

Conservation challenges of the re-installation of a Colombian Art Collection: Banco de la República Art Collection



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Introduction

The Art Museum of the Banco de la República of Colombia houses the most important public collection of modern and contemporary art in the country. It was created in 1957, and today contains close to 5,000 artworks. The re-installation project of the Permanent Collection, which currently displays nearly 800 artworks in 2735 square meters of exhibition space, was initiated in around the year 2000 and the re-installed exhibit was opened at the end of July 2013.

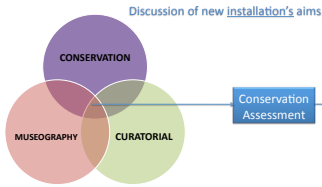
This project involved a series of conservation challenges, which have been addressed throughout the planning of the project, both during its execution and after its completion. It includes the criteria and decision-making processes, which have been reconsidered in order to ensure the preservation and enjoyment of these works exhibited to the public.

Aims

- Assess the initial condition of artworks included in the curatorial lists
- Determine conservation needs to ensure the stabilization of works and/or the esthetic reading if necessary
- Design conservation strategies regarding the exhibition conditions of the artworks

Methodology

Consensus among conservators, curators and museography (designers-producers) was achieved through regular discussion prior to and during the project.



1. Is the artwork currently stable in conservation terms and is it able to be con exhibit in its current state?
2. How can the artwork be exhibited in order to try to prolong its preservation and also meet the museographical and curatorial intentions?
3. Can a minor conservation treatment stabilize the artwork in order to be in an acceptable exhibition condition?

Most Significant Challenges

- ◆ Paper artworks inside showcases, were intended to be shown in a new and "fresh" way by avoiding the traditional frames and displaying them in the cleanest way possible, free of any excessively decorative elements and instead using just the functional elements required for a proper exhibit. In the case of 20th century prints that were made with an intention of political protest, avoiding a frame was mainly a way of maintaining the meaning of the work, according the curatorial guidelines.
- ◆ 19th century portrait miniatures, many of which had not been exhibited and were mounted in a variety frames of different styles and dimensions.
- ◆ Variety of materials and techniques in contemporary artworks, which required a review with the curators and in some cases interviews with the living artists.
- ◆ Recent acquisitions which required further conservation assessment and stabilization treatment, as well as consultations with artists for detailed exhibit instructions in cases were it was necessary to complete the documentation of the art.

Results

Minor conservation treatments for stabilization and esthetic reading

- Detachment from old auxiliary supports
- Removal of acid tapes
- Consolidation and re-adhesion of paint or preparation layers

Interventions regarding dismantling from frames and re-framing

- New arrangements with photographs and drawings required its mounting in a frame according to curatorial and museography needs.
- A number of paper artworks were unframed in order to be displaced in showcases. In these cases different solutions were designed according to the type of works.

Decision-making regarding maximum exhibit periods for certain photographs and artworks on paper and lighting condition requirements

- Paper artworks with a 6-month exhibition period
- Daguerreotypes with a 3-month exhibition period
- Light-sensor activated showcases for especially light-sensitive artworks



Conservation approach for the preparation of paper artworks inside exhibit cases

A total of 129 paper artworks were prepared for exhibition. This included in some cases disassembling from prior auxiliary supports and frames, and minor conservation treatments such as tear repairs and surface cleaning.

The main challenge was to find a meeting point mediated between the curators and production staff's intention on how to display the art that would also meet conservation standards. The idea was to display the greatest number of these artworks without frames and set them inside showcases (both vertical and horizontal). For this, the following solutions were agreed on through group discussions and conservation testing carried out during the preparation prior to the actual installation.

◆ 19th century watercolors (13 artworks)

The artworks were mounted on acid-free cardboard, employing clear plastic mounting channels on borders, and mylar corner protectors. The role of the acid-free cardboard used as an auxiliary support (attached without any adhesive) is to act as a buffer-agent and to mitigate damage caused by relative humidity fluctuations inside the showcase. Also, due to the special historical significance and uniqueness of these watercolors it was decided to additionally use a mylar sheet inserted between the corners to protect the surface from dirt and pollutants. These were attached, with Velcro, to the showcase. The light source from the inside of all the vertical showcases has UV filtered acrylic coverings.



◆ 20th century pencil and ink drawings (27 artworks).

These small-format drawings, mainly paper and ink sketches, were drawn on low-quality industrial paper that has a high acid content. They were mounted on an acid-free cardboard auxiliary support attached by use of mylar corner supports. Plastic mounting channels were used only in those works with length above 30 cm. Velcro was used to install them in the showcase.



◆ 20th century photographs (23 artworks)

These post-card format photographs were attached to an acid-free cardboard with mylar corners. These were displayed in a table showcase, with use of a UV filtered glass protector.



◆ 1960s-1980s prints (42 artworks)

The variety of paper qualities, textures and calibers of the different prints made it necessary to perform conservation testing prior to mounting in order to select the best preservation strategy for the artworks during this installation process.

The main concern was the weight and large dimensions of some of the works that were wished to be displayed without frames. For this, an installation test was carried out inside the work-storage area of the museum with 6 samples of different quality prints (cotton print-making papers, shiny, textured, from calibers within 0.1 to 0.35 mm) over 60 days. The result was that a backing board and channel mounts could be used in 40 of the 42 artworks, without any further treatment.



Two of the large format artworks required an additional hinging support (Hayaku Japanese paper strips adhered to borders of the artwork) in order to prevent paper planar distortion. In addition, the mounts had to be installed by means of a mylar interleaving sheet to prevent surface abrasion of the artwork. An important result was that the adhesive that comes with the channel mounts was not effective for long-term exhibit. Therefore, use of Velcro attached to the back support of artwork was preferred for the installation.



◆ Contemporary art (24 artworks)

A back support with acid-free cardboard was made for each artwork with a 1.5 cm passepartout to protect the border of the artwork. Inside the artwork is mounted with archival polyester corners. Instead of channel mounts, a custom-made 2 cm-wide wood frame for each mountboard was preferred, in order to install the works in vertical showcases.



Present and future challenges

- The installation process required the remodeling of the museum rooms and this has brought about changes in the environmental conditions. Based on monitoring revisions and solutions are crucial to address environmental conditions from an interdisciplinary approach (infrastructure, museography, and conservation, alongside with the museum's director).
- Lighting and electrical aspects of certain artworks have proven to be a new challenge with sensor activated showcases, as well as modern and contemporary artworks that have electrical components.
- The maintenance of artworks inside showcases has been demonstrated to be a challenging aspect and is related to the different levels of difficulty of access and dismantling of the cases. The design of the first exhibit cases gave insights for the next ones produced for the future stages of the project.
- The monitoring of artworks on exhibit is on ongoing project, and it is linked to the establishment of a long-term project for exhibition changes necessary to address conservation issues, and is still to be defined according to the needs of the collection and the possibilities of the museum's resources.

