

Life of Art Collections Improves with Better First Response

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GUAYNABO, Puerto Rico – Moisture is as much an enemy to art as it is to technology. Success or failure in treatment after water damage rests keenly on an immediate response, proper drying and environmental controls.

Documents, film, books, sculptures, paintings and other treasures embodying Puerto Rico’s cultural heritage were imperiled by last September’s hurricanes and flooding that followed. While dedicated staff members continue to work tirelessly to restore and conserve vital collections and archives at museums, libraries and universities, moisture damage and mold remain a threat as this hurricane season unfolds.

Ninety information- and culture-rich institutions in Puerto Rico are addressing water damage, according to a survey taken by the Archirdeivos de Puerto Rico, or ArchiRED. Of 112 respondents, eight museums, 16 public libraries, 45 academic libraries and 21 archives reported damage, according to the network of archivists. Elevated moisture levels resulting in mold was the top source of damage followed closely by leaks, seepage and flood. Fifty-five percent of those surveyed sustained direct damage to their collections.

To better protect cultural heritage from the damaging effects of natural disasters and other emergencies, FEMA and the Smithsonian Institution cosponsors a partnership of 42 national service organizations and federal agencies called the Heritage Emergency National Task Force. With the help of this task force, which collaborated with cultural stewards in Puerto Rico and the mainland, many of Puerto Rico’s collections were spared from more catastrophic damage.

Collections at San Juan’s Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico withstood a double threat from Hurricane María and a flash flood that inundated the museum more than a month later. After María passed, Executive Director Marta Mabel Pérez, paintings conservator Sol Elena Rivera, registrar Sandra Cintrón-Goitía and their coworkers rushed to the museum to find structural damage to its exterior, an inoperable



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generator and no air conditioning due to the power outage.

Inside exhibition spaces containing more than 1,200 works, whole sections of oil paintings were attacked by moisture.

“The artworks felt the water, they all felt the change.... We all saw the change immediately. That is the humidity that affects the collections,” Marta Mabel said in a YouTube video chronicling the museum’s plight.

Staff members quickly began to measure and stabilize the humidity and temperature of the exhibition and storage spaces by introducing air and drying agents. The artworks were monitored twice a day.

“When we had the generator working, we opened the vents. We had silica, lots of silica, piles of it everywhere,” Sol Elena said in the video “Emergency Relief Fund Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico.”

Because they had a working generator to keep the environment safe for artwork, the Museo de Arte later took on six collections from the Santa Catalina Palace, La Fortaleza; the Casa Roig Museum; the José M. Lázaro Library at the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras; the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón; the Museo de Arte de Caguas and the Fundación Luis Muñoz Marín.

“Here we are in a space prepared to serve as a temporary vault for other museums and their collections,” registrar Cintrón-Goitía said. “Their problems with facilities and climate conditions—they don’t allow them to take care of their own.” On Nov. 7, after power was restored, the museum’s staff members were sent home for a break. It was cut short after Marta Mabel received a late-night call with news of a flash flood impacting the Santurce area of San Juan.

“I told them water has gotten into the museum. We have to run. We couldn’t believe it.”

The first floor had flooded, destroying publications and pallets of books, wiping out an education department that had served the community for 17 years. Museum staff renewed their resolve and restarted their work. The Museo de Arte hosted a week-long training offered by the Heritage Emergency National Task Force and taught by the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative with funding from the Smithsonian Institution and the MKM Foundation. Cultural stewards learned how



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to respond efficiently and collaborate effectively when disasters affect multiple institutions.

The museum has since re-evaluated its emergency plan and made adjustments to become more resilient.

“By strengthening the ability of cultural institutions and arts organizations to create effective plans for their staff and collections, (the task force) can help them prepare for the next disaster,” said Lori Foley, administrator of the Heritage Emergency National Task Force.

An online video is available at www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/videos/167231 about emergency response training to museum professionals in Puerto Rico

For information on Puerto Rico’s recovery from Hurricane María, visit fema.gov/disaster/4339.

Disaster recovery assistance is available without regard to race, color, religion, nationality, sex, age, disability, English proficiency or economic status. If you or someone you know has been discriminated against, call FEMA toll-free at 800-621-FEMA (3362) 711/VRS - Video Relay Service). Multilingual operators are available. (Press 2 for Spanish). TTY call 800-462-7585.

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