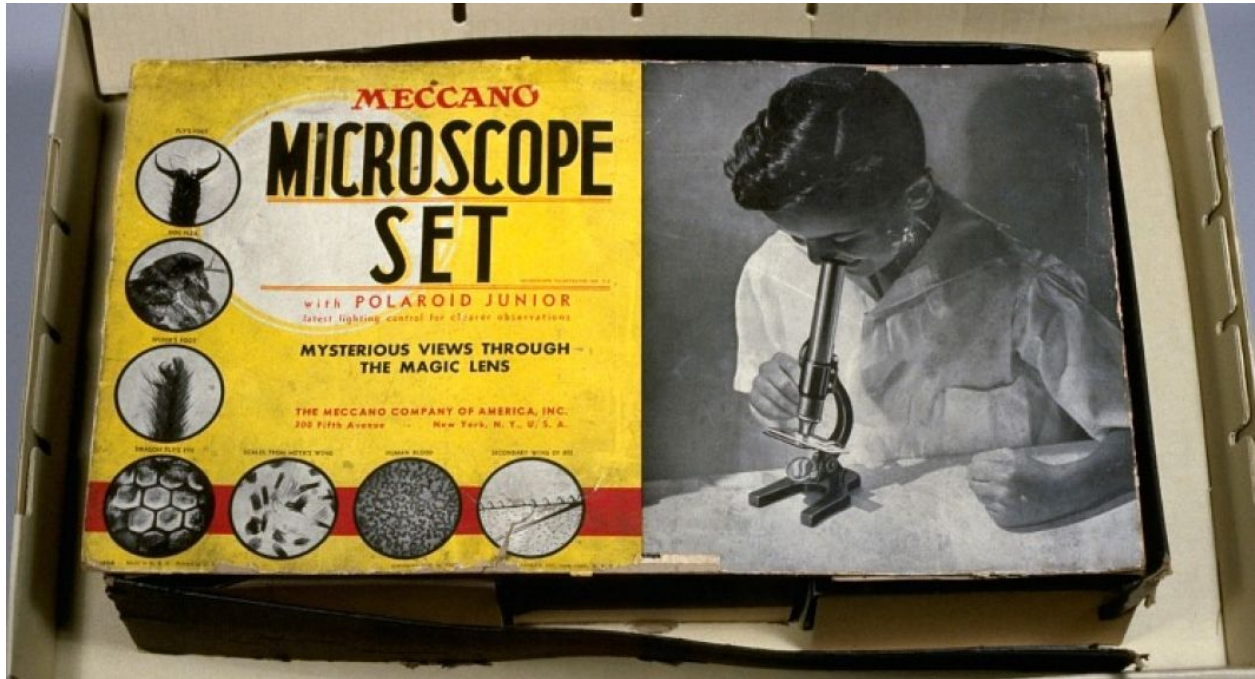




## Icon Trustee Sophie Rowe ACR reflects on collections care during a crisis

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Staff working in the [University of Cambridge Museums](#) have been fortunate to have a staged lockdown which has given us time to get our ducks in a row. I work across several University museums so this involves different things for different institutions.

I am very happy to say that our University understands that collections care is “mission critical” to the work of museums. Essential monitoring – i.e. environmental control for vulnerable objects and pest monitoring - is needed to prevent damage and future losses and expense. This means that we are authorised to enter buildings to carry out this work even while the rest of the University is closed.

We are particularly concerned about:

- Humidity changes causing damage to vulnerable paintings, parchment and wooden

painted sculpture/ Egyptian coffins etc.

- Prolonged excess humidity causing mould on books and organic objects or activating corrosion in iron and bronze objects (especially ancient archaeological ones)
- Pest infestation taking hold - this can decimate clothes, furnishings, ethnographic collections, fur items etc.

We are doing what we can remotely but in many of the museums a conservator also checks the whole building and all collections weekly. *[Personal health and safety is a paramount issue and staff should only access buildings with permission and having carried out the necessary risk assessments; and only if they feel comfortable doing so.]*

Co-ordinating with security teams is essential for many reasons – as conservators we don't want to compromise security arrangements and the staff security teams provide valuable "extra pairs of eyes" who can spot problems in the building they know very well. This crisis is a great opportunity to develop those relationships and continue to have collections care "buy-in" from other staff once the crisis has passed.

Emergencies can happen at any time and perhaps are even more likely when buildings and collections are not being regularly checked and maintained. We already have an emergency support network in Cambridge where people will help each other out in a crisis. We have set up a new contact list of people who would be happy to help in an emergency AND have independent transport to the museums (we are not using public transport any more). We also have a list of people who are happy to help with the essential collections care checks which still have to carry on – we can expect staff to fall ill and extra people will be needed to carry out these tasks.

If you don't already have an emergency network in your area you could set up a WhatsApp or email group – consider buddying up with another local institution to boost your numbers. (Obviously GDPR still applies so make sure everyone is happy to share their details in a contact group.) Again the relationships that we build to help in this crisis will carry on afterwards if we continue to nurture them. I think people will be very eager to help as the lockdown continues – just to feel you are doing something tangible can give a real boost.

Many have activated remote access to environmental monitoring – a lot of systems support this but not everyone has been using this feature until now. We have found the providers have been very helpful in getting us up and running with viewing our data online. Some have also not been using the alarm settings but may decide to switch these on. One challenge with this is that not

everyone has fast broadband at home and there is a lot of loading on the services right now! In particular if you need to use a VPN connection to get access to shared folders or systems in an institution, the VPN may struggle to cope with the demand and not let you in.

We are meeting with various teams daily on Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Slack, Zoom, Hangouts, Skype... there is a huge range of platforms to choose from! This is mainly to check in and share ideas as well as ups and downs. Regular meetings give some fixed points in the day which are so important when we are unused to working away from our museums.

I hope that enforced digital working over the next few weeks is going to make some things better in the long run. For example I have been running a digital network with resources for conservators in our consortium, and this is a chance for people to engage more with that and contribute to it. I also run the Emergency Support Network and have already found people engaging much more with this than before. I have many more volunteers and engagement from people who are not core collections staff, which is very good for organisational resilience.

Once you stop and think there are more things that you can do digitally than you expect: I am going to try holding table-top emergency exercises online and am also starting to plan a webinar to help raise awareness of what our University has in place to support museums in an emergency.

Personally at this stage I am cautiously optimistic that we have got measures in place to look after our collections, and a healthy pool of people to relieve teams and fill in for those who are ill or cannot work for any reason. But I don't think we can be complacent about it! There are also some silver linings in this situation as I mentioned above, particularly about getting more support and engagement around maintaining and protecting the collections during the shutdown.

Having said that I am less worried right now about the collections themselves than about the people who will be most affected by the closure of the museums. As a conservator I am proud that my work facilitates all the valuable and varied things that the museums do for our communities. It is of course a pity that exhibitions will close, loans will be postponed or called off and school trips will be cancelled. But much of our museums' programming is aimed at vulnerable people including the elderly, young mothers and many others who may not have the resources to cope with a lockdown. For lonely and disenfranchised people stuck at home, the loss of outreach that museums provide may be felt very deeply. My husband is a doctor specialising in dementia and his concern is similarly for his patients and carers and how they will cope without day-care services and other provision that helps them get through the day.

To quote from "Game of Thrones"(!): the thing that unites us all is stories. I am very glad to

work in museums that recognise that conservators play an essential role because they look after the objects that we need to tell our shared stories.

Sophie Rowe ACR is an Icon Accredited Member specialising in conservation of organic artefacts.