

Chapter 5: Collections Storage

The American art committee emphasized that a significant part of any institution's care of collections is preventive. This includes providing the best climate control for collections and also the safest storage. The Heritage Health Index defined adequate storage as large enough to accommodate current collections with safe access to them and appropriate storage furniture, if necessary. Room to properly access collections not only makes them more available to staff and researchers but also

Fig. 5.1 Institutions with American Art Holdings' Collections Stored in Areas Large Enough to Accommodate Them Safely and Appropriately

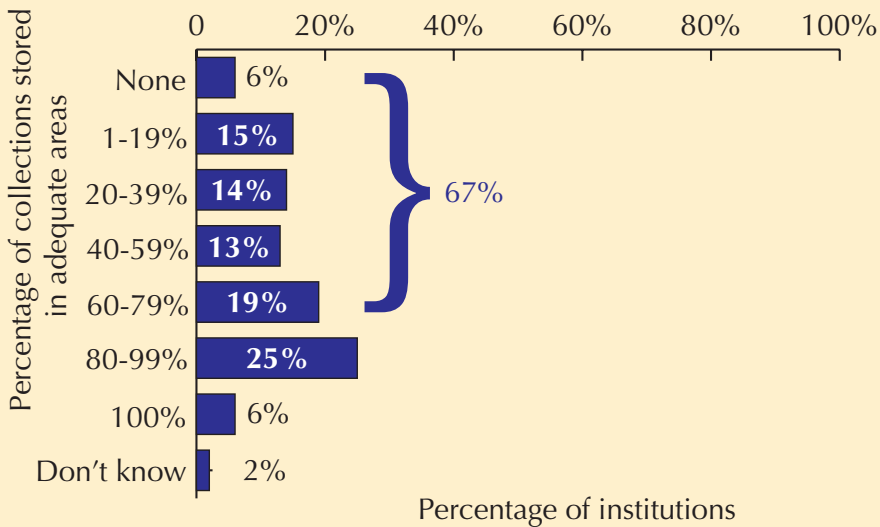


Fig. 5.2 Institutions with American Art Holdings' Collections Stored in Areas Large Enough to Accommodate Them Safely and Appropriately (by size)

