



In This Issue

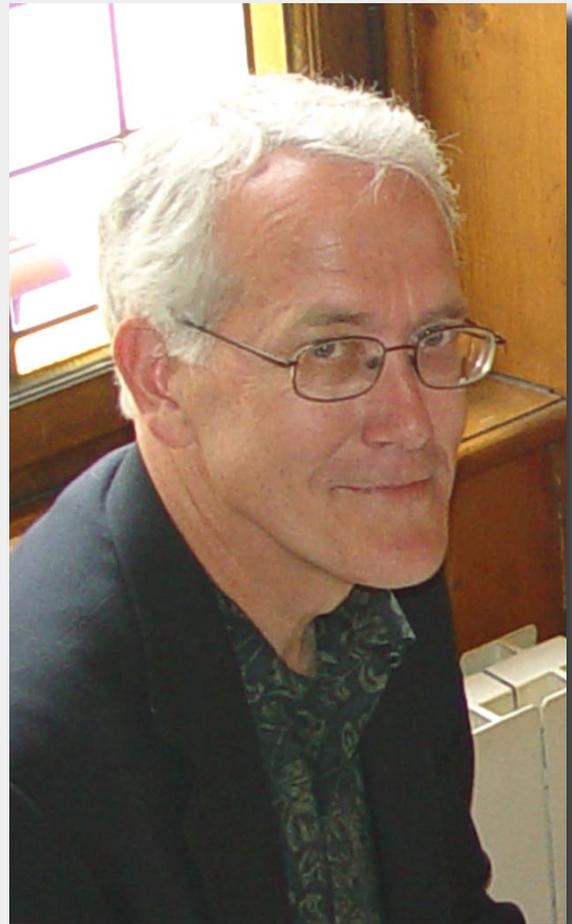
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Upcoming Events

September Program	9/19/04
Dues are due	October 1st
Next Program	November 18

Interview: F. Carey Howlett

By Valinda Carroll



VC: How long have you been a conservator?

FCH: Depends how you define conservator...

VC: Okay, when did you feel comfortable calling yourself a conservator?

FCH: I started doing furniture restoration back in the early seventies. That was before I'd even heard the term conservation applied to decorative arts. My wife [Iris Heissenbittel] and I went into business together when I graduated from college. For eight years, I served a self-inflicted self-apprenticeship, where I read as many books and talked to as many people as I could, but never worked for anybody else. Finally, I realized I needed additional training and sought some museum connections.

In the early 1980s, when delivering treated furniture to clients in the D.C. area, I would stop by the Conservation Analytical Lab [now SCMRE], which was then located in the Museum of American History. I watched all the videotaped conservation lectures by Robert Organ [the first director of CAL] and read books from the CAL library. I also began taking workshops offered through the Smithsonian. I joined the AIC and began calling myself a conservator at that time: I really felt the need to distinguish my approach from that of typical restorers.

In 1986, I entered the first class of the Smithsonian's furniture conservation program at CAL. After four years of courses and labs, I earned an MA in conservation of wooden objects conferred by Antioch University in conjunction with CAL. This part-time program was set up to enable students to continue working, and in 1987 I left private practice and went to work for Wallace Gusler in the new conservation department at Colonial Williamsburg. I was hired as assistant conservator and became furniture lab manager the following year.

VC: What made you decide you wanted to be a conservator?

FCH: What really appealed to me was the multidisciplinary nature of it. It enables me to combine strong interests in art, craftsmanship, materials science, history and basic research. There are very few fields that give you the opportunity to develop skills in so

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Letter from the President

Dear VCA Membership,

I hope everyone has had a good productive summer and that you are now ready to launch into the new VCA season this fall. We have some new officers and committee chairs this year who are committed to bringing you all some interesting programs and events.

Our next member's meeting will be on Thursday, September 16 at the Hancock-Wirt-Caskie House in Richmond. The address is 2 North 5th Street and the meeting will begin at 6 PM as parking is difficult before then. We will see some of the restorations done to the house by a number of our membership over the past 20 years. It should be a very interesting time and I hope you can attend.

Please remember that membership dues are due before October 1, so that we can prepare the VCA directory for you. The dues have increased this year for the first time in 15 years, so please be sure to make the check out for \$25 for membership and \$20 for student membership.

