RESCUING WATER DAMAGED TEXTILES DURING L.A.'S URBAN RIOTS

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ABSTRACT - During the April 1992 urban riots in Los Angeles, a number of costumes and textiles in the study collection at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art were damaged in an off-site storage area. Water damage in the storage area resulted in the need for emergency treatment on a number of artifacts. This paper details the course of action and the rescue effort. It also offers advice for those developing disaster preparedness plans.

1. INTRODUCTION

April 29 to May 2, 1992 was a period of urban unrest in Los Angeles. At that time a portion of the costume and textile study collection belonging to Los Angeles Museum of Art was subjected to water damage. The damage occurred in an off-site storage area, access to which was not immediately accessible due to the concern for staff safety. This presentation will describe the course of action and the rescue effort. It also offers some advice to those working with off-site storage areas and to those developing disaster preparedness plans.

The motivation for this paper is the author's strong belief that, at a time when so many adversities imperil museums, the safety and stability of the museum's collections and cultural heritage require extra attention. It is very important to establish an open communication about past experience as well as existing dangers to avoid repeating previous mistakes and to be better prepared for future disasters.

2. OFF-SITE STORAGE FOR THE COSTUME AND TEXTILES STUDY COLLECTION

Even with the best of planning, museums can out grow their storage. Planning for growth requires a museum to estimate how many artifacts will be acquired over a specified period of time. There is a constant need to plan ahead for the day when storage needs will exceed the space available. To accommodate these needs, museums have several choices: they can limit acquisitions, convert other areas into storage, the museum can expand by building on the present site or storage space can be acquired off-site.

Currently, a portion of LACMA's costume and textile study collection is housed off-site in a building previously used for other purposes. The building was selected based upon the consideration of several criteria: location, security, environmental control, accessibility for loading, and cost. A number of museum departments working together, including conservation, developed guidelines for the safe storage of artifacts off-site. They include the following:

1. Both Curators and Conservators must approve in writing what can be moved to off-site storage. Conservation, art handlers and the registrar advise on the method of storage at the site.
2. The storage team is responsible for moving objects and for keeping the location changes current.
3. All art works going to off-site storage should be crated before delivery. In some instances it may be necessary to deliver the art works to the storage area and to construct the crates there.
4. Crates should always be labelled with stickers, either "Full" or "Empty". All full crates must be labelled with the artist, title and material, along with a photograph of the object, on the outside.

5. Off-site, the areas designated for art storage must be cleaned once a week, have good lighting, and all aisles must remain clear. There should be a ladder available along with other useful tools, such as tape measures, flashlight, etc.
6. Temperature and humidity are to be continuously monitored by a recording hygrothermograph, new charts being installed at appropriate intervals. Any unusual change in temperature or humidity is to be addressed promptly.

3. HOW THE STUDY COLLECTION BECAME WATER DAMAGED

3.1 RODNEY KING CASE AND RESULTING RIOTS

Mr. Rodney King was a motorist who was stopped by the police. During the time that he was stopped his civil rights were violated. A portion of this incident was caught on video tape. After the tape was made public several police officers were arrested and put on trial.

On Wednesday afternoon, April 29, 1992 a verdict of "not guilty" was announced. Angry crowds began looting and fires were started immediately. The next day, Thursday, April 30, the civil unrest increased. Several parts of the city were on fire. LACMA closed to the public in the early afternoon. Staff also went home early. A curfew went into effect at sundown.

3.2 DAMAGE AT THE STORAGE FACILITY

The museum's off-site storage is located in an old style shopping center with rows of one story shops. At one end of the shopping center is a building, formerly a department store. The museum rented the entire basement for off-site storage. The basement does not have overhead water sprinklers for fire suppression, but the floor above it does. On the evening of April 30, the buildings adjacent to the off-site storage were set on fire. Film footage could be seen on TV around 9:30 pm. About that time, the blaze triggered sprinklers on the floor above the basement storage. Personnel could not turn off the sprinklers immediately because the fire had melted all the keys to the shut-off valve room. The next day, fire personnel had to be diverted from other duties to break down the door to this room. The delay was unavoidable because, owing to looting and the possibility of arson on the floors above. The storage area staff had to wait until the National Guard secured the area.

Beginning on the day following the riots (Friday, May 1), LACMA was closed to the public for the next four days. All but essential staff stayed home. In the morning, the sprinklers were turned off on the floor above the off-site storage area. When the National Guard was in position and the area was determined to be safe, a small number of staff, including one person from each of the following departments: conservation, costumes and textiles, and art preparations, went to the off-site storage area to photograph and assess damage. They were permitted to spend only a limited amount of time there.

On Saturday, May 2, a small number of staff went to the storage site to bring back the most seriously damaged artifacts in the Costume and Textiles Study Collection. The visit was kept to two hours because the museum's security did not want to draw any attention to the storage site. Inside it was found that the floors were covered with two to six inches of water (Figure 1) that contained dirt, broken glass, ceiling tiles and pieces of cardboard. Though the crates had been stored up on boards, the water level had risen higher. Also some crates had water collecting on the top. As many crates as possible were quickly raised up further to begin the drying out process. Two small truckloads returned to the museum carrying tapestries and some costumes that were clearly wet.