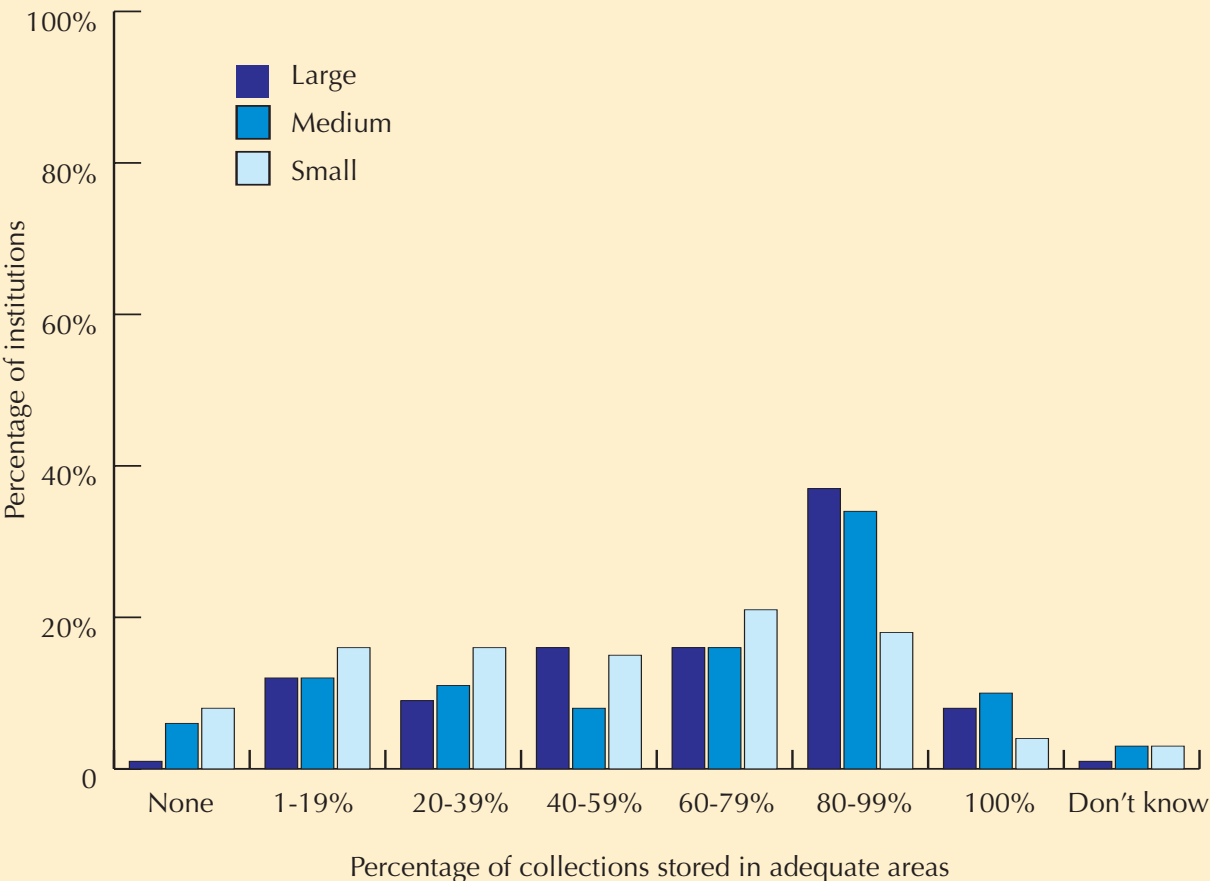
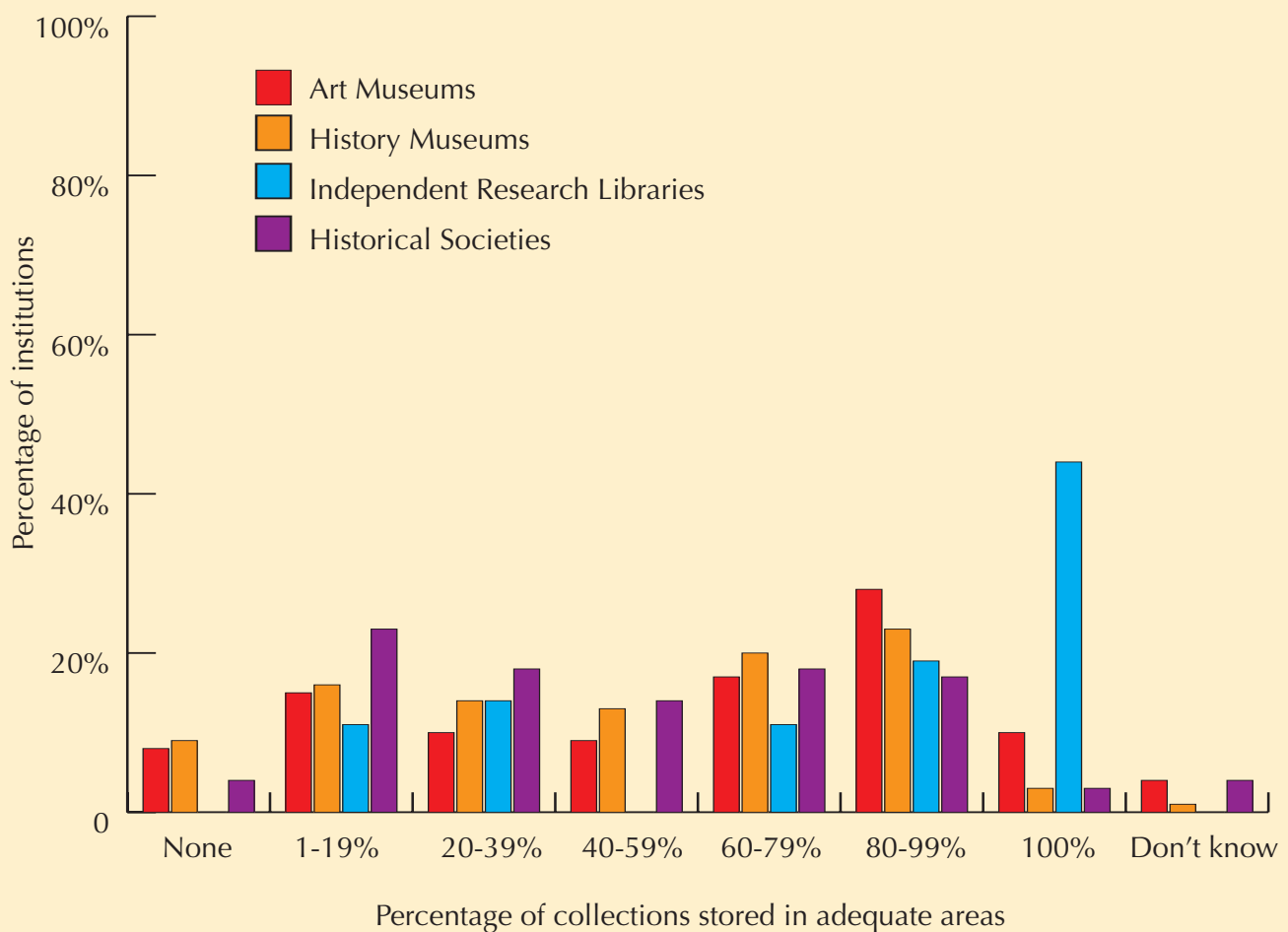


