



**National Gallery
of Canada**

**Musée des beaux-arts
du Canada**

CONSERVATION POLICY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The mandate of the National Gallery of Canada (NGC or the Gallery) is described in the *Museums Act* (1990), which reads as follows:

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 authorities governing this Policy are derived from Section 3 of that Act, which states:

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

The Gallery adheres to international standards of practice for conservation of art, and shall continue to hold itself to the principles and best practices as established by the national and international museum and conservation communities of which the Gallery is an active part.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this Policy is to provide direction for the ongoing development, conduct and management of conservation and restoration activities across the Gallery. This Policy is intended to provide the framework within which the Gallery's conservation program operates.

3. APPLICATION

This Conservation Policy applies to all Gallery staff and interns involved in any activity that directly or indirectly impacts the collection. These activities include but are not limited to processing acquisitions, transit, display, storage, general maintenance, treatment, exhibitions and loans of objects, and research.

External objects on loan to the Gallery or being examined by the Gallery's Restoration and Conservation staff are also covered by this Policy.

Primary accountability for implementation of this Policy rests with the Director, Conservation and Technical Research, in collaboration with the Chief, Restoration and Conservation, under the direction of the Gallery's Director and CEO.

4. DEFINITIONS

4.1 Museum Material/Objects

The *Museums Act* defines "museum material" as:

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, “museum material” or “work of art” includes any cultural property object that is collected or collectable by the Gallery, namely: any historic and contemporary work of art or artifact of any type, which is or may become part of the Gallery’s permanent collection or is 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 preventative and/or interventive activities that are within the museum context, such as: 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 forms an essential part of a complete program of conservation; all are necessary to ensure the proper preservation and display of the collection.

For the purposes of this Policy, “conservation” also encompasses all activities 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 on the collection.

Conservators have a responsibility to oversee the general condition of objects in the collection, and due to their specialized expertise, to devise a complete program of preventative and interventive care and conservation treatment of objects. In this context, conservators work closely with the Chief, Conservation and Restoration, and the Director, Conservation and Technical Research, curators, conservation scientists and other specialists.

Conservators have a responsibility to effect change to the procedures, methods and materials employed by all other Gallery departments that physically interact with art. They are also responsible for contributing to the development of conservation expertise at the Gallery by continuing to develop knowledge and skills, share information and experience, and promote proper conservation care.

5. POLICY

It is the Gallery policy to preserve the works of art that are within its custody by maintaining the physical, historical and aesthetic integrity of those objects. Within this activity, there is a requirement to maintain a balance between the need of the public in general to have access to the objects, and the preservation of those objects for present and future generations.

All conservation activities at the Gallery will be conducted in an ethical manner. All actions of the conservator will be governed by the responsibility to maintain the physical, historical and aesthetic integrity of the object. This obligation will be shared by all other employees of the Gallery, particularly those working in departments within Collections and Research as well as Exhibitions and Outreach.

Due to its specialized expertise, in its role as the primary steward for the physical risk management of artworks, the Conservation and Technical Research Department has a vested interest in all activities, including the approval of new materials and procedures that could have a physical effect on an object or that could cause long-term deterioration of an object, whether on permanent display, on exhibition or on loan.

5.1 Preventive and Interventive Conservation

Preventive conservation deals with the provision and maintenance of safe storage, handling, transport and display conditions to ensure stable environments in which deterioration and damage are reduced to a minimum. Conservation practices will be 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 activities.

- a. Emergency Situations: In the event of an emergency that has already caused damage to or which threatens the safety of objects in the Gallery collection, as per the Gallery's Business Continuity Plan, the response will follow recommendations of the Designated Coordinator for Collection Rescue or the most senior conservator present on site at the time of emergency.
- b. The Museum Environment: The Gallery will strive to provide and monitor environmental conditions in all exhibition galleries, storage vaults, offices, studios and workshops, and wherever else object-related activities occur, in keeping with the Gallery's established standards for relative humidity, temperature, light levels and atmospheric pollutants. Only personnel trained in the correct methods of care for the objects will be granted access to and authority to handle objects.
- c. Inspections and Preventive Maintenance: Gallery staff will monitor the physical condition of all objects on public display and in storage, of accessioned objects outside of the Gallery, and of all art objects entering or leaving the Gallery. 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 as they are selected for programming, will be an acceptable and sufficient approach to preventive maintenance.
- d. Exhibitions and Loans: The conservation of objects in the Gallery's permanent collection, 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 duration; 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.
- e. Special issues: Some types of works of art have special requirements 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 established guidelines for the conservation of technology-dependent works.

