

Conservation Issues of Modern and Contemporary Art (CIMCA) Meeting

Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 2-4, 2008

INTRODUCTION AND OVERALL PURPOSE OF THE MEETING

In June 2008, the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) organized a meeting of international experts to discuss the significant and often highly complex issues faced by professionals in the conservation of modern and contemporary art. The meeting, entitled Conservation Issues of Modern and Contemporary Art (CIMCA), was hosted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and supported by Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro. Attended by twenty-six invited participants from Europe and the Americas, the group included conservators from a number of key institutions and in private practice, as well as scientists, collection managers, and those involved in conservation training programs and professional networks for contemporary art. (A full list of attendees is provided at the end of this document.)

The meeting's attendees were asked to reflect on three questions:

- What are the principal needs and/or issues in modern and contemporary art currently faced by the conservation profession?
- How might the conservation profession best set about responding to these issues?
- What changes would the profession want to see in the next five years that would lead to a significant improvement in the situation?

Although by no means the first such gathering of conservation professionals on this subject, this meeting had a particular task—to build upon some of the main issues highlighted at *The Object in Transition* conference, held at the Getty Center in January 2008

(http://www.getty.edu/conservation/science/modpaints/modern_materials_conf.html).

With an ever-increasing number of researchers becoming more active in this field, it was also felt timely to convene this meeting in order to take stock of current interests, needs, and intentions. The observations and conclusions from this meeting will form the basis of a strategic framework that will enable the GCI and others to initiate, cultivate, and coordinate a range of activities in the conservation of modern and contemporary art—including research, education and training, and dissemination.



ISSUES

The primary issues identified by the meeting participants were grouped into six broad categories:

- research into modern materials;
- research into conservation treatments;
- ethical/theoretical issues;
- documentation;
- dissemination and information sharing;
- education and training.

Research into Modern Materials

Despite recent and significant advances in the conservation profession's knowledge of some of the materials used in modern and contemporary art—in particular, modern paints—there remains a severe lack of information regarding the vast majority of modern/contemporary materials, in terms of understanding how they behave (either alone or in combination with other materials), and how they might alter with age, in storage, with treatment, and/or in transit, etc. Specifically, there is a clear need for:

- further characterization of these materials to understand their chemistry and condition, and how they are likely to alter/deteriorate with age;
- improved access to existing methods of analysis and characterization, especially for private studios/smaller museums, either through hand-held instruments or closer collaborations with analysts/conservation scientists;
- more portable analytical instruments for in situ identification of materials in actual objects—in particular, for rapid surveying of large collections of disparate materials;
- more portable analytical instruments for in situ monitoring of chemical, physical, and/or surface changes in objects with age and/or after treatments;
- better documented, accessible, and reliable collections of reference materials with which analytical methods for identification can be developed and aging studies conducted;
- establishing the optimum environmental conditions/strategies for the display and storage of all modern and contemporary materials;
- determining guidelines for the packing and transportation of modern and contemporary works of art.

Research into Conservation Treatments

Conservators often have to carry out treatments on modern and contemporary art works with a limited range of appropriate materials and treatment options, and without the desired level of understanding of the materials/process themselves and/or the long-term consequences of their use. There appear to be two main factors hampering progress in this area: 1) a lack of research focusing on developing new and novel conservation treatments and/or materials; and 2) a lack of experience and case studies on which conservators can evaluate the longer-term success of previous treatments. In many cases this has led to reluctance by conservators to execute treatments—which, in turn, means that future generations of conservators may have access to even fewer case studies on which they can establish the success or failure of treatments.



An initial attempt to establish a list of concerns for treatments identified the following:

- cleaning of all non-varnished/uncoated surfaces;
- removing stains from raw canvas;
- dealing with surface blemishes on monochromatic paintings;
- removing imbibed materials from acrylic paints;
- difficulties in color-matching synthetic organic pigments.

A wish list for better conservation materials included:

- a broader range of in-painting media, especially water-based media and media for matt surfaces;
- consolidants for matt surfaces (i.e., with low refractive index);
- stable and better-tested UV protective coatings (that could be applied to a range of different materials to slow down their deterioration);
- thixotropic lining adhesives.

