Arts Trade Association Dinner: Speech Research (1963-1967): Article 06

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natural secondary development has been a growing awareness of the museum’s on to maintain its holdings in sound physical condition. Technical details to frequently included in the publications of art scholarship. Public interest problems of conservation* has been stimulated by such exhibitions as the paintings at the London National Gallery, and questions of museum policy field have become subjects of popular debate.

there can be no doubt that the air needs clearing over the field of art conserv- and the free expression of divergent opinions may help to clarify funda-. and to indicate common grounds for agreement on further progress. But always some risk in public debate that a natural momentum may carry it region of all-out controversy. In such an atmosphere a spirit of partisanship ily develop, and endanger the hoped-for benefits of open discussion.

seems unhappily evident that a mild situation of this nature has developed spect to so-called policies in the cleaning of paintings. To whatever extent be true, this is both unnecessary and unfortunate. These comments are ed by the feeling that the schism exists chiefly in the context of the contro- rather than in the realities of actual practice, and that the time is ripe for a start of effort toward friendly and constructive co-operation. The problems of examination and treatment are generally established on an singly sound footing, with the employment of modern technical means for lining materials, for defining their relationship, and for establishing their ion. These problems have never been properly solved by empiricism or by tical debate. There would seem to be scant excuse for falling back upon such ds now.

Museum conservators are all dedicated to the sound preservation of museum s. None of them would knowingly injure a work of art. They can be expected the considerable means now available for avoiding error, and, most important to govern their operations according to the conditions and requirements of dual cases. The descriptions of technical operations that have been published time to time strongly suggest that the great majority would follow very similar s in the treatment of any specific object. Above all, they know very well the of dependence on dogma in the laboratory. But dogma seems to be a common odity of the present controversy. It is apparent in a tendency to classify institutions according to extremes of policy, none of which is, or could be, ed consistently in actual practice. It is reflected in published articles which ngle cases, isolated quotations, and personal aesthetic theories to support road generalizations. It is most evident in the inherent implication that technicrations can be conducted successfully according to arbitrary doctrines. Such ic exercises may do little immediate harm in themselves. But this situa- t continue very long without unfortunate consequences.

Over-emphasis on policies of cleaning may tend to draw attention away from more complex and exigent problems of fundamental conservation. It will

* "Conservation", as used in this article, refers to the preservation, restoration and repair of museum objects, by scientific and technical knowledge and iuls, as practised by specially trained experts who act as scientific advisors to curators.

It is necessary to note this technical definition of "conservation", especially in the French text, because of the confusion arising from the differing French and English connotations of the word. The French word "conservation" as applied to museums has a broader sense than in English; "Conserva- vateur" is exactly equivalent to "Curator" in English, it implies primarily custodial responsibility. Ed.
Certainly foster an already common and misleading impression that the soundness of a conservator's practices can be judged by personal reaction to the visual results. It has already resurrected a notion that has been responsible for unchecked deterioration of countless works of art—that it is safer to leave them untouched than to "risk" injury by treatment. In fact the general tenor of the controversy harks back to the days when restoration was obscured behind the myths of secret formulas and personal virtuosity, and custodians had some consequent justification for nervous uncertainty about the results. But there is an even more serious and fundamental danger. We cannot escape the logic that attack on the condition of objects in a museum is in fact an attack on the judgment and professional competence of its entire administration, including the trustees. Conceivably the theories of non-technical doctrinaires might gather enough popular support to persuade trustees that they ought to impose categorical restrictive policies upon those responsible for the welfare of their collections. The further dangers in such a situation are fairly apparent. Few critics with the future of museums at heart would wish to see any such precedent established.

It should be evident that the only real safeguard of a painting under treatment is the integrity of competent operators. It follows logically that museum officials, having secured the services of such persons, should do all in their power to foster and protect that integrity. There is much at stake in this matter. The recent considerable advances in museum conservation, and the present high standards of accomplishment have grown out of a large amount of systematic research and study of methods by conservators and their associates. A strong sense of professional responsibility has motivated this effort. Although largely self-generated, it has flourished under the enlightened support and cooperation of various institutions. The imposition of blanket restrictions on details of practice would deny the validity of that approach and would imply lack of appreciation of present standards. Moreover such restrictions would create precedent for an administrative regimentation that would be potentially responsive to uninformed popular pressure. In such an atmosphere there would be little incentive for further independent efforts toward progress, or even toward maintenance of individual standards upon which, nevertheless, museums must ultimately depend.

This is not to suggest that conservators be left wholly to their own devices. Obviously every institution has need for a clear pattern of administrative and departmental procedure, with responsibilities sharply defined and fields of authority logically delimited. But such a pattern must be founded on the axiom that each work of art is a case by itself to be treated individually according to its unique requirements. Formal regulations must be designed to protect the processes of conservation from doctrinaire regimentation. At the same time they can, and should, provide the museum with adequate records and other systematic means for demonstrating that these processes are carried out in accordance with sound technical practice. There is nothing particularly difficult or novel about such a programme. In many fields involving institutions and professional employees its general principles have proved both necessary and successful. They are, in theory at least, illustrated in the conservation programmes of most of the museums associated with this controversy. It is to be hoped that in them can be found a common basis for renewed agreement on primary aims, and promise of a return to a co-operative approach to the broad problems of conservation.

As a sort of appendix to these generalities, it may do no harm to describe briefly a pattern of administration which has operated effectively at a large American museum. This is done hesitantly, and without any intent to imply perfection. It is put forward simply in the belief that within its structure can be found the outlines of a sound philosophy.