5.2 Conservation Examination and Treatment

Conservation treatment will be performed only after gathering all pertinent information and carrying out a technical examination of the object and research into the materials from which it is made. Additionally, investigating and assessing the causes of actual or potential deterioration is required. Examination and treatment will include the recording and documentation of the methods and materials used by the artist and by the conservator.

Conservation and restoration treatment will be 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 treatments or the retrieval of information through scientific examination.

All conservation examinations and treatments will be conducted with full respect for the object and within the highest possible standards of practice as established by the national and international museum and conservation communities. The Gallery reserves the right to develop unconventional alternatives of approach in exceptional circumstances, and in such a way as to further contribute to practices of relevant conservation communities.

- a. Examination Prior to Acquisition: Prior to the acquisition of any object by the Gallery, the object will be examined by a conservator, and the consequent report approved by the Chief, Restoration and Conservation. In the case of acquisitions of large collections, the Chief, Restoration and Conservation may deem sampling or group assessments and summary reports to be sufficient. The ultimate aim of such examinations is to determine whether a proposed acquisition is valid in terms of condition and collection usage. The written report can take several forms (e.g. narrative, checklist form, summary, statement, or email), and must serve the following purposes: (a) to determine the authenticity of a work; (b) to accurately determine the condition of a work; (c) to determine whether an object has been critically compromised by damage and/or non-original irreversible additions; (d) to determine reasonable future use of the object and state any restrictions; and (e) to estimate short and long term costs associated with the acquisition and make recommendations for the future.
- b. Assessment of the Physical Condition of Objects in the Permanent Collection: A prerequisite to any conservation treatment program will be the assessment of the physical condition of the objects that make up the permanent collection. Knowledge of the overall condition of the collection relies heavily on established documentation, and the maintenance of a stable and safe environment. Focused examinations of groups of related objects performed by conservators during the course of their duties on an annual basis constitutes a randomized survey of the Gallery collection and affords valid statistics.
- c. Establishment of Priorities for Treatment: Conservation priorities will be established on the basis of: (a) an urgent need produced by a crisis event or as determined through examination; (b) significant contribution to public programming at the Gallery or externally; (c) permanent display requirements at the Gallery; and (d) research projects.

Curators will participate in the establishment of conservation priorities.

- d. Examination Prior to Treatment: Prior to any treatment, the conservator will carry out a thorough examination of the object, which may involve testing of techniques or materials. The nature of the object, the perceived problems, and the level of intervention required will dictate the nature and form of the examination and any accompanying documentation. The examination, along with a discussion with the conservation team and/or the Chief, Restoration and Conservation, will serve as a basis for a treatment proposal. The relevant curator will be made aware of any proposed treatment unless that treatment is deemed to be routine maintenance or minimal intervention (e.g. matting of a work on paper, adjusting the fit of a painting in a frame, routing dusting of objects).
- e. Documentation: Preliminary examination and actual treatment of the object will be recorded by the conservator. Documentation will consist of written and photographic/visual records and may include any other form of information capture (e.g. video, spectra) that the conservator deems appropriate. Documentation provided by the conservator will reflect the specificity of the situation and the museum material in question.
- f. Treatment: Ongoing treatment will be outlined in a Treatment Report, and the object will be visually documented (e.g., by photography, video, the production of Computer Aided Design (CAD) drawings and other schematics, etc.) at key stages during the course of treatment. The progress of the treatment will be periodically discussed with the Conservation team and the relevant curator, if required, and at any point in time that the relevant curator deems necessary. If the scope of intervention constitutes major treatment, the relevant curator will be contacted to discuss the intervention, upon which, a mutually agreed process will be detailed in the conservator's Examination Report.

A major treatment consists of preventive and/or interventive activities in which one or more of the following apply:

- The proposed treatment will take more than 100 hours;
- The treatment will involve the removal of non-original additions;
- The appearance or the nature of the object will be significantly altered and any action, material employed, or outcome is not straightforwardly reversible.

All major treatments as defined above will be countersigned by the Section Head or the Chief Conservation and Restoration, or the Director, Conservation and Technical Research.

- g. Guidelines Governing Examination and Treatment: Guidelines that are specified in the *Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice for those Involved in the Conservation of Cultural Property in Canada (1989)* will be followed in principle. 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 in consultation with the Director, Conservation and Technical Research.

5.3 Examination of Objects for Exhibition or Loan

An object requested for exhibition as part of the Gallery's programming or loan to another institution will undergo a thorough examination of its physical history and its current condition,

bearing in mind the circumstances of travel and display. Other considerations will include: the proposed facilities and their environmental conditions, and the human resources that will be available at the institution to which the Gallery may lend or partner with in programming.

