

Conservation, lifting the veil

To teach in order to conserve

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“A Collection is knowledge that is guarded and communicated”.

Fernando Almarza Risquez¹

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’s 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, and as defined by the ICOM², one of the missions of today’s museums is to promote understanding of their collections. This has great importance from an informal education of the population perspective. It is within this framework that the Figari Museum works. Through the dissemination of the daily conservation labor we create bridges between the museum and the public.

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 evident when contemplating 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 (do not touch, do not use flash, do not smoke, restricted 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. Its care has 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 learned.

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 archives 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 topic 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 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.

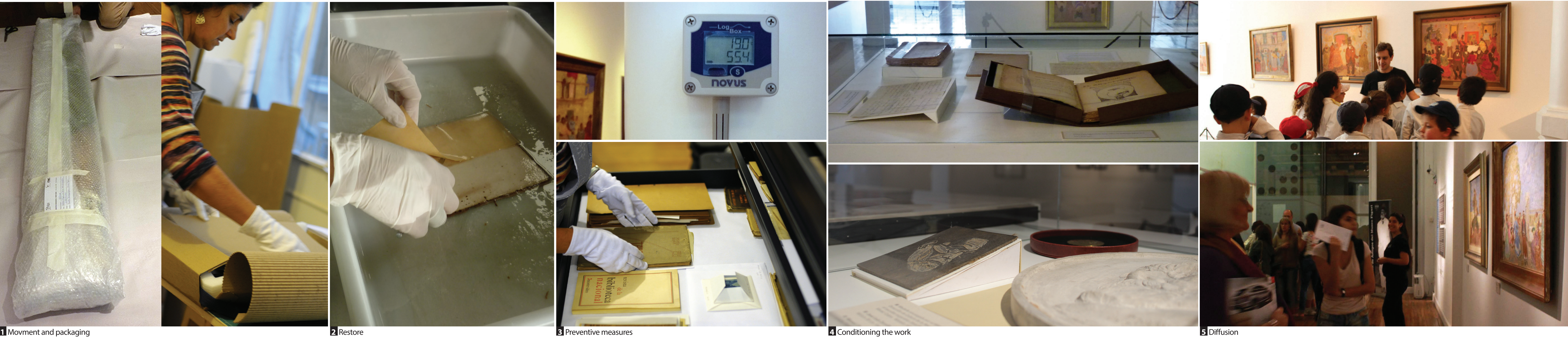
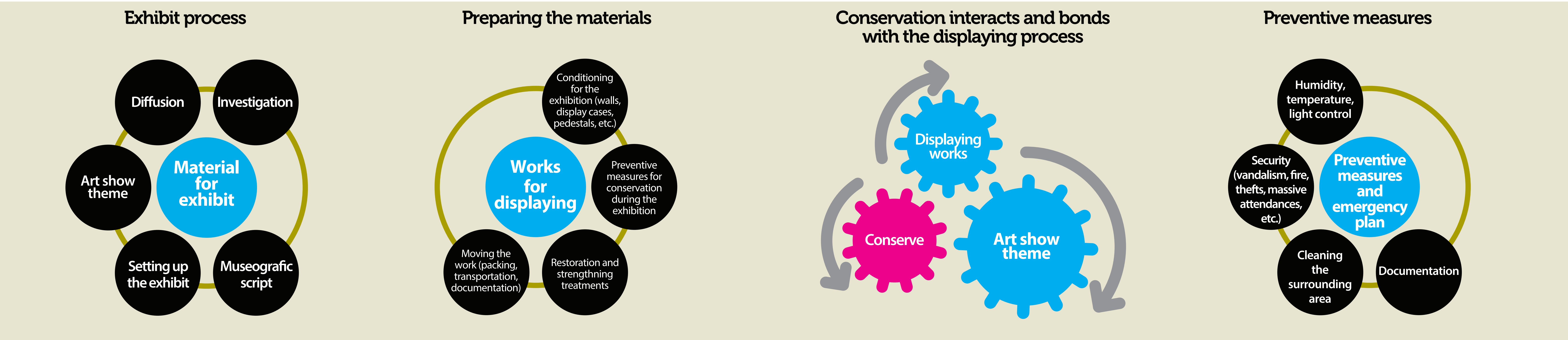
In the museum works a team formed by the director, an administrative assistant, an educative area responsible, an exhibition guide, an archive responsible, a graphic designer and a conservator, in addition to the vigilance and cleaning staff.

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 covers 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 conservative measures throughout this process and how this merges with the general conservation plan.