Fig. 5.3 Collections Stored in Areas Large Enough to Accommodate Them Safely and Appropriately at Institutions with the Largest Number of Art Holdings



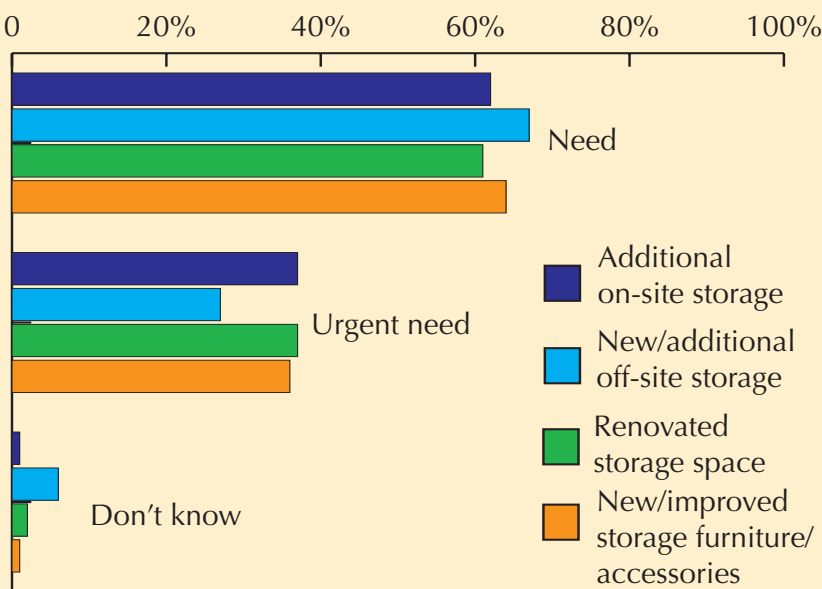
reduces the likelihood of damage due to handling.

Sixty-seven percent of institutions that hold American art collections have less than 80% of their collections stored adequately (figure 5.1). Six percent have none of their collections in proper storage, and another 15% have less than 20% stored appropriately. Considering the total Heritage Health Index findings, 59% of institutions had less than 80% of their collections stored adequately—better than the statistic for institutions holding American art. The problem of inadequate storage affects institutions large and small; about half of large and medium institutions and 76% of small institutions have the majority of their collections stored improperly (figure 5.2). Of the institutions that have the largest holdings of art, history museums and his-

torical societies have the greatest likelihood of having collections in poor storage. The figure for art museums is the same as the national average of all institutions—59% of art museums have less than 80% of their collections stored adequately. Independent research libraries have many of their collections stored properly; 44% have 100% in adequate storage and another 19% have 80% to 99% stored adequately (figure 5.3).

