



An engraved 1823 copy of the Declaration of Independence before, left, and after restoration.

# Preserving art treasures becoming big business

By LITA SOLIS-COHN  
Artists and Writers Syndicate

Conservation, the health care sector of the art and antiques trade, is a growing business.

"Ours is a \$700,000 a year business, up from \$460,000 a year and a half ago when I came to work here," said Robert J. Strauss, executive director of the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia.

CCAHA is one of 12 regional conservation centers in the country that administer treatment to everything from buildings to works on paper. The center in Philadelphia is one of two regional centers that deal exclusively with works on paper; the other paper laboratory is the Northeast Document Conservation Center in Andover, Mass. The others deal with the full gamut of paintings, sculpture and furniture.

The 12 regional centers together billed about \$6 million in preservation and conservation work last year. Add to that the work of more than 2,500 conservators who are members of the American Institute for Conservation, and you get some idea of the size of the art care business.

Sara Rosenberg, executive director of the AIC, headquartered in Washington, is putting together a computerized referral service so that in the future anyone with a conservation problem will be able to dial her number and be matched up with the proper qualified conservators specializing in paper, painting, sculpture, metalwork, ceramics, glass, furniture, or frames. A free brochure entitled "Guidelines in Selecting a Conservator" will be sent to anyone sending a stamped self-addressed business size envelope to AIC, 1400 16th Street N.W., Suite 340, Washington D.C. 20036. You may request a list of conservators working in your area.

There is a shortage of qualified conservators in many parts of the country. While there are plenty of trained professionals in the corridor from Washington to Boston, there are very few in the south and



## Antiques

southwest.

Large museums and major dealers have in-house conservators but even they cannot solve all their problems. Large and small museums, libraries and historical societies rely on the regional centers as well as on private practitioners for a great deal of their work. Like doctors, most conservators are referred by professionals.

The regional centers are organized like health care facilities. "I am the administrator and Glen Ruzicka, our chief conservator, is like a chief of medicine," said Strauss. "We have our specialists," he added.

Wallpaper is among the specialties of CCAHA senior conservator Elizabeth Schulte; she conserved the wallpaper in the President's dining room at the White House.

Schulte also conserved a rare fraktur for the Heritage Center in Lancaster by removing the backing and saving one layer of it — an old newspaper, and then making a lacey piece of paper, painted with birds and flowers, whole again.

"We are prepared to treat prints, drawings, watercolors, collages, maps, posters, photography, rare books and manuscripts, as well as works on parchment and papyrus," said Strauss, moving over to a stainless steel table on wheels that he called a "cadaver table," on which was stretched an engraved facsimile on parchment of the engraved (inscribed or scrolled) copy of the Declaration of Independence. It is one of the 250 John Quincy Ad-

ams ordered from the engraver W. J. Stone in Washington in 1823.

"When it came in, it looked like a relief map of a mountain range," said Strauss, holding up a slide of the crumpled parchment that had come into the laboratory a month before. The cost of making it flat again and repairing the corners, which had looked like a mouse had nibbled them, was \$2,300. Worth it, in this case; the last copy of this historical facsimile of the Declaration offered at auction brought \$19,800 at Brian Riba's sale in Wethersfield, Conn. last fall.

CCAHA, like the other regional centers, is a not-for-profit organization that reports to a board of directors. It seeks grants from the government and private foundations because it sponsors educational programs and internships and offers collection management guidance — the conservator's term for preventive medicine — to member institutions. One of its primary missions is to make institutions and the general public aware that conservation care should be a priority.

Although most of the work CCAHA does is for the 170 institutions who are members, one-fourth is for private clients who want to preserve family photographs, letters, prints or drawings. Generally a diagnosis which includes a condition report and recommendation for treatment costs a minimum of \$57; encapsulating a brittle letter in polyester film so it can be handled is about \$40; cleaning a print can be as little as \$100, or a lot more.

It may be cheaper to get the foxing removed from your Currier and Ives through your local print shop, which sends work out to private conservators, but there is an advantage to dealing directly with the conservator who offers options for treatment.

As for the problem pieces that need major reconstructive surgery, it is often best to go to the equivalent of a big city teaching hospital — the regional conservation center.

If they can't do it, they'll recommend a private specialist who can.