

## A BOOK AND PAPER GROUP PANEL DISCUSSION ON ETHICS

### Introduction

by Timothy Vitale

Why would otherwise conservative professionals question their code of ethics? Many think that code, which was established in an earlier era of the organization, enforces standards which do not reflect the relative degree of sophistication that has evolved in the intervening years. While a serious discussion of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) Code of Ethics is not the most exciting topic of conversation, its specter can be sensed in many professional conversations.

The members of the Book and Paper Group's (BPG) ethics session panel met several times with the aid of conference calls. There were several points which all panelists thought important regardless of the segment of the BPG they were asked to represent. They are as follows: 1) the present Code of Ethics is obviously written with the painting conservator as the model; 2) the Code insists that all objects be treated alike; 3) the parameters for written documentation do not allow latitude for the treatment of a large group of similar objects as a unit; 4) the parameters for photographic documentation do not have latitude for dealing with the enormity of task when treating a group of similar objects or for the minor treatment of one or a group of objects. The BPG has several sub-specialties. Each panelist was asked to represent one or more of these special interests, putting strong emphasis on those points that are specific to aspects of the profession they represent. The panelists included:

Marian Peck Dirda: paper conservator and instructor at a large institution with library holdings (variety of art, cartographics, manuscripts, rare documents)  
Don Etherington: library conservation administrator; manuscripts, art on paper, and rare books on  
Norvell Jones: chief conservator at a large institution; documents ranging from non-intrinsic value (information only) to documents having the highest intrinsic value  
Denise Thomas: paper conservator for a museum, art on paper  
Pamela Young-Randolph: paper conservator at a regional center (formerly) and now in private practice.

Beyond representing their segment of book and paper conservation, the panelists wished to publicly acknowledge that the present Code was difficult to interpret to conservation practice in the 1980s. Many offered their personal judgement on how one might make an interpretation of the Code that reflected the spirit of the Code but allowed for realistic administration of both their professional duties and contractual goals.

Finally, the BPG has been offered the opportunity to participate in the process of deciding if the present Code needs revision, by providing constructive input to the AIC Ethics Committee and officers of the AIC Board.

The panelists offer their thanks to all persons attending the session for participating and signaling to the AIC at large that revision of the Code is a worthy goal for AIC to undertake. The BPG liaison with the AIC Ethics Committee is Karen Garlick. The BPG Ethics Committee members are: Don Etherington, Denise Thomas, and Pamela Young-Randolph. If you have opinions on this subject please contact the appropriate person(s).

[Quotations and references in the following presentations are drawn from the American Institute for Conservation Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice as most recently published in the American Institute for Conservation *Directory, 1984-85*, Washington, D.C.: The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 1984, pp. 10-23. --Editor]