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COLLECTIONS

Advisor



Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society, cropped from original

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What is a Conservator?

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Organizations with a collecting emphasis consider the preservation of their collections of primary importance to their institutional mission. Gathering together artifacts and protecting them inside a building is just the beginning of a long series of steps toward actually preserving a collection. Navigating the preservation mandate is challenging; seeking professional advice from a collections care specialist is helpful. Conservators are those professionally trained in the evaluation, examination, treatment, storage, display and environmental requirements of artifacts. Artifacts may range in material type and structure, including paintings, textiles, furniture, decorative arts made from stone and precious metals, and paper-based items like maps and manuscripts. Conservators are trained at the graduate level and specialize in conservation treatments that physically stabilize types of artifacts where the physical components are similar. Most have a wide range of skills to assist small museums with their collections in many ways. In this article, I will outline a few of these.



*Susan Rogers, senior conservator,
Indiana Historical Society*

- Consultations by phone are an excellent way to make a first contact. Never hesitate to pick up a phone to ask a question or start a conversation and get advice. A conservator can help outline steps to address your specific concerns. They are familiar with common issues like what to do about fading inks and dyes, the best way to handle and store a

fragile flag, or situations that are quite unique – like how to protect a painted advertisement on a newly exposed brick wall. Some think that conservation is an expensive practice. However, there are often very practical solutions to a problem that may only require assessing your situation a bit differently and then taking the steps to affect change for the better.

- Inviting a conservator for an on-site visit is a great way to take your conversation further and to fully understand the preservation concern. Conservators can identify in more detail the concern at hand, whether an item or an entire collection needs to be physically stabilized, its building environment evaluated, or its storage improved. Short reports or written recommendations are often helpful aspects of these site visits which help museum staff more fully communicate preservation concerns to their board and community.
- Conservators are often approved collection assessors who work in tandem with the Collection Assessment Program of the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Heritage Preservation in Washington, D.C. CAP grants are assessment reports funded by IMLS that support a two-day conservator site visit to assess the current state of preservation of a museum or special library collection. The report offers substantial information categorized as low-, mid- and long-range goals to help establish an overall preservation plan. Elements of a preservation plan are outlined and the budget and staff of the organization are taken into consideration, making the report a useful tool in moving forward in the preservation of a collection.
- Monitoring of the environment is an element of a preservation plan that is recommended and often causes confusion for museums. It can be quite simple with tools that are affordable and placed in the right places anywhere artifacts are used: primarily registration, display and storage areas. Conservators can recommend placement of dial hygrometers or data loggers to ensure that readings of temperature and relative humidity are accurate.
- Support grants like Preservation Assistance Grants have fairly simple application procedures and are available to museums through the National Endowment for the Humanities for up to \$6000 that support the purchase of equipment such as environmental monitors, HEPA vacuums, UV light filters, etc. The grant requires the recommendation from a conservator, so it is good to establish on-going communications in advance for this type

of support.

- Workshops are a great way to provide a wide range of information for a museum or a group of museums and their volunteers. When everyone needs to be on the same page about the need for a preservation plan or an overall method of care to collections, a workshop can provide it. The Local History Services department (www.indianahistory.org/lhs) is often familiar with the kinds of workshops and training that are commonly needed and can be a good source for establishing group workshops with a conservator. Offering ongoing training opportunities is essential for museum personnel and volunteers who wish to work hands-on with a collection. Knowing how to provide baseline examination and care, labeling, photography, proper storage and methods for display is important to the preservation mandate. Conservators of many disciplines can provide training in these areas.

Conservators are available through a variety of professional networks. *Ask a Conservator!* is a regional Indiana program that offers advice through the Association of Indiana Museums (www.indianamuseumpeople.ning.com). Professional conservators from around the state attend the annual AIM meeting and provide the opportunity for museum staff to meet one-on-one about preservation issues with a conservator ready to listen, discuss and look up information. The *Ask a Conservator!* table provides time to talk, make recommendations and exchange email addresses. Follow-up information is sent directly to the museum before the end of the day. It is a simple way for museum staff to greet and meet, and establish contacts and confidence in the professional conservation community. *Ask a Conservator!* offers a free conservation project assessment as a silent auction item during the conference; provided and underwritten by the Conservation Department at the Indiana Historical Society. The museum with the winning bid is offered an assessment of a project related to conservation, whether it be on the topic of collection maintenance, training, environmental walk-thru, etc., while the auction proceeds support AIM (www.indianamuseums.org).

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works offers a service that provides museums and private individuals with names of conservators in their area along with their area of expertise. *Find a Conservator* (www.conservation-us.org) provides contact information on their webpage for those who can give advice on a wide range of topics, probable causes for immediate issues that need to be resolved and courses of action. They also can be sources for possible treatments that would stabilize items in collections.

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