Thanks and I'll look forward to seeing you all at the coming meetings!

Sincerely,
Lorraine Brevig
VCA President

From the Editor;

As part of the mission of the Virginia Conservation Association's newsletter, we strive to disseminate the knowledge and experience of each member to the other members. As editor, I would like to include a column in future publications called *Regional News*. This column would include tabs on members experiences, projects of work or study, job changes, etc. Please remember to contact John Fralin, Publications chair, with any news in your part of the world, no matter how small it may seem. We cannot promise we will print everything sent to us (*see below for receiving PDF version online*), but we will try. And pictures, don't forget to

send pictures. *When using e-mail to submit a story or pics, please remember to put VCA in the subject line. Submit to:*

John Fralin, Publications Chair;
888-565-8865, T 804-649-4095,
F 804-649-1923, E mail john@fafas.com

Bonus Material - if you have the capabilities to receive PDF files over the internet. please sign up to receive the VCA newsletter online. The images are much better and there can be more articles and info included - we are not restricted in the size of the document. To sign up to receive the VCA newsletter online, contact John at the above address.

VCA Program

VCA PROGRAM - HANCOCK-WIRT-CASKIE HOUSE, RICHMOND, VA

When: September 16th at 6pm

Where: The Hancock-Wirt-Caskie House

5th and Main Street
Richmond, Virginia

Join us for an evening of exploration as several Richmond-area conservators and artisans speak about their projects. Our host for the evening will be Mr. Aubrey "Bunky" Bowles who will be with us to answer questions about the overall restoration and conservation of this important Richmond landmark property.

Among the featured speakers will be Ms. Karri Jurgens, Ms. Traci Horne-Flores, and Ms. Nancy Beck each giving a brief overview of their work. Their topics will include the history of the house, the restoration of missing decorative paint schemes, and the fabrication and installation of missing composition ornament.

Due to parking restrictions, our program will begin at 6 p.m. with refreshments provided by Mary Studt and Jennifer Zemanek. We will have a very brief business meeting at 6:30 p.m. and at 6:45 p.m. presentations will begin.

NEXT PROGRAM: 'SAVE THE DATE'

VCA PROGRAM - STUDIO TALKS @ FULTON HILL, RICHMOND, VA
November 18th at 5:30pm
1000 Carlisle Avenue

Scott Nolley of Fine Art Conservation of Virginia and Wendy Cowan and Mary Studt of Richmond Conservators of Works on Paper

Interview continued from page 1

many areas. It never gets boring!

VC: Did you have a light bulb moment?

FCH: No. My wife and I originally thought we would become furniture-makers, seeing it as a means to live in the country and avoid 9 to 5 jobs (we came of age in the 60s, you know!). We were interested in antiques and began doing restoration work as a means to bring in income while getting our business established. We developed a good reputation for our restoration work, became more and more interested in the old stuff and finally lost interest in making new furniture except for occasional gifts and a few special projects.

VC: What do you feel are your three most important contributions to the field of conservation?

FCH: I am proud of my contribution to the growth of the conservation department at CW. I feel I had an influential role in the development of the professional staff and the growth of the internship program -- we were able to attract many of the best conservation graduate students to CW for internships, and were fortunate to hire a good number of them (and others) as full-time staff. It's a great department. I'm also proud of my role coordinating the design, building and furnishing of the labs at Bruton Heights while I served as senior conservator and director of conservation. The facility we built stands as one of the largest, best equipped and most practical conservation lab complexes in the country.

VC: Ha, ha, nothing like the old no-tell motel (Ramblewood Lodge)!!! (Several of the old pre-Bruton Heights labs were in a ramshackle converted motel). What are two other things?

FCH: I've been extremely fortunate to lead projects to research, conserve and write about a number of truly fascinating historic objects, including the speaker's chair from the House of Burgesses in Williamsburg, the elaborate Masonic master's chair by Williamsburg cabinetmaker Benjamin Bucktrout, and

Thomas Jefferson's 1786 model for the capitol of Virginia. I'm now involved in a project as interesting and challenging as anything I've done in the past: restoring an elaborately carved Gothic revival room damaged in a fire at the Hermitage Foundation Museum in Norfolk [see article on page 4].

