

The 7th Safety and Cultural Heritage Summit: Springboard to Collaborative Benefits for Collection Care Professionals

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Image



By Keara Teeter, Anne Marigza & Anna Nielsen

Poor attention to health and safety not only places cultural heritage staff, volunteers, researchers, private contractors and members of the public at risk, but also threatens the preservation of collections. Publicizing and encouraging collaborative studies between collection care and occupational environmental health & safety professionals has been the focus of the Safety and Cultural Heritage Summits from 2016 to 2023. These meetings have been collaborative efforts between the Washington Conservation Guild (WCG), the Potomac Section of the American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA), the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Lunder Conservation Center (SAAM), the Smithsonian National Collection Program (NCP), and the Smithsonian Office of Safety, Health, and Environmental Management (OSHEM). The 2020 and 2021 Summits were global and virtual resulting in 550 attendees. The 2023 Summit was hybrid (in-person and virtual streaming) allowing for an ever-expanding reach around the world.

Over the course of seven years, themes that have emerged in the presentations describe relatable challenges many collecting institutions face as well as strategies the speakers and their institutions use to manage, mitigate, and solve them. These challenges have included working safely; hazard discovery, identification, and mitigation; hazard communication in collections care; designing and retrofitting storage and exhibit spaces; and budget consciousness.

The overarching theme has always been collaboration at the intersection of collections care and the safety of the people caring for, using, or experiencing collections.

The Summits have been a springboard to new developments and a forum for many projects in their early stages of research or application. Since their presentation at past Summits, several topics have been expanded further, featured at other conferences and webinars, and published in peer-reviewed journals. The Fall 2023 Summit was no exception. It was a single-day event that featured full-length presentations, lightning round presentations, posters, and museum gallery tours.

The full-length presentations (20 minutes each) encompassed the following:

“Case Study: Preservation of Historically Significant and Critical Retention Scientific Journals” Naval Research Laboratory presentation by John A. Engel, Certified Industrial Hygienist

“Mold Remediation During COVID – Two Emergencies Collide” Smithsonian Libraries and Archives presentation by Katie Wagner, Senior Book Conservator

“Cellulose Nitrate Film: Risks and New/Updated NFPA 40 Guidelines for Appropriate Methods for Handling and Storage” Smithsonian OSHEM presentation by Sara Montanez, Fire Protection Engineer

“The National Park Service New Risk Assessment Tool & Virtual Museum Fire Protection Training Series” NPS presentation by Joan Bacharach, Senior Curator, Museum Management Program

“Balancing Safety and Engagement in the Display of Michael Heizer's Collapse, 1967/2016” Glenstone Museum presentation by Austin Anderson, Assistant Conservator, and Michelle Clair, Senior Manager of Visitor Experience

“Safety Practices for Outdoor Sculptures at Smithsonian American Art Museum” SAAM presentation by Dorothy Cheng, Objects Conservator

“No! We Can’t Expect the Apes and Elephants to Use Fire Extinguishers! A Wildland Urban Interface Assessment of the National Zoological Park – Rock Creek Campus” Smithsonian OSHEM presentation by Elliot M. Paisner II, Intern

“Safeguarding India’s Heritage: Integrating Nano-Biopesticides and Traditional Methods for Sustainable Pest Control in Cultural Heritage Institutions” Aligarh Muslim University presentation by Fatma Faheem, Department of Museology

“Detecting Pesticide Residues in Books at the Walters Art Museum: A Cross-departmental Strategy” Walters Art Museum presentation by Conservation Scientist Annette S. Ortiz Miranda, Ph.D., and Kathleen Hardin, Director of Safety and Security

Lightning Round

Lightning round presentations and posters highlighted other important issues within a variety of topics. In-person attendees were able to view the posters as handouts inside their conference packets (these folders were provided to attendees when they checked in). Virtual attendees were able to live stream or watch recordings of the presentations, and posters were available for download from the Smithsonian External Learning’s Moodle platform.

