

30 Years Safeguarding the Collection

Robert Hauser has decided it is time to retire at the end of August, after close to 30 years of conserving the collections here at the NBWM. As Museum Conservator, Robert thinks that he spent about a third of the time directly working on objects, another (big) third working on exhibit preparation and the remaining time dealing with the management - outside requests, condition reports and other paperwork, writing articles, lectures, teaching interns, and managing conservation volunteers' projects.

[I] had a chance to sit down with Robert recently to talk about his time here, what is next for him and ferret out any good tales he might recall. Knowing this meeting was coming, as always, he did his homework! He produced a number of pages about his accomplishments here, including a piece entitled, *Outward Bound*. It helps in explaining the truly complex job of conservation.

Here are some excerpts:

"My 'Inward Bound' relationship with the NBWM involved a year designing the conservation laboratory and in 1982 being asked to join the staff as museum conservator by (then) Director Richard Kugler and (then) Librarian Virginia 'Po' Adams." The lab would "provide direct and daily care of the collection and support the preservation mission of the museum."

Here are some of "the accomplishments, [advances made] and experiences involved with the care of the collection."

"Treatments" - the direct and daily care of collection objects in the museum conservation

laboratory often involves preservation measures that will reduce forms of damage or deterioration from happening. Some required advanced treatments, such as using enzyme solutions to dissolve animal glue used in pasting scrap paper on logbook pages.

Open Laboratory - the conservation program established relationships with a variety of specialists (i.e. paintings, furniture, glass, photography, etc.) who are contracted for their skills and follow professional standards. Another service included answering technical questions and referral requests from the membership, public and other institutions.



Robert Hauser examining William Bradford's painting "Caught in the Ice".

Conservation Planning - Two programs have been

initiated that will ensure the care of the collection. One, developing a *Long Range Conservation Program* and starting the use of examination forms for assessing the condition of objects to determine the extent of problems, care priorities and best conservation practices. The second, is in maintaining a permanent conservation archive that documents how, who and when an object was treated, as part of the historical record.

Conservation volunteers - Some 15 conservation volunteers were selected, because of professional skills they possessed, from the training program to assist with conservation projects: photographic documentation, assessing paintings, navigational instruments, paper conservation, training interns and more.

Exhibitions - [He] has participated in [preparing] over a hundred museum exhibits and loan requests. ... Conservation staff are mostly concerned with the condition of objects, care and handling, determining treat

ments, archival framing, art packing and shipping, environmental standards (lighting temp. and humidity) and facility safety issues. Other collaborations may involve exhibit preparators, designers and fabricators.

Intern Program - [He] has instructed over twenty interns from various universities and museum programs in the art, craft, history and science - the four legs - of conservation practices. Subjects covered: paper chemistry, artist intent, disaster recovery, art packing, insect identification, bookmaking and more.

Special Projects - four of the most challenging projects were: the 1998 recovery of the 40-ton blue whale skeleton; the 2003 William Bradford painting exhibition; the 2001 condition examination of the 1,250-foot Purrington & Russell Panorama; the 2009 *Harbor & Home* traveling furniture exhibit by the Wintertur Museum.

Professional - [He] has participated in a number of training programs and been active with professional conservation organizations.

His adage:

**Conservate Hodienum Diem Crastino
(Preserve Today for Tomorrow)**

That, in nutshell, is what he has been doing behind that (typically) closed door down at the end of the hallway. Whew!

Here is some on a less procedural bent:

What is the most memorable period for you? When I designed the lab. It was unusual that you could design your own lab at the time. Mystic and Peabody were the only maritime museums that had them, that I know of.

How many administrations have you worked for? At least four directors/presidents and a

half-dozen head curators.

You have seen a lot of changes in that time. What do you consider the best change or transition? [without hesitation] The merger with the Kendall WM.

What preservation or restoration are you most proud of? Surprisingly, the blue whale and also the long range preservation plan, developing the professional-records system.



Robert H. and Penny Cole on the blue whale project. Here, scooping putrid water out of the barrel, so that the decomposing tail section can be removed and further flensed.

What was the most complicated exhibit installation? William Bradford. It was a 5-yr. process looking at all our collection, doing the work—scheduling treatments, frame restoration, the loans from other institutions, crating and more.

Which exhibit has been most vexing after installation? Probably, the sperm whale. [After sitting at the NB landfill and in manure for months] The bugs. We had to [finally] call in Terminex to identify the beetles, which ended up being common in landfills. As they told us, the best solution ended up being the free one, waiting out the life cycle of the beetle. When they run out of food they eat their young. Ok...

What was your favorite exhibit? Why? Subject wise, *Travelling with Mrs. Tripp*, the Chinese artifacts and the great catalogue. More personally, in 1996, my own *Take Care* conservation show.

Least favorite exhibit? Why? [Initially drawing a blank] Nothing specific, but the least planned from a conservation standpoint, those little ones.

Favorite artifact or type? Logbooks, because of the illustrations and the binding.

Did all of your interns have specialties like Jordan Berson with paper conservation?

Three were conservation trained. The rest were undergrads. Some have ended up at places like the Smithsonian and one, in the Netherlands.

You taught them about 'artist intent'? Why is that important? You have to try to interpret how and what the artist created so that you do not intrude on that, or lose that with your conservation efforts.

How many logbooks and bank books have been restored in your tenure? About 25 logbooks [and maybe a half-dozen bank books when Jordan is done].

Any stories?

One time, we were waiting for the return of a loaned desk. The crate came...it was a chair...that was supposed to go to Switzerland! I called and caught the desk before it hit the high seas. The conversation went like this: "Are you sure?" "Yes I assure you, I know the difference between a desk and chair."

Then there was the time the dog ran away with the bone, a blue whale bone, when we were removing the carcass from the harbor. [Luckily, he was well-trained and came when called by his owner].

There was also the John Bockstoe Arctic exhibit years ago. John was 'excitable'. I told him that the baleen in the exhibit had beetles. He said "What do we do?" I replied, "There is nothing we can do, we can't kill them. They are on the endangered species list. It would be unethical." Think if it got out to the press... [Robert let him off the hook a bit later, there

were no beetles.] *There's that sense of humor I know and love!*

On the heels of Barry Jesse's interview (May '11) it seems right to ask who you think would haunt the conservation lab? Robert Hauser.

What will you miss most about this place?

Teaching, the challenges of solving treatment solutions and working with the staff. It is very social here.



Conservation volunteers '06: l to r. Herb Andrew, Rudy Riefstahl, Barbara Faria, Jim Bolton, Nancy Thornton, Robert Hauser, Joan Underwood, Dick Daniels.

What is next for you? After August? Work on my own studio art, printing and collage. Once I get 25 pcs. together I may try to do a show down this way. I'll continue to do special conservation projects with institutions, too.

I have a whole new appreciation for the tremendous work you have done here. I speak for many when I say, "Going to miss you around here."

Here is Robert's stalwart team of conservation volunteers from over the years.

Herb Andrew	Kermit Dewey	Rudy Riefstahl
James Bolton	Barbara Faria	Bette Roberts
Thorney Clarin	Barbara Groves	Jean Smith
Dana Costa	Jane Keeler	Nancy Thornton
Richard Daniels	Dick Purdy	Joan Underwood