

The Importance of Curatorial Planning in Condition Surveys

Conservation collection condition surveys are increasingly being used to determine the overall condition of museum collections, and to identify levels of deterioration and project conservation treatment costs. Curators need this information to plan storage projects effectively, develop funding requests, and evaluate preservation options. A successful survey will produce this kind of information as well as additional documentation critical for long-term collections management.

Conservation collection condition surveys are expensive undertakings. In order for a survey to be cost effective, the curator must be well prepared for the conservator's visit.

The scope of the survey must be determined and goals must be defined: Why are you conducting this survey? Is it for general overall condition information? Are you concerned about a specific collection or type of deterioration? What do you intend to do with the survey? Have you considered the significance of the objects? Are your objectives clearly defined?

Make good use of the conservator's time by planning the survey with him/her. Talk with the conservator beforehand to ensure that background documents, object lists, and assistance are available. While the conservator is on-site, ensure that objects are easily accessible and a knowledgeable staff member is available to answer questions. Conservators often require information that is not documented in the catalog record. They may need to examine environmental records, previous conservation treatment records, or discuss the history of the care of the collections. These needs will differ depending on the scope and goals of the survey.

Ensure that the significance of the objects included in the survey is considered. The conservator is not responsible for determining significance. The curator must decide which objects are important enough to warrant the cost of survey and potential costs of treatment. Discuss future

funding with the conservator so options for treatment are explored.

Recently the Western Archeological and Conservation Center (WACC) contracted a collection condition survey of plastics and rubber to address storage issues. This case study is presented to illustrate the planning process the Center used to obtain the desired information.

Identify the problem. Several plastic objects stored at WACC from the historic collections of Faraway Ranch at Chiricahua National Monument were deteriorating. The objects were brittle and small fragments were detaching. Acrid smells were noticed in several cabinets. A plastic tablecloth was sticky to the touch. Staff wondered whether anything could be done to halt or slow the deterioration. Most of the collection appeared stable, but could anything be done to repair the few deteriorating objects? Were other plastics in the collection degrading in a similar fashion? Were the rubber objects deteriorating too? A collection condition survey was needed to address these questions.

Define the project. In order to understand the magnitude of the potential survey, a list of objects was assembled. This created a challenge for the curator. Materials fields in the National Park Service's Automated National Catalog System (ANCS+) ranged from detailed entries such as vulcanite, acetate, PVC, etc., to generalized "synthetic." A list of all material types in ANCS+ was printed and all plastics and rubber were noted. This allowed the curator to compile a group of approximately 2,500 objects and object parts manufactured from plastic or rubber stored at WACC from various parks. Because all objects on the list were deemed significant, cost estimates included all in the survey.

The results had to supply information useful to us in the preservation of these specific collections: identification of the type of plastic or rubber and of the best method of storage for the artifact, determination of the need for treatment, and estimation of the treatment time.

The WACC conservator determined that baseline photographs of the surveyed objects would enhance the condition record. The deterioration of most plastics and rubber is inevitable and the photographs would allow visual tracking of the damage over time. Each object was first photographed in black and white, and color slides. Obvious deterioration was recorded using microphotography at up to x50 magnification in black and white prints and color slides.

Locate and hire the consultant conservator. Specialized skills are required to identify plastics by sight and touch. Because these skills were not available at WACC, we hired a private objects conservator with an extensive background in plastics and rubber. In order to locate this individual, we began by searching the literature on the subject of plastics and rubber conservation. We then queried members of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC). (A referral service is provided by the AIC.)

The conservator, Sharon Blank, spent approximately three weeks at WACC conducting a conservation condition survey of 597 plastic and rubber objects. Time did not allow for a survey of all identified rubber and plastic items in the collections. Since many are duplicates, examples of each object type were chosen for identification and condition reporting.

Assist and plan with the consultant. We supplied the conservator with background information regarding the history of the collections, a list of objects, our concerns about their preservation needs, a draft of the survey format, and a list of necessary components for the final report. We discussed the survey in advance and decided to make several changes to the survey format. We toured the conservator through the storage space and discussed environmental conditions and present storage materials. We supplied the database and were available to assist the conservator when needed. Two pre-program conservation interns, Audrey Harrison and Terri Moreno, worked with Sharon, locating objects, removing and returning objects to storage locations and entering data. This planning and interaction resulted in a greater number of objects surveyed, more information about specific deterioration mechanisms affecting the collections, and a greater understanding by staff members how to preserve the collections.

The format of the survey was designed in ACCESS by the WACC conservator and computer specialist, with later input from the consultant. The type of plastic or rubber was recorded in order to make the best storage decision for each object. A field was included to allow comments on the condition of the object and any conservation treatment needs. Twelve fields were included to indicate the special storage conditions required and an additional comment field was used to relay any specific instructions for individual objects. Basic data from the catalog record, including the catalog number, object name, location, measurements, etc., were transferred from ANCS+ into the survey format to speed the process of data entry and avoid duplication of information. This allowed the conservator to view existing information, add missing data (e.g., measurements), and correct any errors in materials identification.

Using the survey. The next step in the project is to use the survey data to segregate off-gassing plastics from stable plastics to reduce deterioration of adjacent objects and metal cabinets. The number of objects requiring storage upgrades and the amount and type of materials required to complete the task will be determined by consolidating survey data. Objects not on the survey list will be examined for similarity to surveyed items, and will be stored in the same fashion. After this analysis is completed, pre-program conservation interns from the University of Arizona will be hired to conduct the actual storage upgrade.

Careful curatorial planning of a collection condition survey is crucial to produce a document that is a meaningful and useful tool for preservation. The importance of curatorial planning cannot be underestimated. Clearly defined goals, well-organized assistance and information, and early interaction with a conservator will greatly improve the final product and its relevance for further storage, environmental, and treatment decisions. Collection of data in a format that is compatible with existing systems will maximize its usefulness in the future management of collections.

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