



QUESTIONS

for Debbie Hess Norris

Board Member Debbie Hess Norris, Chair and Professor of the Department of Art Conservation at the University of Delaware, has been affiliated with CCAHA for 37 years—first on the staff, and now on the Board of Directors. She discusses CCAHA’s impact within the wider conservation landscape.

When did you start working at CCAHA? What was your position?

I started in 1980 as CCAHA’s first Photograph Conservator. It was my first job out of graduate school. I still remember where I was when Marilyn Kemp Weidner, CCAHA’s founder, called to tell me I got the job. I was so excited! Marilyn had a vision for a center that could service all kinds of institutions with paper-based collections, addressing conservation treatment and educational needs. Her expertise was in fine art, so she hired Lois Price to develop the library and archival conservation section and me to develop the photograph conservation section. It was an incredible opportunity.

What were some of your favorite projects?

In the 1980s, the cultural heritage community was starting to realize the importance of preventive conservation and collections care strategy. CCAHA made a commitment, early on, to help institutions care for their materials. We realized that our work didn’t need to focus only on conservation treatment and condition assessments—we could also advise institutions on caring for their collections more generally. The opportunity I value most from that time was working with large collections of photographs in many different institutions all over the country. I also, of course, loved the day-to-day examination

and conservation treatment work on a variety of 19th and 20th century photographs, along with the other objects—watercolors, maps, documents, etc.—that I saw pass through the lab.

When did you come onto the Board?

I came onto the Board in 1997. I guess that makes 2017 my 20th year anniversary on the Board! It has been a privilege to watch CCAHA grow.

Where do you see the field of conservation heading and how do you think CCAHA fits into that?

That’s a big question! First, I think the emphasis on public engagement is growing. Through publicizing our work, we can increase awareness of the importance of cultural heritage preservation. CCAHA has been firmly committed to ensuring that our work is shared broadly—using social media, engaging the public in tours, and offering workshops.

Increased access to education is another focus in conservation. Whether collaborating with universities to introduce the field to undergraduates or incorporating online learning into their programming, institutions are encountering increasing demand for engaging with broader audiences, something CCAHA has been doing for some time.

Conservation and preservation efforts are becoming ever more integrated, both on a

national and a global scale. CCAHA will likely see an increasing need to collaborate—with other regional centers, with funders, with other institutions—to meet the needs of our clients. There are many opportunities to work globally; many places that would benefit from learning about CCAHA’s experience as a regional center. And we would learn from them. We’re well-positioned to address some of these needs, developing cost-effective preservation solutions for our shared cultural heritage centered on education, resource development, and advocacy.

Lastly, the needs of institutions are changing. The demand for expertise in the preservation of born-digital materials will only increase. As CCAHA creates preservation plans for institutions with these materials, we will need to build our strength in that capacity. There is also a growing necessity for disaster planning and response. CCAHA can draw upon its past successes in creating disaster recovery networks and writing disaster plans to address these needs.

—AMY HEUER