
The Universal Language of Collections Care

In 2018, Jessica S. Johnson, head of conservation at the Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute, was invited to the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) to speak about her work at the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage (IICAH) in Erbil, Iraq. Her talk detailed the incredible efforts undertaken by the students and teachers at the Institute to protect global heritage.

The IICAH was initiated in 2009 and has the mission of preserving the “legacy of humanity contained in the unique cultural heritage of Iraq... through educating people in conservation and preservation, and by inviting professionals from around the world to share their expertise.” With the support of numerous partners the Institute is able to teach the foundations of conservation to small classes of Iraqi heritage professionals. Participants then take their acquired skills back to their home institutions so the information can be shared within their communities.

This work is inspiring, so despite our limited knowledge of Iraqi needs and resources and our inability to volunteer directly, we became determined to find some way of supporting the Institute.

In response to our inquiry to remotely support the IICAH, it was suggested that we create a digital handout. We were connected with instructors at the Institute who provided feedback regarding what content would be most helpful for current students.

After conversing with Terry Drayman-Weisser, Rae Beaubien, Debra Hess Norris, and Nancy Odegard, our initial inquiry developed into a year-long project to create two didactics with a focus on preventive conservation. Generous funding provided by the U.S. State Department enabled us to involve our classmates, Maddie Cooper, Melissa King, and Julianna Ly, in the project as well as supporting any material needs.

The project started at the end of our first year of graduate school and continued the following fall, as we moved from coursework in foundational knowledge into our specialties.



Our group of conservators included majors in objects, paper, preventive, and paintings conservation. This diversity was essential in deciding what information to include in the didactics, especially objects and preventive conservation.

The first teaching tool concentrated on cost-effective, accessible alternatives to packing and storage materials commonly used by US conservators. The motivation behind this didactic came from discussions with instructors at the Institute, as well as from growing efforts in the field to use locally sourced materials rather than shipping “ideal” materials in from Western colleagues.

Our goal was to provide three alternatives to these ideal materials, and to convey the information with minimal text that can be easily translated, and thus easily used by anyone, regardless of their native tongue. It was not to dictate exact alternatives, but to help guide decision-making when students select from what is available locally.

The first step in forming this resource was to gather and create mock-ups with a variety of materials that could be used as alternates to materials commonly used in the U.S. such as Ethafoam™, Volara®, acid-free tissue paper, archival quality corrugated board, and soft Tyvek®.

Criteria for assessing alternatives included accessibility, safety to the object, and similarity to the ideal, with longevity and aging properties as a secondary factor. Our



reasoning was that the ideal material embodies all of these properties and our choices had to compromise with what was realistic and practical. Ultimately, the best material is the one that is available.

Once we agreed upon alternative materials that met these criteria, we brainstormed how best to compile the didactic. The difficulty with this stage of the project was formulating how to communicate information with minimal text. We developed a multi-pronged solution.

Five-centimeter squares of sample materials are included as inserts. Providing physical examples means students can interact with them. They can feel the qualities valued for different purposes, such as supporting a fragile armature, wrapping friable materials, or providing a barrier against acidic environments.

Images of the alternatives being prepared and in use demonstrate steps be needed to make the material usable, as well as to provide context for how it might be used.

Labeled diagrams denote which materials can be used in direct contact with the collection item, and Arabic and English captions identify each material.

The final product was a physical binder and a PDF. It was scheduled to be tested as a teaching resource in October 2019.

The second tool we are producing focuses on the identification and preventive care of unfired or low-fired ceramics. We are still developing this and intend it to be the first in a series focused on material categories present in collections throughout the Middle East. This pilot didactic will serve as a template for future versions which can be disseminated digitally to all students entering the IICAH.

This project will be continued by two second-year preventive fellows in the Class of 2021 under the supervision of Joelle Wickens, associate director at WUDPAC and preventive conservation major supervisor. Maddie Cooper will work to improve the alternative storage materials didactic based on feedback provided by IICAH students and teachers. Marie Desrochers will pilot the first stage of a longer preventive conservation study led by Dr. Wickens. She will conduct a scientific investigation of the storage materials sourced locally by IICAH students and professors comparing them to the “ideal” materials.

We are thrilled that the project is being continued by our colleagues in the Class of 2021, who are similarly motivated to find avenues for supporting, empowering, and connecting

with our international colleagues.

Through this project, we have found ways to share our education and training and to support conservation professionals around the world who are helping to rebuild their communities. We are grateful to have, in a small way, supported the mission and goals of our international colleagues and the preservation of Iraqi cultural heritage.

