Where to Go to Watch the Paint Dry

Seriously. “Open conservation,” or art-restoration labs set up to be viewed, and sometimes, interacted with, are increasingly a part of museums’ offerings.

By Lauren Sloss
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In the never-ending quest for engagement in a short attention-span world, museums around the world have long looked for ways to spice up visitor experiences. But as after-hours gatherings and dedicated Instagram experiences continue to take off, a time-honored practice has surprisingly gained traction, and become a destination-worthy draw: conservation, or art restoration, done in the public eye.

“Open conservation,” or art-restoration labs set up to be viewed, and sometimes, interacted with, have increasingly become a part of museums’ offerings. Promising transparency in practices, open conservation ideally engages museumgoers on a deeper level.

Higher profile conservation projects are gaining attention, from the live, multimedia-supported restoration of Rembrandt’s “The Night Watch” at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam to this year's new, open conservation lab at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It might be worth working into your next travel itinerary, whether you're a dedicated conservation nerd or a casual art appreciator, one of these four stateside spots to watch conservation in action.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

The Lunder Conservation Center at the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Lunder Conservation Center at the Smithsonian American Art Museum was one of the first to open a visible conservation center, just over 13 years ago.

“It’s not just the painting on the wall or the sculpture you can't touch,” explains Amber Kerr, the chief of conservation at the museum. “It’s an inlet into the complexity of the art world. We talk about x-rays, unique gadgets that look at art in a unique way. It’s not something you need a higher art knowledge to appreciate.”

Since then, their programming has grown to include conservation workshops, focusing on topics like the effects of climate change on cultural heritage, and tours and activities targeting families across five laboratories and studios.
“We’re getting this heightened awareness that these things are fragile and that they can disappear,” Ms. Kerr said. “People are seeing the responsibility of preserving cultural heritage. They want to know what goes into it.”

**CHICAGO**

**The Conservation Center**

Dedicated conservation buffs would do well to book a visit at The Conservation Center in Chicago, where 40 expert conservators work on everything from paintings and paper to furniture in a 35,000 square foot facility housed in a 19th century warehouse in Chicago's West Town.

“A lot of our conservators have been here for a very long time, and are incredibly passionate about what they do,” says Heather Becker, chief executive officer of The Conservation Center. “They’re able to share and express what it means to be in the field, and speak to the mission of saving and preserving cultural items that are precious to people.”

The Conservation Center welcomes groups large and small for free tours, and request that appointments be made in advance (a few days or a week's notice should suffice, Ms. Becker says); the subsequent tour will move through the Center's different departments, and will likely take your interests into account. Works change regularly, and can range from ancient masterpieces to family heirlooms (recent highlights included a focus on Chicago-based artists and a seventeenth century screen from Chinese Emperor Quianlong).

“Every time you come to visit the facility, you’ll see something completely different.”

**PHILADELPHIA**

**The Artifact Lab at the Penn Museum**

The Penn Museum, home to archeological and anthropological-centered collections from around the world, puts conservation efforts on display through The Artifact Lab. Opened in 2012, the glass-enclosed space allows visitors to view the conservators at work and, twice a day, converse with them about their projects.

“Our conservators interact with the public for half-hour periods twice each day, when we literally open a window between the lab and the visitor area,” explains Lynn Grant, head conservator at the museum. “We tend to try to make it more of a dialogue with the visitors than a lecture!”

This year, conservators will be focused on objects destined for the museum's soon-to-be renovated Egyptian galleries. Keep an eye out for funerary statues, architectural pieces, painted wooden coffins, and jewelry in The Artifact Lab, and follow along on the department's blog.
The Dallas Museum of Art

The Dallas Museum of Art’s conservation department allows visitors to view a paintings conservator at work, alongside a gallery exhibition detailing conservation research, which includes key findings from various conservation projects. The works, and the accompanying information, change frequently, making it a dynamic experience for visitors.

“It’s a little bit of forensic science, a little bit of chemistry,” said Fran Baas, interim chief conservator at the D.M.A. “We all love to investigate and discover things. Everybody likes CSI, right?”

Currently, visitors can enjoy an exhibition, a collaboration between the conservation and Arts of Africa departments and the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, centered around an African helmet mask — On display are C.T. scans that were taken of the mask, along with information detailing the surprising materials found beneath the mask’s surface.

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