

Conservation Documentation in Digital Form

A CONTINUING DIALOGUE ABOUT THE ISSUES

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In April 2006, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation organized a ground-breaking meeting to discuss the challenges and opportunities in conservation documentation engendered by the rapid growth of the digital world. Hosted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the meeting convened 44 representatives of 14 organizations – 10 American and four British. The deliberations, conclusions and recommendations of the New York meeting have been reported by Angelica Rudenstine of the Mellon Foundation and Timothy Whalen from the J. Paul Getty Trust in the *Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter* [1]. One key, unanimous recommendation was that the topic of the future of digital documentation and access to that information should urgently form 'the framework for broader exchange with the wider community of colleagues in the European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere in the World' [1, p. 27].

The first steps towards that wider discussion and consultation have now taken place in a follow-up meeting, also organized by the Mellon Foundation, held on 25 May 2007 at the British Museum in London. A number of participants from the New York meeting attended to provide continuity in the debate, but the emphasis in London was to gather the views and ideas of European

colleagues active in conservation and conservation documentation. Accordingly, the delegates, at director and senior staff level, including heads of conservation and scientific research, represented 12 European (including five British) institutions in discussion with representatives of five organizations from the United States.

The London meeting was chaired by Angelica Rudenstine, as had been the discussion in New York, and as she observed in her opening remarks: 'expectations for online access to art collections are growing extremely fast.' This theme set both the tone of the contributions to the exchanges that followed, and defined broad common ground that already exists between Europe and the United States in the field. Many of those present remarked upon just how rapidly the discussion of digitization of museum and collection-based material has been transformed from one of grappling with obstacles and uncertainties over approaches, to a more widespread recognition of the desirability, and indeed inevitability, of a wholly committed digital future for museum documentation, with its tremendous potential for broadening access at the levels of both scholarly enquiry and public engagement.

A number of participants stressed their institution's enthusiasm for increas-

ing public exploration of collections either via the Web or using computerized tools made available within the museum's walls. While this has become a driving force behind newly established institutional priorities, it was also generally recognized that extending techniques of electronic documentation to conservation records (and to the research derived from these) had the compelling additional benefit of tackling some potential future problems in the preservation and archiving of collections documentation, particularly as conventional records grow in volume and deteriorate with age. Older photographic records are a particular example where digitization would provide not only easier access but also a greater assurance of permanence, so long as the new challenge of reliable archiving of digital material can be solved.

It was, however, a widely expressed concern among European participants at the London meeting that while ministries and agents of government tended to approve strongly of digital recording of collections and documents associated with those collections, resources to undertake these labour-intensive programmes are not forthcoming; most European cultural institutions are attempting to maintain their operations against a background of declining public funding. It was clear that creative solutions for

digitization projects would be required and it was also evident that no single organization – whether public or private – could meet the resource needs of widespread digitization programmes in the English-speaking world, let alone around the globe where materials in many languages would be involved. In addition, it was argued that long-term funding, not just start-up funding, would be required to sustain and develop digital archives and databases, and to continue the work of ensuring that they can be interlinked between institutions, a vital development that would increase enormously the research potential of these records.

Representatives of the European institutions present all reported current or planned activity in digital documentation of collections, including records which arise from conservation processes, treatments and supporting ancillary research on objects. A number of delegates also confirmed their belief in the value of making this documentation remotely available to enquirers, preferably in mediated or interpreted form in instances where enquiries were likely to come from the general public.

The scale of these operations and the challenges that institutions face is in some cases enormous, as emphasized by the Museo del Prado, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. For the Doerner Institut in Munich, which holds extensive material from client collections and is advanced in its digital management of information, key questions to resolve were related to external rights of access to information, intellectual property and copyright issues. Even relatively smaller museums such as the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen hold very extensive conservation-based records and argued for the importance of retrospective digitization, although it was widely agreed that there was also a duty of stewardship to preserve the original documents in addition.

Among the spectrum of gatherers and holders of information resources, both conventional and digital, the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD) in the Netherlands stood out as an institution whose explicit central purpose is to provide art-historical and technical documentation to scholars and to the wider public. A representative from the RKD argued strongly not only for the expansion of digital databases on works of art, but offered a vision of much wider accessibility via the Web and the great synergic value to scholars of databases interconnected between institutions and across national boundaries.