4. A COURSE OF ACTION

No two emergencies are alike, but all require clear thinking, a calm approach and common sense. The procedures developed to handle this emergency could be divided into two steps: first

examination, then treatment. During the examination phase, three characteristics were quickly assessed:

1. Degree of water damage.
2. Sensitivity of textile, such as material weakness.
3. Previous treatments: conservation, restoration and other procedures.

After examination, all of the textiles were divided into three categories: wet, damp and dry.

1. Wet textiles were treated right away. Several were washed, using Orvus detergent and water when appropriate.
2. The damp textiles were divided into three categories:
   a) tapestries, which were unrolled onto a large atrium floor to air dry.
   b) costumes which had to be padded with nylon tulle to dry flat.
   c) costumes which had to be hung on the hangers to dry.

Some damp costumes and textiles received immediate attention but others had to wait until personnel were available.

5. EXAMPLES OF TREATMENTS

5.1 TAPESTRIES

Before the riots, tapestries in the off-site storage had been rolled and covered with muslin and wrapped in a layer of plastic. They were placed on the custom built storage racks that included a horizontally suspended steel pole placed through the cardboard tube. The plastic was taped tightly around the ends, where it met the steel pole. It was most fortunate that the plastic had been well secured.

To facilitate the thorough examination of the tapestries after the sprinklers were shut off, and to remove them from the humid environment of the off-site storage area, all of the tapestries were brought to museum where a work area was established in a large open atrium. In an every-day situation, if one plans to work with tapestries on the floor, one would first cover the floor with sheets or barrier paper. It was anticipated that there would be little time to cover such a very large area of the floor in this way. However, because of the fact that this was an emergency situation, cleaning personnel had been alerted to thoroughly wash the floor.

After the arrival of the tapestries, the outer plastic covers were removed and the tapestries were divided into two categories: damp and dry. Fortunately, most fell into the dry category. The damp tapestries were unrolled, face up onto floor in the atrium (Figure 2) and selective photography of damp areas was completed. The tapestries were allowed to air dry. After a final examination confirmed that drying was complete, the tapestries were re-rolled so that they could be moved to another gallery. Those tapestries that felt dry to the touch, seemed to be in no direct danger. There was some uncertainty about how much dampness or high humidity might have affected these seemingly dry textiles. For the moment, though, since there was so much to do, these tapestries were assigned a lower priority. The outer coverings of muslin were opened and the ends of the rolling tubes were propped up on blocks. Two weeks later, all of the tapestries were dry and showed no evidence of damage. They were covered with new plastic covers and returned to the off-site storage.

6.2 COSTUMES

Before the riots, many costumes in the study collection were stored off-site in waterproof, closed wooden crates. In preparation for storage, each costume was padded with acid-free tissue and placed in a muslin garment bag, suspended in a Fome-core box. Each box was custom made

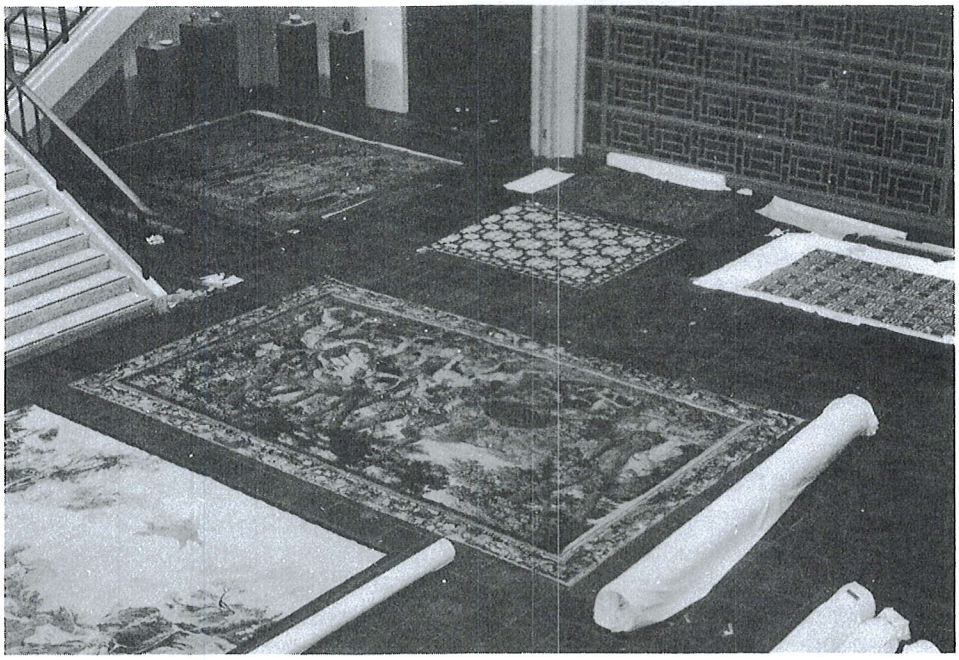

Figure 2. Damp tapestries were unrolled onto the Museum's atrium floor to dry.

