

An Approach To Preventative Conservation

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Introduction

Unlike traditional conservation, that is, restorative or protective treatment of works of art themselves, preventative conservation as it is used in this paper comes no closer to the work than its frame or mount and can take place hundreds of yards away from the works of art. While most galleries feel frustrated at the absence of an adequate specialist staff to undertake restoration of damaged or deteriorated collections, there are many areas in which anyone is able to contribute to the preservation of material. Developing an awareness of these areas and taking steps to improve them will reduce the need of actual restoration. Even if one had the best conservation facilities in the world this approach should be taken; preservation is always more desirable than repair. There are four outside sources of danger to works of art which can be combated, often with free assistance from experts in these fields: the general environment, the immediate environment, disaster, and individual damage.

General Environment

Two variables within the environment provided by nature can be lethal to works of art: light and humidity. Without venturing into scientific analysis of the problem, it is safe to make the broad statement that the less light that falls upon a work of art, the less harm will come to it. Much light damage is irreversible. When light has faded or changed a pigment, it cannot be brought back to its original state. Generally, it is ultraviolet rays which do the most harm. Hence, the types of lighting to be most assiduously avoided are those highest in ultraviolet—direct sun and fluorescent lights. The cost of window curtains and the expense of fluorescent tubes with built-in ultraviolet shielding is minimal, far less than the cost of most paintings.

Within reason, temperature does not significantly affect works of art, but the relative humidity which

rises as temperature drops (and vice versa) does. At high levels, it induces mould growth. At extremely low levels, materials become desiccated and brittle; wood cracks. In general, the best level of relative humidity at which to maintain works of art is right in the middle, at 50 per cent. The second best situation is to try to maintain stable humidity even if it is too high or too low. The strain on materials forced to readjust to winter and summer conditions is, over a long period of time, the most serious result of uncontrolled humidity.

Immediate Environment

The immediate environment of a work of art consists of its mount, frame, pedestal or display case. It is a microcosm governed entirely by the gallery's professional staff, one which can protect or destroy the work it supports or contains. The use of acid-free mount board, glue and hinges can protect a drawing indefinitely, just as pulp board can be guaranteed to destroy it. Perspex on a water-colour (especially if it is travelling) can save it from being cut by broken glass, but on a charcoal the static charge in perspex will pull the medium from the support. Pedestals should be heavily weighted and the objects displayed upon them firmly attached. However, it is not exactly progress to protect a delicate sculpture from toppling by securing it with double-faced tape if you must wrench it free when the time comes to take the piece off show. Glass cases with interior lighting can cook wood or paper objects displayed inside. Any type of transparent covering can trap humidity. The best immediate environment for any work of art must be decided on its individual merits and often involves making a choice between evils.

Disaster

Plagues of locusts are unlikely to be vested upon art galleries. But two more common scourges are

continuing threats, fire and flood. Either can wipe out an irreplaceable collection in a matter of minutes. As these dangers are common to all structures, however, a great deal of research and expertise has become available in techniques for minimising them. It is in these areas that the insurance underwriters probably know more about methods of protection than anyone else. After all, it is very much in their interest to provide advice which will result in fewer claims. Considerations of building safety in fact require their particular knowledge rather than that of an authority on art.

It is an enlightening if frightening experience to discover the incipient fire hazards of gallery buildings, but many of these can be easily overcome and are not too difficult to finance as they are quite comprehensible to business-minded boards of trustees and city councils who might be baffled by the alchemy of conservation. Flood is a horror. While the obsession of architects for designing fire-traps remains hidden until the inevitable disaster, their fondness for roofs which leak and faulty plumbing located directly above storage areas remains a challenge for gallery staff.

A final word on vermin. One word. Vigilance. Silverfish, mice, white ants and others abound. All can be dealt with if we know they are there. Most can be discouraged by good housekeeping.

Damage

On a more modest scale, galleries are constantly confronted with the possibility of vandalism and accidental damage to works of art. The professionalism of the gallery director and staff is most likely

to be of use in foreseeing potential sources of trouble. The most common inspirations for vandals are aggressively avant-garde works, notoriously valuable material, objects with tactile appeal, and pictures with sensitive subject matter such as nudity, religion, or political commentary. Placing such works where they can be watched easily by staff or putting them behind glass or barriers can virtually eliminate the problem.

Accidental damage by staff need not happen if handling rules and responsible storage procedures are observed. Accidents involving the public are often the result of unstable installation methods, overcrowding, or permitting smoking and drinking with the exhibition galleries at openings.

Conclusion

There is probably no gallery in the world in which the hazards of environment, disaster and damage have been fully removed. If there is, the collections are surely never seen as perfect protection can be achieved only in total isolation. For some reason, the moment one danger is checked, three others seem inevitably to appear. Yet watching for these and devising techniques to combat them are perhaps the foremost duties of the museum professional. Other dangers exist also, the possibilities of theft, deterioration through inherent vice, the lack of funds and support. And these are just as compelling problems as the threat of fire. The achievement in preserving a work of art may not be so dramatic or widely recognised as that of restoring it or buying another one, but the benefits to cultural development are at least as great.