

CONSERVATION POLICY

**The National Gallery of Canada
and
The Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography**

*This Policy was approved by the Board of Trustees on September 20, 2004
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1. PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to provide direction for the ongoing development, conduct and management of conservation activities within the National Gallery of Canada (NGC)*. The policy is intended to provide the framework within which the NGC Conservation Procedures will operate.

2. AUTHORITIES

The National Gallery Act of 1913 first empowered the Board to oversee “the custody and preservation of the works of art.”

The authorities governing this policy are the *Museums Act* (1990). The NGC will continue to hold itself to the standards and principles of these authorities as part of its mandate:

The heritage of Canada and its peoples is an important part of the world heritage and must be preserved for present and future generations...

The mandate of the NGC is described in the *Museums Act*:

To develop, maintain and make known, throughout Canada and internationally, a collection of works of art, both historic and contemporary, with special but not exclusive reference to Canada, and to further knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of art in general among all Canadians.

The NGC has also previously been subject to the *National Museums of Canada Conservation Policy* (Codex Musealis Issue No. 1, April 1983), and shall continue to hold itself to the standards and principles of this policy. The NGC is also subject to such laws and regulations as Parliament and the Government of Canada may enact.

3. APPLICATION

This Conservation Policy applies to the following activities relating to the permanent collections and public programmes of the National Gallery of Canada: acquisitions, display, storage, general maintenance, treatment, exhibitions and loans of objects, research and information. External objects on loan to the NGC or being examined in the NGC Conservation Department, are also covered by this policy.

* Note: Throughout this document, all references to the National Gallery of Canada include the Gallery's affiliate museum, the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography)

4. DEFINITIONS

4.1 Object

The terms employed in the *Museums Act* to refer to any moveable cultural property collected or collectable by the National Gallery of Canada is “works of art” and “museum material”. As per the legislation,

“museum material” means objects and documentary material, regardless of medium or form, of a type normally kept by a museum for reference or exhibition purposes.

For the purpose of this policy, “works of art” and “museum materials” includes all historic and contemporary works of art or artifact of any type, which are or may become a part of the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Canada or are borrowed for exhibition. Depending on the context, a work may be a single article or an integral unit made up of its component parts.

4.2 Conservation

Conservation encompasses a broad range of activities within the museum context: prevention of deterioration and damage; scientific examination and research; documentation; conservation treatment; management of risk within the exhibitions and loans programs; and education. Each activity is an essential part of a complete program of conservation. All are necessary to ensure the proper preservation and display of the National Gallery of Canada collections.

For the purposes of this Policy, “conservation” also encompasses all processes usually termed “restoration”, namely cleaning and other subtractive processes, and the addition or replacement of elements to enable full understanding and cogent display.

4.3 Conservator

For the purpose of this policy, the term “conservator” refers to any person whose primary occupation is the conservation and restoration of objects, and who has the training, knowledge, ability and experience to carry out conservation and restoration activities. Any person performing the function of “conservator” will report to the Chief Conservator of the Restoration and Conservation Laboratory (RCL) of the NGC.

The Chief Conservator is responsible for ensuring appropriate standards. The conservator is responsible for devising a complete program of preventive care and conservation treatment for the NGC Collections. In this, the conservator works closely with the curators, the conservation scientist and other specialists.

5. POLICY

The conservation policy of the National Gallery of Canada is to preserve the objects that are the responsibility of the NGC, by maintaining the physical, historic and aesthetic integrity of those objects. Within this activity it is recognized that there is a requirement to maintain a balance between the need of Canadians and the public in general - present and future - to have access to the objects in the NGC permanent collections and the preservation of those objects.

All actions of the conservator shall be governed by this responsibility to maintain the physical, historical and aesthetic integrity of the object, which is a responsibility shared by all other employees of the NGC, but particularly by departments within Collections and Research. Due to special expertise, the Restoration and Conservation Laboratory is the department with the primary responsibility of physical risk management for works of art within the exhibitions and loans programs and the permanent displays, and any activity that may have physical effects on objects. Within this, conservators have a responsibility to effect change to the procedures, methods and materials employed by all other departments. The conservator is also responsible for contributing to the development and growth of conservation by continuing to develop knowledge and skills, sharing this information and experience, and promoting proper conservation care.

All conservation activities in the NGC will be conducted in an ethical manner, and to the highest possible standards, in accordance with the standards of practice established by the international museum and conservation communities.

5.1 Preventive Conservation

Preventive conservation aims at the provision and maintenance of safe storage, handling, transport and display conditions to ensure stable environments and conditions in which deterioration and damage are reduced to a minimum. Conservation practice is based on the principle that prevention of deterioration is preferable to, and therefore should always precede, active intervention in the form of conservation treatments and/or restoration treatments.

