

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
1. Data on Institutions Holding American Art	1
2. Condition of Collections	5
3. Intellectual Control and Assessment	13
4. Collections Environment	17
5. Collections Storage	20
6. Emergency Planning and Security	25
7. Preservation Staffing and Activities	28
8. Preservation Expenditures and Funding	32
9. Public Outreach.....	37
Appendices:	
A. American Art Committee Members	A1
B. Heritage Health Index Participants with American Art Holdings	B1
C. Survey Background and Methodology	C1
D. Heritage Health Index Institutional Advisory Committee Members	D1
E. Heritage Health Index Working Group Members	E1
F. Heritage Health Index Survey Instrument, Instructions, and Frequently Asked Questions ..	F1

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Executive Summary

The Heritage Health Index was the first comprehensive survey ever conducted of the condition and preservation needs of all U.S. collections held in the public trust. The project was designed and coordinated by Heritage Preservation, a national nonprofit organization, in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services, an independent federal agency. The results of the survey were published in December 2005 in *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections*.

The Henry Luce Foundation provided a two-year grant of \$100,000 to implement the Heritage Health Index at institutions with collections by artists from the United States of America. The funding also supported data analysis and a report on the condition of these American art collections. To assist in the review and analysis of the data, Heritage Preservation convened a committee of nine members, including the Luce Foundation's Program Director for American Art, Ellen Holtzman, and eight collections professionals from institutions with leading American art collections (Appendix A).

The Heritage Health Index questionnaire focused on the media of collections as being more relevant to condition and preservation needs than genre. However, Heritage Preservation was able to isolate the Heritage Health Index data on American art by selecting the surveys from institutions with more than 100 works of art, including paintings, art on paper, sculpture, and decorative art, excluding institutions that hold primarily non-American collections, and including 140 institutions that were identified by the Luce Foundation as having significant American art holdings.

In reviewing the resulting list of 1,243 institutions (Appendix B), the American art committee concurred with Heritage Preservation that a significant proportion of these institutions' art collections are of American art. Heritage Preservation then projected the data of the 1,243 returned surveys to all the institutions of similar characteristics in the total study population. By doing this, it is estimated that there are 9,187 institu-

tions holding American art. In this report, "institutions holding American art" refers to this group of 9,187 institutions. The Heritage Health Index data on institutions holding American art has a low margin of error at +/- 2.4%.

The Heritage Health Index documents that institutions holding American art care for 21 million art objects. These institutions include not only art museums but also history museums, historical societies, and libraries. The largest holdings of art are at:

Art Museums	7.9 million items
History Museums (including historic sites, general museums, and specialized museums)	7.6 million items
Independent Research Libraries (including state and major federal libraries)	1.9 million items
Historical Societies	1.1 million items

By looking beyond the holdings of art museums, the Heritage Health Index data provides a new, inclusive view of the preservation issues confronting American art collections. The data in this report is frequently presented by type of institution and size of institution, to better pinpoint where the needs are greatest.

The Heritage Health Index also provides an opportunity to investigate the items in other media held by institutions with American art. Half of institutions holding American art care for seven other types of collections beyond art. The conditions of these collections are important to consider as some of them document art, such as books and bound volumes, unbound sheets, moving images, recorded sound, digital materials, and historic objects. Looking at the condition of other media is also relevant in the case of contemporary art, which can include artworks in audiovisual or digital formats.

For many data points, the Heritage Health Index results pertaining to institutions holding American art show that these institutions may be providing slightly better care than U.S. collecting

institutions overall. However, the condition of collections at institutions holding American art indicates a substantial need for preservation attention and activities. Based on this data and input from the American art committee, Heritage Preservation recommends immediate attention to the following issues.

Collections Assessments

At institutions holding American art, 30% of art objects (6.3 million) are in unknown condition. This includes 21% of paintings, 29% of art on paper, 20% of sculpture, and 37% of decorative arts objects. The situation is worse with photographic materials, of which 41% are in unknown condition. It is not surprising, therefore, that 22% of institutions holding American art report not having done a general collections assessment. Another 16% have done such a survey, but it is out-of-date. Without at least a general understanding of the needs of its holdings, an institution cannot direct preservation activities to the collections that need them most.