Of those institutions that do not have adequate storage, their most urgent needs are for additional on-site storage (37%), renovated storage space (37%), and new or improved storage furniture or accessories (36%) (figure 5.4). The urgent need for off-site storage was less but still notable at 27%. Five percent cited an urgent need in all four categories, and 10% cited an urgent need in at least three categories. Museums and historical

Fig. 5.4 Institutions with American Art Holdings' Need for Storage Improvements



vided an opportunity to increase awareness of collection preservation needs and better storage conditions. For some institutions, changes to the building allowed them to bring collections that were in leased storage space back on site. However, the group cautioned, for collections to ultimately benefit from a major building expansion or construction, collections staff should be prepared to have significant input in the planning process. In some cases, this lobbying has not been successful and collections areas have not improved substantially. It was also noted that many building pro-

grams involve moving the collection, sometimes multiple times, which increases the risk of damage or theft and takes staff time from regular collections care activities.

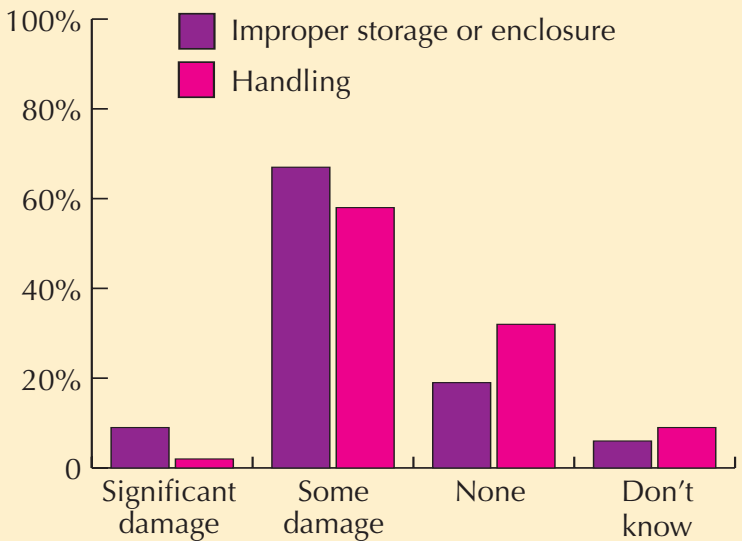
societies were more likely to have pressing storage needs for additional or improved storage. These needs must be taken seriously, as improper storage or enclosure is the second leading cause of damage to collections. Nine percent of institutions that have American art have had significant damage due to poor storage, and 67% have had some damage (figure 5.5). Damage due to improper handling has caused significant damage at 2% of institutions and some damage at 58%.

Almost all the institutions represented on the American art committee are planning or implementing or have just completed major building expansions or new facilities. This trend is especially prevalent among museums, with most major institutions in the process of a building campaign. Heritage Preservation asked the group whether such building projects ultimately benefited collections or if they are primarily focused on improving public spaces, such as exhibit and visitors services areas. The majority of the group agreed that building expansion or a move into a new facility pro-

grams involve moving the collection, sometimes multiple times, which increases the risk of damage or theft and takes staff time from regular collections care activities.

As a possible solution to the storage crisis, Heritage Preservation asked the committee about shared storage facilities. This model has been

Fig. 5.5 Institutions with American Art Holdings Reporting Causes of Damage to Collections from Storage Conditions



successful in the library and archival community, in which several groups have entered into cooperative agreements to lease or build warehouses with proper climate control, fire suppression, intrusion detection, and staffing to meet the needs of their book and manuscript collections. However, a similar idea has yet to be implemented by a consortium of museums or historical societies. Many cities have begun planning cooperative storage ventures over the years, but Heritage Preservation is not aware that any have succeeded.

In general, the American art committee was skeptical of the concept of shared storage, voicing concerns about security, pest management, access to collections, and transport of the collections over a distance. When a detailed plan was explained, in which a regional conservation center would design and operate a state-of-the-art facility, the group was slightly more accepting, but questioned the cost effectiveness of such a facility. It was suggested that institutions with small collections and without preservation staff might find a shared storage facility more useful than a large institution.