- Emergency Situations: In the event of an emergency, which has already damaged or which threatens the safety of objects in the NGC collection, response will follow guidelines as set forth in the NGC Crisis Management Plan, or as recommended by a designated Crisis Coordinator, Collections Rescue.
- The Museum Environment: The NGC shall strive to provide and monitor environmental conditions in keeping with currently accepted standards – for relative humidity, temperature, light levels and atmospheric pollutants – in all exhibition galleries, storage vaults, offices, studios and workshops, and wherever else objects-related activities occur. Adequate protection will be provided through safe access and handling only by personnel trained in the correct methods of care for the objects.
- Routine Inspections and Preventive Maintenance: NGC staff will monitor the physical condition of all objects on public display and in storage in the NGC, of accessioned objects outside the NGC, and of all objects entering or leaving the NGC. Given the strict environmental conditions under which works are exhibited and stored, maintenance of condition by good environmental control, and eventual examination of all objects through programming need, is considered acceptable and sufficient. Collection surveys are also desirable and encouraged, subject to staff and resource availability.
- Exhibitions and Loans: Conservation of objects in the permanent collections of the NGC as well as external objects in the care of the NGC, is a primary consideration with regard to their exhibition or loan. Whether or not an object can be exhibited or lent safely, and under what restrictions, is determined by considering the nature and condition of the object, the record of its exhibition history and travel, the intended use and the ability of

the borrower to provide care and protection. The condition of objects on long-term loan from the NGC and of objects on loan to the NGC will be monitored.

- Special issues: Some types of works of art have special needs in terms of preventive conservation. Time-based media works, for instance, have the issue of replacement components becoming obsolete, and loss of data, which may happen despite tight environmental control. Conservation of technology-dependent works will be undertaken in keeping with the approved Plan for the Conservation of Technology-Dependant Works.

5.2 Conservation Examination and Treatment

Conservation treatment can be performed only after gathering all necessary pertinent information and carrying out technical examination and research into the materials which make up the object, as well as investigating and assessing the causes of actual or potential deterioration. Examination and treatment include the recording and documentation of the methods and materials used by the artist and by the conservator.

Conservation and restoration treatment is undertaken in order to stabilize, consolidate, clean, repair, remove non-original additions, strengthen or reassemble an object, or return it to the appearance of a known previous state by means of physical or chemical intervention. Preservation of the physical, historical and aesthetic integrity of the object shall take precedence over all other considerations.

Conservation treatments will employ techniques and materials which, to the best of current knowledge, will neither endanger the true nature of the object nor impede future treatment or the retrieval of information through scientific examination.

All conservation examination and treatment must be conducted in an ethical manner and with full respect for the object, within the highest possible standards of practice as established by the national and international museum and conservation communities, of which the NGC is an active part. The NGC reserves the right to develop unconventional alternatives of approach in exceptional circumstances, and in such a way further contribute to relevant communities.

- Examination Prior to Acquisition: Prior to the acquisition of any object by the NGC, the object must be examined by a conservator, and the consequent report approved by the Chief Conservator. The ultimate function of this examination is to determine whether a proposed acquisition is valid in terms of condition and collection usage. The report can take several forms, and must serve the following purposes; to accurately determine the condition of a work; to determine whether an object has been critically compromised by damage; to determine reasonable future use of the object and state any restrictions; to estimate short and long term associated costs of the acquisition, and make recommendations for the future.
- Assessment of the Physical Condition of the Permanent collections: A prerequisite to any conservation treatment program is the assessment of the physical condition of the objects that make up the permanent collections. Initial thorough assessments in the form of surveys should be updated and augmented periodically in order to ensure the preservation of the collections. This should be done in the form of focused examinations of groups of related objects.

- Establishment of Priorities for Treatment: Conservation priorities will be established on the basis of: (a) an emergency situation; (b) urgent need of the objects as determined through survey or other examination; (c) research projects; (d) exhibition and loan related demands; and (e) permanent display requirements in the NGC.
- Examination Prior to Treatment: Immediately prior to any treatment, the conservator, in collaboration with the curator, is to carry out a thorough examination of the object and of all available documentation relating to its history and past condition, in order to propose the most suitable treatment.
- Documentation: Preliminary examination and actual treatment of the object are to be recorded by the conservator. These records will be thorough and will usually contain written and photographic/visual documentation of the object prior to, during and after treatment. However, any useful method of documentation employed at any point in an examination or treatment procedure is acceptable.
- Guidelines Governing Examination and Treatment: As specified in the *Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice for those Involved in the Conservation of Cultural Property in Canada (1986)* will be followed. However, it is recognized that in the case of some objects, the above guidelines may not be sufficient and, in exceptional cases, unconventional alternatives may have to be considered.

5.3 Conservation Research

In accordance with the NGC Research Policy, the Conservation Department shall engage in conservation research. Research includes analytical projects involving new methods and techniques of conservation or non-applied research into the properties of various materials and products. Research into artists' materials and techniques contributes to technical knowledge, which leads to a better understanding and appreciation of works of art. Routine technical examination and analysis of objects are an integral part of the conservation process and of research. All conservation research findings are intended for dissemination by appropriate means.

Conservation research within the NGC will be primarily directed toward the solving of problems, and development of understanding and knowledge, relating to: (a) objects in the permanent collections (b) external objects selected for inclusion in NGC exhibitions; or (c) conservation related materials or methodologies unrelated to specific objects or exhibitions. The research is intended to contribute original knowledge, as well as to substantiate the findings of others. The conservator, through systematic analysis and documentation, builds a technical data bank of conservation-related information. In accordance with these aims, the NGC engages in conservation-research related to:

- Artists' materials, techniques and application, including the crafts associated with each category;
- Conservation methods and materials, from the past and present; and
- Environment and deterioration studies.

