
Conservation Priorities

Art Collection and
Galleries 2013

Sweet Briar College

Overview of the Collection

Sweet Briar College owns and maintains a collection of over 4,000 original works of art as well as artifacts and some archival documents. The core purposes of the Sweet Briar College art gallery are: 1) the support of classroom and experiential learning and the stimulation and advancement of research in a variety of humanities disciplines; 2) the inspiration of creative work across all the arts; and 3) the cultivation of an appreciation for and understanding of the visual arts within the scope of a liberal arts education.

The collection includes paintings, drawings, prints, posters, photographs, artist-made books, manuscripts and incunabula, sculpture, archaeological material, and architectural drawings, models, and plans. While the collection's focus has historically been works that supported the art history and studio art curricula, in recent decades the staff has made concerted efforts to encourage and facilitate use of the collection by a variety of disciplines from across the curriculum. While the collection began with a focus on American art, it has grown over the years to encompass European, African, and Asian works; in recent years an active—though not exclusive—collecting focus has been modern and contemporary female artists.

Overview of Standard Care

The care of the collection encompasses not only the preservation and protection of its objects but also the maintenance of its full range of records and inventories. The routine management and care of the collection is the responsibility of the art gallery director and registrarial assistant. Long-term planning for collections management and care is the responsibility of the art gallery director but in this she/he will consult with her/his advisors as well as the College vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty and, as appropriate, the president.

Among the criteria considered when an artwork is reviewed for purchase or donation are: 1) whether the object's condition is such that it can be preserved properly by the art gallery, 2) whether the art gallery has adequate facilities for storing and exhibiting the object. When an artwork is accessioned into the collection art gallery staff inspects it and records its physical condition. Special housing or display needs are assessed at this juncture and, if needed, appropriate storage containers or frames are purchased or custom designed of quality acid-free materials.

When not on public display, the art gallery collection will be housed in controlled-access, alarmed, temperature- and humidity-controlled storage spaces on the College campus. Primary storage spaces will be in the Anne Gary Pannell Center. The art gallery director and registrarial assistant will work closely with the College's physical plant and security departments' staff to ensure that professional museum standards regarding optimum climate and security for original works of art are consistently followed.

The art gallery director and registrarial assistant will be jointly responsible for the secure storage of all objects and will ensure that they are protected from theft, damage, and deterioration.

Objects will not be moved into, within, or out of storage without the knowledge and approval of the art gallery director or registrarial assistant. Objects will not be moved into, within, or out of the exhibition galleries or staff offices without the knowledge and approval of the Art Gallery director or registrarial assistant. They will maintain a current log of the location of each object by accession number, which will be updated in a timely manner whenever an object is moved.

No one except the art gallery director, registrarial assistant, their trained student assistant(s), or experienced colleagues from the College's physical plant department will move, carry, or otherwise handle any object. Assistance may be requested from other individuals in special circumstances or emergency situations. In handling objects all personnel will observe the procedures set forth in the art gallery's manual for handling art objects or will follow guidelines in the emergency preparedness plan.

It will be the responsibility of the art gallery director or registrarial assistant to undertake and/or supervise any packing and unpacking of objects. Any movement of objects outside of the art gallery storage areas or exhibition areas, whether in College-owned vehicles, art gallery staff-owned vehicles, or by recognized professional fine arts shippers should be approved in advance by the of the Art Gallery director or registrarial assistant.

The art gallery director or registrarial assistant will supervise the installation of art in public galleries. In all instances, the safety and integrity of the object(s) will be considered paramount. Care will be taken to ensure the safety of hanging hardware and the appropriate condition of gallery walls and mounting devices. Climate (temperature and humidity) in public galleries will be maintained within acceptable professional standards. The quality, type, and level of lighting in the galleries will likewise conform to accepted professional standards. Some objects may require special display arrangements, and these will be in keeping with recognized standards of care.

Prints are kept in acid-free mats in Solander™ boxes in a secure, climate controlled room while paintings and framed works (prints, photographs) are kept in separate secure, climate-controlled storage rooms on racks and in bins. Archaeological material is stored in acid-free boxes in bins in the latter as well as in an adjacent limited-access archeological lab. The

collection is inventoried on a regular basis. The registrarial assistant and trained student workers observe the standard protocols for safe art handling. Materials and methods used for framing and storage are all acid-free and in keeping with professional standards.

The art gallery director, registrarial assistant, and/or trained student assistants inspect the exhibition galleries regularly for dramatic changes in environment (e.g. temperature, relative humidity, light type and levels, roof or plumbing leaks, vermin) or the condition of objects (daily for Pannell Gallery and primary storage areas; weekly for Babcock and Benedict Galleries and secondary storage). Steps are taken to correct any problems as soon as possible.

If any damage to an object or any immediate threat to the collection is detected by any member of College staff or faculty she/he notifies the art gallery director or registrarial assistant as soon as possible. If a significant problem occurs during non-business hours, the art gallery director or registrarial assistant will come to campus to determine what remedial steps are to be taken. In emergency situations (e.g. fire, severe storm) the procedures specified in the art gallery's emergency preparedness plan will be followed with respect to collections care. The director will report any significant damage to the vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty and the president and will keep them informed as to recovery and repair. A professional conservator whose credentials are known to the art gallery staff will be contracted to perform any conservation work.

Overview of Conservation Phases to Date

Beginning in the 1930s—decades before the College had a centralized art gallery and professional art gallery staff—art history professors cared for the collection and oversaw records pertaining to it. While accession files from these years are often lacking in detail, it is apparent that during the early decades of the collection's history at least a few paintings were actually

returned to the artists or their gallery representatives for cleaning or the repair of chips or small holes.

