



Issue 39, October 2017



Alumni Spotlight: J. William Shank '82

J. WILLIAM (WILL) SHANK IS A WORLD-RENOWNED EXPERT IN THE CONSERVATION OF 20TH century outdoor murals. While it is not unusual for a Conservation Center graduate to become an acclaimed expert in his or her specialty, it is uncommon that a graduate develops an entirely new conservation specialty. In 1999, while Chief Conservator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Will Shank created the field of community mural conservation. In 2006, from his home base in Barcelona he founded Rescue Public Murals, an organization which sought to bring public attention to these distinctly American murals, to document their unique artistic and historic significance, and to secure the expertise and funding to save them.

The road to Barcelona began in York, PA, where as a young boy Will was inspired by the rescue efforts after the disastrous 1966 Florence flood and dreamed of studying conservation in Florence, Italy. He went on to attend Georgetown University in Washington, DC, where he was an Italian major, and after a stint in art school in Denver, he realized his dream and went to Florence to study conservation at the Villa Schifanoia, which was then the Graduate School of Fine Arts of Rosary College. Planning to spend his life in the U.S. and knowing that—at that time—it would be difficult to secure a job in the U.S. with a European degree, he returned to Denver where he worked at the Rocky Mountain Regional Conservation Center. Encouraged by his mentors, including Bettina Raphael and Carl Grimm, he applied to the three graduate conservation programs in existence at that time and began class work at the NYU Institute of Fine Arts Conservation Center in the fall of 1979.

A painter, he chose to specialize in the conservation of easel paintings; murals were not on his horizon yet. He loved the excitement of living in New York City where he was surrounded by great museums and collections. He has fond memories of former Conservation Center Chairman Larry Majewski who was “an extraordinary human being.” He learned a great deal from John Brealey’s paintings conservation classes and remains grateful for the depth of knowledge gained from his art history training at the ‘Tute. Harry Bober and Robert Rosenblum advised him on his qualifying papers, and his undergrad background helped him to breeze through the language requirements—at a time when French and German were required! Will did his final Internship at the National Museum of American Art and the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum) working with Stefano Scafetta '72 and Ann Creager on the treatment of American easel paintings, and the occasional plywood WPA mural. After a year at the Fogg Art Museum, where he published the definitive study of the paintings of John Singleton Copley with Richard Newman and Eugene Farrell, he returned for a year to Denver at the Western Center for the Conservation of Fine Arts working with Carl Grimm. In 1985, Will moved to San Francisco to begin a job at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

As courses on contemporary and modern art were not plentiful during Will’s years at the Institute of Fine Arts, he felt that he lacked the art historical background for this job. Over the next fifteen years he gained substantial knowledge of modern and contemporary art, grateful that one of the



primary sources of knowledge—the artist—was usually available for consultation when questions about materials and techniques arose. Among the artists with whom he developed a relationship was Bruce Conner whose assemblages from the 1950s and 1960s presented both physical and philosophical challenges as they deteriorated. Moving up the ranks at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to head the conservation department in the 1990s meant that Will spent more time on paperwork and less time on hands-on conservation, a situation that did not suit him. Thus, at the end of 1999, he left the museum and on January 1, 2000 he opened a private practice, Conservation Resources Management. Many rewarding moments awaited him after leaving institutional life, including a stint as guest curator at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, where his research on “A Hidden Picasso” was presented in the museum’s galleries in 2004, and repeated at SFMOMA in 2007.

Murals came into Will’s life during his last year at SFMOMA, when he received a call about a mural that had been overpainted by the owner of the Mission district building that Chuy Campusano had chosen for it a decade earlier. In

searching for an answer for his caller, Will found that there was no “well-trod ground” and no bibliography on the matter of contemporary murals and what happens when they deteriorate. He found others grappling with the question of what to do about unwelcome changes in American community murals and, assembling his resources, he soon found himself as the person to call with a mural question, so much so that in 2003, the Getty Conservation Institute and the Getty Research Institute asked him to help to organize a conference on “The Mural in the Americas.” This conference was a turning point for him and for mural conservation.

In 2004, Will applied for and was awarded the American Academy in Rome’s Booth Family Rome Prize Fellowship for Historic Preservation and Conservation. He and his family, which included a daughter, Stassa, who was about to turn two, spent 2005 in Rome where he was granted fellow status and an office at ICCROM to study international policies about the care of public contemporary wall paintings. Again he learned that he was trailblazing, and the Rome Prize experience afforded him the time to be sure of that. (It was also a peak experience in his life and work, and he highly recommends **applying** for the Rome Prize!) After a brief return to San Francisco, in 2006 the family permanently relocated to Europe, settling in Barcelona because of the quality of life and because he and his partner, the sculptor U.B. Morgan, could marry in Zapatero’s Spain.

Despite living in Europe, Will continued his involvement with American community murals. In that same year, with Dr. Tim Drescher, an independent scholar of community murals in Berkeley, he created **Rescue Public Murals** as a program of Heritage Preservation. Rescue Public Murals’ goals were to develop a set of best practices for the creation and maintenance of community murals, to develop plans for identifying and documenting U.S. public murals and providing on-line access to them, and to raise awareness about their plight and to raise funds to save and document community murals.

In Europe, Will has teamed up frequently with Antonio Rava of Turin, and together in recent years they have become the go-to conservators for large outdoor mural projects (see *The New York Times* article on their work on the 88-foot tall Keith Haring mural at the Necker des Enfants Malades hospital in the 15th arrondissement of Paris: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/arts/design/keith-haring-paris-hospital-painting-tower.html?mcubz=0>). Although Will will not always be able to climb such high scaffolding, he forever remains creatively engaged, as he is an art critic for Barcelona’s English-language monthly *Metropolitan*, and he has recently written a screenplay about the life of young Picasso in Barcelona.

Back in the U.S. on May 28-29, 2017, during the **annual meeting** of the AIC, Will, along with Jon Pounds of the Chicago Public Art Group and Leslie Rainer of the Getty Conservation Institute, organized a two-day gathering in Chicago which brought together muralists and conservation professionals for a dialogue about Chicago’s community murals. (see Will’s write up of the event in the VoCA blog <http://www.voca.network/blog/2017/08/28/approaches-conservation-contemporary-murals-will-shank>).

Will notes that pursuing his dreams has meant a long and rewarding journey and one that’s not over yet.

Rebecca Anne Rushfield '80

Conservation Center Rome Prize Winners

1995

Margaret Holben Ellis

1997

George Wheeler

Eric Gordon

1998

Shelley Fletcher

2005

J. William Shank

2007

Pamela Hatchfield

2009

Rosa Lowinger

2015

Anna Serotta



photo credits:

Will Shank on the scaffolding at Keith Haring’s TUTTOMONDO in Pisa. Funding for the conservation work was supported by the Keith Haring Foundation and the **Friends of Heritage Preservation**. (banner image and page 2) Photo by Serena Francone

Will Shank at Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, the Netherlands. Photo by Jennifer Spohn