I've also enjoyed my activities with the AIC Wooden Artifacts group, including my involvement as director of the symposium "Painted Wood: History and Conservation" and as co-editor of the subsequent publication. And I've also enjoyed contributing to the activities of the VCA and have benefited from the contributions of many others.

VC: What do you foresee for the future of conservation in Virginia?

Well, Virginia is fortunate to have lots of great cultural resources, and consequently has a larger contingent of conservation professionals than most states. For the past fifteen years the VCA has performed an outstanding service of bringing together people with an interest in conservation. More recently it has been gratifying to see so many non-conservators join the group. It's also been gratifying to see conservation projects across the state receive excellent publicity, especially since VCA members conducted most of them. I'd love to see the VCA capitalize on the growing interest in conservation to become much more of an advocacy group for conservation and preservation in the commonwealth. There's a great need for more public information and outreach, and occasionally the need for us to become activists in the cause of preservation and conservation.

VC: Any other thoughts on the field of conservation?

FCH: It's interesting -- in the years I've been in conservation I've seen a real change and maturation of the field. When I first joined the AIC, the Code of Ethics was very rigid -- and, I think, limiting -- in its delineation of the role

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Recovering from Fire at the Hermitage Foundation Museum

F. Carey Howlett

On January 7, 2003, Norfolk's Hermitage Foundation Museum experienced a devastating fire. Caused by the spontaneous combustion of a pile of oily rags accidentally left on the site by a contractor, the fire scorched elaborate Gothic Revival woodwork in the museum's music room. Smoke, carried through much of the house by the ventilation system, covered architectural surfaces and extensive collections of Asian, European and American art and furnishings with potentially damaging soot.

Recovery began immediately. From the outset, the Hermitage Foundation adopted a preservation ethic. Staff undertook initial clean-up, vacuuming floors and removing reproduction carpets and non-collections upholstered furniture to minimize the spread of soot. Alex Oliver, then executive director of the museum, called upon conservators for advice within hours of the fire. Mark Lewis, paintings conservator from the Chrysler Museum, arrived first, followed by John Watson and Patty Silence, Colonial Williamsburg's conservators of instruments and preventive conservation, respectively. All advised a careful, measured approach to the recovery using a variety of specialists, noting the eclectic nature of the collections and the fragile pre-fire condition of many of the historic objects in the house.

I received calls the day after the fire from Stacy Rusch, the



Tests proved that charred flat surfaces, such as the damaged wainscot above, can be scraped, toned and coated to match undamaged original oak.

VCA's disaster response chairperson, and from Alex Oliver, and visited the Hermitage later in the week. Following my visit the Foundation, with the concurrence of their insurance company, hired me to oversee the recovery project, schedule necessary cleaning and repairs, and bring in specialist conservators to survey the collections and undertake treatment. Because of my experience in the conservation of wooden objects and architecture, they also asked me to develop a plan for the restoration of the fire-damaged music room and to prepare Requests for Proposals for potential contractors.

At the time of this writing, the recovery process has taken one year and nine months, with the project to be complete by the end of 2004 except for some of the more specialized object treatments. Following are notes on various aspects of the recovery. With the hindsight and insight gained from the experience of the Hermitage Foundation Museum, these notes are offered here to provide suggestions for averting similar disasters, preparing for disasters in order to expedite recovery, and managing a successful recovery.

Learning from Disasters

Disasters often happen in spite of efforts to prevent them. The Hermitage Foundation Museum took prudent steps to minimize the likelihood of fire and to reduce the severity if one occurred. Staff members knew safety procedures and fire extinguishers were placed throughout the institution. The building was protected with an alarm system wired

to a nearby fire department. Why did the fire occur, and why was the damage, though fortunately not catastrophic, so severe?

If one looks at the origin of museum fires over the past 20 years, a simple fact emerges: most occurred during campaigns of construction, repair, or renovation. This was the case for fires at the Cabildo in New Orleans, Upparck and Windsor Castle in England, and closer to home at Surry County's Smith's Fort Plantation.

