Alumni Spotlight: J. William Shank ‘82

J. WILLIAM (WILL) SHANK IS A WORLD-RENOWED EXPERT IN THE CONSERVATION OF 20™
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 Barce-
lona 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 ef-
forts 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 toFlorence 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 paint-
ings 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 relation-
ship was Bruce Conner whose assemblages from
the 1950s and 1960s presented both physical
and philosophical challenges as they deterio-
rated. Moving up the ranks at the San Francisco
Museum of Modern Art to head the conserva-
tion 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 Man-
agement. 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 Pi-
casso” was presented in the museum’s galleries

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 Cam-
pusano 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