
Managing and Conserving the Collection

by *Martha Durant Kratsas and
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EVEN though the exhibits and educational programs are the most popular aspects of the Kansas Museum of History, they represent only two of the ways through which the Society accomplishes the goals of collecting, preserving, and interpreting the history and material culture of Kansas. Collection acquisition and management, conservation, and study are equally necessary and important activities.

Obviously, before an object can be exhibited, studied, or preserved at the Kansas Museum of History, it must be collected and become the property of all Kansans through the Historical Society. When an object is given to the Society a legal transaction takes place and complete records are made which note the donor's name, the history of the item, the construction materials, the size, and the condition. A number is given to the records, and the same number is affixed to the object itself in such a way that the object is not damaged. Thereafter, the object is part of the collection, and any further information obtained by the staff through research and cataloging is included in the records.

Wildlife management, forests, and unpolluted environments immediately come to mind when most people think of conservation. Many would be surprised to learn that the word "conservation" also encompasses the scientific preservation of historic and artistic works. Frequently, restoration is confused with conservation. However, restoration implies the act of returning an object to its original condition and appearance—an ambitious, yet unscientific and usually impossible challenge.

Artifacts are made from materials which age, just like everything else. As the aging process continues, both the appearance and the physical properties change. "Growing old gracefully" is part of the object's history, and it is a philosophy

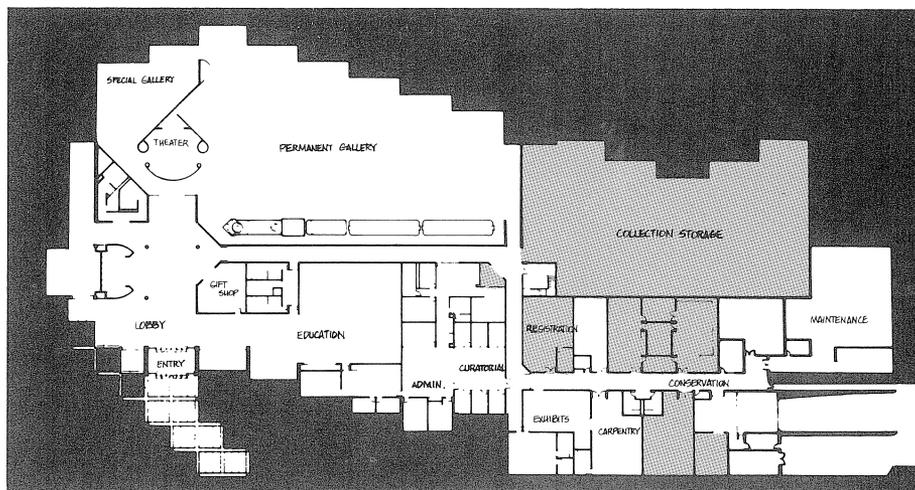
taken into account by most museums and serious collectors. Attempts to return an object to a like-new condition seriously damage its integrity and even reduce its historical value considerably.

Historic furniture often lends itself to these restoration abuses. For example, one could take an early piece of furniture, sand off the old finish to the wood, apply a "durable" new finish, and buff the brass hardware to look like new. In the process, major links with the object's history would be destroyed. Stains, minor abrasions, and evidences of handling would be scraped away. What would remain would be an invention of the restorer, an object with no history.

Conservators such as those working in the conservation center laboratories in the new Kansas Museum of History would first analyze the object extensively, then prescribe a completely different treatment. Analysis would be conducted to help the conservators find out everything possible about the object's materials and history. It would help them determine what comprises the finish, paint pigment, and type of wood. A thorough examination would include photography and perhaps chemistry and even radiography, plus the completion of a written report and a consultation with the appropriate curator. The object then would be stabilized. Stabilization is perhaps one of the best synonyms for conservation. In this example of furniture, stabilization would involve the following: regluing any loose joints with a reversible adhesive, inpainting disfiguring scratches and other abraded areas with a reversible paint or stain, and treating problems so that the lives of the original materials would be prolonged.¹ Finally, conservators would follow

1. Reversibility is important so that any work may be undone easily at a later time. Conservators do not use materials which may in time become inseparable from the artifact. Inpainting is confined only within the boundaries of the damaged area. Overpainting is never used because it would cover some of the original finish.

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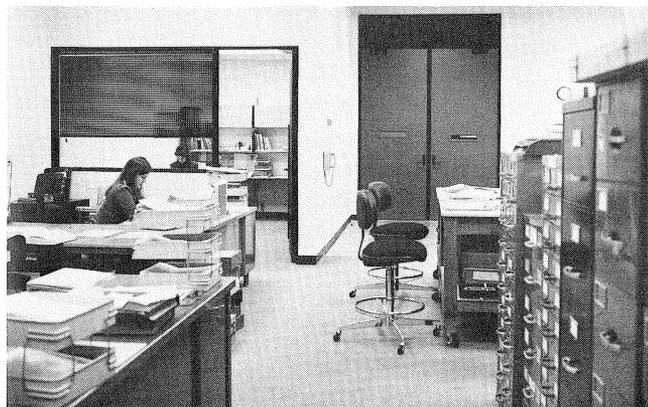
up by monitoring and stabilizing the environment in which the object would be stored or exhibited.

Just as conservators design treatment to assure the maximum level of usefulness for the object within the collection, security is bent to the same end. By "security" a museum means all the aspects of collection management which ensure the future life of the object. These include the proper storage equipment (padded shelving, textile rollers, acid-free containers, dust-resistant cabinets); optimum levels of lighting, humidity, and temperature; intrusion and fire detection and control; twenty-four-hour guards; insurance coverage; and a total plan for saving the artifacts should a manmade or natural disaster strike. Even when an object is lent to another institution for exhibition or study purposes, that institution must provide assurance that it will be afforded the best care possible.

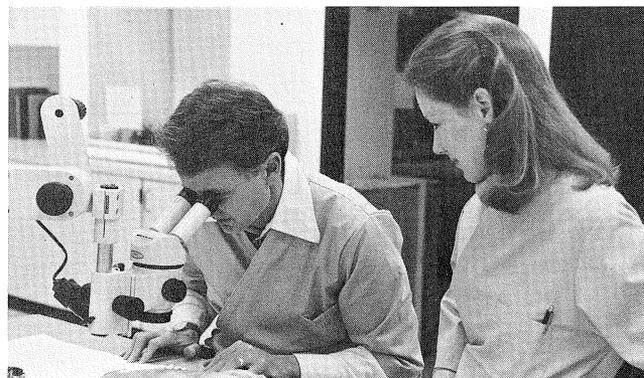
It is at this point that an object can be used by the museum in its programs. It may go on exhibit,

be used in certain education programs, or remain in storage for later use by staff and outside researchers. It should perhaps be emphasized that all objects in the collection are given the same treatment.² Just because an object may not be used for an exhibit in the foreseeable future, it does not follow that it is a "second-class" object. An object reserved for study may never be exhibited, but it can be valuable to scholars delving into the past through the study of material culture. No matter how it is used, an object is an instrument to help the Kansas State Historical Society achieve its goals of collecting, preserving, studying, and interpreting the history of Kansas. [KH]

2. Some objects do not receive the same care; these are not part of the "collection" proper, but are education reproductions or props. Since they are used by groups for hands-on programs, they cannot be protected as are other objects. For this reason, the donor must give permission for objects to be designated for this use.



Records for each object in the collection are maintained in the registrar's office in the Kansas Museum of History.



Robert F. McGiffin uses a binocular microscope to examine a gown worn to President Lincoln's second inauguration as conservation technician Susanne Benda looks on.