

## Chapter 7: Preservation Staffing and Activities

One of the Heritage Health Index’s key findings is that institutions are woefully understaffed to handle the needs of their collections. Twenty-eight percent of institutions holding American art have paid conservation/preservation staff (whether full-time or part-time), a higher percentage than at institutions overall (20%) (figure 7.1). About half of institutions holding American art rely on other staff members to

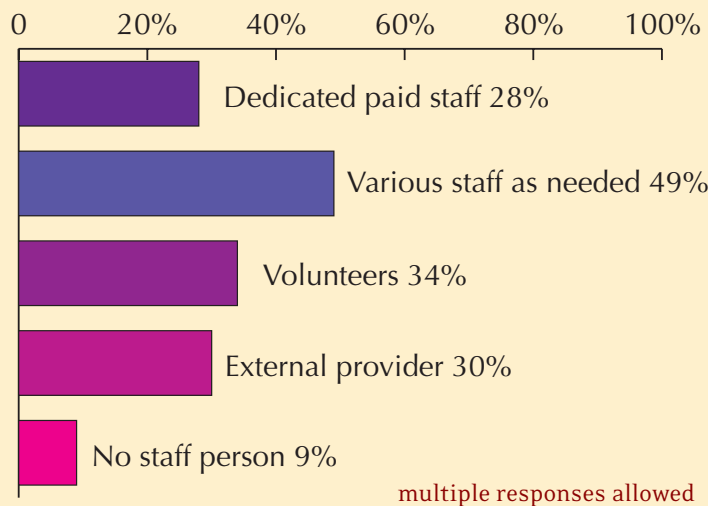
handle conservation and preservation tasks, and 34% use volunteers. Small institutions are more likely to use volunteers and not have dedicated paid staff (figure 7.2).

The profound difference between the groups is that of institutions holding American art, only 9% have no staff person assigned to conservation/preservation activities, compared with 22% at all institutions. This figure is slightly higher at small institutions (10%), but at least the institutions holding American art are closer to achieving one of the recommendations of the Heritage Health Index report—that every institution assign responsibility for caring for collections to members of its staff.

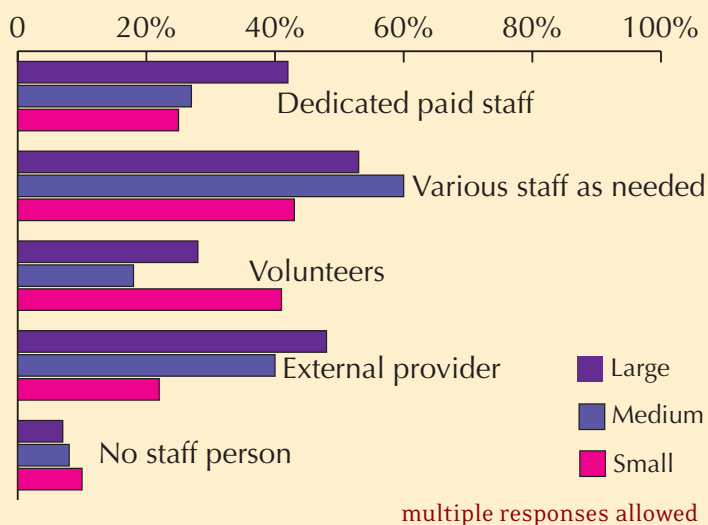
Large and medium museums are more likely to use the services of external providers, such as conservators in private practice, regional conservation centers, or vendors that work with audiovisual or digital transfer. Considering institutions with large quantities of art holdings, art museums are most likely to use external providers (61%). Independent research libraries are most likely to have paid conservation/preservation staff at 77%, while only 23% of art museums, 31% of history museums, and 23% of historical societies have them (figure 7.3). Historical societies are more likely to include volunteers (54%) in their staffing for conservation/preservation.

