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Conservation: Hearings, Reports (1966-1973): Speech 01

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STATEMENT OF ROBERT L. FELLER
BEFORE THE
SPECIAL SUBCOMMITTEE ON ARTS AND HUMANITIES
July 19, 1973

My name is Robert L. Feller. I am a chemist, Senior Fellow of the National Gallery of Art's Research Project on Artists' Materials located at Pittsburgh's Mellon Institute of Industrial Research, now part of Carnegie-Mellon University. For twenty-three years we have been conducting research on problems related to the deterioration of paints, pigments, and varnishes and to the development of new materials and methods for conservation and for the practicing artist.

Permit me to illustrate the role of a chemist in the field of conservation with an example from our own experience: Museum curators frequently telephone to state that they are considering the installation of a commercially available light filter to protect displayed objects from destructive effects of ultraviolet radiation. They usually wish to know if the filter under consideration is as effective as a more expensive alternative, if it will protect the particular objects in their collection, and if it will function in their particular circumstances. Obviously, to answer such questions, scientific tests must be made on materials that a conservator

will use, analyses must be made of the specific materials to be exhibited, and personal consultations must be arranged to evaluate the individual circumstances.

I believe it is fair to say that there are less than 100 chemists in the United States today who are devoting full time to the consideration of museum preservation problems, and that there are not 10 museums in the United States that have adequate facilities where conservation materials can be analyzed and tested.

My first point, therefore, is to call attention to the fact that a program of increased care of museum objects will require the increased support of chemical and physical laboratories to back up the work of the conservator.

In 1950 when the National Gallery of Art decided to establish a laboratory to satisfy its own needs for technical service, it took a highly significant step in insisting that the laboratory's investigations attack problems of broad concern not only of direct interest to itself, but to museum professionals everywhere. For example, we need light to see objects in a museum. Yet it is well known that light accelerates deterioration. For this reason, the Research Project decided to devote major attention to the deteriorating effects of light on varnishes, paints, pigments, dyes, and adhesives and to the development of materials that are highly resistant to deterioration by light.

Although our primary responsibility has been to conduct research, we fully appreciate that new information will do little good unless shared. Thus, while the Research Project undertakes no formal courses of training, we have consciously fostered the continuing education of conservators and curators through the preparation of a textbook on varnishes and solvents and more than 70 other publications. There have also been specific leaves of absence to lecture and teach. To facilitate communication throughout the profession, the National Gallery of Art has encouraged my service as an assistant editor to the internationally circulated Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts, and my service as editor of a bi-annual news and technical bulletin which we have published for 13 years at Pittsburgh on behalf of the American Institute for Conservation.

The second point that I wish to emphasize, then, is that journals, reviews, abstracts, newsletters and refresher courses are vital supplementary activities that are necessary in order to strengthen the base of trained conservators.

Thus, if expanded activities in the conservation of museum and archival collections is to be contemplated, I wish to take this opportunity to call attention to the analytical services needed to provide ongoing technical back-

up to the conservator and to the technical research required to contribute to improved methods of conservation in the future. In addition, refresher courses, texts, journals, and training films will also be needed to facilitate the training of persons already in practice as well as those just beginning.

I appreciate this opportunity to draw attention to the ways in which the National Gallery of Art has sought for more than two decades to meet some of these demands. With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I will submit appropriate documents for the record that will review and summarize the activities of the National Gallery of Art's Research Project. Thank you.