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## Conservation: Hearings, Reports (1966-1973): Speech 03

Sheldon Keck

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STATEMENT TO THE SENATE SPECIAL SUB-COMMITTEE ON ARTS AND HUMANITIES AND THE SENATE SUB-COMMITTEE ON THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION AT THE INVITATION OF SENATOR CLAIBORNE PELL, CHAIRMAN

by Sheldon Keck

Professor of Conservation, Cooperstown Graduate Programs and President of the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works

I am here primarily to address myself to questions regarding the conservation of the cultural and artistic holdings of our museums. Following graduation from Harvard College in 1932, and an all too short apprenticeship of one year in art conservation at the Fogg Art Museum, I have worked in the field of art conservation for almost forty years. Twenty-seven of those years, 1934-1961, were spent in the practice of preserving and restoring the collections at The Brooklyn Museum, a half-time position. The remainder of the time during those same years was occupied in servicing, together with my wife Caroline, collections of the Museum of Modern Art, Guggenheim Museum, Whitney Museum, Newark Museum, Colonial Williamsburg, Phillips Collection and private individuals. During World War II, in the years 1943-1946, I served in the Army of the United States. Almost two-third of that period were spent in the European Theatre in the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Section of the Army participating in the task of saving and protecting, where possible, the world's cultural heritage from the ravages of war. From 1961 until 1969, I participated in training art conservators at New York University's Conservation Center when, together with my wife, we organized a training program in conservation for the Cooperstown Graduate Programs which was activated in 1970, under the auspices of the State University College at Oneonta and the New York State Historical Association. It is on the basis of the foregoing that I feel qualified to offer comments on the state of conservation of our cultural holdings, the state of the art and science of conservation today and to make recommendations our government might pursue.

The Need and the Demand for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works

The task of preserving and restoring the millions of objects in America's 6,000 museums was described in the Belmont Report, America's Museums, The

American Association of Museums, 1968, as "enormous". There has been very little progress since that report was issued so that the need continues to be overwhelming.

Persistently budgets of most of these museums exclude provisions either for a staff conservator or for conservation services. This extraordinary disregard for accepting the expense for care of their possessions, irrespective of admitted cognizance of its necessity, has been documented by a recent survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts. Answering a prepared questionnaire, respondents proclaimed their crucial needs for preservation of collections but placed "conservation" as seventh in their financial priorities. These replies were received from institutions which accepted as normal and practical expenditures for the salaries of directors, curators, registrars, educators, bursars, exhibition specialists, as well as secretarial assistants for such. When it came to paying for the survival of collections, fundamentally their reason d'etre, they announced themselves penniless. Many of them reached the conclusion that perhaps a conservator should be added to their staff but invariably assumed he should be funded externally. Interestingly enough, the concept that a staff conservator should earn his keep by treating works of art from sources other than the serviced institution indicates that private individuals accept the reality of payment for preservation of their collections. The attitude of the majority of museums in this country shows complete ignorance of their own custodial responsibilities and of the monetary protection of their investment that conservation provides.

Of my knowledge I can count no more than 75 institutions (of the over 6,000 art museums, historical museums and libraries) which actually have on their premises a conservation workshop or laboratory. Included in this number of 75 are those museums serviced by the Intermuseum Laboratory at Oberlin, a regional center, some of whose wealthier members are counted twice since they not only receive services from Oberlin, but in addition maintain a conservation staff on their premises. Of these 75 institutions, policy in regard to staffing ranges from one conservator working one day a week to a staff of 20-25 conservators, specialists and technicians.

Naturally it is only large institutions, like the Smithsonian and Metropolitan Museum with massive and varied collections that can afford or require the latter.

Presently, because of the possibilities of financial aid in the form of matching grants from the N. E. A. a number of new regional centers, widely scattered across the United States, either are in process of being established or are in stages of planning. They are usually envisaged as institutional cooperative, collaborative or membership organizations which vary both in number of participants and in limits of perimeters within which they will operate. Some are metropolitan in scope, others limited to a single state, while others include a number of contiguous states. This kind of cooperative system appears to be the solution to the conservation problems of many smaller museums with limited funds, museums which have reached the realization that their collections are gradually and alarmingly deteriorating, and that they lack the know how to arrest it. If and when those centers presently planned are established, they will require trained professionals to staff them. When and if they are staffed and functioning we may begin to reduce the tremendous backlog described by the Belmont Report.