Conservation research will involve collaboration with conservators, Art historians, historians, curators and conservation scientists in the national and international museum and conservation

communities and universities. Of note in this regard is the special relationship between the NGC and the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), primarily because of analytical expertise and facilities at CCI.

5.4 Conservation Information Services

Education is a necessary part of conservation. Consultation, lecturing, publications and other methods of disseminating information should be employed in order to promote a fuller understanding of conservation in general, as well as to share the results of treatment research with conservation and museum professionals, art historians, historians and the public. These activities help to promote proper care of objects and advance the growth and development of conservation of the fine arts.

- National Gallery of Canada Staff: NGC staff will receive basic training and ongoing advice concerning accepted standards of maintenance and care of objects in the collections.
- The Public at Large: Conservation information will be provided to the public in response to inquiries concerning the physical care of works of art, causes of damage and deterioration, and problems of conservation and restoration. If the Director, Conservation and Technical Research or the Director of the NGC deemed it to be in the interest of Canada or the NGC, treatment of objects owned by the public may be undertaken. Otherwise, referrals may be made to suitable organizations or institutions as required. Tours, seminars, public lectures or informal talks on conservation subjects may be provided from time to time by NGC conservation staff.

6. MANAGEMENT OF CONSERVATION

6.1 Conservation Committee

As required, the Gallery shall convene a Conservation Committee, whose primary responsibility will be to review conservation priorities as indicated by conservation and curatorial staff, and to recommend and review the NCG conservation plan.

The membership of the Conservation Committee includes the Chief Curator and Deputy Director - Collections and Research, the Director – Conservation and Technical Research, the Chief Conservator, conservators and curatorial representatives for each collecting area within the NGC. Conservators and curators will only attend those parts of the meetings which directly apply to their own projects.

6.2 Evaluation of Conservation

All conservation activities of the NGC are evaluated through the usual NGC management review processes.

7. ROLES, RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

7.1 Director of the NGC

The Director of the NGC is accountable for development of the NGC Conservation Policy and its approval by the NGC Senior Management Committee and presentation to the NGC Board of Trustees.

7.2 Senior Management Committee

The Senior Management Committee, chaired by the Director of the NGC, is responsible for the annual approval of the NGC conservation plan and budgets.

7.3 Conservation Committee

The Conservation Committee is responsible for recommending the conservation plan to the Senior Management Committee.

7.4 Director - Conservation and Technical Research

The Director - Conservation and Technical Research is responsible for establishing strategic priorities for conservation research on the Gallery's collection and for ensuring that curatorial enquiry is supported by technical expertise of the highest caliber. He/she is also accountable for the implementation of the approved conservation plan and for the operations and activities of the Restoration and Conservation Laboratory of the NGC.

7.5 Chief Conservator

The Chief Conservator is responsible for the implementation of the approved conservation plan and for all ongoing conservation activities within the NGC.

7.6 Conservators

Individual conservators are responsible for carrying out, managing and accounting for conservation projects and for recommending priorities for conservation. They are also responsible for providing information and advice on the conservation aspects of NGC collections and for signing the conservation condition reports of works borrowed for exhibition. Within individual projects, treatments or examination of objects, the conservators have the responsibility for keeping relevant curatorial staff informed of developments, findings and decisions, and have a corresponding right to consultation with curatorial staff at any reasonable point.

7.7 Curators

Individual curators are responsible for recommending individual works for conservation, developing plans and priorities for their collecting areas. They are also responsible for providing information and advice on art historical aspects of conservation projects and for co-signing, with the Chief Conservator, the proposed treatments for major conservation work, including, if necessary, an agreed schedule when milestone discussions between the conservator and curator should take place. Within individual projects, treatments or examinations of objects, the

curators have the responsibility for keeping relevant conservation staff informed of developments, findings and decisions, and have a corresponding right to consultation with conservation staff at any reasonable point.

8. AUDIT AND EVALUATION

It is considered essential that this policy be subject to periodic evaluation and review. This process will ensure that the NGC Conservation Policy will always reflect current standards.

Alterations to this policy can be initiated by any department following discussions with the Director, Conservation and Technical Research and the Chief Curator. The revised policy will then pass through the Gallery's normal policy approval process.

9. INQUIRIES

For any inquiry concerning this policy, please contact the Restoration and Conservation Laboratory, National Gallery of Canada.

10. PROMULGATION AND REVIEW

This policy shall be made available to all NGC employees.

REFERENCES

- *National Museums Corporation (NMC) Conservation Policy (Codex Musealis Issue No. 1, April 1983).*
- *Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice for Those Involved in the Conservation of Cultural Property in Canada. International Institute for Conservation – Canadian Group/Canadian Association of Professional Conservators (1986)*
- *NGC Research Policy*
- *National Museum of Science and Technology (NMST) Conservation Policy (1987)*
- *NGC Crisis Management Plan*