From the various disseminative activities that were done last year at the museum, the presentation “Behind the exhibition” was shown, which documented the presence of conservation throughout the production of the Pedro Figari Iconographical 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



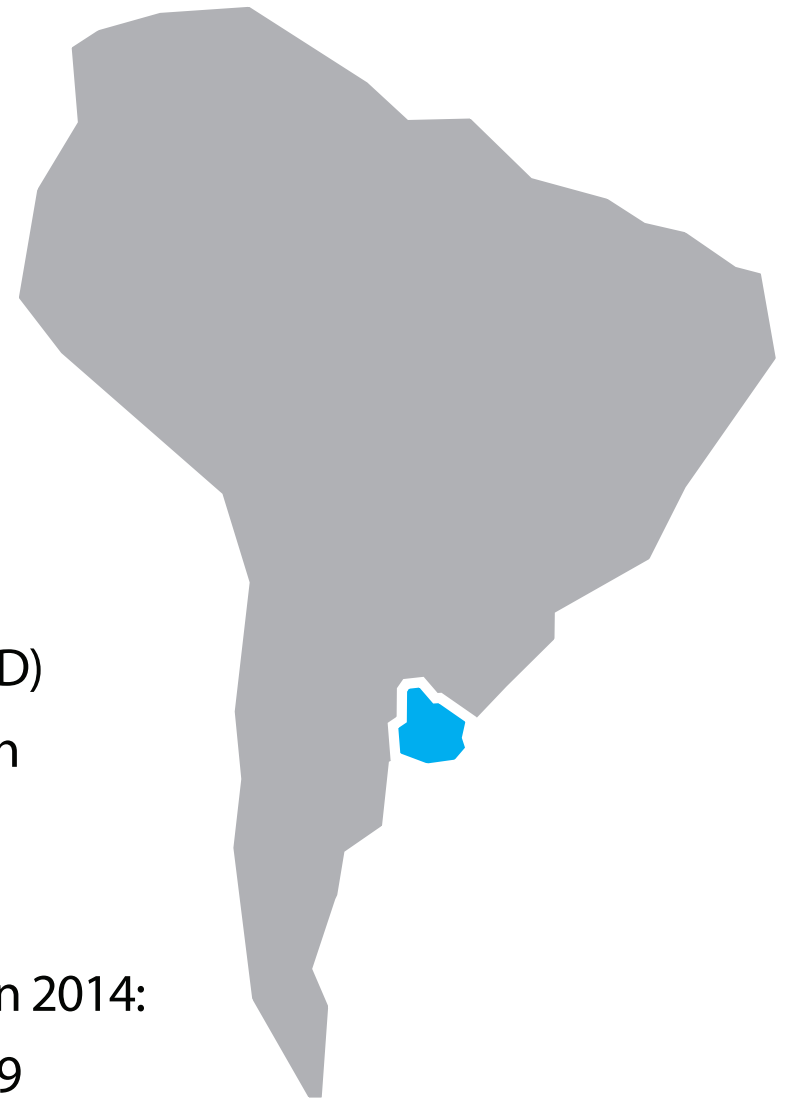
Conservation in Uruguay

In our country, conservation as an academic discipline and a 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 then in museums. Nevertheless, the figure of the conservator does not exist yet –apart from few exceptions- as a specialist correctly trained and occupying a place in a museum’s staff. 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 “Patrimony’s day” commemoration first and the “Museums’ night” after have had a great impact in the link between the Uruguayan population and cultural goods, which shows their huge interest in coming closer and relating to those. This fact is transcendental as well because it has stimulated the recovery of buildings and has set in motion a register of patrimonial cultural goods throughout the whole country. In spite of these boosts there is a gap between the knowledge the objects have and the guidelines for their conservation. It’s necessary to bring closer the tools that enable to protect the objects form the inadequate manipulation, inconvenient interventions, the lack of emergency plans, the absence of preventive measures in the exhibition halls, etc. There is no support for the conservation of cultural goods within formal education. Neither the primary, secondary nor even the training for teachers include in their study curricula the education for the patrimony.

República Oriental del Uruguay

Area 176.125 km²
Population 3.323.906
Density 18.87/km²
Capital Montevideo (MVD)
Official language Spanish
Museums 201
Art museums 69
Visitors to Museo Figari in 2014:
Adults 10.260 / Kids 2.909



Notes

1. Fernando Almarza Risquez. Curso Registro y Catalogación de colecciones. ILAM, 2014
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 in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”
3. The degree in Museology of the Republic University closed at the end of the first generation, in 2013. Nowadays, the degree in Cultural Managing has one course (6 months) of conservation.
4. The commemoration of Patrimony’s day began in the spring of 1995 in Montevideo. Due to the success and impact it had on the population it extended to the rest of the country and a few years ago it started to last a whole weekend, regardless of the name remaining in singular. In 1996, 500,000 participated in the event.
5. The museums’ night has taken place on December for 10 years now and is hosted by the Intendencia de Montevideo (IM) (city hall). It is an activity which like many others in the world is a generator of stimulus for visiting museums, and to these to open their doors in unconventional hours and proposing diverse activities.