The work of conservation at this museum is conducted by trained persons, who are regular members of the staff. The department has full curatorial rank by authority of the trustees, and operates independently under the Director of the museum. In matters specifically related to the physical condition and welfare of works of art the final decision rests with the head of the conservation department.
All decisions are of course subject to review and approval by the Director. The operating routine includes written reports of laboratory examination with intended treatment, formal approval by a staff executive committee before each operation, and full photographic and written records before, during, and after each operation. All operations are open to continuous observation by the curator, whose responsibility in the laboratory is always welcomed. The principle of joint responsibility is inherent in the entire pattern of procedure, and that responsibility is permanently impressed in the records.

It would seem that these policies carry with them inherent safeguards against errors of judgment or of inadvertence. There is some reason to believe that they are the result of a dependable variety of safeguards. With the assurance of mature professional responsibility, codes and doctrines become superficial and unnecessary. Without assurance they are but feeble protection.

The thesis of these remarks can easily be summarized. All museums share the burden to preserve their collections. The task is ever increasing. None can hope to shoulder it in solitary independence. The problem can be met only by the mobilization of co-operative effort, by pooling resources, sharing technical data, and by concentration on common fundamentals. Museums simply cannot afford the time and effort to bicker over doctrines, or to undermine the stature of conservators by imposing dogmatic regulations on technical practice.

The foregoing, emphasis has been laid upon the need for institutional action to further the cause of conservation. The burden must obviously be shared by the conservators.

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30. Vittore Carpaccio, The Meditation on the Passion.*

30. Vittore Carpaccio, Meditazione sulla Passione.**

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* Photographs nos. 30 a 34: Modern museum laboratories are equipped to solve most problems in the surface treatment of paintings. For example, on the Metropolitan Museum’s Meditazione sulla Passione by Vittore Carpaccio, an ancient varnish was found to lie over a Mantegna signature. Infrared photography showed a Carpaccio signature under the other. According to its physical characteristics the varnish might have been an original coating, but laboratory investigation demonstrated that it was later than the false Mantegna signature.

** Photographs nos. 30 a 34: Des laboratoires modernes sont équipés dans les musées pour résoudre la plupart des problèmes que pose la manière de traiter la surface des tableaux. Par exemple, sur la peinture de Vittore Carpaccio qui se trouve au Metropolitan Museum, Meditazione sulla Passione, on a découvert qu’un ancien vernis recouvrait une signature de Mantegna. Des photographies prises aux rayons infra-rouges ont révélé la présence de la signature de Carpaccio sous la précédente. D’après les caractéristiques de sa composition, le vernis aurait pu être un revêtement original, mais l’examen au laboratoire a montré qu’il était postérieur à la fausse signature de Mantegna.
31. The false Mantegna signature, under old varnish.*

32. The signature photographed by infra-red.*

32. Signature photographée aux rayons infrarouges.*

* See footnote p. 235.
* Voir note p. 235.

themselves, and it is pertinent to ask how they are prepared to meet this responsibility. A partial answer to that question may be found in the Internationale Institute for the Conservation of Museum Objects. This organization, now established under British law as an international non-profit corporation, is composed of museum conservators and other professional museum persons who are skilled in their profession and able to further the progress of conservation. The founding membership represents many museums in Europe and America. Its basic objectives are (a) to develop programmes for the exchange and dissemination of technical information; (b) to further specific projects of investigation; (c) to encourage the establishment of programmes for technical training; (d) to define and maintain standards in the practice of conservation; (e) to provide services of consultation for subscribing institutions.

More than one effort has been made in the past to provide means for dealing with these problems. In 1934 a committee was appointed by the Association of American Museums to report on methods for examining paintings. The International Office of Museums of the League of Nations held conferences on the subject of art conservation, and much of the findings have been published in Museum News and elsewhere. Papers on art conservation are regularly presented at meetings of the Association of American Museums and are subsequently published in the Museum News. Periodically, a quarterly journal, Technical Studies in the Field of the Fine Arts, was published by the Department of Conservation at the Fogg Museum of Art. Presently the International Council of Museums is conducting a survey of museum practices in conservation. The intent of all these undertakings has been admirable. Some progress has undoubtedly resulted, and more can be anticipated. On the
valuable work has been wasted in the past for lack of a permanent
devoted to the practical application and systematic continuance of
ready made. The ICOM Commission on the Care of Paintings can aid
greatly on the curatorial and administrative level, but its present field
limited to paintings, and its organization is not designed to carry out
technical programmes of the International Institute for Conservation.
is primarily professional, and it seems certain that an organization for
must be professional in character. In order to continue as an active
must derive permanent impetus from the experience, knowledge, and
principle of those actively engaged in the practice of museum
The problems in this field, whether technical or theoretical, cannot be
ternal ratiocination, or by isolated non-technical investigations and
seums should depend upon and encourage the conservators themselves
need. The International Institute for the Conservation of Museums
ents itself as a means to that end. As a continuing professional
it will be in a position to give regular advice and information on
ervation to individual institutions, and at the same time to co-operate
odies such as museums' associations, Unesco, and ICOM. Under these
there is good hope for outstanding progress in the field of museum

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33. The signature area after cleaning.*
34. Zone de la signature après le dévernissage*.

33. The signature area by infra-red photographs.*
34. Zone de la signature photographie aux rayons
infra-rouges*.

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* See footnote p. 235.
* Voir note p. 235.