One might assume that contractors' lower safety standards are to blame. Certainly, vigilance is required to ensure contractors follow safety

procedures: museums should provide clear guidelines at the outset of a project and monitor safety practices throughout. In the case of the Hermitage fire, however, the contractor showed no pattern of neglect or carelessness in the weeks leading up to the fire – the disaster apparently resulted from a single lapse of basic safety practice. The simple truth is that accidents happen even with effective procedures in place. Heat- or spark-producing equipment, temporary wiring, flammable solvents, dust, debris, combustible materials -- and occasional human error -- are standard features of repair and renovation work. Increased risk is unavoidable.

If this is the case, how do we minimize damage if an accident occurs?

Renovation work often takes place in out-of-the-way areas not typically protected with smoke or fire alarms, such as attics, crawl spaces or basements. Or alarms are temporarily disabled in workspaces as part of the disassembly often associated with such projects. The latter occurred at the Hermitage, where catastrophe was avoided in this early-morning fire only because escaping smoke triggered an active alarm in an adjacent hall. The lesson from this: specifications for renovation projects should require active alarms in the actual spaces undergoing renovation. Temporary supplemental alarms cost only a few hundred dollars to install, but can prevent a major disaster.

Establishing Values, Determining Losses

Confirming building and collections values, determining costs of repairs and conservation, making insurance claims and negotiating payment proved a laborious task, lengthening the recovery. The process drove home the importance of a costly and sometimes neglected aspect of disaster preparedness: the need for regular updates of real estate and collections values. Outdated appraisals may, at their worst, severely limit recovery amounts (in the event of a no-fault loss covered by an institution's own insurer) or may retard the payment of claims if losses are covered by another party's liability insurance. There was clear-cut contractor liability for the Hermitage fire. Nonetheless, we had to

find qualified specialist appraisers to provide pre-fire values for many of the collections objects requiring conservation before the contractor's insurer would agree to cover conservation treatment estimates. This delayed the recovery by several months.



Detail of a 19th-century Russian icon before and after conservation. Highly acidic aerosol smoke residues (below pH 6) and particulates caused the oxidation. The icon is composed of an oil panel painting, a linen/silk overlay embroidered with natural seed pearls, a parcel gilt cover plate, gilt lipped trim, and four semi-precious stone diadems. This icon is one of many composite decorative art objects treated by Amy Fernandez.



Jennifer Zemanek conserving an Italian 17th-century embroidered silk chair cover. Cleaning required its removal from the reproduction chair frame it was mounted upon. Here she is couch-stitching the deteriorated historic textile to a new blue support fabric prior to returning it to the chair.

Because of this experience, the Hermitage Foundation has implemented a ten-year rotating appraisal policy, with approximately one-tenth of the collection appraised each year. This ensures that no object goes more than ten years without reappraisal, and half the collection will have values less than five years old. In addition, the Foundation has reexamined its own insurance policy to assure the best, most cost-effective protection it can afford.

Initial Cleaning and Odor Removal

When a fire occurs, particularly a well-publicized museum fire, a variety of contractors and fire restoration firms appear on the scene to offer services. A few of these firms have experience working with museum buildings and collections. Many do not, proposing methods that demonstrate little awareness of the special nature of historic materials.

Following the Hermitage fire, we hired two Richmond firms, Air Clean Corporation (cleaning of mechanical system and attic spaces) and Certified Services (cleaning of architectural surfaces), to remove soot and smoke odor from the building. Both firms provided complete information on the materials and methods they intended to use and agreed to forego potentially damaging odor removal techniques, such as the use of ozone-generating equipment. The contractors did not handle collections objects. Instead, I worked with a team consisting of Kristin Law, collections manager at the Hermitage, Andrea Prosser, site manager and Valinda Carroll, contract conservator, to remove, re-house, protect and store objects while the architectural cleaning was underway, a process that took nearly a month.

Article continued from page 5

Collections Conservation

A number of specialist conservators came to the Hermitage to survey collections, including John Watson (musical instruments), Mark Lewis (paintings), Patricia Ewer (tapestries), Amy Fernandez (objects), Mary Studt and Wendy Cowan (paper) Jennifer Zemanek (upholstery) and myself (furniture). In addition, specialist restorers Mark Thompson (pipe organ) and Terry Greene (piano) agreed to work with John Watson and me to develop restoration plans for the damaged instruments from the music room using a conservation approach (including preparation of the final report using Conservation Data Systems software developed by John Watson and Jim Judson).

