

IFAR Journal

INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR ART RESEARCH

VOLUME 8 NUMBER 2 2005/06



Cellini's Salt Cellar Recovered—Unharmed
Hurricane Katrina and the Visual Arts
A New Tool for Authentication?
Antiquities Embroil U.S. Museums

EMERGENCY ART RECOVERY AND CONSERVATION IN NEW ORLEANS

HEATHER BECKER*

As we all know, on August 29 Hurricane Katrina arrived on the Gulf Coast region of Mississippi and Louisiana with overwhelming force. In the days that followed, New Orleans was devastated by flooding, leading to the evacuation of the city and innumerable individual instances of property damage and loss. By mid-September, as the waters receded, a new wave of recovery and triage experts descended on the city to save the heritage of this culturally significant region. The following discussion describes the role The Chicago Conservation Center was privileged to play in this landmark national recovery effort.

The Chicago Conservation Center (CCC) disaster response team arrived in New Orleans on September 14, 2005 to assist with the rescue and triage of the countless works of art, antiques and fine furniture damaged by Hurricane Katrina. The CCC is a full-service art preservation facility whose staff includes specialists in the conservation of paintings, works of art on paper, antiques, frames, textiles, photographs, objects and murals, as well as members of our disaster response and transportation departments. As a national resource for the restoration of art, we have been involved in hundreds of small and large-scale disasters. Through our past experience, we knew we had to act quickly in order to provide as much assistance as possible.

As our team was on its way to New Orleans, I received a call from one of my fellow panelists, Christiane Fischer, CEO of AXA Art Insurance Corpora-

“Mold was discovered in an amazing variety of colors — orange, green, purple — including one of the most dangerous, black mold. . .”

tion. AXA’s local clients in New Orleans include The New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) as well as many of the city’s most prominent local collectors. AXA had already secured the museum itself with armed guards and a generator to maintain a safe climatic environment. Recognizing that both humidity damage and looters posed an immediate potential threat to these significant private collections, AXA asked for our assistance in recovering and transporting them to the museum for temporary safekeeping. Due to the extreme nature of the circumstances, the management of even the most basic logistics of the transportation effort required a comprehensive strategy. The development of an effective plan that could be executed immediately to recover this important property would not have been possible without the intense and positive collaboration of the CCC and AXA.

Our disaster response team was charged with recovering property from a number of both private homes and businesses, to be either transported to NOMA for safekeeping or brought to the CCC for disaster recovery and conservation treatment. One of the most important factors in the successful recovery of art, antiques and fine furniture is a timely response.

*Heather Becker is the CEO of The Chicago Conservation Center.



FIGURE 1. Walter Wilson, Director of Transportation and Disaster Response, recovers an oil painting infested with mold.

Rapid changes in temperature and humidity as well as direct contact with water and mold growth can all have an extremely destructive impact on art and furniture. The sooner the works can be removed from the area of damage, triaged and stabilized the better the prognosis for preservation.

The first hurdle to overcome in responding to a disaster situation is gaining access to the property. With the extreme situation in New Orleans, this required the services of special escorts who walked our team through the many security checkpoints which otherwise kept the hundreds of cars in line waiting for hours at a time. Our crew was also equipped with chainsaws and the various tools required to help clear paths through the many fallen trees and mounds of scattered debris blocking roadways.

The high levels of black mold and other dangerous contaminants that pervaded many of the damaged homes and buildings in New Orleans made it necessary for the response team to wear TYVEK suits, gloves, boots and respirators at all times on-site (Fig.1). With no electricity, they also wore headlamps to help negotiate their way through the wreckage as they worked to locate the individual items they were tasked with recovering. The extra clothing and



FIGURE 2. Lower portion of a late 18th century English secretary that suffered extreme water-damage.

equipment further complicated the already difficult task of recovering the property from buildings with high humidity levels and temperatures that reached 105 degrees Fahrenheit.

Once identified, the furniture (Fig. 2) and art were photographed *in situ* and then moved to a stable area outside of the immediate damage zone to be inventoried and packed for transport. Most of this work took place in neighborhoods which had been evacuated, but our crew was surprised by more than a few homeowners who saw our trucks and requested that we include their work in our transports back to Chicago. Many people had lost so much that the family heirlooms and personal collections they had built over the years had become ever more important for them to save.

“... it [was] necessary for the response team to wear TYVEK suits, gloves, boots and respirators at all times on-site. With no electricity, they also wore headlamps to help negotiate their way through the wreckage...”



