

1973

## Conservation: Hearings, Reports (1966-1973): Speech 02

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July 19, 1973

TESTIMONY submitted by Richard D. Buck, Director Emeritus of the Intermuseum Laboratory and Head of the Training Program, Intermuseum Conservation Association, Oberlin, Ohio, at Hearings on Museum Programs before the Special Senate Subcommittee on Arts and Humanities and the Subcommittee on the Smithsonian Institution.

Mr. Chairman:

I, Richard Buck, am pleased to have the opportunity of testifying this morning on the needs of American museums in the field of art conservation and in the training of personnel to serve in the field of art conservation.

I present this statement as the organizer of the Intermuseum Laboratory, and Director since its founding in December 1951. At the beginning of this month I retired from this position, but continue my position as Head of the Training Program of the Intermuseum Conservation Association at Oberlin, Ohio.

ICA was conceived and founded by the Directors of five Midwest museums. They wished through cooperative action to secure services in conservation commensurate with the operating budgets of their museums. ICA was incorporated not for profit in 1953. With growing awareness of the need for museum conservation, other museums have requested membership. The Association has grown to include the following:

- 1952 Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York
- Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio
- The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus, Ohio
- The Davenport Municipal Art Gallery, Davenport, Iowa
- The Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana
- The Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio
- 1954 Galleries of Cranbrook Academy of Art,  
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
- The Minneapolis Institute of Arts,  
Minneapolis, Minnesota
- The Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute,  
Utica, New York  
(Resigned 1970 to use nearby facilities at  
Cooperstown, N. Y.)

- 1959 The Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York
- 1960 The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio
- 1965 The Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, Ohio
- 1967 The University of Michigan Museum of Art,  
Ann Arbor, Michigan  
Elvehjem Art Center, The University of Wisconsin,  
Madison, Wisconsin
- 1968 The Taft Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio
- 1972 The Flint Museum of Art, Flint, Michigan
- 1973 The Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, Illinois  
(Membership pending completion of postal ballot now  
in progress)

The initial and pivotal service of our professional staff has been the gallery inspection of each collection. The inspection records are periodically updated, usually annually, to provide a current inventory of a collection's condition. These records carry colored tabs to indicate at a glance our special recommendations for care or treatment. The records remain at each museum as a readily available reference.

Recent data from these inspection records are as follows:

There are 4330 inspection records on file, covering the most valuable and vulnerable objects in each collection. Paintings predominate. There is partial coverage of prints and drawings, but little attention, as yet, to textiles, decorative objects, metals, stone, and ceramics. 884 of these record cards are tagged for major treatment. We define major treatment as such operations as structural reconsolidation, or clarification of design, requiring the special facilities and staff of a conservation laboratory. 337 records, usually already tagged for major treatment, are also cited for urgent or priority consideration. Urgency is recommended only in cases of emergency repair or the correction of serious structural defects. A painting disfigured by brown varnish would not, in this context, deserve priority treatment; one with loose paint would.

In the 21-year history of ICA between 800 and 1000 objects have been sent to the Laboratory for major treatment. Yet recent records show that 20% of the objects examined need major treatment, 8% urgently. In these museums which have been concerned with conservation, why have we not yet reached a plateau of maintenance?

A first reason may be that requests for services from our member museums have increased rapidly and outrun the capacity of the Laboratory. We have been handicapped by lack of space and by the lack of trained personnel. Need for an increased staff led us to initiate our training program in 1969.

A second reason appears to have been a lack of funds for conservation. This reason has been stated candidly by some of our member museums, and has been implied by the actions of some others. Although I have not personally been involved in the allocation of museum funds, I believe it is accurate to state that the cost of conservation is often viewed as a new expense, competing with established budgetary items - exhibition programs, publications, education, plant maintenance, and staff salaries.

Given the data on condition contained in inspection records, our member museums are establishing conservation as a predictable expense and entering the costs of conservation on their regular budgets. In doing so, these museums are increasing their already heavy financial burdens, or curtailing other programs and expenses.

A third general reason for the poor condition of objects in museum collections, although I believe it really less applicable to our member museums, is neglect through lack of understanding on the part of administrators of the behavior of materials and the environmental needs of collections. The final responsibility for the conservation of a collection, the decisions on the housing, the handling,

the maintenance of condition, and of the attendant costs, rests on the curator and the other policy makers, who include the director and the board of trustees. Formal training in the essentials of conservation to serve as a basic academic reference for the decisions a curator must make is rare. I know only of a recently initiated course at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and a course given by Dr. Robert Organ of the Smithsonian Institution. There should be more courses of similar nature and quality available to students in museology.

I am not alone in this opinion. It has been declared repeatedly in the past by several distinguished curators, and most recently and carefully in the draft of a paper on Curatorial Responsibility to Conservation, submitted last May by Sheldon Keck at a panel of the American Association of Museums considering the purposes to be served by the AAM Workshops on Conservation.

The curator and his associates occupy the keystone positions in conservation. Without his informed cooperation we may expect only the emergency action that is required after damage has been done and discovered, and can only guess at the true needs in conservation of American museums.

The figures I have submitted provide some indication of needs. They represent facts relating to museums aware of their conservation needs, and may indicate the status prevailing at institutions that carry on a conservation program. They are probably far more favorable than the status of collections with no conservation program. A very rough extrapolation would indicate that more than 20% of the objects in American art collections need major treatment, 8% urgently, and that the need is considerably greater in those art, historical, and archeological museums, and in libraries, which have very limited funds for conservation.