

## Session Review from ARCS Travel Stipend Recipient, Dana Murray

**Session:** Taking Care: Collection Support Studio at the Henry Art Gallery

**This session during the 2023 ARCS Conference *Momentum!* featured three speakers, including:**

**Claire Kenny**, Associate Conservator of Paper & Photographs

**Ann Poulson**, PhD, former Curator of Collections

**Sage Sommer**, former Manager of Exhibitions and Registration

This session brought an inspiring and adventurous energy to the last morning of the conference as the panellist shared details of their project, [Taking Care: Collection Support Studio](#). As many registrars and collection specialists can relate, *Taking Care* evolved out of necessity, requiring the gallery staff to pivot, pivot, and then pivot again (does this sound familiar yet?). And yet, it was clear from their presentation that this team was determined to make this project a success. Mission accomplished.

Outlining the events that lead to the project, including the overflow of collections bleeding into auxiliary storage space, space that was originally designed to be an audio-visual gallery, NOT storage, the panel presented an innovative solution to a common issue. Not only were they able to deal with a logistical issue, but also provided an opportunity to exhibit artworks rarely on display while sharing the process with visitors.

To begin, what was intended to be a temporary storage solution ended up staying in place for over a decade, leading to issues with access and care. Concern for the conditions of this temporary storage area aside, one key issue that was identified leading up to this time was the inability to showcase some of the most recent acquisitions, primarily by BIPOC artists. Concerned for the artworks as well as inequity in terms of data and accessibility, the gallery received assistance from the [Collections Assessment for Preservation](#) (CAP) program via grant funding. As a result, the team were able to persuade leadership to make improvements to their storage area, including screens for 2-D artworks. At the time of the conference they were continuing to seek funding via a [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) (NEH) grant for additional safety features.

With the emergence of pandemic came several pivots, on top of limited resources with an ambitious exhibition schedule, few staff, and a moth infestation on another level of the facility. At the end of the day, the space was granted and the team was determined to make the most of it. The result was a salon style display method that included 103 artworks that were installed on 3 walls (for more details, see their [virtual exhibition key](#)). With the help of 10 staff members from collections, conservation and exhibitions, artworks were brought out from storage, processed in public view, and then returned. This allowed visitors to see the labour that went on behind the scenes, as well as appreciate the artwork itself. What was additionally impressive were the lengths to which the staff committed to providing this sneak peak experience, going so far as to

use the same lamps that would be used in the lab or storage to mimic lighting from back of house.

During the session, details were provided on how the team adapted to unique gallery hours, tracked progress, processed artworks, and updated of records. The panel also discussed the supporting video content that was produced for the program; including three previously produced videos with plans for another three. Unfortunately, due to time constraints the additional videos were not shared with the public, but those that have been provide multi-sensorial insights for visitors seeking to deepen that behind the scenes vibe that radiates from the entire program. Additionally, on the note of multi-sensorial additions, another effective feature includes a touch kit with tools and materials frequently used in collections care, and two small canvases upon which to test them.

Perhaps the most interesting component of this project, at least within the concept of care specifically, was the inclusion of collaboration with a community elder to explore concepts of care. I found this incredibly moving, and would have gladly spent the remainder of the session discussing how this relationship was formed and how their work unfolded, but perhaps that is a presentation for the next ARCS conference!

Towards the end of the session panellists shared details on how the collection is regularly used by students at the University of Washington, including those from museology and conservation programs. The collection offers opportunities for acquiring tangible skills in areas such as condition assessments, photography, filming, and curation, with students from the [MA in Museology](#) program recently having their ideas from a curation course assignment printed and available in the gallery library. Such opportunities are few and far between, and the team at the Henry Art Gallery are to be applauded for their commitment to the next generation of professionals!

Regrettably rushed at the end of the session, in a conference schedule packed with outstanding presentations and topics, the panellists were pleased to close the session with the news that they received the grant for the screens that they had been hoping for. This happy news received a round of applause, followed by an enthusiastic Q&A.

Leaving the conference to return home and reflect on the session, I recalled three highlights in particular:

- The touch kits that were used during this project were so simple yet incredibly effective. Gathering tools and materials used in collections care for visitors to interact with while watching the work unfold? Classic and I LOVE it. The only thing that detracted from this aspect of the project is that I would have liked to hear more details on the reception from visitors.
- As so many collection specialists can relate, the Henry Art Gallery staff have shared an innovative way to showcase lesser-known artworks while navigating the all too familiar building modification and construction project. With the additional content and

interactives offered to members of the public, as well as additional plans that were ultimately omitted, it is clear that there are countless opportunities available to us when engaging with the public. There is a desire to better understand what goes on behind the scenes, and the public are genuinely invested in how arts and culture are cared for. Let this be an inspiration to us all next time we find ourselves with limited space and an impending collections shuffle.

- As far as their work conducted with a community elder, I truly wish we could have learned more about this component. Panellists, expect my email!

**Resources:**

- [Taking Care: Collection Support Studio](#)
- [Taking Care Exhibition Key](#)
- [Collections Assessment for Preservation](#)
- [National Endowment for the Humanities](#)
- University of Washington, [MA in Museology](#)