The American art committee's reaction to the idea of cooperative storage is consistent with a study recently conducted by The Exhibition Alliance (TEA), a New York State nonprofit organization that organizes traveling exhibitions and offers climate controlled fine art storage. Their study, *The State of Storage*, conducted in early 2005, concluded that 30% of upstate New York institutions need additional storage, which parallels the Heritage Health Index statistic that 32% of all U.S. collecting institutions have an urgent need for additional onsite storage. TEA wondered if creating additional storage facili-

The Hayward Area Historical Society strives to tell the combined histories of Castro Valley, Hayward, and San Lorenzo, California, through the operation of a museum and the preservation of several historic sites and a historic cemetery. Like many historical organizations, the society's collection is extremely varied and includes a range of fine and decorative arts, in addition to other objects.

In January 2006, as work was underway to re-house, inventory, and catalog the society's collection, black mold was discovered on wooden shelving supports in the large-artifact storage area. Immediate steps were taken to contain the situation. Experts were called in to identify the type of mold and assess the risk to the collection and staff. Once it was clear there were no major health risks, the society's five staff members moved the collection to a temporary storage location with the help of volunteers and interns from local universities. During the move, each object was assessed, and those that were contaminated were isolated. The board of directors, recognizing the severity of the problem, authorized the purchase of new shelving equipment and the contracting of environmental experts, who removed the existing shelving and sterilized the storage area. New metal shelving has been installed and the entire large-artifact collection has been re-housed. Efforts are ongoing to complete the cataloging and inventory project.



Left, in the process of inventorying the collection, black mold was discovered on storage shelving at the Hayward Area Historical Society museum, necessitating the purchase of new storage equipment. Right, the large-artifact and decorative arts collections are re-housed in an acid- and mold-free storage environment.

The Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University opened in 1973 with a collection of just over 9,000 objects. Today it numbers more than 31,000 objects. The museum is committed to maintaining its role as a dynamic cultural, intellectual, and social center of Cornell and the region. Collections care is central to this commitment. However, as an external review panel concluded several years ago, “The one serious challenge facing the Herbert F. Johnson Museum today is the lack of space to carry its mission forward.”

The museum has responded to this challenge and in 2008 will begin a 13,000 square feet expansion—the first in the history of the museum. In the past 10 years, the museum has renovated each one of its art storage areas, adding new, appropriate flat files for storage of works on paper and compact shelving for three-dimensional objects. Yet, as the collection grows, it is becoming increasingly difficult to store works of art in the building. The museum plans to include 1,650 square feet of collections storage in the new wing and to convert 1,000 square feet of space in the existing building to collections storage. In addition, a 2,000 square foot, multi-use study center with open storage is planned for the museum’s new wing and will allow visitors direct access to the collections.



The main storage area at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University does not accommodate the museum’s growing collection. The museum is undertaking an expansion that will provide more space for collections storage and access.

ties upstate would help address this issue and interviewed museums in New York City about whether such a service would be of use. Despite their plan for offering a collections appropriate storage area at a reasonable cost, the idea has been difficult to sell. A few institutions hope for their own improved or increased storage facilities on-site. Those that rely on off-site storage were reluctant to send collections a distance out of the city in part because many do not have enough information about their collections to determine what could go into “deep storage.” Lack of staff time does not make these assessments feasible in the near future. The report states, “(i)nterestingly, few collections-based respondents seem comfortable with utilizing vir-

tual imaging technologies and digital ‘reporting’ as a substitute for initial inspection of off-site materials. The ability to visually survey, handle, and directly scrutinize materials is a hard conceptual habit to appease among museum staff even when the financial benefits of remote storage seem irrefutable.”¹

Heritage Preservation believes the potential for increased savings to institutions and safety to collections could be achieved by cooperative storage projects. Perhaps additional networking with the library and archival field could prompt museums to reconsider this option. It could also be helpful to bring together those institutions that considered joint storage projects in the past to determine what caused the idea to fail. ♦

1. The Exhibition Alliance, *The State of Storage* (2006), p. 6.