

University of Rhode Island

DigitalCommons@URI

Conservation: Hearings, Reports,
Correspondence (1971-1973)

Education: National Endowment for the Arts
and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996)

2-22-1973

Conservation: Hearings, Reports, Correspondence (1971-1973): Speech 05

R. M. Organ

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_18

Recommended Citation

Organ, R. M., "Conservation: Hearings, Reports, Correspondence (1971-1973): Speech 05" (1973).
Conservation: Hearings, Reports, Correspondence (1971-1973). Paper 39.
https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_18/39https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_18/39

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Conservation: Hearings, Reports, Correspondence (1971-1973) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

R.M. Organ, revised 22 Feb 1973

In order to be truly effective a National Institute for Conservation of Artefacts should differ from any other artefact-conserving activity in the following respects:

- 1.1 It must be competent in the conservation of all varieties of artefact that may interest Americans, namely: pre-historic to contemporary, selected from all cultures, primitive to space-age.
- 1.2 It must be a repository for all scientific and technical information necessary for competency in these many varieties of conservation.
- 1.3 It must be practising and steadily improving all of the scientific and practical skills necessary, researching new methods and materials when required.
- 1.4 It must be able to transmit to any enquirer in the nation, with a minimum of delay: a) the factual data, or b) a facsimile of the skills, or c) the practical experience, that he wishes to acquire.
- 1.5 In the course of its operations it should respect any confidences of its clients, not disclosing certain non-technical information without specific approval from the persons concerned.

CONSEQUENCES

2.1 The Institute must have elements actively practicing all possible forms of conservation. Only by constant experience is it possible to become and remain competent in the special expertise blended of skill, scientific knowledge and artistic or aesthetic feeling that is called "conservation". The corollary to this is that the Institute should be located at a center where large collections of all varieties of artefact are in use already and to which scholars, questions, and other artefacts naturally gravitate (costs are always lower and results more effective if paths and processes that are natural or have already been established can be used)

2.2 The Institute must have an extensive library covering: (i) conservation publications world-wide; (ii) scientific papers relating to processes of deterioration of all the many materials of which artefacts may be made; (iii) commercial products which satisfy the Institute's specifications for long-term compatibility with artefacts; (iv) commercial products of possible interest to enquirers as materials or tools satisfactory for temporary association with artefacts during treatment; (v) all reports of the Institute's own practical work.

The library must be more than book-storage. Input of data to it will come from published sources, from technical conferences and from internal and external reports. One of the operations of the library will be to re-cast data into a form suitable for immediate access, preserving reference to its source and date. Another action might be to stimulate publications helpful to its own objectives, for example, by supporting publication of Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts.

2.3 The Institute must encompass many skills, ranging from scientific methods of examination and authentication to relevant handicrafts. Skills belong to an individual and are difficult to communicate. Many of the practical skills needed in conservation are vanishing because they are not used. The Institute must keep skills in use. It must therefore be constantly working on artefacts, not be merely an assemblage of intellectuals. It should maintain each active skill doubly-manned, the second being a younger person, and the skills should be photographically or video-tape recorded so that a facsimile of the skill can be provided to enquirers as an introduction. If the practical work is being done properly, using the up-to-date information stored in the institute, then automatically it should be to the highest standards and making use of currently available materials. Furthermore, frequent internal use will serve as a continuing test of the utility of information held in storage ("internal feedback" continuously refining the quality of material available for output). In fact, any specific internal report should serve as a model to an enquirer after methods and materials in the same field.

In the course of constant practice, which of necessity includes preliminary examination, information about artefacts will accumulate that will be of great interest to curators. This could be made available on demand, subject to the approval of the owner or the curator of the artefact concerned.

2.4 The library must have superlatively good systems for access to data and for communication, internal and external. The information stored in it MUST be accessible to enquirers nation-wide, not only to those within-house and to the wealthy who can pilgrimage to it and remain to study. Ideally, the information should be dispensed by an expert who understands the enquirer's problem and can filter out the less-immediately useful material. Unfortunately, the diversity of educational background of the entire field of enquirers is wide and the number of experts available is severely limited. Therefore this ideal cannot be realized immediately. Instead, communication must be so rapid that the enquirer can easily react to a first general reply with a refined request, the process being readily repeatable until he has the best answer the Institute can give to the best-defined request the enquirer can make. The entire process can be educative to both terminals.

