

THE CONSERVATOR AS COLLECTION MANAGER

Panel Discussion
Mary Wood Lee/Panelist

In considering the role of the conservator in collection management, I must admit that I have approached it somewhat differently, and reached different conclusions than those of my fellow panelists. I had originally intended to discuss ways in which the involvement of Regional Center personnel might differ from that of conservators serving a single institution. The suggestion that the collection management role is a reflection of (or results in) the conservator's increased professionalism was something of a surprise to me. Since I take the opposite view, I offer my thoughts on the matter for consideration, with the hope that it may stimulate discussion.

Collection management, as I understand the term, is the day to day, general maintenance of the collection as a whole, involving environmental control, handling, storage, materials and facilities. It deals with the monitoring and maintenance of clearly defined accepted standards which have been dealt with extensively in both the museum and the conservation literature. Though I believe that conservators should work closely with collection managers, I take exception to the idea that only conservators are able to deal with these matters, and further, that it is an appropriate, let alone higher use of conservator's skills and expertise.

Most museums are heavily weighted toward curatorial staff who are subject specialists, with little or no museology training, and technicians who carry out a limited range of specific tasks. There is a pronounced shortage of staff with the time and/or inclination to address the routine questions of collection maintenance. Conservators seem to be increasingly picking up the slack, accepting responsibility for what is essentially a general museology rather than a conservation function. They are accepting this responsibility because of the lack of qualified, trained museum personnel, or perhaps because of a reluctance to accept any encroachment by non-conservators into those functions we view as our area of expertise. Yet the conservator's expertise, in fact, goes far beyond the routine of collections maintenance. It lies in dealing with the extra ordinary, the exceptions to the rule, the deviation from the norm. Yet routine responsibility for collections is being shunted off on conservators, particularly senior conservators, who spend an ever increasing amount of their time trying to regulate, educate,

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develop and control in the absence of an institutional acceptance of these functions.

It would seem that there is an urgent need for another category of museum specialist, an individual trained in collections management, working as an adjunct to both conservation departments and curatorial departments, freeing conservators for that work which three to four years of graduate training and additional years of highly exacting bench work has prepared them: the treatment of individual items, the resolution of problems beyond the norm. How and where such staff is to be trained is a matter of some concern to conservators, and certainly conservators should participate in museology training programs to a greater extent that they have in the past. Alternatively technician and collection management level training courses could be added to conservation training programs, resulting in certificates rather than degrees. There is no one solution, however, I feel strongly that the expertise and professional skills of conservators are not being well utilized by their relegation to dealing with the great mass of general museum problems.

This is perhaps taking a very narrow view of professionalism, and may seem to be a return to the old, and I hope outmoded view of conservators as "mindless hands" pattering away at the bench, unconcerned and uninvolved in the daily museum operations. It is not intended as such. Neither of these extremes is good for the development of the field. It may be naive to seek some utopia where conservators will be involved in developing policy, but not occupied in monitoring it, and will be able to fully utilize their skills and training, and thrive on the challenges of finding solutions for the impossible rather than regulating the routine.

How one fits into a system or develops a career may have a great deal to do with individual personalities and individual institutions. Having come from a Regional Center background has no doubt shaped my perceptions of what is appropriate. Because they serve a number of institutions, regional center staff tend to be more on the order of outside consultants than in-house staff. Requests from members tend to be either for help in formulating policy or for recommendations regarding specific problems. The implementation is the responsibility of in-house staff within the institution. Clearly, I feel this is not inappropriate. It seems to me self-defeating for senior conservators to devote their time to routine conservation matters in order to protect younger staff members, allowing them to acquire the requisite treatment expertise, so that they too may rise to administrative ranks, where they carry on the collections maintenance function so that the next generation can repeat the cycle.