

New Materials and Research

A New Working Group: Materials Selection & Specifications

At the June 2017 annual meeting of the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPNHC) in Denver, Colorado, a group of conservators informally engaged in a conversation related to the challenges in effectively selecting materials for collections storage, transport, and exhibit, sparking the idea for a Materials Selection & Specifications Working Group (MWG). From this initial conversation to sustained email discussions over the coming months, it became clear that that engaging a larger, formal group of professionals (ranging from scientists to conservators, and from exhibit designers and fabricators to manufacturers and collection managers) is critical to create understanding in defining the challenges related to materials selection and to establishing a vehicle which can be used to facilitate information exchange.

In early February, Smithsonian partners sponsored a 1.5-day event that aimed to bring together a select group of stakeholders from a wide range of allied fields and interests so that discussions could commence on a larger scale. From this meeting of 30 allied professionals, the MWG developed a basic framework of organization and has recently secured official status as an exploratory working group under the auspices of AIC's Collection Care Network (CCN). The MWG's research, development, and production of a means to exchange information within the collections care community is envisioned as a multi-year, multi-phase endeavor.

Kick-Off Meeting

A two-day "kick-off" meeting hosted by the Smithsonian Institution on February 8 – 9, 2018, provided the opportunity for approximately 30 preservation professionals from the U.S. and Canada to establish context and develop a framework for the MWG. Structured as a day-and-a-half meeting, the group considered the state of current information parameters, divided into three sub-committees, and ended with a discussion that included a vision for creating a more coordinated and comprehensive way to present materials selection information to the cultural heritage community.

CONTEXT

The first half-day was devoted to presentations by stakeholders – conservators, preparators, collections care professionals, scientists, and representatives from industry. Catharine Hawks and Pam Hatchfield provided an overview of current needs within the field and recent efforts to bring this type of a group together, highlighting the importance of collaboration with allied disciplines and organizations. Next a series of seven lightning talks focused on specific aspects of materials selection and specifications, concentrating on contemporary initiatives by individual researchers or organizations that could benefit from a broader, collaborative working group. These included short presentations highlighting current research initiatives, and descriptions of current methods for evaluation of materials, reviews of material challenges for end-users, and information about current resources available for information on materials choices.

TABLE TALKS

Attendees spent the remainder of the first day engaged in roundtable discussions, in three separate groups: materials testing, materials specifications, and resources. The goal of these discussions was to allow deeper conversation among experienced professionals to explore priorities; learn how an interdisciplinary, allied working group could effectively address specified areas of concern; and identify additional working group members.

LARGE GROUP SYNTHESIS

The final portion of the meeting allowed MWG members to reconvene as a large group; the general consensus from all attendees was that development of guidelines and best practices for materials selection and evaluation would require a coordinated effort by an interdisciplinary body of preservation professionals with direct input from the broadest spectrum of our professional community. While it was acknowledged that standards and specifications for testing can be beneficial, developing specifications for individual materials may not be advisable. Rather, developing a framework for decision-making that incorporates risk evaluation may provide a more sustainable model for individualized needs at the institutional level. The group also agreed that the MWG should rely on a direct interface with the greater preservation community—seeking input from and collaboration with professionals and allied organizations engaged with materials selection decision-making.

WORKING GROUP STRUCTURE

The MWG has developed a structure to most effectively address these primary goals, consisting of several subcommittees to explore and advance specific aspects of the overall group's goals. The MWG is structured with a chair and a steering committee constituted of 3 – 4 members from each subcommittee. Each subcommittee worked towards defining their mission and outlining their short-, medium-, and long-term goals within a five-year framework.

Subcommittee: Materials Selection & Specifications

The goals for this sub-committee include developing an approach (decision-making process) to help end-users in the selection of appropriate materials, including specifications and/or guidelines. Members: Andrew Robb, Jenifer Bosworth, Antje Neumann, and Carolyn Leckie

Subcommittee: Materials Testing & Standards

The mission of this subcommittee is to identify and refine methods for evaluating materials and to improve means for their implementation and interpretation for the end-user within the collections care community. Members: Catharine Hawks, Eric Breitung, Christopher Maines, Susan Heald, and Emily Kaplan

Subcommittee: Resources & Dissemination

This subcommittee is tasked with gathering, packaging, and disseminating data, information, and best practices to aid in choosing materials for storage, exhibition, and transport for the benefit of collecting institutions and cultural heritage communities. Members: Lisa Elkin, Rachael Arenstein, Lisa Goldberg, and Mary Coughlin

FUTURE WORK

Gather information about parallel or similar efforts from other organizations and institutions, and invite participation

- Survey user groups in a wide range of allied professions for desired tools and resources
- Seek case study material related to decision-making processes for selection and evaluation of materials that can benefit the collection care community
- Work towards meeting annually to advance the goals related to each subcommittee

The MWG will focus on developing a collaborative, productive, sustainable community of collection care, conservation, analytical science, and allied professionals who are united in our efforts to provide a multi-faceted approach to materials selection through well-defined research methods, risk assessment, and performance evaluation. The work of MWG will enable AIC to further the preservation of collections by facilitating exchange and dialogue, and will support resources of interest to collection care groups, ultimately leading to the application of sound collection care practice in cultural institutions. If you are interested in participating in a subcommittee of the MWG, please contact Rebecca Kaczowski (kaczowskir@si.edu).

—*Rebecca Kaczowski, MWG Chair, kaczowskir@si.edu*

New Publications

Ciatti, Marco, and Cecilia Frosinini, eds. *Structural conservation of panel paintings at the Opificio delle pietre dure in Florence: Method, theory, and practice*. Firenze: Edifir edizioni; Opificio delle pietre dure, 2016. ISBN: 9788879707923. This book contains translations from Italian into English of twenty critically important texts in the structural conservation of painting on wood, originally published 1999-2012.

Hout, I. C. van. *Indonesian textiles at the Tropenmuseum*. Volendam: LM Publishers, 2017. ISBN: 9789460223907. This book describes the formation, growth, and character of the Indonesian textile collection in the Tropenmuseum (Amsterdam) and includes information on the materials and techniques used in several Indonesian weaving traditions. It is the sixth and final publication in a series on the Tropenmuseum's collections.

Jemelková, Simona, ed. Pod kůží Marsya: Restaurátor a malíř František Sysel (1927-2013). *Kroměříž: Národní památkový ústav, územní památková správa v Kroměříži*, 2017. ISBN: 9788087231425. This book was published to accompany an exhibition at Muzeum umění Olomouc and Arcidiecézní muzeum Kroměříž (7 April-8 June 2017), honoring the Czech painter and restorer František Sysel. Biographical chapters are followed by articles that place his restoration work within the context of the Czech school of restoration. Case studies focus on three of his key achievements as a restorer, including the restoration of Titian's Apollo and Marsyas (Arcidiecézní muzeum Kroměříž) that took place from 1961-1968.