

1994

President's Committee (1994): News Article 01

Jo Ann Lewis

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_70

Recommended Citation

Lewis, Jo Ann, "President's Committee (1994): News Article 01" (1994). *President's Committee (1994)*. Paper 5.
http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_70/5

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in President's Committee (1994) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.



Gallery Weathers The Storm

Director's Plans Would Keep The Elements From the Art

By Jo Ann Lewis
Special to The Washington Post

Years ago, in the late 1930s, architect John Russell Pope envisioned a stately National Gallery of Art, with big rooms and high ceilings. He chose a classical design with a noble dome. And so that paintings would be bathed in filtered sunshine along with artificial light, he chose to install huge skylights in the roof—by then the custom in great museums.

That fateful decision has since been praised by critics, and enjoyed by millions of visitors who have seen how a Titian changes when the sun passes behind a cloud. But nature's light soon brought nature's problems, too: snow and rain that creep through the gaps between the panes; wild temperature swings from frosty dawns to torrid noons.

Over the 54 years since Pope's building was opened, the incursion of nature and the aging process have worked a gradual havoc on that stately building—in addition to the leaking skylights, the heating and cooling systems began to creak, the humidifiers went bonkers. The staff dreamed up stopgap solutions. Then the solutions gradually went haywire.

Little by little—while the public was being wowed by blockbuster exhibitions—a lot of things began to go wrong.

Last year, a team of consultants was called in by National Gallery Director Earl "Rusty" Powell III to examine the place from the skylights down to the boilers, and it delivered a confidential report last spring. "The condition of the facilities and the organizational problems that prevail currently with the National Gallery of Art threaten the security of the collection," the consultants announced. Some of the world's greatest works of art were "at risk" of "serious damage."

This dramatic conclusion became the backbone of an investigative TV series this week on WJLA-Channel 7, which obtained a leaked copy of the report. "Gallery of Shame," as the three-day series was called in promos, led off with a harrowing saga of dripping skylights, clouds of steam and flooded

storerooms at the National Gallery. It told the story of a humidifier that went berserk and turned the normally clear varnish white on John Singleton Copley's masterpiece "Watson and the Shark."

The series also drew on the report to conclude that staff morale is low and organization at the gallery is poor, a conclusion amply buttressed by tearful employee testimony on camera. The series prompted a promise of hearings on gallery conditions by Rep. Ralph Regula (R-Ohio)—the likely new chair of the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the National's budget (which included \$59 million from the federal government this year).

One question went unexamined, however: What, if anything, is Director Powell doing about this mess?

Ingenuity in Action

Rusty Powell probably thought he'd seen his last earthquake when he left the Los Angeles County Museum two years ago, and came to Washington to fill the shoes of retiring J. Carter Brown. Then he saw "Gallery of Shame" and its implications of disaster.

The problems revealed by Channel 7 weren't news to him, Powell said. "We talked about them at my first board meeting" in the fall of 1992, he said. In fact, that's why the consultants, from the Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers (known, for some reason, as APPA), were called in. "I wanted to know the condition of our 'envelope,'" Powell explained. "It was key to our long-range planning. . . ."

"What needs to be said is that the gallery's record of maintaining and protecting its works of arts is exemplary," he said during an interview in his office this week. "And as far as I know, we've never had damage to a work of art." But he acknowledged that the Copley painting got steamed up last December and had to be treated by conservators. No lasting damage was done.

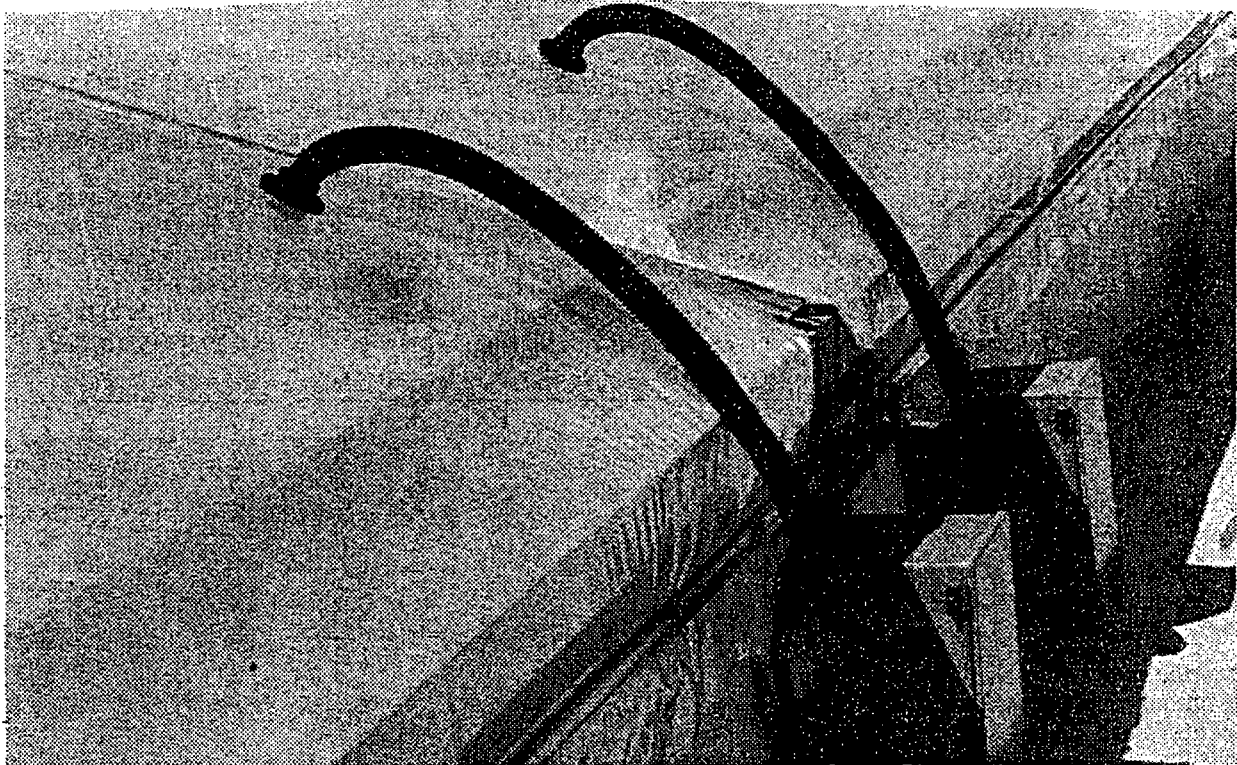
The incident "was like lightning striking a golf course on a clear day," he claims, but he allows that serious damage would have occurred had the problem not been found. But it *was* found, he said, because the museum staff has learned to deal with its capricious West Building and the newer, but also aging, East Building—in this case by patrolling periodically to check the temperature and humidity in each room. Other techniques the consultants found include:

