

Stewards of the past

by Mark Hallgren

Unseen enemies lie in ambush for The InterNorth Art Foundation's priceless works of art. Sunlight and pollution steal bright colors. Heat and cold pull at aging surfaces while moisture hopes to make them warp and buckle.

The only way to completely protect an art collection is to lock it away in a darkened, climate-controlled vault, says Jim Finnegan, executive director of The InterNorth Art Foundation. "But no one would be able to appreciate it, and that would defeat one purpose of having the collection.

"We resolve the conflict by displaying the collection under carefully regulated conditions and giving it the most scientific care possible," he explains.

The collection's works are by artists who traveled or worked on the Western frontier: Karl Bodmer, Alfred Miller, Charles Russell and Frederick Remington. The works are on permanent loan to Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Neb.

David Hunt, Joslyn's curator of Western art, explains that all works in the museum's care are periodically examined by specialists with university training in both art and science called conservators. If a work shows signs of deterioration, it is sent to a conservation center. The InterNorth Art Foundation sends its oil paintings to the firm of Gustav Berger in New York City; the watercolors, the bulk of the collection, are sent to the Conservation Center for Art and Historical Artifacts in Philadelphia, one of the few laboratories which specialize in such works.

"We receive pictures from many different collections," says Marilyn Kemp Weidner, the Philadelphia center's director and chief conservator. "But it is always an event when something arrives from the InterNorth collection . . . the water colors are so beautiful. We all gather 'round while it's being unpacked."

The painting is assigned to a conservator who carefully examines it, often under a microscope.

"That enables us to detect even the tiniest cracks, flaking and other problems invisible to the unaided eye," Weidner explains. "It also tells us what kinds of paint and paper we have."

The 19th century artists in InterNorth's collection used water paints similar to those used today, but worked on heavy rag paper which lasts much longer than modern wood pulp paper.

"As soon as the art foundation approves our plan of action, a conservator goes to work," Weidner says. "We can treat most problems."

For example, a wrinkled work can be flattened using a humidity chamber to relax the paper fibers, and then weighing it down between blotters and pieces of felt.

If the wrinkle persists, the conservator can use a small heating tool or a vacuum table, a piece of equipment developed by Weidner that gently pulls a painting flat.

"Twenty-five years ago, water colors, sketches, pastels and other works on paper weren't nearly as valuable as oil paintings, no matter who the artist was," she says, "so their owners didn't do much to take care of them. The handful of people, like myself,



Treating works of art calls for such precision it sometimes must be done under a stereo microscope.

who were concerned about conserving them had to develop most of our techniques and equipment from scratch."

Works that are cracked or torn require special treatment.

"We realign and clean the torn edges under a low-power microscope. Then we make a patch from special, hand-made Japanese paper and put it behind the break with wheat-starch paste," Weidner explains.

The Japanese paper is strong, flexible, and chemically pure. The paste not only matches the expansion and contraction properties of the paper, but it won't stain and can be easily removed. Flaking paint is treated with a special chemical mixture which first softens the paint, making the flakes lie down, and then hardens, holding the paint to the surface.

"It's a very slow process," Weidner says. "But speed isn't a consideration in our work."

Dust and pollution eventually sneak up on most pictures, Weidner adds.

"The center does quite a bit of cleaning. We use powdered erasers and gently, gently brush them across the painted surface. It requires the touch of a surgeon."

But the conservators' patience and skill are wasted if the paintings they treat aren't displayed under carefully controlled conditions.

"At the Joslyn we maintain the temperature between 60 and 65 degrees Fahrenheit and 50 percent humidity so the paintings won't expand or contract," Hunt explains. "And we are careful to mount them using the very best non-acidic materials."

Also, the foundation's paintings are covered with a special glass which filters out ultraviolet light and protects them from dirt, pollution and fingerprints.

InterNorth's collection will be even better protected when its new home at the Joslyn, the Center for Western Studies, is completed later this year.



Applying a special, heated chemical mixture, a conservator rebonds flaking paint to the surface of a picture.

Dryness and acidity can make paper as brittle as autumn leaves. So before a conservator chooses a treatment, microscopic sections of the paint must be tested to see if they will dissolve in water. If not, the work is floated in a special deacidifying bath. If the colors are soluble and cannot be washed, the conservator strengthens the work using the Japanese paper backing.

"Exposure to light's ultraviolet rays slowly robs a painting of its brightness and breaks up the fibers in the paper, causing them to darken," Weidner says.

"The loss of brilliance can't be corrected. But the discoloration can be treated by placing the painting in an alkaline bath and then using a gentle bleach, if necessary."

According to Finnegan, the new climate control system will closely maintain temperature and humidity.

"The skills, time and hard work of many people are needed to preserve the InterNorth art collections," Finnegan explains, "but their beauty and unique value as both art and history make the task a labor of love." □

