries, and professionals in this field realize that unless more

people can be trained as conservators, with access to the scientific and institutional facilities necessary for actual work on the holdings, the deterioration of our heritage and culture will continue at a rapid pace.

Mr. Paul Perrot, Assistant Secretary for Museum Programs at the Smithsonian, and Mr. Robert Organ, Chief of the Smithsonian's Conservation Analytical Laboratory, both concur that the needs in the field of museum conservation are not currently being met anywhere in the world. In the United States alone, approximately 60 trained professional conservators could be employed each year just to take care of current restoration and preservation work. A backlog of work also exists but for lack of space, adequate funding, and the necessary personnel, any attempt to deal with this must be postponed.

The major training centers for museum conservators graduate approximately twenty students each year. For example, students enrolled in the Cooperstown Program in Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works in New York, study both scientific and analytical aspects of the care and treatment of works of historic and artistic significance. The acquisition of precision skills and the development of respect for the integrity of the artifact is emphasized during the three-year program. Students graduating from the Cooperstown program receive a Master of Arts degree and a Certificate of Advanced Study. These students also serve an internship period, often with the National Collection of Fine Arts or the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. The Cooperstown program graduates approximately twelve students each year in conservation, and the school receives almost 300 applications

from prospective students who wish to enter the field of museum conservation. But neither the space necessary to handle more students, nor the money necessary to enlarge the program sufficiently to take more students, is available at this time.

The Cooperstown program, the New York University graduate program in conservation, and the Oberlin College program -- in cooperation with the Inter-Museum Conservation Association -- conduct the major training of conservators in this country. Each of these institutions receives a combination of private and governmental financial assistance for their professional training programs. An additional training program is planned, and the curriculum drawn up, to be conducted at the Winterthur Museum in Wilmington, Delaware, in cooperation with the University of Delaware. This program would admit students on the undergraduate level and prepare them to enter graduate programs in conservation with a double major in science and art history. A graduate of the Winterthur program would receive a Master of Science degree and would have received basic training in the conservation of the decorative arts, such as furniture, glass, metal, and tapestry. This would be the only program in this country to emphasize the decorative arts as apart from paintings and paper conservation.

The students graduating from Oberlin College and New York University in the field of conservation, approximately seven or eight each year, receive either a professional certification (Oberlin) or a Master of Arts degree (New York University) in recognition of their achievement. Emphasis at these two institutions focuses primarily upon art history with training

in the skills and scientific techniques of preservation and conservation. Every student serves an apprenticeship and acquires sound basic knowledge of the behavior and properties of the artifacts and paper with which he works.

According to both Mr. Perrot and Mr. Organ of the Smithsonian, dozens of questions are received by that institution on where prospective students can go to be trained in the field of museum and library conservation. The Smithsonian itself lacks adequate space, personnel and funds to carry on a comprehensive training program of their own although some short-term "on-the-job" training and apprenticeship programs are offered to students already engaged in a conservation training program. Mr. Organ also offers a series of lectures for Smithsonian personnel and members of the Washington Region Conservation Guild on the background of conservation work. The members attending the lectures are, for the most part, employed in various kinds of conservation work in Federal departments, local museums, and private commercial establishments.

There appear to be several current problems which hinder the development of training for an adequate number of professional conservators at this time. Directors of the major conservation training institutions who are highly skilled in their field and able to pass on their knowledge and training to others, often must spend a great deal of time raising the money necessary for the institution to survive. Funds for the institutions come from several sources but no one source is constant and continuous enough to support on-going programs over a period of time. Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts have been most helpful, these directors say, but these grants must be applied for each time and they are usually for

specific projects and not for operating expenses of the institution. More museums must form cooperative programs with universities and training institutions so that students can work directly with the artifacts, paper, and paintings they are studying. Conservation must play a more important role as well in the budgets of the museums themselves and trustees must be persuaded to allocate funds for the care of their works as well as for the acquisition of additional pieces. Finally, an increased awareness on the part of the public is necessary of the current need for museum and library conservation and people trained to work in conserving works of art. At the present time, commercial restorers and conservators earn considerably more money than conservators working in public institutions or training conservation students. If the salaries for conservation training could be made more comparable to those in university teaching and commerce, it is believed that more trained conservators might be attracted to enter the training field.

