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## Large-Scale Art Collection Claims: Protecting Private and Corporate Assets

by Heather Becker  
 August 23, 2007

The conservation of art, artifacts and decorative objects is a field that has been practiced, performed and refined over hundreds of years. To this day new techniques and materials are being tested and utilized to further refine this marriage of art and science.

Art conservation overlaps with the restoration industry when a residence, company or institution housing items of a more sensitive nature is exposed to damage (by fire, water, mold, ice or wind, for example). It is in these situations that a specialist is needed to assist in the handling, removal and treatment of these items.



### For Example



It is 8 a.m. and, after a 5-hour flight and a 2 1/2-hour drive, we know there is still a long day ahead. We are soon greeted by three distraught, teary-eyed collection managers whose spring break was cut short when the climate control system malfunctioned in their art storage vault, resulting in more than 900 wet paintings, drawings, prints and artifacts, some of which are already covered in mold. Understandably, the clients were overwhelmed and did not know what

to do.

After an initial inspection of the vault and the collection, we quickly set up a staging area to inventory, examine and photograph each piece before preparing it for transportation to The Chicago Conservation Center (The Center) for triage. We remove and assess the most valuable and significant pieces first, then divide the vault and remove the remaining items section by section to ensure that nothing would be overlooked. It is pertinent to the success of the upcoming triage stage that the collection be transported in an air-ride, climate-controlled truck to ensure the fragile condition of the art would not be further compromised.



Immediately on arriving at The Center, teams organized according to specialty carefully un-frame and stabilize each piece. After triage, conservators examine each piece and determine what treatments will be necessary to return each piece to its pre-loss condition. Approximately 98 percent of the collection was saved because of our ability to quickly respond and triage.

### Large-Scale Recovery Strategy



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Large-scale art collections often represent a considerable asset to the private, corporate, or institutional owner. The experience of handling hundreds of high-volume disaster scenarios involving art and artifacts, including some in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, provides invaluable knowledge for the future. The Center has assisted with the recovery of many large corporate collections, such as the LaSalle Bank photography and print collections. More recently, due to several university claims, we have employed a large-scale recovery strategy that follows a series of guidelines established over several years:



- Is there a disaster plan in place? If not, detail the situation for future disaster prevention planning.
- Assemble a disaster response team and establish protocol.
- Visit on-site immediately and document the collection in situ.
- Establish safety needs and environmental requirements.
- Set up a safe staging area on-site to make an official inventory including medium, dimensions, artist, frame/mount, date and title, if available.
- Photograph every piece individually and offer any triage required.
- Establish safe packing, handling, and transportation based on the material.
- Transport in alarmed, climate-controlled, air-ride vehicles.
- Unload, examine, and test each item for condition and treatment assessment.
- Prepare a written report with condition, treatment recommendations, and cost and time involved for each item, including a collection summary. This includes establishing pre-loss and post-loss damages.
- Triage items in need of immediate care and stabilization after written authorization.
- Slowly, under controlled and monitored conditions, return the pieces back to a stable environment of temperature and humidity controls ranging from 68-72 degrees Fahrenheit and 40 percent to 50 percent humidity.
- Await approval of treatment and, once written authorization is received, proceed with conservation treatment recommendations.

### Lessons Learned



After reviewing many scenarios and recoveries over the years, we tend to see a host of repeated lessons learned. Using this information as a preventive tool is our current lecture focus across the nation

- Keep art collection information off site: policy documents, disaster plan, disaster team members and phone numbers, inventory, appraisals, and documentation/photography.
- Establish a disaster plan and a designated full-scale team in advance.
- Thoroughly walk through and review a punch list for all warehouse storage exposures.
- Thoroughly review and collect advice on any basement or first floor exposures.
- Consider climate exposures relative to art collection mediums. Example: panel pictures in a dry climate like Arizona are at risk of splitting – or photography in a hot and humid environment like Florida at risk of adhering to framing materials.

### On-site Tips

When on-site dealing with art, there are additional details that need to be considered: correct identification (artist, title, medium dimensions); cause of damage; condition stability; risk of transportation; insurance status/coverage during transport; best method of transportation and proper packing/crating procedures. A specialist in art conservation will have



insight from years of experience and can advise how to best manage the situation. For example:



As soon as the property can be safely entered, immediately document in-situ and contact the broker/insurance and experts/conservators. The conservation company will advise on the process of response and removing items of concern. Items with damage or of concern should be moved as soon as possible to a controlled area where they can be safely kept from further damage and harmful exposures.

As items are removed, they should be inventoried with a brief written notation and then photographed. Numbering each item (or bar-coding if possible) and creating an inventory will assist in the management of the recovery process. Although it is important to address the items in a timely manner, a few moments spent ensuring precise records are kept can be invaluable going forward.



During recovery, if items become structurally unsound, be sure to retain all components where possible and keep them together. Bag and label any pieces that come loose for easy identification.

Never assume an item is a loss. During the recovery stages, all items that can be removed should be considered for examination, until a conservator deems an item a

total loss.



Wet or damaged property should be transported as soon as possible to a conservation laboratory or temporary facility for immediate safety and triage when necessary. When dealing with significant and/or high-end property, experts can assist with transport in a climate-controlled air-ride truck. If it is necessary to ship property through a national carrier, begin the

process immediately so that items can be assessed by experts prior to the occurrence of any fast drying which can potentially cause irreversible results. Books and works of art on paper can be shipped in coolers with ice packs so that they can be kept in their current state.

During triage, conservators will carefully review each piece and undertake slow, controlled and monitored drying as necessary.

Once items are stabilized, a conservator should prepare a thorough condition report of each piece and provide detailed treatment recommendations with photography for your review. This process should include consultation with clients to determine which items are eligible for conservation and expected treatment outcomes, as well as any items that are potentially a loss.



When private and corporate assets are held within an art collection, a timely response can make the difference in saving the value of the collection. It takes years of experience to build an understanding of what to do and how. Having a conservator on your team for these scenarios can be an invaluable addition to your

restoration and recovery services.

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*Heather Becker*

*For more than 23 years The Chicago Conservation Center has provided disaster response services for art collections large and small throughout the country. Whether in response to fire, water, mold, wind, or everyday accidental damage, The Center's disaster response professionals can provide nationwide pick-up and delivery services, on-location inventory, triage, photography, and condition reports for private, corporate, and non-profit collections. Visit [www.chicagoconservation.com](http://www.chicagoconservation.com) for more information.*

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