

Conservation in Brazil: Challenges and Achievements

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the preservation and conservation of library and archives materials in Brazil during the past fifteen years. It examines obstacles faced by conservation professionals, including: climatic and geographic conditions; economic shortcomings and disparities; lack of institutional and political support; limited number of trained professionals and training/education opportunities; cultural isolation; and the unavailability of conservation materials and technology. The paper comments on several national, local, and private programs for conservation/preservation and training, the effort to bring the conservation profession and work to established international standards, and the move towards preventive conservation.

INTRODUCTION

Five hundred years ago Portuguese explorers found a new land where the valuable brazilwood tree not only was plentiful but also yielded a red dye of excellent quality. This land was named Brazil, and it remained a Portuguese colony until 1822. In 1889 it became a republic. Brazil is a large and complex nation, marked by severe socio-economic, geographical, and cultural contrasts. It is the fifth-largest nation in the world, about the size of the continental United States.

About eighty percent of the country is in the tropics; only the southern region is in the Temperate Zone. There are the hot and humid Amazon lowlands covered in great part by the Rain Forest, the arid semi-desert of the northeast, the eastern highlands, the southern pampas, and the Atlantic coast.

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From the colonial period we have inherited a rich heritage of baroque architecture, paintings, and sculpture. We also inherited an authoritarian style of government where the importation of books was restricted and the printing press forbidden.

In 1808 a major war in Europe changed the history of this colony. Because of the imminent invasion of Portugal by Napoleon's army, the Portuguese royal court transferred the center of the government from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro. It was only then that the first printing press and the National Library were established. Today it is the world's eighth largest library, containing over eight million works. The National Archive was founded in Rio in 1838.

In the twentieth century an immense growth in the urban population and government-directed industrialization changed the face of the country. The centralized political structure was consolidated and permitted the establishment of cultural institutions of national scope.

CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION ACTIVITIES

The first institution in the field of preservation was created in 1937: the Institute for National Artistic and Historical Heritage (IPHAN). From the beginning, the Institute's goals have been comprehensive, seeking to survey, to protect, and to introduce national policies. It has been active mainly in the preservation of monuments and architecture. Recently considerable efforts have been made to preserve the vast documentation from the Institute's archives.

Traditional institutions, such as the National Archives, the National Library, and the Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa,¹ were pioneers in setting up conservation programs for their library and archives collections. They also took on a national role in training conservators and setting up programs and policies that reached across the country. In 1978, for instance, the National Library and the Casa

de Rui Barbosa established a program for microfilming Brazilian periodicals. Regional microfilming units were formed in several cities adhering to the National Library's guidelines. Some of these units are still in operation. The master copies are stored in climate controlled conditions at the National Library. In 1981 the National Foundation for the Arts (FUNARTE)² established the National Program for the Preservation and Research of Photography. An extensive survey of the photographic collections existing in the country revealed the lack of, and the urgent need for, technical information and support. Four years later the program created the Center for Photographic Conservation and Preservation. The Center provides technical expertise such as training opportunities, research, and dissemination of photographic preservation information. National and international experts have collaborated with the Center.

The establishment of training programs has been an important objective for conservation and preservation professionals. Much effort has been made to create and sustain the training programs in different parts of the country. A recent example is the certificate program in the conservation of paper-based objects offered by the University of Paraná. It was started two years ago. We would like to highlight two successful programs.

One is the two-year certificate program offered by the Center for Conservation and Restoration, CECOR, at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. Started in 1980, it focuses mainly on the conservation of easel paintings and polychrome sculpture. It has been one of the most successful graduate level programs in Latin America. CECOR also develops research projects and provides treatment and consulting services.

The other program is the non-degree training program on library and archives materials offered jointly by the Brazilian Association of Bookbinding and Restoration (ABER)³ and the National Service for Industrial Education (SENAI)⁴ in São Paulo. The ABER-SENAI program was created in 1991 to train technician-level staff. Initially it emphasized individual treatments. Today the program emphasizes all aspects of preventive conservation as well. It provides 480 hours of lectures and laboratory sessions, divided between graphic arts and conservation. It includes courses such as printing, photography, papermaking, conservation ethics, and book and paper conservation techniques. In 1995 ABER-SENAI created a well-equipped book and paper conservation laboratory to provide services and workshops. Some of the equipment used in this lab was made in Brazil, such as heat-sealing and leaf-casting machines. National and international experts have presented workshops and lectures on both conservation and bookbinding techniques.

ABER has developed projects with the most important public and private academic institutions in Brazil, such as

the Law School and the Architecture School from the University of São Paulo. It has also selected conservators to attend internships in Brazil and abroad.

Another successful project in our field has been the Preventive Conservation in Libraries and Archives Project developed in Brazil with the support of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) and funded by the Mellon Foundations and VITAE.⁵ The project goals were to translate and disseminate preservation knowledge. Fifty-two English-language preservation publications and two videos were translated into Portuguese. Two thousand copies of each title were printed and distributed. Initially 160 conservators attended week-long workshops where the technical aspects of the texts were explained and discussed. The project also developed a website and a database listing seventeen hundred museums, libraries, and archives. The project's report has been published by CLIR.⁶ Its enormous accomplishments rely on the efforts and cooperation of the consortium of Brazilian institutions. They formed an efficient information network dealing with preventive preservation.

