

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Mellon Pilot Project

In the wake of the April 27, 2006 meeting in New York, the Museum concluded that without completion of a systematic inventory of its conservation documentation, it would be impossible to determine a path forward. It is now undertaking a one-year pilot study of its holdings, supported by an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Officer's Grant. The project has three essential components:

1. A complete written report of the 2004 survey of the Museum's conservators mentioned in the April 2006 summary, including the results of updated discussions with curatorial and conservation staff.
2. A detailed inventory of existing conservation documentation using three Museum departments as test areas: Egyptian Art, European Paintings, and Photographs. The Paintings and Objects Conservation Departments will also be involved in this project. The inventory will be a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the documentation. Because the documentation is accessed by a diverse pool of users, including curators, conservators and scientists at the Museum, and scholars and colleagues in other institutions, access-tracking data will also be gathered.

The Departments of Egyptian Art and European Paintings each have a long history of conservation and technical study involving conservators, scientists, and curators. This has produced a wealth of conservation and curatorial documentation of different types, the majority of which is well preserved and accessible in paper form (e.g., treatment, examination, and excavation reports, photographs, x-rays, infrared reflectograms, etc.), but not generally integrated with the curatorial records in TMS.

Photograph Conservation, while relatively new, has been a leader in the integration of conservation and curatorial information in its collections management system.

3. An evaluation of digitization and cataloguing requirements for this material, based upon sampling selected types of documents within the areas inventoried. This will provide preliminary cost models, necessary for the Museum to establish priorities for any future cataloguing and retrospective digitization initiative.

At the end of the one-year project, the Museum expects to have a clear sense of the scope, methodologies, and formats of the documentation that it has created and will continue to create in its twelve conservation and science facilities. From this data, the Museum will extrapolate the costs associated with creating, cataloguing, digitizing, and managing the documentation, and a plan for prioritizing the activities of the next several years. This will likely also include crafting recommendations for future documentation practice throughout the Museum.

In addition, the results of the pilot inventory will provide an opportunity for continued engagement with colleagues addressing these issues at other institutions, and for discussions of how our plans and priorities integrate with theirs.

The Museum recognizes the fundamental importance of its conservation documentation as a resource for conservation and scientific research and for art historical studies for its staff and for the art historical community in general. Effective tools and guidelines are a key need for managing information, as demonstrated by current efforts by the Museum to store and share its collection of digital images. This project will provide an important platform from which to base future efforts for conservation documentation management and sharing efforts, both within the Museum, and in collaboration with other institutions.