



Emergency Art Recovery After Hurricane Katrina

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast region of Mississippi and Louisiana with overwhelming force. As a national resource for the conservation of art, fine furniture and family heirlooms, and a DKI partner, The Chicago Conservation Center dispatched a fully developed Disaster Response and Transportation Team to New Orleans on September 14. The team was privileged to play a role in the landmark recovery effort to save the heritage of this culturally significant region.



As the team made its way to New Orleans, Heather Becker, CEO, received a call from an insurance company whose clients include The New Orleans Museum of Art, as well as many of the city's most prominent local collectors. Immediately following the hurricane, the insurer secured the museum with armed guards and a generator to keep the art safe from looters and to control the climate to prevent humidity damage. Recognizing that the private collections they insured were also in danger of theft and further damage, the insurance company decided to recover and transport the art and antiques of these policyholders to the museum for temporary safekeeping. In addition to assisting in this endeavor, The CCC was charged with transporting a portion of these pieces to Chicago for conservation treatment. Due to the extreme nature of the circumstances, the management of even the most basic logistics of the transportation effort required a comprehensive strategy.

One of the most important factors in the successful recovery of art, antiques and fine furniture is a timely response. Rapid changes in temperature and humidity, as well as direct contact with water and mold growth, can have an extremely destructive impact on art and furniture. The sooner the works can be removed from the area of damage, triaged and stabilized, the better the prognosis for preservation. The first hurdle to overcome in responding to a disaster is gaining access to the property. Because the situation in New Orleans was so extreme, this required the services of special escorts who walked The Center's team through the area's various security checkpoints which otherwise kept hundreds of cars waiting in line for hours at a time. The team was also equipped with chainsaws and other tools required to clear paths through the many fallen trees and mounds of scattered debris blocking roadways.

Once identified, the damaged furniture and art were photographed in situ and then moved to a stable area outside of the immediate damage zone to be inventoried and packed for transport. Most of this work took place in neighborhoods which had been evacuated, but the crew was surprised by several homeowners who saw their trucks and requested that their art be included in several transports back to Chicago. Many people had lost so much that the family heirlooms and personal collections they had built over the years had become even more important for them to save.

Though The Chicago Conservation Center is still transporting hurricane damaged work from the Southern region to Chicago for treatment, in the first two months following the disaster the Disaster Response and Transportation teams safeguarded and transported over 2500 works to Chicago from private collections, corporations, museums, universities and dealers. The works, ranging from rare, irreplaceable art to purely sentimental items, were carefully packed and transported in secure, alarmed, air-ride and climate-controlled trucks. Upon arrival at The Center, the items were carefully unloaded, individually documented and triaged by a staff of specialized conservators. The sheer volume of items required a thirty-member staff working almost around the clock to stabilize the property before further damage could occur. The system used had been well-tested by the conservation staff – in fact, just a year before a similar large-scale triage had been undertaken when over 4000 works from LaSalle Bank's world-renowned photography collection had been damaged in a December 2004 fire.

The Center's first task was to separate each work of art from its frame, backing or mounting, where necessary, and then slowly reintroduce it to a stable environment. Climate consistency is critical because rapid fluctuations in temperature and humidity can cause items to expand and contract, destabilizing support structures. Maintaining mid-range humidity levels can prevent mold growth and deter insect infestation, while cooler temperatures can minimize natural processes of aging and deterioration. In order to stabilize the property it was slowly allowed to acclimate to a safe humidity level of approximately 40% and a temperature of 68 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Once stabilized, the triage team began to clean and carefully vacuum the mold and other debris from each item, providing structural supports when necessary. A wide variety of mold was discovered, including black mold, or *Stachybotrys*. Debris included the usual branches, leaves and feathers as well as unexpected and sobering bits including children's puzzle pieces and toy fragments.

As the triage phase was completed, assessment of condition began. The conservation staff undertook a thorough examination and testing process that provided the basis for treatment plans developed for each individual item. These were submitted to the clients for review and approval before work began. Thus far The Center has experienced a successful recovery rate of approximately 90% for the items examined, which is a direct result of a focused team effort to provide a timely response, proper documentation, safe transport, immediate triage and patient and meticulous conservation attention.

This conservation work will continue for the next year or so, and will be treated alongside individual items that regularly come in through claims from around the country. Given the unfortunate prospect of another active hurricane season in 2006, The Center is prepared to deal with a series of large-scale disasters should the need arise. Their Disaster Response and Transportation Departments are available 24/7 and can provide safe and timely recovery of art, fine furniture and family heirlooms in company-owned air-ride and climate controlled trucks.

In the meantime, The Chicago Conservation Center looks forward to returning all of the work treated as a result of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma to its rightful place in the Southern region. Though the devastating effects of this disaster will be felt for years to come, it was been the staff's honor to play a small role in salvaging property that has cultural and often extreme sentimental value to its victims.