In 1985, just after the Sweet Briar established a central gallery space and secure art storage areas and hired its first professional gallery director/curator (Constance Bowen), the College retained the services of a Washington, DC, painting conservator (Susan Corn Conway) to repair and clean a group of Hudson River School paintings and nineteenth-century portraits of the school's founding family.

The first comprehensive survey of the collection's works on paper by professional conservators came just a few years later, in 1988, under the director of the art gallery's second professional director (Carma Fauntleroy). A paper conservator (Pamela Young Randolph, Chesapeake Paper Conservation) based in Richmond, Virginia, inspected 517 artworks in the permanent collection. Chief problems noted were acidic mounting and poor quality framing materials, soil, and tears from handling or inadequate storage. Art gallery staff subsequently embarked upon a comprehensive campaign to correct matting and framing issues and to upgrade storage containers. Individual objects were also targeted for treatment, based on the relative acuteness of their condition and their significance as works of art. Professional paper conservation labs and independent conservators in the Richmond area were used for this work.

This effort was carried on into the 1990s and late 2000s by the third professional art gallery director (Rebecca Massie Lane), guided by the 1988 survey's multi-stage prioritized report and using a combination of grant funds, donor-generated restricted gifts, and the gallery's general operating budget. Current art gallery staff estimates that approximately 50 works on paper were treated between 1990 and 2008. In addition to working through the 1988 recommendations for works on paper, over the past 20 years a variety of significant paintings,

15-20, were also treated (mainly cleaning and repair of small losses) when they entered the collection as gifts and bequests. All the work, on both paintings and works on paper, was carried out by professional conservators based in the Richmond, Virginia, region. For the past ten years the Sweet Briar College art gallery has relied on the expertise of paper conservator Mary Studt.

The Sweet Briar College art gallery has undergone both MAP II (Collection Management Assessment) and CAP surveys, in 2001 and 2008 respectively.* The first surveyed general procedures and facilities and made basic recommendations regarding handling, storage, display. It generally complimented the art gallery staff on its use of proper materials and techniques. This report highlighted the need for better climate control in the building that houses the main art gallery and art storage areas. This need was vigorously highlighted in the 2008 CAP report, which focused on the building's environmental shortcomings. Following both reports, art gallery staff worked with the College's physical plant staff to correct obvious problems and take basic preventive steps to control humidity and temperature fluctuations (for example, installing a separate air handling system in a small storage room used for paintings and framed works on paper; stepping up cleaning, maintenance, and inspection schedules; installation of dehumidifiers [plumbed to drain continuously outside the building membrane] in all art storage areas; use of desiccant packs in cases, boxes, and drawers; and removal of a mold-dense rare book collection belonging to the College library from the building entirely). Art gallery staff, joined by the leaders of a philanthropic support group, The Friends of Art of Sweet Briar College, continues to work with the College administration to seek major funding for comprehensive building renovations and to schedule the work in the context of other campus facility priorities.

* A MAP I broad survey of governance, mission, finances, staffing, security, and audience development was performed in 1995.

In addition to these CAP reports, the art gallery requested a survey of the building environment by conservator Mary Studt in 2007, specifically to address the impact of environmental issues on the works on paper in the collection. Among her recommendations were the purchase and use of HOBO digital data loggers to monitor and record fluctuations in temperature and humidity and the purchase and use of a Nilfisk HEPA vacuum for cleaning frames, painting and print backing materials, and storage containers such as Solander™ boxes. These recommendations were followed immediately and the equipment is in regular use by art gallery staff and trained student assistants.

Overview of the Current Conservation Strategy

The current art gallery director (Karol Lawson) has approached the issue of conservation along three pathways.

- First, advocating with the College administration for the comprehensive renovation of the building in which the primary art gallery and art storage areas are housed; assisting with the preparation of materials for prospective major donors for this pressing need; and keeping The Friends of Art leaders informed and engaged on this crucial topic.
- Second, vigorously maintaining a regular schedule of inspection and cleaning in all art storage areas; addressing HVAC issues promptly with physical plant staff; and ensuring that the best acid-free, archival quality materials and procedures are used for storage and framing.
- Third, building on the three decades of work by her predecessors, she continues to address the conservation needs of particular artworks by making judicious use of reserve funds, the general operating budget, and appropriate grants.

On the third aspect, the current director has established basic internal focal points in order to prioritize conservation goals on a limited budget (as well as limitations on resources such as staff time). The conservation goals listed below have been reviewed and approved by the vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty (December 2013). They are broadly informed by the art gallery's mission statement and core purposes:

Prioritized Conservation Goals

- Focus on works on paper since these make up bulk of collection and are most at risk due to inherent fragility of materials and the challenges of a teaching collection and an imperfect facility.
- Focus on the works in need that demonstrate the potential for the most significant aesthetic and pedagogical impact as part of a teaching collection.
- Focus on the works most in danger of deterioration from handling due to study and use in an academic context.
- Focus on the works that will benefit from basic conservation treatment to make them fit for use in exhibitions.
- Focus on groups of related works in need so as to maximize the educational impact of any conservation investment.

Summary

As a teaching collection, the Sweet Briar College art gallery's holdings are subject to pressures not normally seen in general, stand-alone public museums: they are frequently studied close-up (unframed and not within a formal exhibition context) by a wide variety of students, professors, and other scholars; they are housed in a historic building that is not a purpose-built art museum; they have been donated by a wide array of supporters and so have come to the College with a

corresponding variety of framing and condition issues. The fundamental goal of the current director's conservation strategy is to stabilize and maintain the collection's artworks so that they can be used effectively to support the art gallery's educational mission, both in the present and the future.

Process

written by KL November 2013 for a grant application (IMLS)
approved by Amy Jessen-Marshall December 2013