The problems being faced by professionals in the conservation of library holdings differ somewhat from those of museums. Libraries deal primarily with paper preservation and the conservation of books, manuscripts, prints, maps, and posters. According to Mr. Frazer Poole, Assistant Director for Preservation in the Library of Congress, there is really no place one can get full-scale comprehensive training in the conservation of library materials. The three major training centers mentioned before do offer courses in paper preservation but paper is not emphasized and a majority of students do not specialize in this subject. The need today is for people versed in the history and chemistry of paper conservation for the quantity of items requiring attention is tremendous. Mr. Poole has noted that approximately 6 million of the 17 million books in the Library of

Congress' collection are shredding away -- the paper is so brittle that the books disintegrate when touched. For years, until 1965, the stacks in the Library (main building) were not air conditioned and in the summer the temperature would run up to 125 degrees. With this heat, the humidity would react with the acid used in the formulation of the paper and the resulting chemical reaction destroyed the pages of many books.

The Library of Congress now has both a restoration office, responsible for preserving and restoring paper, and a research laboratory experimenting with inexpensive methods to de-acidify books, neutralize the acid in the paper, and slow or prevent deterioration. One such method is the use of gas to treat the books and they are hoping to develop a gaseous process with which they can treat a number of books simultaneously at a cost of less than fifty cents a book. At the present time, two major methods of paper conservation are used by the Library. One method involves dipping each page of a book in a chemical solution and laminating the page for protection. To dip and laminate one book, according to Mr. Poole, runs about \$150. The second method, microfilming the book, runs approximately \$13 per book.

The Library of Congress appears to be the major source for paper preservation work. A number of research libraries are attempting to set up conservation projects but they have a difficult time finding enough trained conservators to staff them. Paper conservation is not taught in library science programs and the current need is for people who are familiar with the technical aspects of paper as well as the craft of paper conservation. The preservation office and laboratory of the Library of Congress employ about 28 staff members with the expertise to become a paper conservation

center, but time and funding do not permit the Library to treat materials from public and academic institutions. Many requests are received by the Library from here and abroad to train conservators in work with paper, and the Library has been of help in offering advice, but it does not have a teaching and training program of its own.

The great need for people knowledgeable in the field of paper conservation was painfully realized during the summer of 1972 when Hurricane Agnes left many libraries suffering from flood damage. Books damaged by the mud and water from the floods and from fire can be worked with and partially restored but this process takes skill and knowledge which only a few people possess. It is the training of people to assist us in preserving and taking care of irreplaceable books, paintings, and art which is needed today. We cannot as yet prevent natural disasters, but with skilled professionals we can lessen some of the damage caused by these disasters to our cultural heritage.

Pressures for conservation in all aspects of our lives are being felt today. The movement to improve our environment, to encourage a "green revolution" is probably the most publicized of these. But there is also a very strong movement to actively preserve our heritage. The number of people visiting museums has increased substantially over the past few years -- attendance nearly tripling during the decade of the 1960's. The interest of the public in the preservation and interpretation of our cultural, historic, and scientific heritage is currently being served by our museums but the increased attendance also has its effect on the very objects we wish to preserve.

Pollution in our cities, where most of the major museums are located, changes in temperature in the museums themselves, and the increased amounts of handling and physical effects of crowds of people take their toll among the objects not adequately protected. Not many institutions can afford the facilities to properly care for their collections and this problem, along with training the conservators themselves, is one of the major needs being faced by museums today.

It is hoped that by further developing opportunities for training in museum and library conservation, we will, at the same time, phase increased training into the development of on-going preservation work. Teaching must be accompanied by the development of operating establishments -- museums with objects needing conservation. One method of providing the needed facilities for training and for the conservation of the objects themselves is the regional center idea. A regional center is established which has the facilities for caring for the holdings of several museums, employing five to twelve conservators to serve a number of institutions. This centralizes the required equipment and space and enables museums which could not otherwise afford to employ their own conservators to benefit from the knowledge of these professionals. The idea has caught on in the United States and at least three regional centers are now operating and have received some support from the National Endowment for the Arts. Those receiving a grant during fiscal year 1973 include the Oberlin Inter-Museum Conservation Association, the Maine State Museum in Augusta, and the Portland Museum of Art in Portland, Oregon.

The Canadian Government has begun a major program of regional conservation centers across Canada and has recruited approximately 92 people to staff the centers. These professional conservators have come from all over the world, including the United States. The project, under the direction of Dr. Nathan Stolow, is to comprise five or six regional centers employing a number of conservators at each center. The centers will primarily care for art objects and books in government sponsored institutions.

