

Transcription of remarks by Marjorie B. Cohn at AIC
1986 Annual Meeting, Book and Paper Group luncheon presentation.

[The tape recording began after I had begun my remarks. I assume I said something about the split in my time between bench work and my serving on various museum committees, my teaching of non-conservators, my participation in scholarly research with art historians, and my work as a administrator of one section of the Fogg Center, which is also a regional center.]

[In order to have a positive influence on collections management, so that the art works will be preserved, conservators, all the while working with administrators and] ... curators [must] keep their hand in enough so that the co-managers of their collections, their curators, their museum administrators, their registrars, and so on, will continue to have regard for them as working professionals, will see that this person really knows their onions when talking about specific conditions.

I don't think that the world is so large, I don't think that collections are so large, that the people who truly matter to the collections have distanced themselves from the objects -- yet. It might happen. I'm not saying it might not be different in the future. But I honestly feel that the reason why I have a great deal of respect at the Fogg Art Museum and why other conservators I know have a great deal of respect at their institutions is that

their curators recognize the abilities of the conservators as conservators and recognize the dedication of those conservators to the individual objects in their care.

If they are only practicing conservators, of course, that means that they will never get to the larger issues of collections management, so obviously there has to be a sharing of time from the bench to the curatorial meetings where the conservator sticks his oar in when something's requested for loan, to discussions of what kind of boxes should be purchased for the Drawing Department, to arguing with the maintenance engineers about what to do about humidity controls in a certain area of the building -- all those things we do which do not have anything to do with treatment. But I really hope that you all as conservators can maintain the respect of the curators and the registrars and all those people by the magic you work on the individual object in your care.

One more thing I'd like to add is that I work in an educational institution, where many of the people with whom I come in contact are students, and not just conservation students. I think that one reason there are as many curators in this world who have regard for conservators -- I hope that this is a reason -- is that I have tried and the rest of the staff where I work have tried to treat all those students (undergraduates and graduates alike at Harvard, who end up all over the country) as if their curatorial opinions are as valuable

as those of the curator, and that their curatorial problems in the study in the works of art are as serious as those of the curator, and that the conservator can give as much to them in an understanding of objects that are items of question to them in their studies as a library can or another art historian can. If in your jobs you come in contact with people in the very beginnings of their careers, whether it is the beginnings of their careers as conservators or as art historians or other kinds of scholars in the humanities or the sciences, for that matter, -- if you give their queries as much attention and professional enthusiasm as you can, then I think our profession not just as practicing conservators but as collections managers will be that much easier, because young sprouts that I saw twenty years ago are now chief curators in print and drawing departments all over the country. I am not the only person with an opportunity to see these people when they are just fledglings and warp them a little toward conservation interests. I think we all have that opportunity and I would ask you for the sake of collections management of the future to do your very best to warp those little minds in the right direction.

Discussion [MBC remarks only]

It has occurred to me listening particularly to what you (NYPL administrator) have said but also to myself and my three other panelists, that one thing that none of us have really settled down to define is the different kinds of administrative

tasks that distract the conservator from bench work. I would maintain that there are several different kinds of categories, some of which are quite valuable adjuncts to our practice as conservators and others of which are not, although they may be very valuable to collections management. I would maintain that surveys, for instance, for me, going out into New England historical societies whose objects have not been handled by conservators or scholars since they were deposited there in 1823 is one of the most educational processes for me as a practicing conservator, to acquaint myself with natural aging processes, with historic mounts -- things like that -- and I wouldn't miss a survey for the world. On the other hand, the kind of meetings that have to do with humidity control in the West Wing, as you say, where they certainly don't need a conservator to tell them that the line on the hygrothermograph should be flat -- that is something that gives nothing to my education. So I think that as a practicing conservator, when we consider what kinds of administrative or non-bench time we are willing to accept and what we try to find surrogates for, we should try to weigh very carefully the benefits to ourselves as practicing conservators so as to try not to relinquish our continuing education, even if we happen to be an exalted Stage-4 type.