FIGURE 3. Helen Conklin, Chief Conservator of Paintings, uses a microscope to examine a series of paintings damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

In all, we had rotating crews in New Orleans and the surrounding area for almost two months, safeguarding and transporting over 2,500 works to Chicago from private collections, corporations, museums, universities and dealers. The work, ranging from rare, irreplaceable art to purely sentimental items, was carefully packed and transported back to Chicago in secure, air-ride climate-controlled trucks. Upon arrival at the CCC, the items were carefully unloaded, individually documented and triaged by our staff of specialized conservators. The sheer volume of items required a thirty-member staff working almost around the clock to stabilize the property before further damage could occur. Fortunately, our system had been well-tested just a year before when we undertook a similar large-scale triage of over 4,000 works from LaSalle Bank's world-renowned photography collection damaged in the fire of December 2004.

Their first task was to separate each work of art from its frame, backing or mounting where necessary, and then slowly reintroduce it to a stable environment. Climate consistency is critical because rapid fluctuations in temperature and humidity can cause items to expand and contract, destabilizing support structures. Maintaining mid-level humidity levels can prevent mold growth and deter insect infestation, while cooler temperatures can minimize natural processes of aging and deterioration. In order to sta-



FIGURE 4. Helen Conklin removes the crazed varnish layer of a water-damaged painting.

bilize the property, it was slowly allowed to acclimate to a safe humidity level of approximately 40% and temperature of 68 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Once it was stabilized, the triage team began to clean and carefully vacuum the mold and other debris from each item, providing structural supports when necessary. Mold was discovered in an amazing variety of colors – orange, green, purple – including one of the most dangerous, black mold or *Stachybotrys*. Debris included the usual branches, leaves and feathers as well as unexpected and sobering bits, including children's puzzle pieces and toy fragments.

As the triage phase was completed, assessment of condition began. The conservation staff undertook a thorough examination and testing process that provided the basis for treatment plans developed for each individual item (Fig. 3). These were submitted to the clients for review and approval before work began.

At this point, we anticipate positive results with many of the upcoming treatments (Fig. 4), including everything from noted early pendant portraits to a historically significant map of New Orleans. Over the past months, we have had inquiries from around the world from people wondering what type of work we were able to salvage. The answer is: exceptionally varied collections of paintings, sculpture and works of art on paper ranging from examples of



FIGURE 5. A water-damaged frame, which experienced extensive gilding losses, is carefully returned to its pre-damaged condition.

Little Dutch Masters of the Baroque to 18th and 19th century artists, to examples of 20th Century Expressionism and Regionalism and 21st Century Naïve and Pop art, Photorealism and Abstract Expressionism. We're also preserving collections of fine furniture and antiques from the late European Baroque to Modern American movements (Fig. 5).

“We have experienced a successful recovery rate of approximately 90% for the items we’ve examined.”

We're looking forward to returning all of the property we've been treating to its rightful place in New Orleans and have been grateful to have learned a great deal during this process. Thus far we have experienced a successful recovery rate of approximately 90% for the items we've examined. We attribute this success to an incredible team effort providing a timely response, proper documentation, safe transport, immediate triage and patient and meticulous conservation attention.

With the threat of another active hurricane season in 2006, it is our hope that through education outreach efforts, such as this forum, we can help other institutions, museums, corporations and collectors put disaster plans in place. This can provide a heightened level of awareness and proactive steps to follow prior to and immediately after disasters occur. We can only hope this unfortunate experience can help us all ensure that our cultural heritage, fine art, antique and furniture losses can be minimized or even prevented in the future.

... →

HURRICANE KATRINA AND THE VISUAL ARTS

Q & A

Q Ms. Becker, exactly where did the conservation work take place? The triage was at the New Orleans Museum of Art, but after that, were the works transported to Chicago?

A HEATHER BECKER: Yes, a little over 2,500 works were transported to Chicago, and we set up three different locations ahead of time to do the triage.

Q A question for Christiane Fischer. What is the effect on someone's ability to obtain insurance if the proper procedures are not in place? In other words, could you talk more about the practical conclusions to be drawn from your talk?

A CHRISTIANE FISCHER: Everybody is probably closely watching what the marketplace is doing. People who renewed an annual policy in the third quarter were in good shape because those quotations were out before Katrina hit. As you know, insurance companies like AXA Art, which would be considered a primary insurance carrier, turn around and also buy reinsurance. That's why when a catastrophe like Katrina happens probably every major insurance company in the world is affected by it, because they all share in pooling the risks. So, what I am about to tell you now is my own personal view, it's not an industry view, as to what will happen. I think that we will see a harder time for collections that are in what will be considered catastrophe-prone areas. They will have a harder time obtaining insurance at the prices that they are used to. There will be a lot more questions asked, a lot stricter rules and guidelines, and a lot of work will have to be done to show that everything is being done to prevent the worst.

