Review of *A Virtual Exhibition of the Ravages of Dust, Water, Moulds, Fungi, Bookworms and other Pests* 

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The physical substance of our cultural heritage needs careful tending if we wish to hand over to future generations what we so gratefully have received from the past. Institutions such as archives, libraries, and museums, have long since been established to ensure the continuity of this process into an undefinedly distant future. A cornerstone of their ability to address issues relating to the preservation of their collections is the rapid dissemination of information about the myriad destructive forces that constantly act to turn all structured matter into dust.

Although the mechanisms of deterioration are not subject to continuous revision, our understanding of them is constantly improving. As a result, new remedial tools and techniques are under ongoing development. Spreading the word about such activity is important. Even more important, however, is the swiftest possible communication about accepted conservation methods that are discovered to have significant long term deleterious effects.

Conservators and conservation scientists began to apply electronic networking technologies towards this end well before the current popularization of the Internet. When the broader community began to use Internet based resources, conservation information was already there waiting for them. Although such material had long been available in ink-on-paper disciplinary publications, ferreting it out could be a daunting task for anyone with limited familiarity in the field. Unfortunately, easily accessible popular publications about how folks might treat their antiques often describe potentially disastrous procedures. The “best” way to keep grandad’s old saxophone nice and shiny and ready to play is by no means going to ensure that it will even exist a few decades hence. Sadly, something as intuitively reasonable as regularly polishing such an object is an excellent way to guarantee that it will not be around long enough to become an heirloom of many generations standing.

In this light, a virtual exhibition intended to provide an introductory description of the destructive processes that beset books and paper is of great potential utility.

* By the European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA); http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/expo.htm
The Ravages of Dust, Water, Moulds, Fungi, Bookworms and other Pests, provides a cogent, easily assimilated “exposition” (a term that its producers interchange with “exhibition”) of precisely those concepts that would benefit a knowledge thirsty nonspecialist. It also provides detailed information on a professional level and, as befits any Web production, it provides links to hardcore specialist resources.

Before proceeding with a detailed summary of the contents of the exhibition I cannot resist the temptation to digress in more abstract terms about the very notion of reviewing something as deliberately and easily modifiable as a Web site. This, surely, is a matter of shooting at a moving target. The greatest concern is that whatever is found at the URL when the review is written may be substantially changed, perhaps even replaced or removed entirely, by the time the review becomes available. The exhibition under present scrutiny is clearly labelled with the ubiquitous disclaimer, “still under construction”, and it can be assumed that the following discussion may be of something that differs significantly from what the reader may subsequently visit.

Most physical exhibitions are ephemeral and there is no reason to expect a journal review to provide more than a retrospective glimpse of the past event. The review becomes part of a body of historic documentation about something that has been dismantled for, if nothing else, lack of long term storage space. Equivalent constraints on our ability to maintain repositories of such documentation are, fortunately, becoming ever less of an issue with the ascendancy of digital storage media.

A consequent profound difference between physical and virtual exhibitions is that the latter are instantly tuck-awayable in their entirety in digital format for the delectation of visitors in the distant future. Although perhaps not as commonplace as construction signs, there are countless documents on the Web that are prefaced with some statement of irrelevance to their initial purpose but continued availability for “historic reasons”. The distinction between the thing and the documentation of the thing grows ever blurrier.

The task of reviewing a virtual exhibition is thus not entirely the same as that of reviewing a physical one. There is a pretty good chance that the reader of this review will find some version of the exhibition at the URL indicated above. It is also likely that the exhibition will be refined in light of the feedback so easily elicited and conveyed via the Net. (In fact, editorial attention was called to the exhibition through a request for critical input specifically to effect change.) It would probably make little real sense to comment here on points of detail that may easily have been modified by the time this review is published. Nonetheless, no review of a Web event would be complete without some consideration of the way in which the medium is used.

In the early days – way back in the mid-nineties – we saw museums mounting virtual exhibitions much as they had worked in physical space. The visitor was ferried, to the extent possible, through an ordered sequence of objects, text, imagery, and sound. If a primary purpose of the exhibition was educational, the order was