Examination and testing indicated that smoke permeated more than half the house interior. Ultimately conservators identified nearly 300 objects needing cleaning or more elaborate treatment, with another 30 objects added to the list in late summer 2003 after developing serious tarnish. These were in enclosed cases initially considered uncontaminated by smoke. The tarnish proved otherwise.

In their treatment proposals, conservators noted 1) the necessity of removing acidic soot to prevent further deterioration, 2) the importance of devising treatments to remove soot layers without altering earlier historic patinas and 3) the complexity of cleaning some of the fragile objects: addressing pre-existing condition problems was essential before cleaning would be possible. Objects with important patinas included outstanding examples of Chinese and Indian religious sculpture retaining evidence of ritual use. Objects with condition problems pre-dating the fire included such things as a Spanish Renaissance sculpture with flaking gesso and paint in need of consolidation, European tapestries with old brittle backings that must be removed to permit wet cleaning, and upholstery textiles of aged silk requiring support fabrics.

In liability situations such as this, the insurer is obligated to pay for the return of objects to their condition prior to the fire. This comprises everything it takes



John Watson (l), instruments conservator, and Mark Thompson, organ restorer, develop the treatment plan for the damaged pipe organ.



Carving the replacement upper beam of the rood screen at Agrell Architectural Carving in California. Photographs and a polyurethane casting of a section of original beam (to the left of the carver) serves as the model.



The rood screen as it appeared after the 2003 fire. The lighter-colored areas at left resulted from surface cleaning to determine the extent of charring.

to remove the damaging soot, including steps necessary to stabilize or strengthen objects to withstand cleaning. The obligation results in an unexpected benefit to the Hermitage Foundation Museum: many objects will be in a better state of preservation after treatment than they were prior to the fire.

Repair and Restoration of the Music Room

The gothic style music room, location of the fire, was designed in 1922 by Frank R. Watson and fabricated by Philadelphia's Chapman Decorative Co. The room suffered a gradation of damage that complicates its restoration. Some woodwork survived untouched. In other areas, surfaces were irretrievably singed but intact. Near the fire's origin, flames consumed portions of the room's elaborately carved rood screen.

My firm (F. Carey Howlett & Associates) is leading the project to restore the music room, working with a millwork company (Waterfront Lumber Co. of Newport News) and an architectural carving firm (Agrell Architectural Carving, Ltd. of Mill Valley, California). The project incorporates a range of conservation, restoration and replication techniques, with the overall intent the preservation of as much original material as possible. Salvageable blackened carvings are consolidated then faux-finished to simulate undamaged oak. Blackened wainscot and beams are scraped down to fresh wood using tools simulating original jackplane marks, then chemically stained and finished to match the appearance of the old surfaces. The rood screen is being replicated in its entirety using patterning techniques devised to provide sufficient models for a faithful hand-carved copy (photographic stitching, molds and castings, and CAD drawings). The decision to replicate the screen allows the stabilization and preservation of the damaged original screen elsewhere on the museum premises.

Conclusion

Although the fire at the Hermitage

Announcements / Workshops

Foundation Museum represented a serious loss, the two-year recovery process is producing unexpected benefits. New policies and procedures will minimize future risk of disaster and, if one occurs, should expedite recovery. Conservation of the collections not only enhanced their appearance and state of preservation, but produced a wealth of new information documenting historic materials and fabrication techniques. Finally, upon witnessing the effort to restore a single fire-damaged room, staff and visitors have a new-found appreciation for the skill and artistry embodied in the elaborate architectural detail throughout the Hermitage Foundation Museum.



A Solinet Preservation Workshop Basic collections Care Wednesday, September 22, at Massanutten Public Library, Harrisonburg, VA.

This workshop will teach public librarians and school media specialists how to minimize damage to collections by learning proper use handling, and storage of collections. Also covered are simple, economical, and preservation-quality repairs on materials in general circulating and reference collections. Designed for staff members who repair books in public libraries and school media centers. Register and Info: visit the "Workshops & Training" section of the SOLINET website, or call 1-800-999-8558 ext. 4918.

