

Document Management with ConservationSpace

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ConservationSpace is a web-based, open source software application to create, manage, and preserve conservation documents. With support of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, has led the development effort in partnership with the Courtauld Institute of Art, Denver Art Museum, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art (withdrew in late 2015), Statens Museum for Kunst, and Yale University.

The conservation community realized many years ago that a digital solution for managing documents would increase access, improve discoverability, expand research opportunities, support workflow procedures, and reduce document loss. Several institutions sought grants to develop document management software tailored to the specific needs of their institution; however, it quickly became clear that this was an expensive approach that did not facilitate collaboration between institutions. In response to these concerns, the Mellon Foundation organized several meetings to discuss challenges and collaborative solutions for conservation documentation. These efforts resulted in the formation of the ConservationSpace partnership.

In 2012, the National Gallery awarded a contract for software development to Sirma Enterprise Systems (formerly Sirma ITT). ConservationSpace utilizes the Sirma Enterprise Platform, a combination of multiple open source components designed to allow rapid development for diverse business requirements. While the system can be installed on institutional servers, it is primarily intended for a Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) approach in which the application is centrally hosted and delivered over the Internet as a service. For many users, web-based software reduces costs and simplifies software maintenance.

The database management system is constructed on semantic technology. Semantic repositories are an alternative to more traditional relational databases for storing, querying, and handling structured data. The semantic graph database utilizes an ontology that provides easier integration and reasoning capabilities with a large volume of diverse data. It enables searches that find complex relationships—ones that current standard data models would not discover. This benefit is particularly important for an application that must access and link highly heterogeneous data scattered in diverse systems, making it the ideal approach to gathering and storing information for conservators.

In the summer of 2016 the National Gallery of Art was the first partner institution to implement ConservationSpace to create and manage new documents. The Gallery is now in the process of scanning hard copy legacy documents, with optical character recognition (OCR), and migrating existing digital records into ConservationSpace. The other partners are in various stages of implementation.

The ultimate success of ConservationSpace will be measured both by the effectiveness of its document-management solutions and the ease in which the software application can be used and adapted by conservators and scientists in other institutions and private practice.

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