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Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute Fact Sheet

The Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute's mission is to become the center for specialized technical collection research and conservation for all Smithsonian museums and collections. To fulfill this mission, MCI staff combine their knowledge of materials and the history of technology with state-of-the-art instrumentation and scientific techniques to provide technical research studies and interpretation of art, as well as anthropological, and historical objects.

MCI conducts in-depth studies of artistic, anthropological, and historic objects using state-of-the-art analytical techniques to elucidate their provenance, composition, and cultural context, and to improve the Smithsonian's conservation and collections storage capabilities.

In addition to aiding in conservation of an object, these studies may provide authentication and help determine its level of technological sophistication. Thus the studies assist art historians and conservators as they place objects within a culture and a time period, look for new cultural influences within societies, and compare cultural and technological change across different periods and geographic areas. With this information, art historians, historians, and archaeologists document cultural interactions and the spread of ideas.

MCI also provides specialized knowledge to assist our natural history collections in assessing current storage practices and possible new solutions, and in assessing and remediation of pesticide contamination, among other projects.

MCI is the only Smithsonian resource for technical studies and analyses for the majority of Smithsonian collections. Technical studies require the latest instrumentation, analytical expertise, art historical knowledge, and interpretive abilities. MCI has unique capabilities in most of these areas, as is evidenced by requests for consultation not only from within SI, but from outside organizations, including the White House, U.S. House of Representatives, Defense

Intelligence Agency, Secret Service, World Monuments Fund and other federal, museum, and academic organizations.

History

In 1963, MCI was established by the Smithsonian Board of Regents to respond to the growing need for a scientific laboratory to support conservation of collections in the whole Smithsonian. A newly graduated conservator, a chemist, and a secretary with a background in the arts comprised the first staff of what was known then as the Conservation Research Laboratory.

The name of the laboratory was changed to the Conservation Analytical Laboratory in 1965, to better reflect the needs of its constituents. With its move to the Museum Support Center in Suitland, Md., in 1983, the laboratory accepted a wider range of responsibilities, including a congressionally mandated national conservation training program and expanded scientific research program in conservation. In 1998, the Board of Regents approved another name change—from CAL to Smithsonian Center for Materials Research and Education—in recognition of the laboratory's mission to serve national and international museum communities, as well as the Smithsonian, and to provide professional training and education programs. The latest change, to Museum Conservation Institute, produces an easier-to-say name and abbreviation (MCI), reaffirms the central role of the unit to provide highly technical conservation science to support the Smithsonian museums and collections.

Budget

MCI has an annual federal budget of \$3.0 million.

Staff

The staff of 18 includes specialists in the conservation of paintings, furniture, textiles, and objects; as well as in organic and inorganic chemistry; biology; metallurgy; engineering, microscopy, information technology, and administration.

Facilities

MCI laboratories, located in the Museum Support Center in Suitland, Md., are equipped with advanced analytical instrumentation including: inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry, Fourier transform infrared spectrometry, Fourier transform Raman spectrometry, gas chromatography, gas chromatography-mass spectrometry, optical microscopy, scanning electron microscopy with energy dispersive spectroscopy, xeroradiography,

micro-X-ray diffraction, X-ray fluorescence, X-ray radiography, ultraviolet-visible light spectrophotometry, and 3D color scanning of objects.

Publications

MCI staff contributes many articles to the professional literature and hosts a monthly series of lectures entitled “Topics in Museum Conservation.”

For further information please check MCI’s Web page: www.si.edu/mci