Transmission of data to the standards formulated above would require a nation-wide high-capacity transmission network able to fill an enquirer's TV screen with, first, preliminary information that enables him to refine his question and then, successively, with more and more precise data until he has the answer required. This system does not yet exist but is in many people's minds. At present the telephone and letter-writing serve as the channels available. Material must therefore be put into and held in a form amenable to these methods of communication, available for immediate access and transmission.

Furthermore, some system of feed-back must be established. Every enquirer should be asked later about the utility of the data given, whether he would like to add to it or vary it as a result of his experience, or whether the method worked for him (in practice, for reasons of economy, this request will be constructed at the time of best-reply but will only be forwarded after some suitable interval of time in a prepared form to simplify reply. Feed-back will allow the Institute's reactions to be refined, especially for suitability to various areas (availability of materials or of local conservators, for example) and personalities. It will also mitigate possible antagonisms:

the user will learn that he has contributed in return, that this is no "Father-knows-best" organisation. In fact his work can be used with proper acknowledgement to help others in the same way as other more scientifically-controlled work inside the Institute. Properly-used, feedback can result in snowballing competence and can raise standards in all areas.

Facsimiles of the skills can be transmitted at present only as tape-slide descriptions or as sound-films. In due course video-tapes will become replayable. An audio-visual department will therefore be necessary to the Institute.

Transmission of true skills can only be achieved by imitation and practise. The Institute must therefore have work in progress (another reason for plentiful local sources of artefacts) and be prepared to admit apprentices and to teach both the theory and practice of the skill they wish to develop, broken down, of course, into assimilable small portions and practised to perfection on expendable material before application to artefacts of importance.

Sources of data-input must always be acknowledged in the output, both because this is the proper procedure among scholars and because it facilitates evaluation by the user.

NEEDS AND THEIR SATISFACTION

3.1 Almost all possible forms of conservation are already in progress in the Smithsonian, for example: ethnological - NMNH; artistic - FAPG, Hirshhorn, FGA; machinery - NMHT, NAFMAB; primitive - NMNH; space-age - NASM; variety - CAL; and at the Library of Congress - ordinary and rare books and flat paper. A National Institute could very well be located in Washington.

3.2 Library facilities such as Smithsonian Libraries, including CAL's specialised collection, and the Library of Congress are established and much used in Washington.

3.3 Conservation skills are being practised actively and thoughtfully in Washington, where a Regional Conservation Guild with 130 members meets monthly to improve its members' skills and where laboratories exist already or are being built for: art (FAPG, NGA, Hirshhorn), for textiles (Textile Museum, NMHT), for instruments (NMHT), for musical instruments (NMHT), for anthropological artefacts (NMNH), for Oriental objects (FGA), for aerospace artefacts (NASM); and for objects generally (CAL). Such a variety of skills is not being exercised anywhere else, nor being tested with new problems every day. Clearly, all of them should be incorporated into a National Institute.

3.4 The handling and storage of large volumes of data is already in progress at the Smithsonian's Information Systems Division. It is probable that one of its tested programs is adaptable to the special needs of an Institute of the kind described here.

Furthermore, Smithsonian's Office of Museum Programs is already recording skills for wide diffusion. So also have other bureaus, such as the Freer.

A functioning Institute can be created economically out of existing fabric as follows.

a) Register individual workers as "Institute-Conservators" or "Institute-Scientists". Registration should be conditional upon agreement to: become part of the Institute communication network, installing whatever terminal equipment is needed (perhaps initially a transmitter and receiver of facsimiles would suffice); use the Institute's information library for

Dillon Ripley - leaving June 7.

Circulate 796 to EXEC. agencies

The difference between an Institute-Registrant and a casual enquirer would be that the I-R is professionally competent, adequately equipped, in full-time operation, able to train in particular units of skill, and is paid for his Institute work. (Some private conservators may be eligible as I-Rs) Every user of the Institute would be expected to provide the feed-back considered essential for the system to operate effectively. Ultimately, users may be charged a fee proportional to their time on-line withdrawing data.

An Institute as described above would be a truly National system and the first in the world, for "those who must be first!", to which all would contribute - a ghostly college with its ectoplasm emanating from the Mall!