Since the question on kinds of staffing allowed for full-time or part-time staff to be recorded, it is necessary to look at the Heritage Health Index findings on full-time equivalents for a true sense of personnel for conservation/preservation. Institutions were asked how many staff hours were devoted to professional conservation/preservation staff (e.g., preservation administrators, conservators, research scientists), support staff (e.g., collections care assistants, technical assistants, handlers), and volunteers. The

**Fig. 7.1 Institutions with American Art Holdings’ Staffing for Conservation/Preservation**



**Fig. 7.2 Institutions with American Art Holdings’ Staffing for Conservation/Preservation (by size)**



definitions were kept broad to allow institutions to define “professional” or “support” staff as most appropriate for their institution. For example, at a large art museum, a conservator would be considered professional and a collections manager might be considered support staff; however, at a small art museum, the collections manager might be considered professional staff. Although 28% of

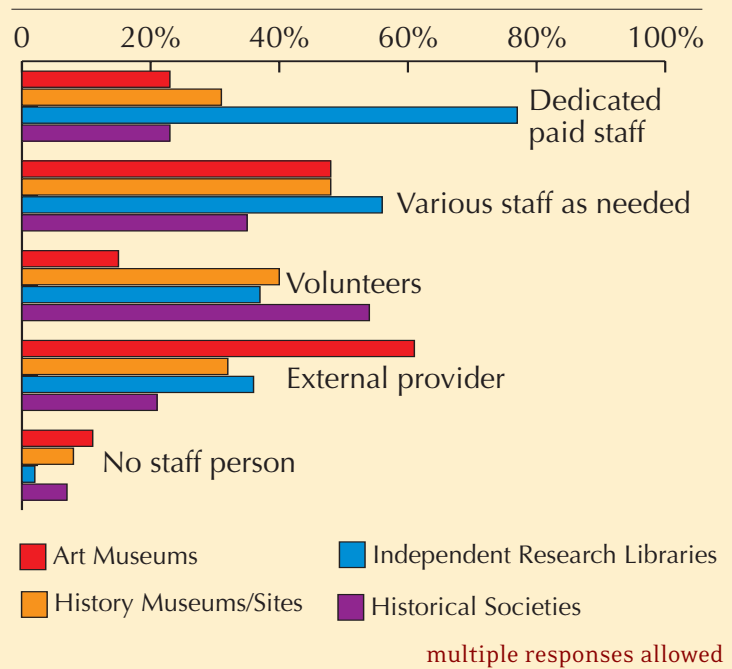
Given the transitory nature of ephemeral materials, built-in physical variability, and performance elements that characterize so much of the art of the last 50 years, conserving contemporary art is not business as usual. The Elise S. Haas Conservation Studio at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) is devoted to the care of modern and contemporary works. The conservation studio is integral to the Museum’s exhibitions and acquisitions program, in which American art is featured prominently. In addition to specialized expertise in painting, sculpture, works on paper, and photography, the studio is committed to addressing the entire range of unorthodox challenges presented by non-traditional art forms, including time-based media. Conservation at SFMOMA is based on interdisciplinary collaborations and the notion that recording information about artists’ materials, processes, and intentions—whenever possible, directly from the artist—may be among the most important contributions that conservators of contemporary art can make toward the future care of the art of our times. SFMOMA has developed two long-term initiatives designed to address these critical shifts in conservation practice that contemporary art requires.

Living Artist Archive: Regular consultation and collaboration with artists contributes to a growing living artist archive. Last year alone, conservators worked with artists such as Adrian Piper, Robert Gober, Tom Friedman, Richard Tuttle, and Gary Hill, obtaining video and audio records of the collaborations for the archive.



