

## Position Paper on Conservation and Preservation in Collecting Institutions

To create a collection, to inherit one, or to be given oversight of a collection, is also to create, inherit or accept a great responsibility. The challenge for collecting institutions is to meet the charge of stewardship and to assure that their valued collections, whether works of art, historical documents, scientific specimens, library collections or other forms of material culture, are preserved for future generations.

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) is committed to meeting this challenge through productive partnerships with all collecting institutions. Toward this goal the AIC is pleased to provide the

*Position Paper on Conservation and Preservation in Collecting Institutions.* This paper is meant to capture the essential reasons why the inclusion and support of conservation within collecting institutions is an integral part of stewardship and a necessity within any institution's stated mission.

With the *Position Paper on Conservation and Preservation in Collecting Institutions*, the AIC strives to address the ever-increasing conservation needs of collections across the United States; to encourage stronger commitment to conservation within cultural institutions; and to define the appropriate conservation resources needed to support the preservation and proper long term care of collections. As well as serving as a guide to preservation practice in collecting institutions, the position paper can be used as a tool for securing additional support for conservation and preservation efforts. It is hoped that the paper will act as a springboard for further initiatives, constructive dialogue and direct collaboration among all the professions whose responsibility it is to manage and care for our rich cultural heritage.

### **What is AIC's position on conservation and preservation in collecting institutions?**

Every institution has a responsibility to safeguard the collections that are entrusted to it. That responsibility includes incorporating preservation and conservation awareness into all facets of the institution's activities so as to ensure the long-term preservation of its collections. The institution's commitment will be reflected in the accurate assessment of condition, thorough and comprehensive planning, and the assignment of appropriate financial resources.

### **Why are sound conservation policies and practices important?**

In any collecting institution the collections are of primary importance as they are intrinsic to the meaning of the institution and define its unique identity. Preservation of collections is fundamental to the mission of a collecting institution and this should be reflected in all planning and decision-making processes. The responsible care of collections requires sound conservation policies and practices based on a thorough understanding of the range of materials in the collection and the physical needs of different types of objects.

## **How does an institution demonstrate preservation awareness and well-integrated conservation policies?**

- Preservation and conservation of the collections is clearly articulated and supported in the mission statement of the institution.
- A conservation plan and clearly articulated policies, developed in consultation with conservation professionals, that specifically address the safe and responsible care and use of collections.
- The incorporation of conservation issues and concerns into ongoing institution-wide planning and decision-making processes as well as expansion and new construction plans. This should be accomplished in consultation with conservation professionals.
- A conservation staff if resources allow, or well established relationships with consulting conservation professionals who have expertise in specific material types or issues appropriate to the collections.
- An emergency preparedness and response plan that is regularly reviewed and updated by conservation professionals and other appropriate staff.
- Conservation or preservation grants (as well as other forms of support) that have been routinely sought for projects beyond the museum's resources.
- An annual budget appropriation, appropriate to the size of the institution, for preservation and conservation of the collection.

## **How does preservation awareness influence activities within an institution?**

Every level of the institution's governing authority and staff benefit from an awareness of their role in preserving the collections in their care. Evidence of this commitment will be manifest in daily involvement with the care and use of collections. A collecting institution that is focused on preservation issues will:

- Monitor and maintain environmental conditions within established parameters in all exhibitions, storage, and study areas. Environmental concerns include temperature and relative humidity, light levels and exposure times for light sensitive materials, airborne particulates and pollutants, and monitoring for evidence of mold or insect infestation.
- Regularly conduct general and object specific condition assessments of the collection. Whenever possible this should be done in consultation with a conservation professional.
- Maintain secure and well-managed storage areas and use materials to house all collection objects according to prevailing professional standards and in consultation with conservation professionals.
- Provide training on the proper care and handling of collection materials for all appropriate staff members and volunteers with the input of conservation professionals. Additional opportunities for professional development in the area of collections care are advisable.
- Comply with currently accepted exhibition and loan policies and practices to ensure the safety of objects on display and during transit. Areas of particular importance are the documentation of condition for all objects before, during, and after the loan period; the use of stable materials and finishes for exhibit construction; adequate security and stable environmental conditions during transit and while on exhibition; and sound packing procedures and materials