Ethical/Theoretical Issues

Many of the difficult decisions faced by conservators for modern and contemporary art pose highly complex, ethical dilemmas, and in numerous instances there are clear disagreements within the conservation profession—as well as among other parts of the art world—on how to resolve conflicting values. Art history and conservation have traditionally relied on the authority that each field brings to an artwork's meaning and understanding. This is now under some re-evaluation when it comes to contemporary works. Not only is there a certain curatorial/conservation blur when it comes to questions of meaning and material, with contemporary works there is an inherent resistance to shutting down interpretive possibilities for works that have not yet lived in the world. There therefore appears to be a particular need for a far more active interdisciplinary dialogue with other areas of the arts profession, especially art historians and curators, and for more opportunities for theoretical research projects and/or masters/doctoral theses to be undertaken.

Some specific issues raised were a need to:

- rethink and revise the traditional and strict role definitions of the conservator, researcher, artist (or their estate), art historian, curator, dealer, valuer, insurance agent, and others;
- identify, weigh, and navigate a different set of *values* in works of modern and contemporary art, such as *meaning*, *function* and *intent*, and how they will all change with time;
- establish a set of ethics for the conservation of ephemeral/transitory art;
- assess further the implications of making replicas of works of art, particularly for those works that have altered dramatically with time;
- develop additional appropriate forums to discuss these issues in a cross-disciplinary way.

Documentation

Considerable amounts of time and resources are currently placed on gathering information on modern and contemporary art for documentation purposes, especially—but not exclusively—for museum collections. However, this creates its own



set of issues, in particular the need to consider several new aspects in works of contemporary art that should be documented beyond the physical object—such as the significance, value, and meaning of materials, sound, motion, and even smell—and to develop strategies and methodologies for documenting them. It is also imperative that a more standardized terminology is developed within the profession to ensure that this documentation is easily shared and understood.

Specific issues that were identified include a need to:

- offer more descriptions of why a decision to treat an object (or not) was made;
- offer more instructions/information from the artist and/or manufacturers;
- document works of art as soon as possible after they are made;
- gain access to other conservators' unpublished records/archives;
- address the fact that because a diversity of approaches/models are currently used by different collections for installation art, information sharing is very difficult;
- manage obsolete technology and the data from time-based media works;
- devise a process to document Web art (which can suddenly disappear offline);
- develop a method to characterize the patinas on bronze sculptures.

Dissemination and Information Sharing

Communication and information exchange within and beyond the profession is inadequate. Despite the existence of professional networks—for example, INCCA (The International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art), ICOM-CC: MMCA (the Modern Materials and Contemporary Art working group of the International Council of Museums–Conservation Committee), and AMIEN (Art Materials Information and Education Network)—these are still under-utilized; they remain, however, the logical vehicles for creating far more dynamic forms of networking and dissemination.

There is a clear need for:

- improved communication among colleagues/institutions to share information more effectively on all aspects of conservation (especially research results and treatment decisions);
- engaging a broader cross-section of the arts profession (especially art historians, artists, collectors, and curators) in many of the discussions;
- identifying more experts from other fields (e.g., structural engineers and video technicians) who could share useful advice and experience on specific issues and types of artwork;
- raising awareness within the public through many of the discussions and debates.

Education and Training

It was recognized that the training and education of more conservators in modern and contemporary art is key to progress in the field, and that the majority of conservation training programs are already attempting to respond to this need. There remains, however, a significant amount of disagreement on how best to achieve the most appropriate training for such conservators, and on how to get around the limitations of existing educational models. Other levels of education and training possibilities are also lacking—for example, pre-program and mid-career opportunities.



It was felt that there is a need to:

- consider a more cross-disciplinary track (i.e., to move away from the conventional materials-based divisions) at the training programs;
- identify a new skills set for conservators of modern and contemporary art;
- establish opportunities for PhD research in theory/ethics and conservation science;
- establish opportunities for sabbaticals/mid-career exchanges;
- improve public awareness of issues;
- broaden demographics of the field, and attract students from a wider background of education styles/subjects.



POTENTIAL RESPONSES TO THESE NEEDS

The suggested responses for all six categories of issues fell into four areas: research, documentation, dissemination, and training and education.