There was some discussion of the galvanizing effect that the UK Freedom of Information Act had had on British institutions participating in the meeting. Since the public are now able to request to see museum records including conservation information (unless specifically exempted by the Act) it is expected that institutions should survey their records and be readily able to locate requested information. It is useful to set policies regarding conservation records within the broader institutional policies for all records, as there is considerable experience and expertise in the world of professional archive and records management upon which those who are formulating policies for the management of conservation records might usefully draw.

With the limited resources at its disposal, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is focusing on specific issues for development and exploration in order to test a variety of experimental systems for conservation-related and other technical materials as well as access to and searching of records. By funding a number of 'pilot projects' in digital documentation, the Foundation is directing resources to resolving some of the key questions that need to be addressed in order to develop and apply internationally agreed principles to wider projects. At the same time the Foundation is

encouraging international collaboration between institutions to share expertise.

Four pilot projects have so far received funding from the Mellon Foundation:

1. The Metropolitan Museum in New York is undertaking a year-long survey of its vast collection of conservation documentation. At the end of the 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' [2]. This information will be used to plan and prioritize future digitization activities.
2. The British Museum in London is in the process of integrating the records of its science and conservation groups into the museum-wide 'Merlin' collections database system. Ultimately all of these documents will be made available to enquirers on the Web. As of October 2007, the curatorial information in the Merlin system is being made available to the public on the Web in incremental stages that will eventually see most of the conservation and science documents made accessible to enquirers.
3. The Courtauld Institute of Art is leading a cooperative effort with the Harvard University Art Museums, the Worcester Art Museum and the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Florence to create an online research resource to investigate the oeuvre of the fourteenth-century Florentine painter known as the Master of the Fogg Pietà (sometimes called the Figline Master). The digital compilation of panels dispersed around the world will facilitate the study of style, techniques, and materials as well as the proposal of virtual reconstructions of polyptychs attributed to this artist.
4. At the National Gallery in London, a remotely accessible database is being designed and built to record

a comprehensive range of image- and text-based documents – conservation-derived, technical and art-historical – on works by Raphael in the collection, with the future aim of enriching this resource for scholars by incorporating related material held by other institutions in Europe and the United States. The Raphael Resource, designed first for scholars, will also be made available on the Web in interpreted form for the general public.

An additional pilot project in preparation at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles (with direct Getty support), will result in an image database focusing on the works of Lucas Cranach the Elder and his workshop. The database is described as ‘an ever-expandable repository that should eventually include not only works attributed firmly to Cranach himself, but all of the works associated with the workshop’ [3]. A key feature of this database is that it will allow users to make close comparison of high resolution images on-screen. This resource will also

be made available to the general public as well as to scholars.

Each of the pilots was described in some detail at the London meeting, and the wider group of delegates discussed the potential of the intended outcomes for their own plans in digital documentation [4].

In her concluding statement, Angelica Rudenstine reiterated the commitment of the Mellon Foundation to seeing real, sustained progress in this field, not to produce ‘homogenization of processes or outcomes’, but rather to ‘offer the opportunity to experiment with methodologies and to test models of collaboration’. The next steps would be to foster projects across national boundaries, bringing together two or more institutions to think about common problems and drive the whole field further intellectually. At the same time all participants at the London meeting were encouraged to think of ways of bringing the agenda of digital documentation of conservation and technical records to greater public attention, with the necessary ultimate aim of influencing

national governments to provide resources for broader programmes in the future.

REFERENCES

- 1 Rudenstine, A.Z., and Whalen, T.P., ‘Conservation documentation in digital form: A dialogue about the issues’, *Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter* **21**(2) (2006) 26–28, www.getty.edu/conservation/publications/newsletters/21_2/news_in_cons.html (accessed 12 October 2007).
- 2 Leona, M., Scientist-in-Charge, Metropolitan Museum, New York, personal communication.
- 3 Leonard, M., Conservator of Paintings, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, personal communication.
- 4 Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, ‘Issues in conservation documentation: Digital formats, institutional priorities, and public access’, <http://mac.mellon.org/issues-in-conservation-documentation> (accessed 12 October 2007)