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A Laboratory for Art in Its Library

Francesca G. Bewer



Edward Forbes's office, Hunt Hall, December 1926.
20 x 25 cm. 182 H267 6F(i) 10.

I HAVE MARVELED AT THE GENEROSITY OF THE FINE ART LIBRARY'S STAFF and holdings since I began to work at the Harvard Art Museums in 1997. And I could not imagine writing *A Laboratory for Art—Harvard's Fogg Museum and the Emergence of Conservation in America, 1900–1950* (2010) without that treasure trove. I'd spend many an hour nestled among the tight rows of periodical stacks in the bowels of the old Fogg Museum building—or to be more exact, of Werner Otto Hall—trawling through the collections of early-to-mid century periodicals and other publications relating to museum work and conservation. I leafed through issue after volume after year of serials now long out of print, such as *Museums Journal*, *Gazeta de les Arts*, *Museumskunde*, *Museum News*, *Museion*, and *American Art News*, gaining a better understanding of the national and international context in which Harvard and

its art museum came to play the role it did in training a new breed of academically-minded museum professionals. And I also made surprising discoveries—for instance, that as early as 1917 the American Association of Museums had recognized the need for advanced training of museum professionals and already considered Harvard University as a possible venue for such endeavors. Such museological training eventually came to pass through the dedicated efforts of Fogg museum director Edward W. Forbes and his close ally, associate director Paul J. Sachs; they gradually transformed the museum into a “laboratory for art.” Forbes envisioned a school “perhaps at Harvard, where painters, restorers and museum officials may learn about the chemistry of paintings and the care of them, on strictly scientific principles”¹ But it was the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Fine Arts that first created such a course in the “science of painting and the care, preservation and restoration of paintings” in 1921. That course was short-lived, while Forbes’s dream took shape as the country’s first art museum conservation department and lives on as the Harvard Art Museums’ Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies.

Many of the publications I consulted come from the personal libraries of these two men and still bear their names. The “heavenly twins,” as Forbes and Sachs were known, systematically built up the holdings of the Fine Arts Library alongside the art collections for the benefit of the university’s students, often donating their own copies of books and periodicals to the museum and the university libraries. More than half a century later, it was a thrill to hold—and benefit from—some of the palpable remains of their diverse interests and of their legacy to the museum world and academia.

1 Edward W. Forbes, “The Technical Study and Physical Care of Paintings,” *Art Bulletin* 2, no. 3 (1920): 160–170.

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