In-person attendees also had access to guided tours onsite. The tour “Picturing America,” with docent Eileen Doughty, examined an array of artworks that offer varied pictures of the United States and its peoples. The “Conservation Tour: Modern and Contemporary Galleries,” with conservators Keara Teeter and Martin Kotler, explored the newly reopened galleries and provided insight into the behind-the-scenes conservation work that was done to prepare the reinstallation. Three self-guided audio tours were also available to guests: (1) Collection Highlights, (2) Historic Building Tour, and (3) American Voices and Visions.

Lightening Round presentations included:

“Collections-Based Hazards Flipbook: An Update” presentation by Amy Zavec, PRICE and Professional Development Contractor

“Providing Reliable Resources on Emergency Planning to Heritage Institutions: The AIC Emergency Committee Wiki and Zotero Library” presentation by Melissa Miller, NCP Collections Emergency Program Specialist

“Hazards of the Job: How the Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum Plans to Mitigate Hazardous Materials in their Collection” ONHM presentation by Haley Higingbotham, Assistant Archivist, and Devon Valera, Curator and Collections Manager

Posters

“[Promoting Exhibit Access and Safety \(PEAS\): A Collaborative Approach to Collections Care - 2023 Update](#)” poster by Jeff Hirsch, Cali Martin, Melissa Miller, and Sam Snell

“[Arsenic in the Stacks: The University of Chicago Library’s Preliminary Response](#)” poster by Ann Lindsey, Patti Gibbons, Melina Avery, and Jenny Kim

[“From Poison Books to “Bibliotoxicology” Highlighting Hazards in Paper-Based Library Collections”](#) poster by Rosie Grayburn and Melissa Tedone

The 7th Safety and Cultural Heritage Summit hosted 85 in-person attendees and 113 virtual attendees. Overall, people were thrilled that registration was offered in a hybrid format, since past conferences were in-person only (2016–2019) or virtual only (2020–2021). People onsite at the Museum affirmed that they were happy to see people face-to-face again; their post-conference evaluation surveys revealed that 59% were first-time Summit participants (41% had attended another Summit between 2016–2021). Evaluations from virtual attendees revealed that 55% were first-time Summit participants (45% had attended an earlier Summit). When asked if they would plan to attend future Summits, based on their experience in 2023, 96% of in-person attendees and 98% of virtual attendees responded “yes”.

Video recordings of previous Summit content are available online through the Smithsonian National Collections Program (NCP) website and on YouTube. Content from the 7th Safety and Cultural Heritage Summit will be released through the NCP website in Fall 2024.

10/29/20: 2020 Safety and Cultural Heritage Summit (5th Annual). [Video]. NCP.
<https://video.ibm.com/recorded/128574904>

10/30/20: Safety and Cultural Heritage Summit (5th Annual). [Video]. NCP.
<https://video.ibm.com/recorded/128574907>

10/19/21: Safety and Cultural Heritage Summit (6th Annual). [Video]. NCP.
<https://video.ibm.com/recorded/131149292>

10/20/21: Safety and Cultural Heritage Summit (6th Annual). [Video]. NCP.
<https://video.ibm.com/recorded/131149832>

04/06/23: WCG & Potomac Section of AIHA joint meeting at SAAM | “The Safety and Cultural Heritage Summit: A Conversation on Its Impact and Future”. [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/_A0VR83Lg-A?si=E9E0tOW1xNxsULr

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Author bios

Keara Teeter served on the 2023 Summit Committee under two capacities, as Vice President of the Washington Conservation Guild and as SAAM’s Meisel Conservator of Modern American Paintings. Keara holds a M.S. from the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation, and she is active in several member organizations including the Society of Winterthur Fellows, AIC, IIC, and INCCA.

Anne Marigza is a conservator at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC and a Professional Member of the American Institute for Conservation. Anne is a member of the Museum and Cultural Heritage Industry Working Group, a collaborative effort between AIC and the American Industrial Hygiene Association to provide health and safety information to the collections care profession.

Anna Nielsen is Program Coordinator at the Lunder Conservation Center, Smithsonian American Art Museum. She served on the 2023 Summit Committee, is a member of the AIC, and volunteers with the AIC Outreach Subcommittee. Anna uses her museum education background and outreach, and her B.A. in art history, to promote interdisciplinary learning through the preservation of our cultural heritage.

Read the article and see all the images in the April-May 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 101, p. 52-57