

Melvin J. Wachowiak, Jr., Smithsonian Senior Conservator, 1958-2014

Melvin (Mel) J. Wachowiak, Jr., Senior Conservator at the Smithsonian's Museum Conservation Institute (MCI) passed away May 28, 2014, at his home in Davidsonville, MD, after a long struggle with cancer. Mel was born on February 15, 1958, in Springfield, MA.

Mel received his M.S. in Art Conservation, with a Major in Joined Wooden Objects, from Winterthur Museum, Art Conservation Program, University of Delaware in 1989 and a B.S. from Springfield College in 1981. During this period he worked at the George Walter Vincent Smith Museum of Springfield, MA, and had a training internship at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. His professional training was in

the conservation of wood objects such as furniture and he had a special interest in Asian furniture. Mel began his career at the Smithsonian's MCI, then called Conservation Analytical Laboratory (CAL), in August 1989 as a professional furniture conservator, with proven expertise as a microscopist among his many skills. He developed new techniques and materials for examining and restoring wooden objects, including identification of wood types, and textile and paint sources for Spanish Colonial sculpture in the US and Mexico; guided restoration of Yup'ik Indian masks for display and of a Hawaiian outrigger canoe for the Hawaiian Treasures exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History; and documented the steam-bent plywood on the world's first all-wing jet aircraft, the Horten H IX V3, for the National Air and Space Museum (NASM). He held two United States Patents: Patent Number 6156108 for Wax Emulsion Polish and Patent Number 6258882 for Wax-resin Polish. Mel was an Instructor in Wood Science at the University of Delaware from 1989 to 1991. He was an Instructor in the CAL's Furniture Conservation Training Program from 1989 to 2001 and its Director from 1995 to 2001. He served successively as the Assistant Director for Programming, the Assistant Director for Conservation, and the Head of Conservation between 2001 and 2006.

Over the past decade, Mel had developed and led the use of 3D scanning, multi-spectral imaging, other computational imaging techniques, and most recently reflectance transformation imaging (RTI), to



Photograph by E. Keats Webb, Museum Conservation Institute

enhance the quality and scope of information that can be captured digitally. He demonstrated the cultural heritage applications of these techniques through a multitude of collaborative research, conservation, and exhibition projects carried out with Smithsonian partners, and developed an international reputation as a leader in digital imaging. Keenly aware of the importance of techniques that are both portable and truly non-invasive (requiring no samples and not altering the original in any way), Mel sought new ways to capture high-resolution digital information at a time when these were relatively unknown technologies in the museum community. His recent work, through a Smithsonian-funded project with the Freer/Sackler Galleries, used RTI to digitally document a large, significant collection of 19th C. paper impressions of inscriptions from now-degraded ancient Persian monuments – available to researchers worldwide on a Smithsonian website – exemplifies the high quality and reach of his endeavors. He also used optical microscopy and computation imaging to examine NASM's Apollo spacesuits for evidence of lunar dust. The MCI Imaging Studio under his leadership was a partner in the Smithsonian's pan-institutional program *Inventing American Photography* and used computational imaging to examine the Smithsonian's extraordinary holdings of early American daguerreotype photography.

Mel was dedicated to mentoring and training others, including Smithsonian staff, fellows, and interns, in the use of these techniques in their own project work. At the same time he worked actively with professional partners and service providers to develop improvements of these technologies' features for use in a museum research and preservation context. The reputation he has earned as a leader in digital imaging has been recognized through project funding received from a number of Smithsonian as well as federal sources, including NSF and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Mel was a devoted husband and father, leaving behind his wife of 28 years JoAnne (Butler), son Nikolas Joseph, and daughter Natalie. He was the soul of MCI and a great asset for the Smithsonian. He was very generous sharing his knowledge and friendship with everyone and will be deeply missed. A memorial service will be held Sunday, June 8, 2014, in Annapolis, Maryland.

Messages of condolences can be sent to MCI (MCIWeb@si.edu) for forwarding on to the family.

Harriet F. Beaubien, Paula T. DePriest, and Robert J. Koestler