- Manually slamming the thermostats from maximum heat to maximum cold as the building temperature fluctuates;
- Strategic placement of buckets and pans to catch drips;
- Covering the skylights with plastic.

As the consultants put it: "The buildings' mechanical systems are operated in a 'by-the-seat-of-the-pants' manner." In some cases, though—like the wrapping of the skylights—the jury-rigging has been pretty ingenious.

The plastic coverings are known at the gallery as "raincoats." And on the six-acre roof, the 40-by-100-foot sections of skylights are sealed against the weather by bubbles of silvery-gray plastic. One layer is taut over the glass. Another rises a foot or two over the glass, inflated by pumped-in warm air.

They were the brainstorm of National Gallery Administrator—then assistant administrator—Darrell Willson, a former police officer from Waukegan, Ill., who was hired by Brown in 1989 and was losing sleep over the leaks. Then: "My brother had a greenhouse in Indiana," Willson said, "and one day I realized that greenhouses were no longer



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Two layers of plastic, with a cushion of air pumped between, has temporarily stopped leaks at the National Gallery.

being built from glass but rather from inflated plastic bubbles." Willson called in a greenhouse manufacturer from South Carolina and asked whether the floating plastic bubble system might be adapted to cover the gallery's leaky acreage.

In the two years since the raincoats were installed—at a cost of only 20 cents a square foot—roof leakage has been cut by 90 percent, Willson says. The improvised repair is guaranteed for four years, but the occasional patch has already been required.

Long-Term Solutions

No museum director would argue that drip pans, plastic wrap and humidity patrols are the best way to run a museum of priceless art. But museums all over the world have been doing it as their aging plants, one by one, have undergone necessary—and hugely expensive—overhauls. The Freer Gallery of Art recently redid its entire roof, and the Corcoran Gallery is still using buckets as it awaits the millions of dollars required for similar repairs.

Now it is Powell's turn, and he said he had already begun to implement the long-term solutions even before he received the APPA report. Early next year, he said, a four-year, \$20 million skylight replacement project will begin on Pope's West Building. By 1996 roof repairs will require closing parts of the building, one quadrant at a time.

Also next year, the gallery will start installing a \$3 million state-of-the-art "buildings automation system," which will electronically monitor heat and humidity from a central point.

"We've been talking to Congress about these problems for three or four years at least," said Powell, who pointed to the money that has been budgeted for both projects. All the funds needed to automate the climate control systems have already been committed by Congress and the Department of Energy, he said. And \$4.5 million in initial funding for the skylight project is part of next year's budget, now awaiting congressional approval. Some gallery staff—and doubtless Powell too—see a possible silver lining in the embarrassing public airing of the APPA report: that the news of deteriorating gallery conditions will spur Congress to approve the

money quickly. Powell, however, waved off a suggestion that the report might have been leaked for just that purpose.

As to the other issues raised in the report—including insufficient minority hiring and appallingly low morale among blue-collar workers—Powell plopped his hand down on a three-inch ring binder on his desk. It was, he said, a plan to implement all of the proposals in the APPA report within a year. "I've accepted it as being realistic," he said of the plan.

Powell has already added three minorities to the gallery's senior staff, including a new chief and deputy chief of security. And these changes have begun to raise the spirits of the unhappiest employees—guards and maintenance workers—according to Ralph Wright, a guard who serves as president of Local 1831 of the American Federation of Government Employees.

"The guard force is on the road to recovery after a disastrous three years," said Wright. "Rusty's new appointments are wonderful, caring people, who are well informed on labor law, and have negotiated everything they've done with the union." Wright said that Powell consulted him before naming the new security chief—a sign, the union man said, of improving labor relations at the gallery.

Powell did not appear in the television series, refusing to face the camera without knowing what questions would be asked and what charges would be leveled. As a result, it looked to many viewers as if the gallery was being evasive.

Some people reacted to disclosure of the APPA report by calling for an inspector general to be assigned by Congress to monitor the gallery. Powell disagreed: "This place is so oversighted compared to other institutions that I hardly think we need more."

In the cloistered world of Washington art insiders, "Gallery of Shame" was well up the Richter scale; it isn't often that television turns its bright lights on the museum world. But Powell seems to have shrugged it off. "I can't say we don't have problems, but I think we've addressed them," he said.

Shortly thereafter boarded a plane for London to see an exhibition of James McNeill Whistler's paintings that will be coming to the National Gallery in May. Art museum directors, after all, must still deal with art.