Figure 3. Damp costumes were spread out on tables in the textile conservation laboratory, padded with nylon tulle and air dried with the aid of fans.

in the museum to fit snugly in the crate. Unfortunately, at the time of the riots, some costumes were in cardboard boxes awaiting placement in wooden crates. These were the textiles that suffered the most damage. Those costumes that we stored in tightly sealed wooden crates sustained no damage.

Those costumes in need of urgent attention arrived first. Eight costumes were found in a collapsed cardboard storage box on the wet floor of the off-site storage. Water had leaked from the ceiling onto the box. The box had split wide open creating an urgent situation. The costumes were brought to the museum and the goal was to avoid permanent staining and tide lines. The wet costumes were spread out in the textile conservation laboratory, quickly examined with brief written reports, and photographed. The wet costumes that showed no evidence of dye bleeding and appeared to have stable fibers and trims were washed in Orvus detergent and water. All of the costumes were padded out with nylon tulle to facilitate drying and fans were used to speed the process.

Overall, the costumes dried successfully, except for three, one with water sensitive sequins that had turned to gelatin on one costume and another that had a fugitive blue dye bleed into the pink silk of the dress and onto the neighboring costume. Neither costume was washed. This work, along with the tapestries was completed in one day and, to say the least, was stressful and exhausting.

The next day, 25 American designer suits from the 1930's and 1940's and 4 early Californian (19th C) dresses were brought to the museum. After examination, all were found to be slightly damp and they were hung on hangers on portable racks in the atrium to dry. The four 19th C. costumes were suitable for wet cleaning and this was done over a period of two hours using Orvus detergent and water. Photographic documentation and conservation treatment files were completed.

Finally, after examining of the crated costumes and textiles, three wooden crates of costumes were brought to the museum for examination. Apparently one of the crates had not been closed tightly and water had seeped in. The Fome-core boxes inside of this crate were soaked with standing water on some of the lids. Fortunately, only the boxes were very wet, but the objects, stored in muslin bags, were only damp. All of the costumes were laid out in the costume and textile exhibition galleries and in textile and paper conservation laboratories to air dry (Figure 3). As one side of a costume dried it was then turned over to dry the other side. Similar to the very wet costumes, the damp ones were stuffed with nylon tulle and air dried overnight. Because the crates were examined within a few days of the leak, no mold growth was found and there was no permanent damage to any of the pieces.

7. HOURS WORKED

The rescue and clean-up effort required 454 staff and volunteer hours, both at the off-site storage and at the museum. During the first days of the rescue effort, the team was comprised of: the collections manager and her assistant, two textile conservators, two objects conservators, three curators, three curatorial assistants, one student volunteer intern, and four guests volunteers. The later clean-up was done by two textile conservators, student volunteer intern and the two collection managers over a period of two months.

8. CONCLUSION

If one understands order as a necessary condition for making a structure function, we, as human beings, strive for harmony. We become insecure and confused when we have to face disorder and chaos. During the tumultuous events of the L.A. riots, all of us watched the television reports with anxiety and disbelief. We worked hard to stay calm, to communicate effectively and to make wise decisions. Team work was critical and it was team work which made it possible to save the

artifacts.

In today's changing world all of us face political and ecological instabilities. For those of us who are devoted to protecting our cultural patrimony, it is painful to witness disasters that result from these volatile times. The earthquake in San Francisco, 1990; the ongoing war in former Yugoslavia, 1991-?; the urban riots in Los Angeles, 1992; the hurricane in Honolulu, 1992; the terrorist action in Florence, 1993; what they all have in common is that cultural heritage was affected and suffered damage. War, urban unrest and terrorist action involve the deliberate destruction of culture and people. This reflection upon recent turmoil shows us that the late 20th century has many characteristics of other confusing and dangerous times in the history, the times when so many things break down in order to establish new period of peace.

Based on these experiences, the following is recommended:

1. Write and practice a disaster plan. The most critical aspect is the establishing of the chain of command; defining the critical personnel and their duties.
2. Follow established guidelines for museum art storage.
3. Carefully crate everything that goes to the off-site storage and keep the crates tightly closed.
4. Raise all crates off the floor.
5. Install water sensors connected to the alarm system.
6. Drape the tops of the crates with heavy plastic.

In case of disaster:

1. Do not panic, calm down and think before acting.
2. Find out who or what is in danger (people, art works, building or any combination).
3. Contact appropriate personnel for assistance.
4. Organize a course of action according to the particular situation. Protecting human life supersedes protecting works of art.
5. Document the situation and rescue effort using film, camera or tape recorder.
6. Prepare the recovery work area.

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