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Conservationists revive storm-damaged art

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CHICAGO - Helen Conklin whisks a cotton swab delicately across a 19th century painting of silvery fish set in deep earth tones. She's looking for, of all things, mud on the canvas - and sure enough, there it is. She peers at another painting through a microscope, focusing on a cardinal's rich crimson robes that have faded to a sickly pink. That's the mark of floodwaters.

These works and many others - paintings and frames crusted with mold and fungus, bits of debris, even a few feathers - are here to be repaired and revived by art conservationists participating in their own version of hurricane recovery.

They're part of The Chicago Conservation Center, a team of experts working in a sprawling seventh-floor studio more than 800 miles from New Orleans and the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina. They have much to do: A giant multicolored abstract is splattered with grime, an autumn landscape is flaking, canvases are sagging.

In an epic disaster where there were many harrowing chronicles of life and death, these treasures tell a different tale of survival.

"Art is a narrative and tells a lot of personal stories," says Heather Becker, CEO of the center. "If we don't try to save the history of our culture, of our communities, we lose that forever."

The conservation work in Chicago is among many public and private efforts to salvage tens of millions of dollars' worth of cultural gems damaged in hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works, based in Washington, D.C., is sending conservators to the storm-ravaged Gulf Coast to help the Federal Emergency Management Agency and cultural associations determine how to best repair waterlogged historic documents, sodden furniture and artwork. It also will help private citizens with damaged collections and heirlooms.

Even before the floodwaters buried New Orleans, efforts were under way to preserve art treasures. Workers at the New Orleans Museum of Art secured sculptures and moved some paintings before the storm, then kept vigil inside in the chaotic days when looters rampaged through the streets.

The museum's insurer, AXA Art Insurance Corp., dispatched private security guards to protect the building as well as clients who had galleries or private collections in the French Quarter or other areas.

The museum, which has 40,000 pieces in a collection estimated to be worth about \$250 million, escaped relatively unscathed. A giant sculpture in the garden needs repairs. And three other objects inside had water damage. The building is now haven to nearly 1,000 works that private collectors, galleries and other museums are storing there temporarily.

"If there are angels in the heavens above, the museum's angels were archangels," says Jacqueline Sullivan, the museum's deputy director. "The storage was 12 feet underground. I can't imagine why it did not flood." But others weren't as lucky.

AXA estimates that Katrina-related losses to its private clients - including collectors, corporations and galleries - could be as high as \$30 million, according to Christiane Fischer, the corporation's chief executive officer.

In recent weeks, hundreds of damaged pieces - including paintings by well-known artists such as Helen Frankenthaler, William Merritt Chase and Alfred Bierstadt - have arrived at The Chicago Conservation Center in climate-controlled trucks.

They were collected by intrepid staffers who secured the art in what they call "rescue and recovery missions."

Donning impermeable Tyvek suits with hoods, gloves, boots and respirators and guided by flashlights, the workers often made their way through dark, flood-scarred homes in New Orleans.

"It's like an oven," says Walter Wilson, the center's director of disaster response. "You're doing an excruciatingly difficult job when it's 100 degrees."

Heat wasn't the only obstacle. A few times, Wilson pulled out a chainsaw to cut branches from fallen trees so he could get into houses.

Once inside, the work could be slow-going. It took an entire afternoon for a crew of five to pack a 21-foot wide abstract expressionist piece that weighed about 250 pounds.

"We take our time in the best conditions and double that in the worst conditions," Wilson explains.

The teams were escorted by the same private armed security guards hired by AXA - many of them former New York police officers - but didn't run into any trouble.

Still, April Hann, vice president of operations for the Chicago center, remembers a police officer guarding the levees telling her crew: "You're either brave or crazy to be down there." But, she adds, "he did wish us well."

The damaged objects delivered to Chicago include paintings, mostly by 19th and 20th century American artists, French, German and Italian works, Russian icons, drawings, photographs, furniture, textiles and wood panels.

Every recovered piece is inventoried and photographed, and a report with proposed treatment is prepared for the owner.

Wind, water and humidity can do severe - sometimes irreparable - harm to art.

Floods can cause paintings to crack, flake or change color; the canvas can shrink or buckle, distorting the image. Humidity can cause shrinking, too. The varnish on a painting can become gray and cracked. If the paint layer itself is saturated, the colors can turn milky.

Luckily, Becker says, about 90 percent of the Katrina-damaged works so far are salvageable. (She expects art caught up in Hurricane Rita to arrive soon.)

In repairing these works, conservators use reversible techniques so they can be replaced if more advanced methods come along in 50 or 100 years and they never do more than is absolutely necessary, Becker says.

"You have constant respect for what the artist intended to create," she says. "You don't want to recreate anything."

Repairs can cost from hundreds to thousands of dollars and take a month - or a year. "Everyone here has incredible patience," Becker notes.

Damaged drawings may be treated in specially filtered water baths that open up the fibers of the paper and allow grime to flow away. Tears or rips can be repaired with Japanese tissue paper and methyl cellulose used as a binder. Injectable adhesives are sometimes used to reset flaking paint.

The work takes extraordinary hand-eye coordination and a knowledge of chemistry. "Conservation is a meeting of art and science," Becker says.

Conklin has mastered both worlds in 14 years as a painting conservator.

Conservators focus on the art, she says, but sometimes the reality of what brought these damaged objects here intrudes. When she recently picked up a painting and a jigsaw puzzle piece fell out, it reminded her of children and the enormous scope of the Katrina disaster.

"From time to time I do get this pang," she says. "You try to be logical. ... Sometimes I cannot completely separate myself from what happened."

She's now working to revive a chipped, faded landscape - a project that will take months before it returns home.

Saving a painting "is wonderful," she says. "It can have this magic, this texture. ... It can have this wonderful directness, as if you're looking at it in the artist's studio. It's just a fantastic experience."

That's the ultimate goal - to revive a work so it is pristine, or nearly so, Becker says.

"We can't make miracles," she says. "But sometimes we feel like we are."