Research

Clearly, increased research into many of the identified issues—for both modern/contemporary materials and for the development of more appropriate conservation treatments—would be an effective response. It was felt that the conservation profession should attempt to establish a well-integrated network of researchers and/or a high level of collaboration in order to avoid unnecessary duplication, and to facilitate the evaluation of different approaches taken. It was deemed particularly important to encourage a range of approaches to developing and testing conservation treatments, due to the inevitable uncertainties of aging processes, resulting in an inability to properly evaluate success for many years. Breaking up some of the larger, long-term research projects into smaller units would also have significant benefits. Some of the larger research projects identified include:

Aging of Modern Materials

- Establish more complete data on the aging of coatings, adhesives, and consolidants.
- Develop methods to monitor surface changes.
- Improve non-destructive means to assess the structural stability of materials.
- Develop methods to stabilize cellulose acetate (CA) and cellulose nitrate (CN) plastics.
- Study further the aging processes involved in modern oils to better understand water-sensitive oils, liquefying oil paints, and efflorescence.

Preventive Conservation

- Compare current state of thinking and practice regarding climate guidelines, control, and management in different museums and collections, either by a survey or with a meeting to compare/contrast the various approaches and policies.
- Gather data on the behavior of different materials to different environmental conditions in order to develop knowledge (and ultimately guidelines) for optimum storage or display conditions for these materials/objects.
- Assess the implications for storage of objects in crates: design of crates, interaction of materials, off-gassing, etc.
- Assess the implications of climate change and sustainability issues, which are set to impact heavily all areas of cultural heritage conservation in the near future.
- Assess the increase in longevity of face-mounted photographs in cold storage.
- Establish guidelines (for packers and artists) for the display and transportation of modern and contemporary works of art (especially the effects of vibration on 3D objects), and design better wrapping methods for unvarnished paintings.



Research into Conservation Treatments and Materials

- Make stronger connections with industrial partners (e.g., Rohm & Haas) to tap into their knowledge and expertise on resins and coatings.
- Increase involvement of conservators in evaluating the success of treatments from a more practical and empirical standpoint.
- Establish, whenever possible, practical research efforts that test multiple treatment approaches.

New Instruments/Methodologies

Develop methods for improved, scientific documentation of change—especially portable, non-invasive, low cost, and yet still high-tech instruments. It was stressed that for all such development, it would be important to concentrate on changes that are significant (e.g., weak links or irreplaceable components). Some specific ideas included:

- better methods for characterization of surfaces (texture, gloss, transparency) to assess the effects of aging and treatments;
- development of non-invasive deterioration indicators (e.g., peroxide formation);
- development of improved methods of characterizing/describing patinas on bronzes;
- assessment of new methods (e.g., mechanical techniques, laser techniques) for cleaning non-varnished surfaces, especially on monochrome paintings.

Time-Based Media: Magnetic Media and Digital Art

- Bring established technical knowledge to the art world.
- Create guidelines for mastering digital art on servers.
- Develop methodologies of keeping works accessible when technologies become obsolete.

Contemporary Art in Tropical Climates

- Develop methods to prevent and treat mold growth.
- Revisit the pros and cons of microclimates (e.g., glazing and/or applying backboards) for paintings
- Refine management systems for climatic extremes.
- Study salt degradation of oil paints.

Documentation

A number of ways in which the new needs for documentation practice could be addressed in general were identified, as well as some specific responses for installation and digital art.

General

- Develop better links with more artists and/or artist estates, to ensure continued access to any information held by them.
- Document contemporary art at the earliest possible moment, and continue to monitor changes.
- Improve methods for data collection (artists' interviews, etc.).
- Improve access to oral histories.

- Create more documentation specialists (e.g., Tate’s Information Coordinator).
- Establish a standard terminology.

Installation Art

- Create, share, and test models and new technologies for documentation of installation art that include new parameters: light, sound, motion, 3D, etc., building on those explored in the Inside Installations project (<http://www.inside-installations.org>).
- Test documentation models and technologies via installations at other institutions.
- Encourage more collectors/institutions to test models and provide accessible case studies.
- Create best practice guides.
- Work toward a methodological approach.

Time-Based Media

- Evaluate and utilize existing methods for documenting moving images (such as those used in libraries, industry, etc.) for time-based media.

Dissemination

Dissemination and information sharing are considered absolutely key to improving the field, in both the short-term and the long-term. A number of ideas were discussed on how to facilitate the exchange of information and experiences.

