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## conservation 2.0 New Directions

37th Annual Meeting

May 19–22, 2009

Hyatt Regency

Century Plaza

Los Angeles, California

*See insert for preview  
registration information!*

## Fundamentals of Health and Safety: A New Approach

*By Dennis Ertel*

Poor attention to health and safety in museums places staff, volunteers, and visitors at risk, and poses threats to the preservation and utility of collections. Traditionally, staff in museums and related cultural organizations has not always assumed responsibility for personal safety, placing greater emphasis on providing protection for the collections held in trust by these institutions. In reality, this is an assumption that often places heritage collections at risk.

A casual or an uninformed attitude towards safety can be detrimental to both collections and those who care for them. For example, handling dusty, radioactive fossils near non-radioactive specimens can cause spread of contaminated dust that is radioactive as a result of contact with the fossil. Moving a large sculpture without proper rigging may result in damage to the sculpture, to other objects in the same display or storage area, and even the individuals involved in its movement. Use of solvents or corrosive chemicals without proper, local exhaust ventilation can allow vapors from the chemicals to pollute the atmosphere around collections and individuals. Allowing building renovations to occur without careful worksite inspections has resulted in fires that have severely damaged museum collections and have resulted in a variety of human dangers. Many decades of well-intentioned, but unsafe or ill-informed use of pesticides have left museum and university-based collections with millions of objects damaged by treatments and/or compromised for research and other uses. Such activities not only threaten human and collection safety, but they can also leave the survival of an institution at risk from liability litigation.

In recent years, safety professionals have begun to examine cultural institutions as workplaces and have found a widespread lack of understanding about health and safety among governing boards, administrations, staff, visiting researchers, and volunteers. It is equally clear that as workplaces, museums, and related institutions pose a set of challenges to health and safety that are quite different from those encountered in other work environments. In spite of a few isolated journal articles or chapters in various recent publications, the necessary tools to broaden awareness of these hazards in museum work are lacking. There is just one text devoted to this topic: the now long-out-of-print *Safety in Museums and Galleries*, by Frank Howie, which focuses on regulatory issues in the United Kingdom.

In 2003, a joint editorial group was formed by members of the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPNHC) and the Health and Safety Committee of AIC (AIC H&S) to begin planning a publication that could broadly describe many of the risks, dangers and potential solutions to health and safety problems within a cultural institution. The editorial group included safety professionals with significant experience in museum settings and museum professionals from various backgrounds.

AIC and the SPNHC have jointly sponsored this project because both organizations have a long history of interest in health and safety concerns for their members. AIC has had a Health & Safety Committee for most of the 36 years of its exist-

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tence. This committee has regularly published articles and organized workshops of importance to conservators as well as other museum professionals. For some time, the committee considered preparing a text on safety and health for conservators, but recognized that this type of limited audience would not warrant the costs of producing the volume. In the summer of 2002, a graduate course on safety in museums was offered at the George Washington University, with curriculum developed by an ad hoc Working Group of the AIC H&S committee. The course underscored the urgent need for a textbook on the topic that would benefit all professionals who deal with heritage collections and properties, and could be used in any institution, anywhere. Various members of the SPNHC have also recognized and reported on health and safety issues at meetings, in publications and workshops. With funding from the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training, the National Park Service, AIC and SPNHC solicited sponsorship from a number of organizations for a highly successful symposium on the problems associated with repatriation of contaminated museum collections. SPNHC dedicated two issues of its journal, *Collection Forum*, to this important topic, and has made both issues of the journal available to the general public at no charge by posting the complete texts at the SPNHC website. At an annual meeting, members of SPNHC felt so strongly about the need for a new publication on museum safety that the organization committed substantial funds for professional copyediting, layout, design, printing, and distribution of the new text.

Members of AIC and SPNHC, and a number of nationally known safety professionals spent the first few years discussing and organizing a body of topics that they felt were of primary importance to be included in a text for the museum community. These individuals then recruited specialist authors and peer reviewers for each chapter, resulting in a pool of authors that now numbers well over forty individuals. This effort brings together an extraordinarily talented group of safety professionals and museum professionals who

have sufficient contacts in both communities to describe health and safety procedures that are required while promoting solutions that will be effective in our unique workplace environments.

Edited by Michael McCann, PhD, CIH, well known for his book *Artist Beware*, the project is being directed by current AIC Board Director, Catharine Hawks, who has taken a lead in organizing regular conference calls, insuring internal review, peer review, and consistency for all 19 chapters. The approximately 400 page, soft cover text will incorporate a preface, an introduction by Monona Rossol, a series of short side bars, numerous appendices, a glossary of terms, and an index. The AIC H&S committee has agreed to provide an online list of resources, which they will update regularly, to accompany the text.

The book was conceived as three separate parts: Part One deals with the overarching issues of safety program planning and implementation; Part Two deals with specific hazards that may be encountered in work situations related to cultural property and the nature of the health issues posed by these hazards; and Part Three deals with the functions of museum staff (collections management, conservation, educational programming, exhibit production, research, and field work) and the mechanisms by which museum workers encounter hazards in each.

The focus of the book is to identify potential safety risks while informing the reader about regulations and obligations related to the hazards, about the basic science and the medical issues underlying the subject, and about practical solutions to dealing with the inevitable safety concerns that are part of everyday museum work. The chapters in Part One include basic guidance on health and safety programs, facility design and construction, fire safety, occupational medicine, health hazard control, environmental protection and management of hazardous materials, and international regulations pertaining to health and safety. A fundamental principle conveyed throughout this portion of the book is the recognition that responsible parties need to be aware of the potential for health and safety challenges, and need to have the

authority to do something about it if an issue is identified.

Part Two focuses on specific hazards in the museum environments and work with cultural property. Specific hazards include particulate, chemical, biological, physical, radiation, and laser hazards. Nearly every museum operation will encounter some of these hazards on a routine basis, either on site or during associated field operations. Field operations in particular can expose museum workers to physical hazards such as heat and cold, and biological hazards such as ticks, snakes, and poisonous plants, among others. Again, a fundamental element of these chapters is the focus on responsible parties being aware of the hazards and having the correct support to address and reduce risks.

Part Three deals with many familiar functions of museum staff including facilities management, collections management, conservation, educational programming, exhibit production and research, and ties the potential for various health and safety concerns and solutions together. The purpose of this section is to describe tasks common to museum professionals in order to help in evaluating risks related to specific tasks.

While there is ongoing work before the book is complete, the process is well underway. Production of the book has been pursued using a process regularly used by others in the field - namely finding experts on particular topics to prepare chapters that are peer reviewed and then edited by a core group of professionals with knowledge of the museum field and the topics addressed in the book. Chapters are currently being formatted for publication while other chapters are in revision and/or review. The committee conducts frequent conference calls through AIC in order to make sure that information between chapters is consistent, clear, well presented, and as comprehensive as possible. The committee plans to have the new book ready to go to press by the end of this calendar year. The working title for this text is *Health & Safety for Museum Professionals*.

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