



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL MATERIAL INC.

The Shock of the New: Modern Materials, Media and Methods Joint Objects and Electron SIG Symposium February 8 to 10 2017 - Melbourne Museum

Abstract

Title:

Conserving shoes: the problem of identification and conservation of synthetic polymer based artefacts in museum collections

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Abstract:

This paper will present the findings of a Master of Cultural Materials Conservation student minor thesis project that involved research undertaken at Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (GCCMC) Melbourne and the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS), Sydney Australia. Plastic materials in museum collections present a significant problem because they are hard to identify, deteriorate rapidly and plastics conservation practices are still evolving. The MAAS collections comprise of over 1000 pairs and 300 single shoes, many of which include plastics. The aim of the project was to identify synthetic polymer shoe materials, assess their condition, and recommend strategies to inhibit future deterioration.

Identification is the first priority for conservation care of plastic artefacts. Therefore, a non-invasive methodology for identification and condition assessment of 13 shoe case studies was adopted. Methods included: Fourier Transform Infrared – Attenuated Total Reflectance (FTIR-ATR) spectroscopy, photography, and a customised condition report. It was found that a large proportion of the shoes had minor to severe degradation, particularly those constructed of polyurethane or poly (vinyl chloride). The FTIR-ATR results from both institutions also differed, highlighting the pitfalls of this method for accurate identification. The paper will present the research findings, with an emphasis on the limitations of identification and conservation of plastic materials in the context of museum collections.

Brief Biography of the Author(s):

Kim Goldsmith has just completed the Master of Cultural Materials Conservation degree, University of Melbourne, with a focus on object conservation. She was the 2015 International Museums and Collections (IMAC) award recipient, and travelled to The University of Birmingham, UK to work within the University Collections for four weeks in 2016. She is

also an artist, and has lectured at The University of Sydney and The University of Nottingham, Ningbo China campus in a range of art, design, craft and architecture programs.

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