

Routine Conservation and Emergency Preparedness: Ethnographical Items

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Resumen

Hábitos de conservación y preparación para las situaciones de emergencia - Objetos etnográficos

La conservación preventiva desempeña un papel esencial en los archivos, bibliotecas y museos. Las colecciones conservadas en estos tres tipos de instituciones son objeto de medidas preventivas. Aunque exista un contexto general favorable, se debe prestar una atención especial a los objetos etnográficos, teniendo en cuenta que su conservación resulta especialmente delicada y difícil.

Existen recomendaciones comunes destinadas a ser aplicadas dentro de las instituciones, a fin de poder reaccionar ante situaciones de emergencia. No obstante, esas recomendaciones varían en función de los tipos de catástrofes (erupciones volcánicas, terremotos, etc.) y de las regiones y lugares de localización de las instituciones.

Al estar la ciudad de São Paulo situada en una zona geográfica con características climáticas específicas (humedad, emanaciones de gases, temperaturas elevadas, etc.), las colecciones etnográficas - que representan el 10% de los objetos de las colecciones museísticas - deben ser objeto de cuidados especiales.

Résumé

Habitude de conservation et préparation aux situations d'urgence : objets ethnographiques

La conservation préventive joue un rôle essentiel au sein des archives, bibliothèques et musées ; les collections que conservent ces institutions sont soumises à des mesures préventives. Malgré ce contexte propice, les objets ethnographiques doivent faire l'objet d'une attention particulière puisqu'ils sont délicats et difficiles à conserver.

Il existe des recommandations communes au sein des établissements pour répondre à une situation d'urgence, cependant elles varient en fonction du type de catastrophes (éruption volcanique, tremblement de terre, etc.) suivant la localisation et la région.

La ville de São Paulo est située dans une zone géographique aux caractéristiques climatiques propres (humidité, émanation de gaz, chaleur, etc.) ; pour cette raison les collections ethnographiques (10 %) du musée doivent faire l'objet de soins particuliers.

Routine Conservation

The conservation of heritage items kept by any institution is a major, routine task and should be systematic. It is technical in character, involving frequent, highly specialized care and a multidisciplinary approach. Greater attention is now being given to preventive conservation which is seen as a long-term responsibility.

Take the case of archives, libraries and museums: common problems and challenges can be found for the different institutions today, or even inside each one. For all of them, conservation has only recently been systematised, with principles and procedures, but distinct problems can also be identified and appropriate solutions must be found. Issues range from paper to magnetic tapes, from periodicals to rare books, from metal objects to ceramics.

Our option is therefore to focus on a particular type of item, i.e. ethnographical items which, with the immense variety of raw materials and crafts, are the most delicate and hardest to conserve, being organic traces, some older, others not, fragile, complex and syncretic compositions, fine and elaborate.

Emergency Preparedness

Preparedness and response to accidents, emergencies and disasters, the theme of this symposium, have recently developed to be part of systematic conservation. While people have been aware for a long time that disasters may occur, as is the case in life in general, it is only recently that attention has been given to the appropriate response to different threats and to possible forward planning for such exceptional circumstances, including the kind of measures to be taken before, during and after.

There are obviously common measures recommended in the different institutions, with emergency preparedness being studied, planned and adopted in response to the adverse circumstances. Depending on the region and site, the need may be to deal with an earthquake or tidal wave, or a sudden volcanic eruption; but all over the world there is the risk of fire. There is also, and, sadly increasingly so these days, the possibility of an unexpected and extended black-out or even war.

There are also key differences in the forward planning and organisation of an efficient response to different circumstances. What is an efficient emergency response for one situation may not be for others; in fact, a correct response to one emergency may turn out to be not only inappropriate but detrimental. An efficient response could be a source of conflict for neighbouring collections, for routine preventive conservation. Here, ethnographical items, either alone or with other collections, provide a striking example.

The MAE USP case

The Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (MAE) at the University of São Paulo (USP) is one of three major centres in Brazil and has more than fifty academics, professors, researchers and technicians expert in collecting, documenting, conserving and restoring, in museography, education and the circulation of information. It has Indian,

pre-Colombian, Afro-Brazilian, African, Classical Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern collections. The Museum has field and laboratory work in addition to curatorial practice, one specialized course in museology, plus undergraduate and graduate classes in archaeology and ethnology.

The Museum receives support from public and private research agencies and has refurbished its storage facilities and materials with appropriate sliding stands, special cases, natural and artificial lighting and partial air conditioning. Looking beyond systematic conservation and critical restoration, the Museum is currently implementing the second phase of a major project for training technicians and improving conditions for emergency preparedness; this has been financed by a private foundation.

Our Museum has thus combined established preventive conservation measures and emergency preparedness. With the 20,000 ethnographical artefacts (of a total of 150,000 pieces), the project has focused on certain specific problems, such as the warm, humid weather in São Paulo, violent summer storms, the hostile environment with earth movements and gas being released, inappropriate building materials, inadequate finishing work and the presence of less "demanding" archaeological items nearby.