



Team bringing New Orleans art treasures back to life

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Chicago - Helen Conklin whisks a cotton swab delicately across a 19th-century painting of silvery fish set in deep earth tones. She's looking for, of all things, mud on the canvas - and sure enough, there it is.

She peers at another painting through a microscope, focusing on a cardinal's rich crimson robes that have faded to a sickly pink. That's the mark of floodwaters.

These works and many others - paintings and frames crusted with mold and fungus, bits of debris, even a few feathers - are here to be repaired and revived by art conservationists participating in their own version of hurricane recovery.

They're part of The Chicago Conservation Center, a team of experts working in a sprawling seventh-floor studio more than 800 miles from New Orleans and the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina.

The team has much to do: A giant multicolored abstract is splattered with grime, an autumn landscape is flaking, canvases are sagging.

In an epic disaster where there were many harrowing chronicles of life and death, these treasures tell a different tale of survival.

"Art is a narrative and tells a lot of personal stories," says Heather Becker, CEO of the center. "If we don't try to save the history of our culture, of our communities, we lose that forever."

Protected works

The conservation work in Chicago is among many public and private efforts to salvage tens of millions of dollars' worth of cultural gems damaged in hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works, based in Washington, D.C., is sending conservators to the storm-ravaged Gulf Coast to help the

Federal Emergency Management Agency and cultural associations determine how to best repair waterlogged historic documents, sodden furniture and artwork.

It also will help private citizens with damaged collections and heirlooms.

Even before the floodwaters buried New Orleans, efforts were under way to preserve art treasures.

Workers at the New Orleans Museum of Art secured sculptures and moved some paintings before the storm, then kept vigil inside in the chaotic days when looters rampaged through the streets.

The museum's insurer, AXA Art Insurance Corp., dispatched private security guards to protect the building as well as clients who had galleries or private collections in the French Quarter or other areas.

The museum, which has 40,000 pieces in a collection estimated to be worth about \$250 million, escaped relatively unscathed.

A giant sculpture in the garden needs repairs. And three other objects inside had water damage.

The building is now haven to nearly 1,000 works that private collectors, galleries and other museums are storing there temporarily.

"If there are angels in the heavens above, the museum's angels were archangels," says Jacqueline Sullivan, the museum's deputy director. "The storage was 12 feet underground. I can't imagine why it did not flood."

But others weren't as lucky.

AXA estimates that Katrina-related losses to its private clients - including collectors, corporations and galleries - could be as high as \$30 million, according to Christiane Fischer, the corporation's chief executive officer.

In recent weeks, hundreds of damaged pieces - including paintings by well-known artists such as Helen Frankenthaler, William Merritt Chase and Alfred Bierstadt - have arrived at The Chicago Conservation Center in climate-controlled trucks.

90% is salvageable

The damaged objects delivered to Chicago include paintings, mostly by 19th- and 20th-century American artists, French, German and Italian works, Russian icons, drawings, photographs, furniture, textiles and wood panels.

Every recovered piece is inventoried and photographed, and a report with proposed treatment is prepared for the owner.

Wind, water and humidity can do severe - sometimes irreparable - harm to art. Floods can cause paintings to crack, flake or change color; the canvas can shrink or buckle, distorting the image.

Humidity can cause shrinking, too. The varnish on a painting can become gray and cracked. If the paint layer itself is saturated, the colors can turn milky.

Luckily, Becker says, about 90% of the Katrina-damaged works so far are salvageable. (She expects art caught up in Hurricane Rita to arrive soon.)

Have respect for artist

In repairing these works, conservators use reversible techniques so they can be replaced if more advanced methods come along in 50 or 100 years, and they never do more than is absolutely necessary, Becker says.

"You have constant respect for what the artist intended to create," she says. "You don't want to re-create anything."

Repairs can cost from hundreds to thousands of dollars and take a month - or a year. Damaged drawings may be treated in specially filtered water baths that open up the fibers of the paper and allow grime to flow away. Tears or rips can be repaired with Japanese tissue paper and methyl cellulose used as a binder. Injectable adhesives are sometimes used to reset flaking paint.

The ultimate goal is to revive a work so it is pristine, or nearly so, Becker says.

"We can't make miracles," she says. "But sometimes we feel like we are."