The Conservator will offer an assessment of the overall risks concerning the specifics of the requested object(s) and the cumulative circumstances, including recommendations for measures that will reduce risk, up to and including treatment of the object. This assessment will be a critical factor in the eventual risk/benefit analysis that will be agreed upon by the Conservator and relevant Curator. In the case of loans, the Gallery's Loans Committee will participate in this risk/benefit analysis.

5.4 Conservation Research

In accordance with the NGC Research Policy, the Conservation and Technical Research Department shall engage in conservation research. Research may include 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 will be 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 Gallery will be primarily directed toward the solving of problems, and the development of understanding and knowledge, relating to:

- (a) objects in the permanent collection;
- (b) external objects selected for inclusion in Gallery 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. In accordance with these aims, the Gallery engages in conservation research related to: artists' materials, techniques and application, including the crafts associated with each category; innovative treatment methods and solutions; conservation methods and materials from the past and present; and environmental and deterioration studies. Through systematic analysis, the Conservator compiles technical data concerning individual objects, artist's practice, and conservation-related information. This data is stored in either the object's individual file, the x-radiograph archive, and/or the shared digital archive.

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 Gallery and the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), primarily because of the analytical expertise and facilities at the CCI.

5.5 Conservation Information Services

Education is a necessary part of conservation. Consultation, lecturing, publications and other methods of disseminating information will 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 promote proper care of objects and advance the growth and development of fine art conservation.

- National Gallery of Canada Staff: Budget and workload permitting, Gallery staff will receive training and ongoing advice concerning accepted standards of maintenance and care of objects in the collection.
- External Stakeholders and the Public at Large: Budget and workload permitting, conservation information will be provided to other museums, institutions, universities, and 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 and CEO deem it to be in the interest of Canada or the Gallery, examination and 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 the Gallery's conservation staff, with the approval of the Director, Conservation and Technical Research.

6. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

6.1 NGC Director and CEO

The Director and CEO of the Gallery is responsible for development of the NGC Conservation Policy, its approval by the Gallery's Senior Management Committee and presentation to the Gallery's Board of Trustees.

6.2 Director, Conservation and Technical Research

The Director, Conservation and Technical Research is responsible for overseeing the conservation and technical research programs for the Gallery's collection and for ensuring that curatorial enquiry is supported by technical expertise of the highest caliber. As a member of the Gallery's Senior Management Committee, the Director, Conservation and Technical Research, is also accountable for the strategic implementation of the operations and activities of the Gallery's Restoration and Conservation Laboratory.

6.3 Chief, Restoration and Conservation

The Chief, Restoration and Conservation is responsible for the management of resources for all ongoing Gallery conservation activities and for ensuring that consistent service of the highest quality is achieved and that appropriate standards in conservation are upheld.

6.4 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 the Gallery collection and for signing the conservation condition reports of works borrowed by the Gallery for exhibitions. Within individual projects, treatments or examination of objects, the conservators

are responsible for informing curatorial staff of developments, findings and decisions, and for providing information and advice on technical art historical aspects and conservation. Conservators have a corresponding right to consultation with curatorial staff at any reasonable point in time.

6.5 Curators

Individual curators are responsible for proposing works for conservation and developing plans and priorities for their collecting areas. In the case of acquisitions, they are responsible for deep consideration of the nature of the work and its condition, and implications for conservation as outlined in the Conservation Examination Report, which is prepared prior to acquisition. Curators also share the responsibility for risk to the collections engendered by display, exhibition and loan, and treatment. In the case of major treatment, this shared responsibility will be documented and represented within the Conservation Examination and Treatment Reports. This collaboration will include, if necessary, an agreed schedule for the timing of milestone discussions between the conservator and the relevant curator. Concerning individual projects, treatments, or examinations of objects, the curators have the responsibility for keeping relevant conservation staff informed of developments, findings, and decisions and for providing information and advice on art historical aspects of conservation projects. Curators have a corresponding right to consultation with conservation staff at any reasonable point in time.

7. EVALUATION

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

It is considered essential that this Policy be subject to periodic evaluation and review. This process will ensure that the Gallery's Conservation Policy will always reflect current standards. Accordingly, this Policy will be reviewed at least every five years.

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.

8. INQUIRIES

Questions concerning the interpretation of this Policy should be addressed to the Chief, Restoration and Conservation.

References

Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice for those Involved in the Conservation of Cultural Property in Canada (1989)
Museums Act
NGC Business Continuity Plan
NGC Code of Conduct