#### The State of Art Conservation as a Professional Discipline

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) with some 200 professional conservator Members was recently incorporated as a tax exempt professional business league in Washington, D. C. In addition to its Members are over 200 Associate and Institutional members interested in the purposes for which it was founded. The professional conservator Members are pledged to uphold and abide by the standards of practice specified in the Murray Pease Report of 1963, and the Code of Ethics for Art Conservators, copies of which are appended.\* Each of these documents had been adopted previously by the membership of the AIC's predecessor, the International Institute for Conservation - American Group (IIC-AG). Except for the younger Members who have had formal education in conservation, the majority of the professional Members of AIC have disparate educational backgrounds. They entered the field from apprenticeships which varied widely in quality and duration and are often channeled

\*Appendix 1

into a narrow area of specialization. However, they share a common goal, namely the conservation, not only of the physical-material structure of each work of art or history, but of its integrity as a document of its time and as an aesthetic expression of its creator to the end that our cultural heritage will present to future generations faithful and truthful evidence of our past. Some of them bring extensive skills and knowledge to the field, others considerably less. These Members are actively engaged in attempting to improve their capabilities and capacities through attendance at conferences, seminars and professional meetings, and through study of professional publications. They include, with no more than 3 or 4 exceptions, the conservation personnel of the 75 institutions mentioned above.

In addition to this number of 200, in every city in the United States with a population of 100,000 or more there are listed in the local Yellow Pages of the telephone book those who specialize in art restoration and artifact repair as a commercial venture. The quality of work performed by this number, which I would estimate in the thousands, varies gravely. A small percentage has adequate training and a high degree of skill. The conservation treatment they give is complete and of a high standard. The greater percentage, in my experience, is completely lacking in competence. What they are performing is often the grossest and most superficial kind of "restoration" without any consideration for the integrity of the work of art or for its future preservation. Among those in this category, who from time to time consulted me at the Brooklyn Museum, was a man who had answered an advertisement involving the sale of a frameshop and restoration business. The proprietor of the shop assured him that if he bought the business, the proprietor would teach him everything he needed to know about restoration in two weeks. The owner further asserted that it was not necessary at all to have any special 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. Unfortunately, many works of art which are of the quality or historical significance eventually to enter a museum collection have previously been "restored" in such a shop.

Only since 1960 have University centered training programs in art conservation begun to give to a new generation of conservators a common background of knowledge together with standards and experience in the basic techniques of preservation and restoration. It seems reasonable to me that as more of these younger professionals are trained, they will replace the number of unprepared, partially trained, persons who presently replace their retiring predecessors in either professional practice or in the commercial ventures described above. Expert, high quality training of dedicated professionals is essential, in fact a prerequisite, to the establishment of regional centers in the United States. Without trained personnel the centers cannot provide a true future for our past.

#### Training in Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works

A parallel is often drawn between the practice of medicine and the practice of art conservation. The physician is dedicated to the prevention, arrest and cure of disease to keep man in normal health and prolong his life. The art conservator strives to prevent, reduce and reverse deterioration in the body of a work of art so that it may continue to express the spirit of its creator and inspire the viewer. Unlike the physician, the conservator receives no help from a living organism which may be encouraged to repair and renew itself within its lifespan. The conservator treats inanimate matter, incapable of self-renewal once its material structure is attacked by agents of deterioration. However, the object of his remedial attentions is not doomed to die at a definite point in time. It has been said that a doctor may bury his mistakes but a conservator is condemned to have his outlive him in rebuke. The death toll in artifacts is from the ravages of environment and the acts of man. Only circumstances of isolated security permitted paintings from 3000 B.C. to survive in Egyptian tombs: not a single picture by an ancient Greek painter has come down to us. In our sorely polluted and vibrating world all our best efforts will be needed to insure the survival of the heritage we possess. The parallel between the medical profession and that of the art conservator is an apt one: both devote themselves to preserving and prolonging what is of utmost importance to us - our lives

and the expressions of our culture. These are no casual commitments. Special training and education for the practice of medicine has unquestionably been accepted for over 200 years. Only recently has it begun for conservation.

I believe that formal university programs designed to give students a thorough, rounded training in the principles and professional practices of conservation of historic and artistic works is the superior system of preparation for this vocation. The alternative, apprenticeship or on-the-job training no matter how carefully controlled, cannot presume to encompass the particular combinations of science, art history, technology, and manual dexterities which provide the basic framework for critical and objective competence. Only in a university setting, where departmental disciplines may be crossed and the wealth of varied instrumentation and expertise spread before the novitiate, may the range of requisites be fulfilled. It should be possible today to educate practitioners in conservation far better prepared for their task than any of their predecessors. This is exactly what those of us teaching in the field are striving to do.

The first formal American training program in art conservation was established in 1960 at New York University. It has space and faculty to train 4-5 students per year in a four-year period. Two other graduate training programs added in 1970 are at Cooperstown, New York, and at Oberlin, Ohio. These train per year respectively 10 and 3 students in a three-year period. In addition, the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard has established a three-year apprenticeship curriculum on a graduate level for some three students per year, but apparently without academic recognition by the university. As of 1973, the four functioning programs have a capacity of graduating a maximum annual total of 21 trained practitioners.

