Conservation, lifting the veil
To teach in order to conserve

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Introduction
This presentation shares our experience with conservation diffusion in the Figari Museum.

Our work is based on two interrelated premises. First, educating the public about conservation increases their appreciation of the museum collection in particular and of patrimony in general. Conservation information enriches understandings of heritage and ought to be shared with the public. Second, popularizing the task of conservation is expected to improve the professional status of Conservators. The appreciation of conservation both as an area of knowledge and as a professional activity is an essential cultural heritage management. The place given to conservation by the government and its sociocultural policies, as well as the museums and the community as a whole, is essential to the patrimony's sustainability. In this sense, we understand the conservation of cultural goods is integrally involved in every aspect and stage of patrimonial management.

Museums are responsible for much of a nation's collection of cultural goods and must include conservation in their management strategies.

In addition, as defined by the ICOM2, one of the missions of today's museums is to include conservation in their management strategies.

Conservation, an invisible work
Conservation is often an invisible and silent activity to the public, even to the authorities and leaders. Its importance in caring for heritage is neither well known nor appreciated. This is partly due to the fact that it is a task carried out behind closed doors, it is not something one contemplates on an object on display. Usually the conservation necessities of an object are not provided, and often if they are, then these directions are given in a negative or unfriendly way (don’t touch, do not use flash, do not smoke, restrict access area, etc.) without explanations for the necessity of restrictions.

Conservation information, compressed in the technical reports, limited to the professional environment of the institutions must reach the exhibition halls, be a part of the information available to the visitor. The physical and chemical properties of an object, the factors that lead to its deterioration, the preventive conservation measures to ensure a higher endurance over time, contribute to the understanding of a cultural good.

To know the requirements for care of heritage confers the population with ability to participate in its conservation. Wanting to conserve an object is a decision that concerns the community it belongs to. To have close relation to the value given to the heritage by that community. What is cared for is what is appreciated, and both caring and loving are taught and learnt.

Our disseminating experience in the Figari Museum
The Figari Museum is a public institution entirely devoted to the work of the brilliant and multifaceted Uruguayan painter Pedro Figari (1861-1938). The Museum opened its doors in February 2010, in a 1914 building declared architectural Patrimony of Montevideo’s Old City. It hosts about 100 oil on cardboard artworks, from the almost 4000 that he painted in his lifetime, and guards three anhects that document his life, thought and work. Before becoming a painter Figari was an outstanding lawyer, prolific writer, journalist, philosopher, educator, poet and politician. His fruitful work still awakes debates, admiration and inspiration. The museum aims to be a place of privilege for investigations that explore his character and work.

Almost at 60 he fully turned to painting. He was internationally renowned for its creativity and peculiar technique. His humanist thinking is outlined in all of his artistic production. A major part of his work covers the topics of traditions in which he depicts countryside landscapes and traditional dances, and it grants a special place to the socially underprivileged groups at the time, such as the Afro-descendants. His work, which impressed the second and third decade of the past century’s European avant-gardes, is embodied in cardboard with neither priming nor varnish, giving away a touch of rustiness whilst imparting velvety shimmer to the oil. From a conservation point of view these characteristics are a challenge that deserve a separate chapter.

In the museum works a team formed by the director, an administrative assistant, an educational area responsible, an exhibition guide, an archive responsible, a graphic designer and a conservator, in addition to the vigilance and cleaning staff.

The conservation project, which cares for both the paintings as well as the documentation, is integrated within the museological approach of the institution. The conservation that concerns both the heritage collection and the building containing them is present in every activity of the museum’s agenda.

One of our work proposals is centered on directing the public to information that is generated throughout the objects’ conservation work, from the moment they arrive at the museum: transportation, registration, cataloguing, restoration, storage, documentation and display. It highlights the importance of conservation measures throughout the process and how this merges with the general conservation plan.

From the various disseminating activities that were done last year at the museum, the presentation “Behind the exhibition” was chosen, which documented the presence of conservation throughout the production of the Pedro Figari Iconographic Exhibition. From the topic’s conception, the investigation, the museographic script, to the preparing and exhibiting of the material that takes part in conservation. This exposition was particularly significant as a great variety of objects and techniques of diverse artists were included.

Conservation in the production process of an exhibit

Exhibit process
Preparation of the materials

Conservation interacts and bonds with the displaying process

Preventive measures

Conservation in Uruguay
In our country, conservation as an academic discipline and professional activity makes a great effort to hold its neck above water to preserve the national heritage. The new law on Heritage (2010) and the Law on Museums and the National Museum System (2012) constitutes the first steps toward addressing the issue correctly and start leaving behind the 19th century conception that has reigned until now in museums. Nevertheless, the figure of the conservator does not exist yet—apart from a specialist correctly trained and occupying a place in a museum’s staff as opportunities for appropriate training in Uruguay are just emerging. There are only a few experts who were trained overseas and some others whom have a degree in other disciplines such as history, restoration, cultural management, anthropology, etc., which have come closely to the study of museum conservation. In general, conservation in national museums is marked by the criteria and sensibility of its directors.

At the same time, the massive attendance and mobilization prompted by the “Patrimonio’s day” commemoration and the “Museums’ night” visit have had a great impact in the link between the Uruguayan population and cultural goods, which show an huge interest in coming closer and relating to those. This fact is documented the presence of conservation throughout the production of the Pedro Figari Iconographic Exhibition. From the topic’s conception, the investigation, the museographic script, to the preparing and exhibiting of the material that takes part in conservation. This exposition was particularly significant as a great variety of objects and techniques of diverse artists were included.

Notes
2. According to the ICOM Statutes, adopted during the 21st General Conference in Vienna, Austria, in 2007: “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution for the purposes of education, study and research. It is open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, displays, interprets and communicates human cultural heritage. It is an activity which like many others in the world is a generator of wealth and prosperity, and makes a great effort to hold its neck above water to preserve the national patrimony. In general, conservation in national museums is marked by the criteria and sensibility of its directors.”
3. According to the ICOM Statutes, adopted during the 13th General Conference in Athens, Greece, in 1996: “The degree of knowledge of the public increases with the number of people who visit collections, study the objects on display, and obtain information about the history and the environment of the object. It is important that the public understand the conservation work, how the objects are conserved and why the objects are conserved.”
4. According to the ICOM Statutes, adopted during the 17th General Conference in Athens, Greece, in 1998: “The degree of knowledge of the public increases with the number of people who visit collections, study the objects on display, and obtain information about the history and the environment of the object. It is important that the public understand the conservation work, how the objects are conserved and why the objects are conserved.”
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6. Precautionary measures: the preventive measures are carried out in the spaces where the objects are displayed.
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