

The Code of Ethics and the Conservation of Art on Paper

by Denise Thomas

I am going to break up what I have to say into three parts. The first will focus on the single standard (Part One, II.C.) and how it relates to documentation as Marian Peck Dirda and Norvelle Jones have similarly presented the problem. Secondly, I will introduce a concept which our panel discussed, called "risk factor." Lastly, I thought I would briefly sketch some of the different ethical problems encountered by museum conservators.

In many museums today the increasing travelling exhibitions and the subsequently frequent loan requests have resulted in the necessity of quickly handling and treating large groups of objects, many of which do not have major problems. There is not the time, and often there is not the funding, to do the photography and the documentation as outlined in the Standards of Practice. In the paper lab at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, we often forego taking before and after photographs of our minor or "first aid" treatments which usually involve hinge removals and very minor repairs. The single standard could be modified to allow flexibility for a conservator to apply common sense where needed without compromising useful thor-

oughness and appropriateness of approach. The single standard is really an attitude which implies consistent responsibility and conscientiousness, from care in handling to the proper choice of durable and appropriate materials for treatment. I think what we are aiming at is some sort of standard which includes more workable variables.

There is only one place in the Code of Ethics that deals with anything relating to risk, to any imperfection in treatment, to anything that might go wrong. And that is the warranty or guarantee (Part One, III.I.) which states that a conservator is not allowed to guarantee his or her treatment; however, should a defect appear over time in the completed work, the conservator may correct the flaw. Other than that, there is nothing which suggests the possibility of something going wrong in treatment, that changes might be anticipated, or that, despite thorough testing, changes may unpredictably occur.

Owing to the subtlety of art on paper, there are often very slight alterations created during certain treatments. I remember as a student when I noticed a change following a treatment procedure, I was not sure whether or not I was supposed to describe it in my final report. This "risk factor," as we termed it in planning for today's panel, is worth considering for inclusion in the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. A brief phrase which expresses the idea might read: "Recognizing the risks inherent in many conservation treatments or similar interventions, the conservator can only proceed to the best of his or her ability, balancing the advantages and disadvantages of treatment. Risks should be discussed with the client or custodian and stated in treatment proposals as appropriate. All changes incurred in treatment should be noted in

subsequent treatment records." Another important issue to thoroughly address and outline involves the necessity to alter the course of a planned treatment when events do not proceed as tests or experience might have predicted.

Lastly, I would like to discuss problems of ethics sometimes encountered in museums. What follows does not apply to any one particular museum but results from talks with museum colleagues and from my own experience. In a museum, you may not necessarily be employed by a conservator. Your employer comprises an aspect or aspects of the museum administration, i.e. the director and the curators among others. Oftentimes, no matter how enlightened an institution may be, some curators are not always as enlightened as one might hope, and some of the ethical standards in conservation are at times ahead of the curators' (or often administrators') perceptions or education. You may find that the administration does not always share your ethics, however, you are employed by them and are sometimes requested to comply with their wishes. You may be asked to do a treatment that you do not consider safe, appropriate, or ethical; you may be rushed or pressed to complete treatments, oftentimes complex, to meet exhibition or catalogue deadlines. Sometimes, in the interest of specific cosmetics, you may be asked to conceal damage in objects the museum wishes to deaccession and sell. You may get caught in the middle of all sorts of loan and exhibition politics. Your recommendations may be overridden or conversely, you may be asked to make a statement or recommendation useful for the administration's purposes. These may not necessarily be frequent or unresolvable but it is certainly not an easy task to deal with them.