Publications

Dissemination and information sharing ideas related to publications included:

- launching an online peer reviewed journal that would link conservation, art history thinking and research, and beyond (e.g., visual culture, sociology, etc.), in recognition of the fact that all these perspectives inform the way we look at and live with art made in our time;
- making far better use of existing journals—for example, *Reviews in Conservation* for overviews of the profession to date, and *Art Forum* and *Future Anterior*—to target the interdisciplinary audience of conservators and art historians;
- facilitating access to master’s theses and student research projects through links to ENCoRE, VDR, and ANAGPIC.

Conferences

Conferences are still viewed as essential to the field in terms of keeping abreast of current research, as well as fostering larger debates through panel discussions and audience participation. It was thought that, ideally, a series of conferences could be developed that would:

- be attended by a maximum of 200 people (to facilitate discussion);
- be focused on a specific themes that should involve invited and targeted specialists, thereby engaging other disciplines, especially those in science;
- be accompanied by a Web-based publication;
- include, potentially, the following themes: coatings; failure (of materials); time-based media; ephemeral (transitory) objects; and preventive conservation.

New Forums on the Web

A number of suggestions revolved around making more use of the Web to disseminate information. These included:

- creating a series of online panel discussions with an invited group of experts, to focus on specific issues/problems, using the model of Skin Deep: Questions on the Conservation of Post-War Paintings (Collectors World Online Forum, January 29–February 15, 2003 [<http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/byform/mailling-lists/cdl/2003/0129.html>]);
- supporting INCCA to be a clearing house—the first Web site people will access to find information, or to seek links to other Web sites/publications;
- drawing more attention to AMIEN, a widely accessed Web site, that is already facilitating communication between artists and conservators/conservation scientists;
- encouraging all museums and research institutions to be more pro-active in linking their Web sites to those of other organizations;
- initiating a discussion list/listserv for the conservation of contemporary art;
- utilizing more innovative formats with improved visual layouts and more dynamic functionality (e.g., Second Life, virtual study rooms/conferences);
- raising awareness with the public by utilizing the numerous Web methods for public feedback, discussion loops, and community involvement.

Education and Training

The conservation profession needs to establish methods for improving the training of modern and contemporary art conservators. It was felt that to enhance training and education of conservators of modern and contemporary art it was important to consider the continuum of training from pre- through post- conservation education programs. Specific suggestions included:

- increasing flexibility of programs to allow variable paths through curriculum;
- establishing a conservation PhD (especially important for researching ethical and theoretical issues);
- seeking a broader demographic diversity/education backgrounds in entrants to the field;
- developing a series of public lectures about some of the complex issues in order to public raise awareness;
- establishing a number of post-program fellowships in museums of modern and contemporary art, learning from experience gained by SFMOMA;
- establishing further opportunities for staff exchanges, including private as well as institutional conservators (in fact, exchanges *between* private and institutional studios could be especially beneficial to both sectors);
- assessing desirable qualities in the new breed of modern and contemporary art conservator (e.g., problem solving skills, ability to evaluate complex and abstract data, ability to make collaborative decisions, ability to arrive at negotiated outcomes, skills in engineering or structural issues, and experience with all aspects of digital imaging and processing).



PRIORITIES

Although the difficulties and limitations in setting priorities were recognized, the following short- and long-term priorities were identified.

Research

- Increase focus on preventive conservation issues, including evaluation of optimum environmental conditions for modern materials.
- Develop more portable analytical instruments for materials identification, condition assessment, and surfaces characterization.
- Continue and expand studies on cleaning modern painted surfaces, with the specific requirement that the results be made very accessible to conservators.
- Increase study of time-based media conservation.
- Provide greater access to existing research on magnetic tape and digital media.
- Conduct more research on coatings and adhesives.
- Increase study of the effects of tropical climates on modern and contemporary art (including a reassessment of micro-climates).

Documentation

- Develop standard methodologies and test new technologies for the documentation of installation art.

Dissemination

- Establish a series of conferences focused on specific issues.
- Support and improve INCCA for information dissemination.
- Use IIC/ICOM-CC meetings to report on the CIMCA meeting and to encourage further feedback.
- Establish online discussion forums.
- Create an online inter-disciplinary journal.

Training and Education

- Establish a working group to discuss the pros/cons of different training program models and to consider whether to promote a unified approach or to encourage variations.
- Establish and monitor further post-program training fellowships.
- Create opportunities for mid-career staff exchanges and sabbaticals.
- Develop more possibilities for students to spend time in artist's studios.

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