

Notes from the Director

Last week, at the Associate's Spring Event, as I was listening to John Pedley's splendid talk on the achievements of Francis Kelsey, I was struck once again by the foresight and expansiveness of Professor Kelsey's educational vision. This nineteenth-century "man of many parts" was himself inspired by all aspects of classical antiquity and sought to pass that inspiration on to generations of Michigan students and citizens, not only through texts, most notably his edition of Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, but also by providing hands-on experience with ancient artifacts. Although the Museum only took on Kelsey's name years after his death, he was directly responsible, through insightful purchases and well-chosen excavations, for over 50 percent of the Museum's current holdings.

Today, as we prepare to install many of Kelsey's never-before-displayed acquisitions in the new Upjohn Exhibit Wing and carry on ambitious programs of field and collections research, we are building on and expanding Kelsey's vision with twenty-first-century tools and questions. Were Kelsey miraculously resurrected for the November 1 opening of the Upjohn Wing, he would see much that was familiar but also many surprises. I think he would be pleased.

Sharon Herbert
Director

Conserving Maria Barosso's Watercolors

When we first began planning for the Upjohn Wing, one treasure in our collection was discussed over and over again: the Barosso watercolors. These twenty-two watercolors are arguably one of the rarest and most beautiful "objects" in the Museum's collection. Commissioned by Francis Kelsey and painted by the highly regarded Italian artist, archaeologist, and archaeological illustrator Maria Barosso, the nearly life-size paintings depict the famous fresco cycle at the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii. They were painted between 1925 and 1927.

Because the watercolors are so large (up to 20 feet long), they've been exhibited only once since they arrived in Ann Arbor in the 1920s. Everyone agreed that this sad fact should be remedied in our new wing, but how? Not only are the paintings huge; they'd been rolled up for most of the past seventy years, and the thick, canvas-backed paper was warped. Some paintings were torn, others were dirty. Plus, watercolor pigments are notoriously light-sensitive, making long-term exhibition virtually impossible.

Assuming these obstacles could be overcome, how would we mount them? The Barosso watercolors are an unusual hybrid: oversize works of art on paper that is backed with canvas. Not quite paintings on canvas, they're also not quite works of art on paper. Traditional framing wasn't a good option. The cura-

tor for these paintings, Elaine Gazda, wanted visitors to have the experience Kelsey originally intended—of walking into a space that looked and felt like the room at the Villa in Pompeii.

We approached these various challenges from two directions: exhibit design and object conservation. Working with architects, engineers, and exhibit designers, we created a special room for the paintings. Located on the second floor of the Upjohn Wing, the room is sized specifically for the watercolors, with motion-activated lighting that can

be set at levels low enough to protect the watercolor pigments.

On the object conservation front, Claudia Chemello and I applied to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) for financial assistance, and in the spring of 2008 we received a Conservation Project Support Grant from IMLS, which is providing funds for conservation and mounting of the watercolors, along with an educational component that will explain the unique history of the paintings as well as their conservation.

How did we solve all the mounting and conservation issues for the watercolors? Thanks to our IMLS grant, we were able to send the watercolors to the Intermuseum Conservation Association in Cleveland, Ohio. There, conservators who specialize in paintings and works of art on paper are hard at work flattening, repairing, and mounting the watercolors. Wendy Partridge is the lead paintings conservator on the project, while Jamye Jamison is the paper specialist. Together, they've been able to merge the disciplines of paintings and paper conservation to develop an innovative treatment and mounting plan for the watercolors.

To help us protect the Barosso watercolors long-term, Dr. Paul Whitmore, of the Art Conservation Research Center at Carnegie Mellon University, tested the paintings for light sensitivity using a special micro-fading technique. His research revealed that the red colors are extremely light-sensitive. This work will assist us greatly in designing exhibition and other visitor programs for the watercolors. For example, his research will

inform the lighting protocols used in the Barosso room.

Overall, this project has proved to be a fascinating exercise in collaborative problem solving across multiple disciplines: conservation, architecture and design, museum curation and education. I know that all of us look forward to the day when we can see the result of our labors—the Barosso watercolors, beautifully and safely installed in their new home at the Kelsey Museum.

Suzanne Davis



Intermuseum Conservation Association (ICA) and Kelsey Museum staff discuss treatment of one of the watercolor panels. Pictured are (left to right): Jamye Jamison (ICA), 05 (ICA), Suzanne Davis (Kelsey), Claudia Chemello (Kelsey), Wendy Partridge (ICA), and Scott Meier (Kelsey).