## **Does your institution need help in developing a conservation plan or in locating conservation resources?**

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) is the national membership organization of conservation professionals dedicated to preserving art and historic artifacts of our cultural heritage for future generations. AIC advances the practice and promotes the importance of the preservation of cultural property by establishing and upholding professional standards, and coordinating the exchange of knowledge, research, and publications related to conservation and preservation. The AIC holds annual meetings with over 70 educational sessions, workshops and tours related to conservation; publishes a peer reviewed journal (JAIC) three times yearly; and publishes informative brochures on a wide range of topics related to conserving cultural heritage. The AIC hosts a free Guide to Conservation Services with information on how to select a conservator and a list of conservation professionals (or specialists) across the country. The AIC website, [www.conservation-us.org](http://www.conservation-us.org) contains vital and continually updated information on conservation topics and issues as well as other organizations dedicated to the conservation of cultural property.

*The AIC is indebted to the numerous museum professionals, directors among them, who provided invaluable review of this document. Gratitude also goes to four senior conservators who pooled their considerable knowledge and expertise to create this paper:*

*Lucy Commoner (Textile Conservator, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum), Betsy Palmer Eldridge (Book and Paper Conservator in private practice), Pamela Hatchfield (Objects Conservator, Boston Museum of Fine Arts), and Jay Krueger (Conservator of Modern Paintings, National Gallery of Art).*

*Their work and insights are exemplary and their commitment typical of a profession dedicated to saving our cultural treasures for the future.*

*—Jerry Podany*

*President, AIC/FAIC, June 2002*

*"The Association of Art Museum Directors compliments the American Institute for Conservation on its Position Paper on Conservation in Collecting Institutions. Conservation of works of art in museums is a prime responsibility of a museum and the Position Paper provides clear guidelines for all collecting institutions to preserve artistic and historic heritage."*

*Mimi Gaudieri, Executive Director, Association of Art Museum Directors*

*"In the field of state and local history, most collecting organizations do not enjoy the resources necessary to hire a conservation staff. But it is imperative that conservation and preservation stay at the forefront of planning for the long-term, for collecting institutions of all sizes. AIC's position paper sets ideal goals which will hopefully encourage collecting institutions to continue to do more."*

*Terry C. Davis, Executive Director and CEO, The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH)*

*"AIC's position is a much needed and comprehensive guide to collections care responsibilities. The benefits are of immeasurable value for institutions and those they serve. By using the AIC guidelines in fundraising efforts*

*collecting institutions can demonstrate a commitment to professional standards that assure best practices are being followed."*

*Lawrence L. Reger, President, Heritage Preservation*

*"The Registrars Committee of the American Association of Museums, supports the AIC position on "Conservation and Preservation in Collecting Institutions." Registrars often man the front line in collections care, especially in those institutions without a permanent conservation staff, and in all cases must consider preservation of objects and works of art the highest of priorities. The AIC position paper touches on the most important areas of risk management for collections and provides a checklist and guide that can be used by the collections profession."*

*Rebecca A. Buck, Chair, RC-AAM*

*"AIC's Position Paper provides a clear reminder of basic responsibilities for long-term stewardship of museum collections. The paper is consistent with the federal government's directives concerning the management of its heritage assets, including collections of scientific, historic, and artistic objects. This is a useful reminder for agencies and institutions within parent organizations that have primary goals other than management of museum collections."*

*Debra E. Sonderman, Director, Office of Acquisition and Property Management, Department of the Interior*

*"Collections are critical to advancing a museum's mission and serving the public as a place of learning, but only if they remain viable and accessible. This document will help collecting museums of all sizes and types stay aware of conservation issues and best practices, while allowing each to scale the guidelines to their unique collection needs and available resources. This document is also a valuable resource for museums and peer reviewers participating in the Museum Assessment Program, particularly the Collections Assessment, and complements the Accreditation Commission's Expectations Regarding Collections Stewardship."*

*Edward Able, President and CEO, American Association of Museums*