In addition to the regional centers in the United States, almost every major museum, numbering about three dozen, has a conservation laboratory or a workshop where care and treatment of art objects can be performed. The work of conservation by a museum is carried on by both scientific laboratories, where analytical data is gathered, and in conservation workshops where the data and knowledge is actually applied to the object. Although many museums operate their own workshops, only a handful have actual scientific facilities with the equipment necessary to analyze and research data for conservation purposes.

The conservation of museum and library holdings is certainly not a new idea, but the interest that is being generated at this time is a new development. According to Mr. Sal Costabile of the American Association of Museums, the Association and its membership have placed conservation as a primary objective for the coming years. During the past year, the Association sponsored three workshops on museum conservation, each lasting one week, and the response to these seminars was so enthusiastic that the Association has scheduled an additional series for next year. The workshops,

held at Winterthur, Oberlin, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, were designed to inform museum personnel of basic needs for proper care of museum collections; to increase the awareness of museum professionals regarding conditions and procedures leading to deterioration and negligent damage within collections; and to acquaint museum professionals with information for basic emergency conservation techniques and to instill in them the knowledge of when to call in a qualified conservator.

The workshops were made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Endowment has played an increasingly important role in museum conservation. According to Mr. John Spencer, director of the Museum Programs division of the Endowment, grants are awarded for three conservation categories: the conservation of collections, training in conservation, and regional conservation centers. In fiscal year 1973, approximately 59 grants were approved for conservation activities, the majority of these being awarded for the conservation of collections. These grants totalled \$830,113 with an additional \$100,000 from the Treasury Fund to match private donations.

The National Arts Endowment launched the conservation and renovation of museums program in May of 1972, in recognition of the problems that a shortage of funds, coupled with a dearth of trained conservators, were causing for the preservation of America's cultural heritage. The response to the conservation and renovation programs surpassed all expectations, according to Mr. Spencer. The number of applications, representing a new public awareness to the needs of museums, was so great that the Endowment could not do justice to all the worthy projects. Of particular interest to me were two grants to the Rhode Island School of Design, at the Museum of Art

in Providence. One grant, of \$6,748, was for the conservation treatment of the British watercolors and drawings collection of the museum and another, of \$136,000 was for the installation of a climate control system. Both of these grants from the Endowment have been matched by private funds.

In 1971 the National Endowment for the Arts surveyed 450 selected museums to ascertain the scope of the conservation and renovation needs they were facing. The results, according to the Endowment, were unequivocal. Museum directors across the country placed a high priority on preservation. However, as public demand for services and the resulting pressures have grown, museums have had to turn their attention to the more visible public service programs of exhibitions, education projects, community programming, and children's projects. The crucial problems of preservation, they say, have not received the needed attention or funds. The National Endowment for the Arts has said that it would like to help focus national attention on the severe problems of conservation and to encourage private, corporate, and local and State support, as well as Federal support, for museum programs.

A current report, prepared by the National Research Center for the Arts in New York, should be published this summer and will contain a variety of statistical data on the state of museums today, their priorities and their needs. The American Association of Museums is also preparing a new financial and salary survey of museums which should indicate the changes in attendance patterns, salaries of museum personnel, sources of funding, and location of American museums.

The growing interest in conservation by both professionals in the museum and library field and the general public is perhaps a sign that the need for a professionally trained cadre of conservators has been recognized. The catastrophe to the Florentine Renaissance treasures during the 1966 flood created a crisis in the conservation world. The lesson of this tragedy created an awareness among all art lovers that action had to be taken to provide reasonable safety for works of art in world institutions and public collections and that programs of conservation training had to be implemented to insure some form of protection to our historic masterpieces. The future need for conservators in this country alone has been estimated by Mr. Charles Hummel, curator of the Winterthur Museum, to be between 300 and 600 over the period of the next ten years. A minimum of 370 professional conservators will be needed, he says, for the current demand, to take care of the number of conservators retiring, leaving the field, and the new positions opening with museums. This figure is far below the actual number of conservators needed to take care of works requiring attention throughout the country. The number projected for conservators who will actually be trained over the next ten years is estimated at 167.

Certainly there is enough work to be done to encourage more people to enter this field, and the interest already being expressed by prospective conservation students is impressive. The problems appear to be in the number of training institutions now operating and the lack of adequate facilities in which to carry out conservation operations. With concerted efforts on the part of all of us, perhaps we can make this Bicentennial period in our Nation's history especially meaningful by meeting the challenge of adequately preserving our American heritage.