A recent informal survey by the University of Delaware and the Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum of museums and private organizations in the United States and Canada, indicates that over the next ten years a minimum of 371 openings in conservation will become available due to retirements, death and newly created positions. On the basis of the figures from the four training programs above described, the maximum production of trained conservators during

that decade will be 210. If we are to overcome the backlog described in the Belmont Report, if we are to staff the several projected regional centers which are surely required to reduce this backlog of deteriorated artifacts, we must increase to some extent, without loss in standards, the number of persons being trained. The present programs are confined to their present quotas by space limitations and by the low student-faculty ratio, in the nature of 5:1 to 1:1, required in this kind of instruction.

#### Recommendations

1. In order to increase the number of trained practitioners by 10 per year, which would add 100 in a decade, I strongly recommend that financial support be found in one or more of the government agencies for the graduate program in museum conservation which has been jointly planned and will be administered by the University of Delaware and the Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum. A description of the proposed program and its admission requirements and curriculum is appended.\* The facilities and faculty are available and ready to go. Only lacking is the funding.

This program will in no way compete with established programs, but happily will augment them with teaching specializations and experience not readily available elsewhere. The expertise is broad, but especially strong in the instrumental analysis of art materials and in the conservation of furniture, textiles, costumes and the decorative arts. In making this recommendation I would like to emphasize that in this field, experienced, knowledgeable faculties are very difficult to assemble. Conservators who are outstandingly talented and skillful practitioners do not necessarily make good teachers. Under no circumstances would I suggest that any other program be established except where the faculty is at hand and known to be competent in the subject of conservation. And I therefore reiterate that, except for funding, the University of Delaware-Winterthur Program in Museum Conservation is organized, equipped and able to instruct with standards second to none.

\*Appendix 2



It is my belief, also, that if the University of Delaware-Winterthur Program can be financed and initiated, and if the existing programs are given continuing support, the requirements of the United States in the field of conservation can be met. A further proliferation of more programs, however, will surely lead to dilution of quality because of the scarcity of available, qualified faculties.

2. On June 15 and 16, at Winterthur, Delaware, a conference on conservation training with a wide ranging agenda was attended by faculty and university representatives of all the programs mentioned above. Also in attendance were representatives of the N. E. A., National Museum Act, Smithsonian Institution and a number of private foundations. Among the needs identified and agreed upon by a consensus of those present were for a "central reference point", "an established arrangement for interchange" and for "long-range careful planning on a national and perhaps international level" in regard to training, research and the diffusion of knowledge in the field of art conservation. It was unanimously agreed and recommended that an Advisory Board or Institute be created - the membership of which should include, but not be limited to, those members of the International Centre Committee of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation which have a major interest in museum conservation. I would like to recommend as attendee at the recent conference and as President of AIC, that on the creation of this Advisory Board or Institute, support be granted under the National Museum Act for expenses of meetings and the modest staff required to make the work of the Board effective.

3. Finally, I would like to recommend continued, and where possible, expanded financial assistance to the conservation training programs for fellowship grants to students. The costs of undergraduate studies today are so enormous that little self-support either by the student or from his family remains for graduate work. Conservation training, like conservation practice, is extremely time consuming, leaving practically no extra time to the student for "working his way". If government funding to the programs for fellowship grants could be allocated over a longer time

period, 3-5 years, instead of one year as at present, faculties could devote more time to instruction and less for fund raising. A most urgent requirement of the training programs in conservation is fellowship funding for needy and deserving students.

#### Conclusion

May I express in closing my gratitude to and esteem for the work of the Senate Special Sub-Committee on Arts and Humanities and the Senate Special Sub-Committee on the Smithsonian Institution. Aid from the National Museum Act has not only benefited many museums but has directly assisted training programs in conservation. For instance, our program at Cooperstown, New York, has been the recipient of three grants from the National Museum Act: on a matching basis with serviced institutions, we received \$12,750 for 1972 summer work projects (an eight-week work assignment for trainees); \$23,000 for 1972 internships (a full year of service); and \$31,000 toward 1973 internships. In these periods of our training curriculum, students learn under supervision to face and solve the myriad problems encountered in day to day preservation at museums and historic houses which they will have to face during their future careers as responsible professionals. That portion of their cost-of-living stipends allocated under this Act has been already employed toward conservation of our national patrimony, as well as helping to round out training with realities of practice. I enthusiastically support reauthorization of the National Museum Act and sincerely hope that it and the Museum Services Act will be accorded favorable response in the 93rd Congress. Both of these measures will give the people of the United States invaluable assets and serve to deter the inroads of depreciation on our cultural and artistic wealth. We possess a great heritage, our children and their children should not be deprived of their rightful inheritance.