A Solinet Preservation Workshop Hurricane Preparedness, Thursday, September 23rd, at Regent University Library, Virginia Beach, VA.

There is no way to guarantee the survival of your institution in a hurricane. There are, however, steps that can be taken before the storm hits that can increase

the chances of survival and minimize devastating damage. This one-day workshop will focus on the following: The nature of hurricanes - are they survivable?; general issues in developing a disaster plan; making your institution more storm-proof; activities before, during and after the storm; and available assistance. Register and Info: visit the "Workshops & Training" section of the SOLINET website, or call 1-800-999-8558 ext. 4918.

Rome Prize 2005

Deadline November 1st, 2004
Fellowships are awarded in the following fields:

Architecture, Design, Historic Preservation and Conservation, Landscape Architecture, Literature, Musical Composition, Visual Arts, Ancient Studies, Medieval Studies, Modern Italian Studies.

The American Academy in Rome invites applications for the Rome Prize competition. One of the leading overseas centers for independent study and advanced research in the arts and the humanities, the Academy offers up to thirty fellowships for periods ranging from six months to two years. Rome Prize winners reside at the Academy's eleven-acre center in Rome and receive room and board, a study or studio, and a stipend.

For more information or to download guidelines and application forms, visit the Academy's website at www.aarome.org, or contact the American Academy in Rome, 7 East 60 Street, New York, NY 10022. Attn: Programs. Tel: 212-751-7200, x 47, email: info@aarome.org. Please state the specific field of interest when requesting information.



Interview continued from page 3 of the conservator. There was a notion underlying most of the precepts that scientific objectivity was the chief aim of the conservator. This was undoubtedly a good-faith attempt to elevate the profession and to counter the reputation of earlier restorers for arbitrary, non-scientific “seat-of-the-pants” practices or, conversely, the employment of by rote “recipe book” approaches to treatment.

Unfortunately, in my opinion, the preeminence of the ideal of objectivity in the earlier Code of Ethics rendered the conservator to the status of a slightly glorified technician. To maintain objectivity, the conservator was to be concerned almost solely with the physical nature of an object: the materials it was made of, the processes of deterioration, and the means to forestall further deterioration. Less tangible aspects of an object – its aesthetics, cultural context, intrinsic value, and meaning – were not the conservator’s purview because of their highly subjective nature. Scientific objectivity, therefore, precluded the conservator from engaging in the interpretation of objects; that role was reserved for curators. The conservator was to present the “facts” to the curator based on scientific observation, and the curator would determine the way to proceed based upon his or her interpretation of the object.

With the plethora of examination methods now available to conservators, the increased complexity of technical analysis and the range of treatment approaches available to conservators, the old rules no longer apply so easily. While scientific objectivity has its place, we know there’s still an art to art conservation. And thank goodness, the current AIC Code reflects this.

For one thing, conservators are much more involved in

studies designed to learn more about objects. We know from experience that, if we ignore or minimize the importance of all the subjective, intangible, non-physical aspects of objects, information derived from examination and analysis may be misleading, inconclusive, and ultimately pointless. David Bomford, paintings conservator at the National Gallery in London, is a proponent of what he calls “technical art history”, the endeavor to strive for a holistic merger of traditional art historical research with scientific analysis and technical examination (the concept is a familiar one to many of us, but I really appreciate the relatively recent label). Technical art history is one of the most exciting things in the field right now. At its best, it can lead to remarkable new insights into the nature and -- dare we say it -- the meaning of objects. The conservator, whether engaged in solitary work or serving as the intermediary between the scientist and the curator, has no choice but to look at all aspects of an object, using judgment and skill to help arrive at an interpretation – and a more comprehensive understanding – of an object.

We’ve come a long way from an inadvertently limiting devotion to scientific objectivity. From here, it’s only a short step to realizing that everything we choose to do to an object – to clean surfaces, fill losses, replace missing parts, apply a new coating or simply leave an object untreated – has an effect on the future understanding of that object from the day it leaves our hands. It’s a great responsibility. Let’s face it -- treatment is a physical act of interpretation every bit as important as a written interpretation or the interpretive placement of an object in an exhibit. In many cases even more important because of the irreversible nature of most treatments. But that’s another whole topic to consider.



Virginia Conservation Association

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