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## *Art Conservators: 10,000 Years of Work*

**by Ruth Z. Deming**

Every work of art contains the seeds of its own deterioration. The paint can blister, powder or crack; flakes can chip off leaving white patches. A painting can wrinkle and the back become diseased with mildew. These grim fates, however, are countered by the remarkable techniques of a group of people known as art conservators or restorers.

"The primary directive of a museum," says Albert Albano, conservator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, "is to preserve the collection. Conservation is the very heart of a museum."

Large museums have their own departments of conservation. The Phila-

delphia Museum of Art, for example, employs six conservators who specialize in the areas of painting, decorative objects (porcelain, glass, sculpture, etc.), paper, and furniture.

Smaller institutions, lacking the money for in-house conservators, have a couple of options. They can contract for the services of a private conservator or they can join a growing movement of institutions who pool their money and join a "cooperative conservation center."

The Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts is one such nonprofit conservation center. Its six conservators handle paper, photographic, library and archival materials from over 100 member institutions, mostly in the mid-Atlantic states.

Founded in 1977 by private conservator Marilyn Kemp Weidner, the Center takes up half the 20th floor of the Philadelphia College of Art. Recently expanded, the lab utilizes the most modern techniques available including a suction-vacuum table developed by Ms. Weidner which facilitates many kinds of treatment, such as stain removal.

Preservation techniques are crucial. The Center sends out its conservators to visit member institutions to make sure art objects are housed in the safest environment possible. Conditions such as building structure, location of windows, exposure to light and heat are gone over and a list of recommendations to ensure long-range preservation is drawn up.

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# 10,000 Years of Work

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"Only a small part of a museum's objects are on display," says Virginia Greene, one of two conservators at the University Museum. "Since most objects spend most of their time in storage, the way they are stored is very important."



*Marilyn Kemp Weidner*

When the Woodmere Gallery built a new storage facility last year, they utilized the latest in technology. Formerly the mansion of an art collector, Woodmere has been turned into a museum housing his collections. Its paintings are stored on sliding racks in an "environmentally controlled climate" where the temperature and humidity are kept constant.

Franklin Shores, a private conservator who works with paper (prints, drawings, and other works on paper) blames much deterioration on the way a painting is mounted. A great deal of ignorance surrounds these procedures, he says. "An article published recently in a national art magazine on matting and framing techniques was largely incorrect and actually hazardous to the painting."

He says that though there are several hundred people in the field of conserving art on paper, only 35 or 40 are actually certified.

The newer conservators, however, follow a standard course to qualify as professionals. "In the good old days," says Ms. Greene of the University Museum, "you learned as an apprentice on a one-to-one basis."

Today you get a college degree. Generally people with backgrounds in art history, archaeology, fine arts or chemistry attend one of the three schools which offer the requisite master's degree: Winterthur/University of Delaware; New York University; or the Cooperstown, N.Y. program, which is part of the State University of New York.

The master's program lasts three years — two of schooling and one year as an intern at a major institution.

Graduates usually have no problem finding jobs. As Franklin Shores says, "There's enough work out there to keep a conservator busy the next 10,000 years."