The Future of Preservation Awareness and Action in the Arts

A Green Paper

submitted by the

American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC)

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“The preserver, restorer, conserver is the indispensable, the primary living link in the human chain that connects yesterday’s accomplishments with tomorrow’s possibilities.”

James H. Billington, Librarian of Congress

Vision for the Future

AIC and its Foundation envision a world that values the preservation of artistic and cultural materials and views the conservation profession as indispensable to increasing knowledge, preventing damage, and ensuring the longevity of our shared cultural heritage for future generations.

We envision a world where artists and conservators are in constant dialog, recognizing that the arts—in homes, museums, and galleries—ground us in our past, provide a sense of community through a shared heritage, allow us to reach out and understand others, and help us envision a common future.

AIC and its Foundation envision a future where citizens are empowered at a grassroots level to help guide the conservation of the heritage that surrounds them and in which preservation is used to create community.

AIC and its Foundation envision a collaborative development of conservation theory and practice that will incorporate many voices—artists, conservators, art historians, material scientists, philosophers, collection managers, arts administrators, and critics.

We envision a time when allocating resources for preservation will be considered integral to the process of discovering, creating, studying, and exhibiting our artistic and cultural heritage.

Challenges to Achieving Our Vision

The challenges, the obstacles faced, are great. Preservation is a small voice in a loud world that embraces the newest and the fastest and where material goods are considered increasingly disposable.
While advocacy for the arts is growing stronger each year, incorporation of a strong message of the importance of preservation lags behind. Public understanding, appreciation, and support of preservation and conservation is essential, yet the difficulties in achieving ongoing support through building awareness and providing education can be overwhelming. Making an effective case to support the preservation of our artistic and cultural heritage to legislators and their constituents is a huge task—and one beyond AIC and its current resources.

There is tremendous need to tackle the problems in preserving contemporary art. Artists are using new media and many do not consider the long-term preservation of their creations. The literature on the conservation of contemporary art is in its infancy. Conservators working with contemporary art must balance sometimes conflicting ethical demands in preserving both the work and the original artistic intent. Artists must be convinced that engaging in a dialogue with conservators is important to their own work and our culture at a whole.

In order for individuals and communities to take part in the dialogues surrounding the preservation of cultural heritage important to them, they must have a good basic understanding of what they can do on their own and what professionals can accomplish.

The world of conservation is changing and a successful transition to a new paradigm for preservation cannot be accomplished in a silo.

Without proper stewardship, a huge amount of cultural heritage will be lost. Left alone, artistic creations will chemically or physically deteriorate. Yet, the lack of sufficient funding in preservation and conservation is a constant. In addition to insufficient funding for preservation projects, not enough resources are being dedicated to primary research needed to advance the field. In order to develop standards for treatment, research is necessary into both the materials used to create art (particularly new and unconventional materials), as well as those used for conservation treatments. Federal agencies and private foundations are not yet positioned to provide significant ongoing funding for conservation research, and currently there is not united voice from the arts community or end users of conservation services on the importance of funding these projects and initiatives.

Remedial conservation treatment will always be like a drop in the bucket in preserving our nation’s cultural heritage. The focus on preventive care and maintenance is not currently as strong as it must be.

**Strategies to Overcome Challenges**

Conservators are trained to meld art with science, and they have the skills necessary to bridge multiple areas of expertise. Yet, alone, conservators do not have the power to change in significant ways the environment within which they work. We propose a multi-pronged strategy that encompasses strong collaborations that take advantage of evolving technology and the creativity of the art world.
We propose a series of public dialogs with artists, curators, scientists, art historians, and conservators that result in ideas for building collaborative initiatives. At the same time, information and ideas will be shared electronically, particularly through social media sites, on an ongoing basis, to continue to inspire new efforts.

We propose partnerships between the conservation community and arts agencies and cultural institutions to develop initiatives promoting preservation of our artistic heritage. A critical goal of these initiatives is to capture the attention and support of artists, the public, and, importantly, legislators.

We propose strong federal and state advocacy efforts in the arts that embrace preservation as a central component. The arts are essential in maintaining the fabric of our communities, opening minds and hearts to shared experiences. Only by supporting the preservation of this artistic and cultural legacy can future generations be inspired by today’s creativity.

We welcome your comments!