

Conservation² = Preserving Collections x Our Environment

25th Annual National Archives Preservation Conference, 2011

National Endowment for the Humanities Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections

I'm very pleased to be here; the topic of preserving collections and our environment is of great interest to us at the National Endowment for the Humanities and attending conferences like this allows us to learn and gather information that informs our grant programs.

About two years ago, the NEH announced a new grant program called Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections. With this program, we are encouraging libraries, archives, and museums to explore and implement preservation strategies that are sustainable – and by this we mean preservation actions that respond to threats to collections rather than prescriptive targets, balanced against cost and environmental impact.

We came to the decision to emphasize sustainable preservation strategies after an extensive review of our grant programs, of conference proceedings and research reports, and very helpful meetings with colleagues from the U.S. and abroad, some of whom are speaking here at this conference.

We announced the new grant program in May of 2009 at a conference on Sustainable Cultural Heritage co-sponsored by the NEH and the National Research Council of Italy. During this day-long event, eight Italian and American experts discussed the impact of global climate change on tangible cultural heritage, methodologies for assessing the condition of collections and monuments, and strategic approaches to managing the environments in which collections are stored and exhibited. Transcripts of the papers of the American speakers, which include Jerry Podany, Jim Reilly, Michael Henry, and Debbie Norris, can be found on the NEH web site at the conference agenda: http://www.neh.gov/projects/Conference_09May/NEH-CNR_Conference.htm.

The Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections program, or SCHC for short, continues a strong history of NEH support for preventive conservation. From 1990 to 2008, NEH had a grant program that supported the preservation of humanities collections through the implementation of improvements to environmental and storage conditions, security, fire protection, and lighting. The findings of the Heritage Health Index reinforced for us the importance of continuing our funding for these activities.

So SCHC does continue to fund the implementation of preventive conservation measures, but a significant new feature of the grant program is its support for planning. As the field grapples with how to define guidelines for good collection environments, there is a growing acceptance that one size does not fit all; that striving for flat-lined conditions is not always necessary and is rarely sustainable. There is also growing interest in making the systems already installed work

better and more efficiently, and in looking for passive and low-energy alternatives to complex, energy-intensive mechanized systems for managing environmental conditions.

We believe that interdisciplinary, collaborative planning is one of the keys to identifying effective, energy-efficient, and environmentally sensitive approaches to preservation, particularly for managing collection environments. This is why we are offering planning grants.

Planning projects must involve a team and that team might include, in addition to an institution's own staff, architects, building engineers, conservation scientists, conservators, and facilities managers, among others. The teams should consider the nature of the materials in a collection, the performance of the building envelope and its systems in moderating internal environmental conditions, the nature of the local climate, the cost effectiveness and energy efficiency of various approaches, and a project's impact on the environment.

We announced the first round of 23 SCHC awards last June with 13 planning grants and 10 implementation grants. Just to give a sense of what we supported, I'll mention a few; the full list is on NEH's Web site, <http://www.neh.gov/news/awards/SustainingCulturalHeritage2010.html>.

The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, received a planning grant to work with facilities, energy management, and preservation experts to document, analyze, and optimize the performance of several air handling units that serve collection spaces. If optimization proves effective, the library can apply this process to the building's HVAC system more generally. The goal is to understand the capabilities of the library's mechanical systems and provide a better preservation environment for collections by enhancing the performance of the existing system.

The Frelinghuysen Morris Foundation in Lenox, MA, preserves the house and studio of George L. K. Morris and Suzy Frelinghuysen and their collections of modernist art, sculpture, film and photographs, furniture, and correspondence. The museum had been attempting to maintain 50% relative humidity and 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit for the collections, but there were signs that these conditions were harming the structure. With an NEH planning grant, a collections conservator and architect and engineer will work with the museum's staff to analyze environmental monitoring data, the building's envelope, the collections, and the local climate and to develop more realistic targets for relative humidity and temperature and more pragmatic approaches to managing conditions that will protect both the collections and the structure.

The Genesee Country Village and Museum in Mumfords, NY, received an implementation grant to convert two galleries into a collections storage space and to experiment with a combination of passive and mechanized methods to manage conditions. By using the mass of the earth beneath gallery floors and well-insulated walls, they would be able to install simple, low-energy equipment that can maintain environmental conditions within a broader range, seasonally adjusted.

All grantees that are planning for or implementing sustainable strategies will be preparing white papers about their projects for posting on the NEH Web site to share lessons they learn.

Finally, I would also like to mention that NEH has two other grant programs in the Division of Preservation and Access that offer support related to preventive conservation and sustainable

preservation practices: Research and Development grants (May 19, 2011 deadline) and Education and Training grants (June 30, 2011 deadline). The Image Permanence Institute at the Rochester Institute of Technology received awards recently in both of these categories. With an R & D grant, IPI is investigating the impact on library collections of short-term fluctuations in environmental conditions due to managed shutdowns of HVAC systems, while an E & T grant is supporting five workshops around the country and nine webinars on managing collection environments in sustainable ways. The Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia, PA, through its NEH-supported regional preservation field services, has held workshops on *Environmental Management: Stewardship and Sustainability for Cultural Collections*. And last year, New York University received an award in support of its graduate program in art conservation and, during the grant period, the faculty will enhance course content about sustainable preservation practices.

So, NEH is very interested in preserving collections and our environment and through our grant programs for Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections, Research and Development, and Education and Training, we hope to see more applications that address preservation practices in sustainable ways. Program officers in the Division of Preservation and Access would be happy to provide additional information and help potential applicants navigate the grant application process.

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