

The Getty Conservation Institute

Pushing the Conservation Agenda: A Conversation with Lawrence Reger

Since 1988 Lawrence L. Reger has been President of the National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property. He was Director of the American Association of Museums from 1978 to 1986, after serving in several senior policy positions, including General Counsel at the National Endowment for the Arts from 1970 to 1978. He has consulted with a range of foundations and cultural organizations on management, fund-raising, and long-range planning. Mr. Reger holds a law degree from Vanderbilt University, and from 1964 to 1970 he practiced law in Lincoln, Nebraska. He spoke with Jane Slate Siena, Head of Institutional Relations at the Getty Conservation Institute.



Photo: Bruce Dale

Jane Slate Siena: Your commitment to the arts at the national level began in 1970 when you came to Washington to help run the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

Lawrence Reger: It was early in the Nixon Administration, just six months after the appointment of Nancy Hanks as NEA Chairman. It was a dynamic and pivotal time in American culture. The Abstract Expressionist movement had happened, dance was flourishing, and there was a sense that the federal government could play a role in stimulating exciting artistic activity. We took advantage of this convergence of creative activity and dynamic political leadership to bring the Endowment close to its present plateau in terms of budget and scope of programs.

What do you think motivated the Nixon Administration to establish a central role for federal funding of the arts?

It was of course understood that other countries provide major support for the arts at the national level. But more importantly, the idea that the federal government could encourage businesses, foundations, state and local governments, and individuals to increase giving took hold quickly. We thought that the Endowment could bring people together from various disciplines and develop programs with modest amounts of money that would leverage additional contributions from other sources. This produced an explosion of support for cultural programming just at the time when artistic activity was at a peak.

During an eight-year period, we increased the Endowment's budget by over 400 percent and instituted a range of programs that comprehensively covered the arts. For example, we added programs for museums, symphony orchestras, and opera and instituted the "challenge grant" concept that sought to leverage large investments from additional sources. We also expanded the Endowment's reach into diverse communities.

Was conservation included in the original museum program?

Conservation was one of the program's highlights and somewhat radical at the time. Funding was made available not just for treatment of objects but for professional training and, if you can imagine, upgrading museum storage areas. There was consensus that the NEA should not fund capital construction, so we had a heated debate over providing funds to renovate storage areas. But we were able to make the case that by doing so we could help preserve the cultural heritage, which anticipated the movement toward the preventive conservation approach that we promote today.

From these various debates, does a form of national policy emerge?

Absolutely. There are two ways to develop policy. One is the legislative approach—you write the policy into law. The other is through practice by looking at what people actually do—what we call the "case method" in the law. If you examine what people are doing, then you will see that the NEA helped establish a national policy based on program priorities such as institutional development, conservation, exhibitions, and so forth.

How would you characterize the development of cultural programs in the United States over the past 20 years?

At the federal level, the approach has been to identify needs in specific fields, avoid being the only source of funding, leverage the federal investment with partnerships, and function on a peer-review system. The peer-review process was quickly perceived by businesses and foundations as the right mechanism for project review, and it stimulated additional funds. So a relatively small amount of government money has generated enormous support from other sources.

Since leaving the federal government in 1978, you have served as the chief executive officer of two major organizations: the American Association of Museums and the National Institute for Conservation. At both you expanded the base of support, developed a strong vision and program, and stabilized operations during difficult financial times. How?

Leadership in any organization is critical, and I've been fortunate to work with elected boards who have exercised leadership. At the AAM, we established priorities at a time when the organization was defining a long-range plan and mission. In priority order, we decided to: 1) improve professional standards; 2) advocate the importance of museums both professionally and among the public; and 3) publish a regular newsletter, magazine, and, when possible, landmark studies. By emphasizing professional standards, we helped the museum community define itself through accreditation and assessment programs, and develop a code of ethics. This gave us a core group of accredited museums that could make strong statements to both the Congress and the public. In the process, membership grew by over 200 percent, services to the profession increased radically, and a diverse funding base evolved.

Several of the landmark studies you undertook at the AAM during the 1980s have had a defining impact on conservation.

Yes. At the AAM, we launched the Commission on Museums for a New Century which looked at museums in their broadest aspects. The care of collections emerged as a preeminent concern. We took this finding to Congress and urged the development of new funding for museum conservation at the Institute of Museum Services. We also did a quantitative study for the Congress on conservation needs. This helped define the scope of the country's collections and their conservation problems. Concurrently, we worked with the National Endowment for the Humanities and codified, for the first time, the concept of "collections care."

What are your priorities for the National Institute for Conservation?

Again, I came to an organization engaged in significant reflection about its future. The board leadership was highly committed and motivated, and we set out three goals: 1) to increase public awareness of conservation; 2) to make conservation and collections care an integral part of museums, libraries and archives, and historic preservation organizations; and 3) to help coordinate conservation and preservation activities at the national level.

What are some of your most significant projects?

In the area of public awareness, we have had enormous success with the Save Outdoor Sculpture program. With a start-up grant from the Getty Grant Program and a strong partnership with the National Museum of American Art, we have a program essentially implemented with volunteers to conserve and maintain public sculpture across the country. This grass-roots effort has

stimulated public awareness, improved the condition of countless outdoor sculptures and monuments, and leveraged the initial Getty seed contribution of \$409,000 into \$5.5 million. It's resulting in important documentation, on a community-by-community basis, of significant sculpture, creating a new database of information at the National Museum of American Art. We also published *Caring for Your Collections* with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., which is the first book on conservation geared toward collectors.

NIC's second priority seems to stem from your earlier experience in professional standards at the AAM.

In this area, we have worked with the Getty Conservation Institute to publish *The Conservation Assessment: A Tool for Planning, Implementation*. It has been of signal importance in helping guide assessments of objects and buildings with a holistic view of conservation. This work laid the foundation for our very successful Conservation Assessment Program which provides support to small and mid-sized museums across the country. Our third priority—to coordinate national projects—includes two other projects with the Getty Conservation Institute: the National Summit on Emergency Response and Interdisciplinary Cooperation in Managing the Conservation of Our Cultural Heritage.

In your 25-year experience working with national cultural organizations in the U.S., how has the role of conservation changed?

Conservation was really a minor interest in most institutions 25 years ago. An awareness of conservation flourished as overall cultural programming grew. Today we are much more enthusiastic about conservation and the need to protect our past. As we enter a new century, I think people are going to be reflecting on the value of their heritage and how it enriches our lives. It's important that we find a way to translate that interest and energy into the support and resources needed for cultural heritage preservation in this country. The NIC will take a leadership role in doing just that.



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