Intellectual Control

The Heritage Health Index found that 43% of institutions holding American art have significant backlogs in the cataloging that provides intellectual control over their collections. Fourteen percent have none of their collection cataloged. While small institutions are more likely to have a cataloging backlog, even 26% of large institutions cite that less than 60% of their collections are cataloged. Not having basic information about holdings contributes to the lack of knowledge about the condition of collections, which has a tremendous impact on their long-term preservation and care.

Emergency Planning

Eighty percent of collecting institutions nationwide have no written emergency/disaster plan with staff trained to carry it out; at institutions holding American art, that figure is 74%. Recent natural disasters have underscored that collecting institutions with disaster plans are able to recover more efficiently and effectively than those without plans. Writing a plan and conducting training and drills for staff are two tangi-

ble improvements to collections care that can be achieved within most institutions' current resources. In addition, many excellent models and handbooks exist to assist institutions in disaster planning.

Storage

Only 31% of institutions holding American art reported that the majority of their collections are stored in areas large enough to accommodate current collections safely. More than a third of institutions have an urgent need for additional on-site storage, and 37% report an urgent need for renovated storage. Providing adequate storage is a need that cannot be delayed—67% of institutions holding American art have reported damage to collections due to improper storage.

In recent years, the Luce Foundation has been instrumental in supporting visible storage areas at institutions around the country. These projects provided optimum conditions for collections and made more collections accessible to the public. In getting a behind-the-scenes glimpse at these wide-ranging collections, visitors also gain an appreciation of the demands on institutions that care for our nation's collections.

Digital Preservation

Preservation of digital materials is an area of increasing concern. Some contemporary art is created in digital format, and without specific preservation plans in place, these works could be irretrievable in a matter of years. Documentation that accompanies artworks, which often provides critical information for their preservation, is being collected and stored digitally and is at risk as well. Yet almost half of institutions holding American art have not included the responsibility to preserve digital collections in their preservation mission or program. One-quarter of institutions holding American art reported that more than 60% of their digital collections are in unknown condition.

Stable Funding

Preservation requires perseverance, yet only 38% of institutions holding American art allocate for this vital activity in their annual budgets. In their most recently completed fiscal year, more

than half of institutions holding American art had \$3,000 or less in their budget for preservation. Fifteen percent of institutions holding American art budgeted nothing—for art museums, the figure is 20%. Existing public and private funding programs have made an impact on improving preservation, but institutions still struggle to find stable funding to maintain staff, cover basic supplies, and keep pace with cataloging and preventive conservation activities. Only 22% of institutions holding American art have used income from endowed funds to meet conservation/preservation expenses in the last three years.

Conclusion

The Heritage Health Index data has already brought attention to the need for increased and sustained resources. The survey results received substantial press attention, including stories in *The New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Los Angeles Times*; in newspapers nationwide through the Associated Press; and on National Public Radio and the San Francisco ABC-TV affiliate. The Luce Foundation has distributed *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report*

on the State of America's Collections to the 400 members of Grantmakers in the Arts. Collecting institutions across the country are citing the Heritage Health Index in presentations and requests to granting agencies and other stakeholders. Heritage Preservation continues to track their success.

The Heritage Health Index provided an important check-up on the state of our nation's most unique resources—American art collections. The survey concludes that maintaining these extensive collections will require institutions to recommit to basic collections care tasks such as assessment, cataloging, and emergency preparedness. It will also be necessary to prioritize more extensive projects, such as improving the storage of collections, planning for digital preservation, and developing sustained financial support for preservation staff, preventive care, and conservation treatments. Heritage Preservation commends the Luce Foundation for its involvement in these activities and encourages other funders—both governmental and in the private sector—to assume responsibility for providing the support that will allow these collections to survive. ♦