The conservation community in Brazil has grown considerably. The Brazilian Association of Conservators (ABRACOR)⁷ was founded in 1980. It has been working on several issues such as professional accreditation, minimum curriculum, and the strengthening of the code of ethics and standards of practice. ABRACOR organizes a biannual national conference for all conservation specialties.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

An ongoing problem is the purchase of equipment and archival quality materials. There are actually two situations: one is importing, and the other is finding and using products made in Brazil. The rather unfavorable exchange rates and heavy taxation, as well as difficult bureaucracy, have made it particularly difficult to acquire anything from abroad. The small market and the necessity of a good storage environment for paper-based materials make conservation rather unattractive for business enterprises. Brazilian industry has been able to provide some products similar to those found in the U.S. Unfortunately, there is no catalog listing them. Often, conservators have to first find the manufacturer and then find a way to buy or obtain the small quantity they need. Since late 1995 the paper industry has begun to convert papermaking to an alkaline technology. Alkaline paper with long fibers can be found in different thickness. Corrugated polypropylene boards are made in Brazil and are widely used for housing. Other basic materials used in conservation, such as lining paper, acid-free boards, and adhesives (polyvinyl acetate, methyl cellulose, and wheat starch paste) need to be imported. For example, mold growth on works treated with wheat starch

paste is a concern. The Brazilian brand has been proven to mold easily.

Another concern is the lack of extensive scientific testing to assure the archival quality of these materials. The causes of deterioration of organic materials are well known. In the tropics, degradation may occur faster and be more severe. Since most of the collections in Brazil have been kept under constant high temperature and relative humidity for decades, or even centuries, we may wonder how these collections still exist. Brazilian conservators are constantly faced with challenges to find solutions that are most appropriate to climatic conditions and the realities of their own situations. Recently studies have been done on the environmental changes in different types of buildings, building materials, and design. They have also looked at non-chemical treatments for pest control and means of controlling the environment other than with HVAC systems.

Most cultural institutions either belong to the government or depend on government funding. The federal government is one the major sponsors of all cultural activities, ranging from conservation treatment and training to commercial filmmaking. Because of this close connection, when there are changes in the federal, state, or local governments, changes in policies, priorities, and leadership can be expected to happen as well. The replacement of personnel, for instance, has affected not only the leadership positions, but also the professional and the technical staff essential to execute the projects. Political connections overrule professional qualifications. Projects are constantly interrupted and funding is often shifted. This pattern is a major drawback.

Fortunately, a number of independent state agencies have been supporting several conservation projects. The Foundation for Scientific Research (FAPESP),⁸ for instance, has supported the establishment of conservation laboratories since the early 1980s. In the past four years it has been focusing on the conservation of library and archives collections. VITAE is probably the only Brazilian private funding institution providing the conservation field with money for projects ranging from training to the establishment or upgrading of conservation facilities.

Since 1991 Brazilian businesses can get tax breaks by sponsoring cultural projects, including conservation projects.

The library system in Brazil has always been inadequate, insufficient, and not a major component of the educational process. Students have relied heavily on lectures and handouts prepared by instructors. The Internet is providing access to information never experienced before. However, access alone to information is not enough. Information has to be interpreted so it can be properly used. This fact points to the need for more than just the training of technician-level staff.

What is needed are broadly-trained conservation professionals who can assume leadership positions and become involved in important decision-making processes. It is important that professionals in Brazil have access to sound academic programs and/or internships as well as sufficient exposure to more advanced centers of conservation. A well-informed leadership is essential to evaluate and determine new directions, train and assure quality of work, and develop cooperative projects with other institutions. A recent example is the move towards preventive conservation and the considerable increase in preservation awareness in Brazil. This has been achieved through the Preventive Conservation Project (translation and dissemination), the ABER and CECOR educational programs, and training opportunities offered by the National Library, National Archives, Casa de Rui Barbosa, and the Center for Photographic Conservation and Preservation.

A final balance between challenges and achievements gives us a more optimistic view of the future of conservation in Brazil. A strengthening of dialogue and exchange is needed among Brazilian conservators as well as a continuing dialogue and exchange with the international community.

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NOTES

1. The Casa de Rui Barbosa was officially created in 1930 to honor the memory of Rui Barbosa (1849–1923), a distinguished politician and intellectual, by preserving and making available his valuable library and archives. Today the Casa de Rui Barbosa is an important research center, museum, library, and archives dedicated to the study of *Braziliana*.

2. FUNARTE is a federal agency of the Ministry of Culture responsible for promoting and supporting the development and diffusion of artistic and cultural activities. It was created in 1975, inactivated in 1990, and re-created in 1994.

3. ABER is a private not-for-profit organization. It has received support from a private institution, VITAE, and from the government, as well as from the paper industry's school, SENAI, to set up and maintain activities.

4. SENAI is a private institution dedicated to professional training and education, technical and technological support, and dissemination of information in several industrial areas such as the cellulose and paper and the textile industries. SENAI is maintained by one percent of Brazilian industry's payroll.

5. VITAE is a non-profit organization focused on supporting projects in cultural, educational, and social fields to improve life quality in the community. It is maintained by the Lampadia Foundation in Liechtenstein which also works in Argentina and Chile through the Antorchas and Andes foundations. VITAE develops its own projects and financially supports projects in public and private non-profit institutions.

6. Beck, Ingrid, *Building Preservation Knowledge in Brazil*, Council on Library and Information Resources, 1999.

7. ABRACOR is the Brazilian equivalent of the American Institute for Conservation. For more information, see the website <www.abracor.com.br>.

8. FAPESP is an independent state agency created in 1962 to support scientific and technological development by offering scholarships and competitive grants to research projects and related activities. FAPESP is maintained primarily by one percent of the State of São Paulo sales taxes.

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