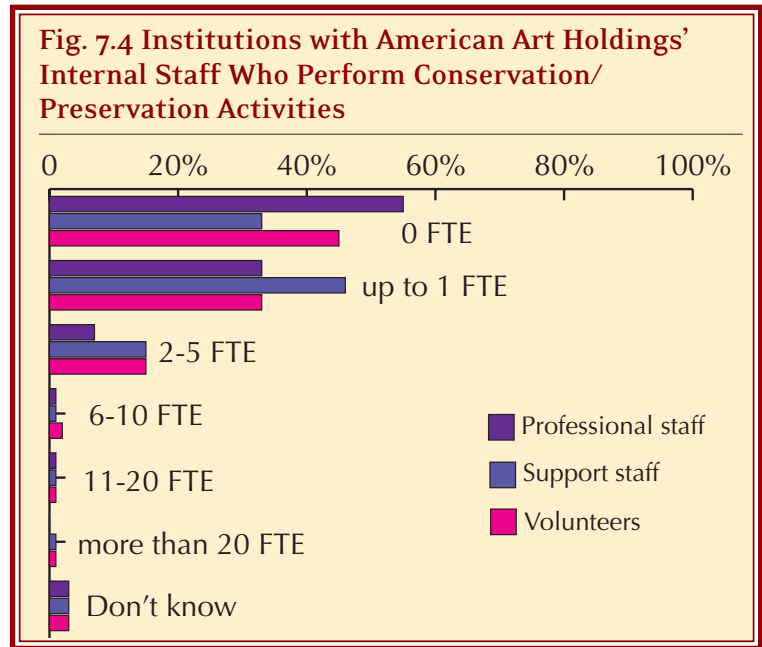
*Ellsworth Kelly examines surface damage to his sculpture “Untitled (Mandorla)” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Museum conservators were able to successfully repair the damage.*

**Fig. 7.3 Institutions with the Largest Number of Art Holdings’ Staffing for Conservation/Preservation (by type)**



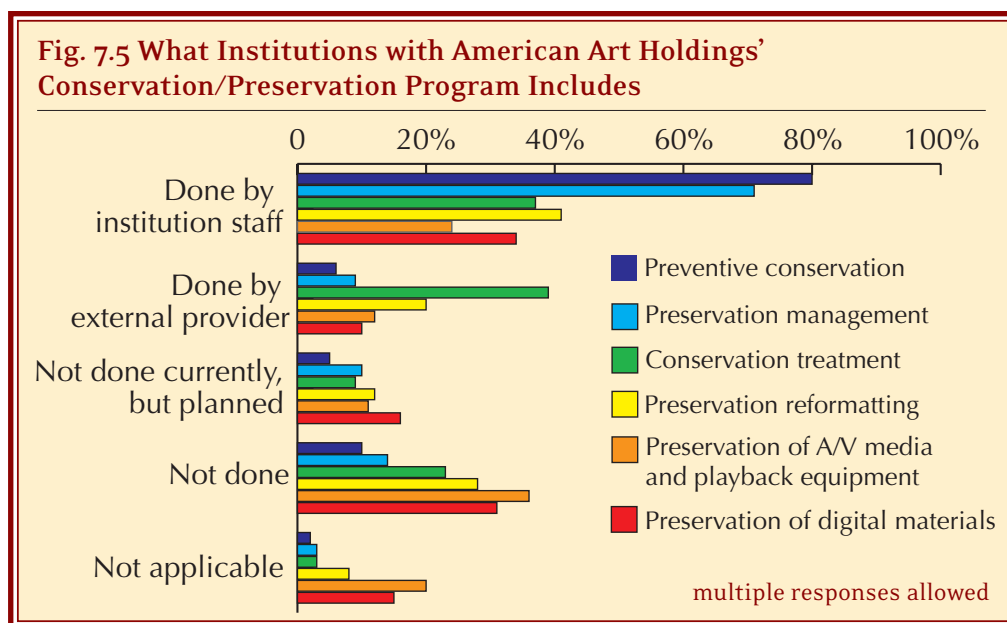
institutions holding American art have paid staff members for conservation/preservation, 55% have zero full-time equivalent hours going to professional staff and 33% have less than one full-time person (figure 7.4). The average full-time equivalent is one. More institutions rely on support staff, with 46% using up to one full-time equivalent and 15% using two to five full-time equivalents, bringing the average to 1.4 full-time equivalents. Only one percent of institutions holding American art have 6 to 10, 11 to 20, or more than 20 full-time equivalents for professional, support, or volunteer conservation/preservation staff. Considering professional staff, support staff, and volunteers, institutions holding American art have an average of 3.7 full-time equivalents for conservation/preservation activities.