Q I was just in New Orleans for five days with Harvard University. . . . No one's talked about the fact that many of the returning homeowners and residents have no place to commune. What I found was that it was a choice between parking lots

for neighborhood meetings or meeting at the Ogden Museum. People find out information about their neighborhoods by going to art openings and book signings. Art is helping to rebuild the community. Do you think that museums are going to help bring back these neighborhoods?

A PATRICIA H. GAY (PG): I think that the art world is going to be just about as strong as ever. Every restaurant that is open is packed, as are the shops; there's a lot of traffic. All of the historic neighborhoods of New Orleans except for the twentieth-century ones, are there, and the people are moving back. We had a gallery night on the first Saturday in October. It was just a few of us, a few galleries on Julia Road, but they were all open. We had another gallery night in November and we had one in December. So I think the art world is going to do well. . . . The people in Mid-City, who have larger houses that were built in the twentieth century but really close together, are not going to abandon those houses. It would be a terrible thing for our country to lose the housing stock that's just sitting there. So we are concerned that not enough action's being taken. In Lakeview, people are meeting in parking lots, but they are meeting, and they are saying: "We are coming back and we want to rebuild, save our neighborhoods."

Q My company, Racine Berkow Associates, presently has a team of ten people in New Orleans who are relocating the State Museum of Louisiana. I was very impressed with the AXA Art response, and the conservator's response, but we're dealing on the state level with the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA), and it's a completely different story. On the other hand I am happy to say that, unlike a lot of other companies that are in Louisiana from out of state, we have all local people working for us, including some of the people who were laid off from the New Orleans Museum of Art.

Q I was part of a group of four appraisers, three of whom are still down in New Orleans, who went to do valuation and advise individuals as to the treatment and valuation of their properties. What I find extraordinary is the brain trust here in New York clearly does not appear to be communicating with the populace down there. So what I would like to see happen, if it's possible, is for greater communication with the individuals who are living this nightmare. If we can get through to the Mayor of New Orleans' office and enable him to better disseminate this body of accumulated knowledge to assist the individuals down there, it would be an enormous benefit. I never saw a population that was so unaware of the dangers, risks, and hazards that they faced.

to deal with. There is so much information, I wish we could be having meetings all over the city to help people deal with the financial matters because there is FEMA money, there is insurance money, although in some cases, not much. Still, just to help people with their financial decisions.

Q People are definitely reduced to haves and have-nots. The haves had insurance and the correct type, and the have-nots had insurance, but maybe they had flood insurance and not wind or storm insurance. Maybe they had windstorm and not flood.

A PG: We were aware. It's a whole other issue to get into why the levees failed, and of course there was a lot of fighting about that in the newspapers. The levee wall was supposed to be 17 feet high, and it was 10 feet, and whose fault was it? The failure had been predicted for a long time; it was a man-made disaster. I think it can be dealt with. I think people are going to move back into these neighborhoods regardless. What they aren't aware of is insurance for their house, and what the policies are going to be, and what building code issues they will have

A PG: You'd be surprised how many people didn't have the insurance they needed but who were not "have-nots." And the flooding was across the board. It was wealthy; it was very poor; it was in-between; it was black and white. But still, people do need to be educated about this and encouraged, and so we're lobbying for the tax credit for homeowners who renovate historic houses, who restore historic houses. That's just one thing that we'd like to do. We need incentives to get people back to New Orleans and to start dealing with these issues. But the spirit is there. . . . We're optimistic, but when we stop and think about how far we have to go, it is discouraging.



ADVERTISEMENT

APPRAISAL RESOURCE ASSOCIATES

COMPREHENSIVE APPRAISAL AND CONSULTING SERVICES
FINE AND APPLIED ARTS

CORPORATE, INSTITUTIONAL and PRIVATE COLLECTION
ARTISTS' ESTATES, DONATIONS
LITIGATION SUPPORT

Frances Zeman, M.A., FASA, DIRECTOR



TEL: (212) 432-6530 (718) 852-4961 FAX: (718) 643-6486

WEBSITE: www.appraisalresources.com

E-MAIL: franzasa@aol.com

SCENES FROM AN *IFAR EVENING* ON HURRICANE KATRINA



Jean Portell (left) and Susanne Sack (right).



Ulrich Guntram and Heather Becker.



Moira Egan and Lawrence Reger.



Elin Lake Ewald.



Left to right: Vivian Ebersman, Sabine Wilson, and
Gordon A. Lewis, Jr.



Barbara Hoffman (left) and Racine Berkow (right).