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 1967, and today contains close to 5,000 artworks. The re-installation project of the Permanent Collection, which currently displays nearly 800 artworks in 2,755 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 recommended 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 list
- Determine conservation needs to ensure the stabilization of works and/or the aesthetic reading if necessary
- Design conservation strategies regarding the exhibition conditions of the artworks

Methodology

Conservation strategies, curators and museography (designers-producers) were achieved through regular discussion prior to and during the project.

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 clearest way possible, free of any excessive decorative elements and instead using just the functional elements required for a proper exhibit. In the case of 30th century prints that were made with an intention of political protest, avoiding a frame was merely a way of maintaining the meaning of the work, according to curatorial guidelines.
- 19th century watercolor miniatures, many of which had not been not 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

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 new conservation treatments such as new frames and glass coverings.

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 still keep 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 myler corner protectors. The role of the acid-free cardboard used as an auxiliary support (unattached 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 weight of the artworks, it was decided to additionally use a myler sheet 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, mostly paper and ink artworks, were shown 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 myler corner supports. Plastic mounting channels were used only in those works with length above 20 cm. Velcro was used to install them in the showcase.

- 1960s-1980s prints (42 artworks)
  The variety of paper qualities, textures and colors 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.
- Contemporary art (24 artworks)
  A light source with acid-free cardboard and myler corners. These were displayed in a table showcase, with use of a UV filtered glass protector.

Conservation needs to ensure the stabilization of works and/or the aesthetic reading if necessary

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

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