The Heritage Health Index asked institutions to report on whether they were involved with various conservation/preservation activities and whether those activities are being done by internal or external providers. For institutions holding American art, 80% of internal staff are involved in preventive conservation activities, better than the overall Heritage Health Index finding of 66% (figure 7.5). Preservation management is also done internally at 71% of institutions holding American art. Conservation treatment is also done internally at 71% of institutions holding American art. Conservation treatment is most frequently done by an external



provider (with 39% reporting this is the case), followed by preservation reformatting at 20%. Preservation of audiovisual materials and playback equipment and digital materials are the most likely not to be done, but are also among the most likely planned. At institutions with high quantities of art that are not involved in conservation treatment, 14% are art museums, 19% are history museums, 32% are historical societies, and 6% are independent research libraries. Yet 19% of institutions holding American art say they have an urgent need for conservation treatment, and 64% have a need for conservation treatment. More historical societies (26%) have an urgent need for conservation treatment than other types of institutions with significant art holdings; 21% of art museums, 18% of history museums, and 17% of independent research libraries also have an urgent need for conservation treatment.

Staff training is one of the most frequently cited needs, with 81% of institutions holding American art



can art having an urgent need or need for it; this figure is about the same at art museums, history museums, historical societies, and independent research libraries. There is not much variation of need for staff training considering size: 79% of large and medium institutions and 82% of small institutions have a combined urgent need and need. However, the percentage of urgent need is higher at small institutions—17%, compared with 13% at medium and 9% at large institutions.

Heritage Preservation has been investigating whether increasing the number of trained volunteers could help remedy the dramatic staff shortage in collections management and preservation. Especially with the highly educated and motivated “Baby Boomer” generation coming into retirement, the time seems right to recruit and train more volunteers. When this idea was proposed to the American art committee, there were many concerns, especially regarding the level of training required and the possibility for mishap. Several members mentioned that volunteers, not

being paid, are less motivated to make a regular time commitment and are difficult to dismiss if they are not performing their tasks responsibly. Others wondered why, if volunteers could handle collections care activities, an institution would continue to use paid personnel. Clearly, for such a volunteer program to succeed, it would need to involve extensive screening and training.

Other possible staffing solutions were discussed, such as institutional partnerships, with larger institutions providing preservation mentoring to smaller institutions or perhaps doing some *pro bono* conservation work. Group members asserted that many conservation labs at large institutions are already involved with other institutions in their region that do not have facilities, and many provide treatment, especially as part of loan agreements. Expecting any more collaboration was not deemed feasible, given the many demands that preservation staff at large institutions already have on them. ♦

Since the department of conservation was established in 1956 at The Art Institute of Chicago museum, facilities have been developed for the conservation of paintings, works on paper, textiles, photographs, three-dimensional objects, and books. Currently, the museum employs 19 conservators and two scientists. In 2000, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a \$2.75 million grant to the Art Institute to establish and operate a scientific laboratory, which also enabled the Art Institute to hire a head scientist. The new laboratory focuses on analyzing works of art and studying their materials’ structural and chemical natures. The cost of equipping the laboratory is significant, and the development of funding sources for the purchase of analytical instruments and conservation equipment is an ongoing challenge.

In order to enhance scientific research and analysis capabilities, the Art Institute has teamed up with Northwestern University, again with funding from the Mellon Foundation, on a program with two main components: collaborative research projects and a seminar series in conservation science. The ultimate objective of the program is not only to strengthen the Art Institute’s research capabilities, but also to offer a model for integrative and cross-disciplinary collaboration among museums and universities in the effort to strengthen the field of conservation science in the United States.



*Above, Thomas Cole's Distant View of Niagara Falls, which underwent conservation treatment in 2003. Right, a conservator works on Barnett Newman's The Beginning (1946) in the paintings conservation studio.*