Article: Current Trends and Collaboration Among Heritage Institutions in Latin America: APOYOnline Regional Conference and Workshop in Medellin, Colombia

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Current Trends and Collaboration Among Heritage Institutions in Latin America: APOYOnline Regional Conference and Workshop in Medellin, Colombia

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Abstract

APOYOnline, the Association for Heritage Preservation of the Americas, is a non-profit organization committed to promoting cultural heritage preservation across Latin America and the Caribbean. In August 2016, APOYOnline organized the Regional Conference on Heritage Preservation in Medellin, Colombia, which brought together over 70 professionals from 15 countries. This paper outlines the history and accomplishments of APOYOnline, and provides information about the background and planning of the conference including goals, fundraising, and choosing a location. It also discusses the format and themes covered during the conference and accompanying workshop, before discussing the impact of the event and future directions for APOYOnline.

Founded in 1989, APOYOnline (formerly APOYO), the Association for Heritage Preservation of the Americas, is a non-profit organization deeply committed to strengthening exchange, regional and global professional networks, sharing conservation information via translations, providing scholarships, and building awareness about the need to preserve cultural patrimony across Latin America and the Caribbean region. For almost thirty years APOYOnline has collaborated with major national and international organizations such as the Smithsonian, ICCROM, CCI, and AIC, among others. In 2017 APOYOnline celebrated 20 years collaborating with AIC to bring Latin American scholars to the United States. Since 2007 APOYOnline has organized multilingual workshops with AIC, most recently the multilingual workshop “Conservation on a Budget,” with eight panelists from six countries during AIC Chicago.

From August 30th to September 2nd, 2016, APOYOnline carried out its first Regional Conference on Heritage Preservation in Medellin, Colombia, which brought together over 70 professionals from 15 countries. This conference provided the opportunity for these professionals to share experiences in conservation practice, education, collections care, and heritage management. The conference built and strengthened networks within the heritage preservation field in Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries, and also strengthened connections with professionals in the United States. The conference was open to all specialties, but specifically focused on the conservation of photographic materials because of the immediate need to address this topic in the region, and the importance of photographic collections in Latin America. Debbie Hess Norris of the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation also conducted a workshop concerning photograph conservation.

Colombia was selected as the conference venue because of its centrality in South America, which provided easy access for participants across the continent. Also because
Medellin is a city of 2.4 million people, so logistics were easier than in a larger city like Bogota. Medellin is a newly revitalized city searching for opportunities and projects to promote it, so the conference provided an opportunity for a lot of positive media attention.

To coordinate an event like this was a real exercise in engineering, especially with a team spread out all over the globe. The APOYOnline team had to connect from four different time zones: from Europe, Colombia, Guatemala and the United States, so we relied heavily on technology like Whatsapp and Skype.

The conference could not have happened without the support of many North American institutions, foundations, private donors, manufacturers, and local institutions. The fundraising was immense. TruVue and the University of Delaware (USA), and Banco de la República (Colombia), were instrumental in getting the conference started, and this attracted other supporters. Banco de la República provided the auditorium, other workspaces, and valuable support during the conference for administrative issues and local press contacts. In total, 21 sponsors contributed, including specialized groups like the PMG, IPI, and the Getty Foundation. Avianca, the Colombian airline, provided a special discount code for the event.

With the help of those 21 wonderful sponsors and various private donors, APOYOnline was able to provide scholarships for 100% of all 73 participants: 60% partial grants and 40% full grants. Participants journeyed from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Venezuela, the United States, and Spain. They included professionals in conservation and restoration, conservation science, and collections management. They represented national libraries, archives, museums, cultural ministries, film repositories, universities, and centers for the preservation of cultural patrimony, as well as vendors of conservation materials.

The four-day conference was divided into two parts: presentations in the morning, and workshops in the afternoon. Presentations covered topics like risk management, preservation planning for cemetery collections, education, storage, collections care, the impact of microbiological research in the region, emergency response after natural disasters in tropical countries, and treatment proposals for ceramic murals. A poster session provided more opportunities to share information, and posters addressed international meetings in preventive conservation, risk management for sculptures, glass plate negative collections, preservation of audio-visual materials, paper conservation in tropical climates, and the preservation of photographic collections.

The Photographic Conservation workshop included lectures, discussions, and hands on activities to familiarize the participants with the identification of early photographic processes and the degradation and preservation of photographic material. The teaching material was simultaneously translated during the workshop, and had been previously translated into three languages, so all participants had access to the material in Spanish before, during, and after the conference. The workshop was initially scheduled for 25 people, but it quickly became clear that everyone wanted to participate. Thanks to the flexibility of the workshop instructor Debbie Hess Norris, the registrants, and the workshop venues, it was possible to accommodate nearly 70 participants.
The workshop increased participants’ awareness of the preservation needs of their collections, so they could go back to their countries and more clearly identify and prioritize what needs to be done. Photographic conservation challenges in Latin America are immense; environmental control, the climate, and political instability all represent major hurdles. The most pressing needs of photographic collections in the region are tape removal, immediate inventorying, cleaning, reorganizing, and storage. Despite challenges, the commitment of the participants was truly heartfelt, and everybody, even non-photographic conservators, wanted to learn as much as they could.

The conference received significant press coverage by newspapers in Colombia, as well as in the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Uruguay. Social media was a powerful tool for organizing and disseminating information about the conference. Announcements on the APOYOnline Facebook page reached nearly 9000 people that week! All sessions were videotaped and made available for free on the APOYOnline webpage so others around the Americas could benefit as well. Forging alliances with local embassies was crucial, as embassy newsletters can reach thousands of people at once.

Perhaps the most important component of the conference in Medellin was the opportunity for participants to forge and strengthen connections between Latin America and the United States. Many discussions focused on programs and conferences in the USA, and encouraged Latin American participants to travel and exchange knowledge there. So much so that at AIC Chicago a poster from Ruahidy Lombert, Viviana Dominguez, and Giselle Canosa, from the Dominican Republic, Argentina, and Curazao was presented, representing a joint research project that was sparked during the conference in Medellin, concerning the development and testing of a gel cleaning system for outdoor murals.
A special session with the participants was organized to outline how APOYOnline will move forward in the next four years, titled “Vision 2020.” The main suggestions were increased research, more events like this one, and the continued dissemination of information. To achieve these goals APOYOnline has been working to issue memorandums of understanding with countries like Honduras, Brazil, and Colombia, working with universities and cultural institutions to provide more training and exchange, and serving as the bridge to bring professionals from the USA to Latin America and vice versa.

APOYOnline’s first ever regional conference proved to be an inspiration to continue reinforcing the interdisciplinary field of heritage preservation across the Americas. Participants demonstrated a deep interest in developing the networking and learning opportunities offered by the conference, and to foster future collaborations. The meeting provided an environment that encouraged engagement and empowered participants to share their work and stories through presentations and posters. Since the conference, participants have continued to exchange news, ideas and experiences via social media.

APOYOnline would like to thank all the wonderful sponsors who made the Medellin conference possible.

The extraordinary success of this conference is a tangible result of the 27 years of tireless hard work and perseverance of countless volunteers. APOYOnline is pleased to witness that the younger generations involved with APOYOnline today are as enthusiastic and passionate as the small group who started this initiative in 1989, with the tremendous advantage of having 21st century technology to continue advancing the mission of building bridges of communication to support the preservation of cultural heritage in the Americas. The fact that the conference was conducted simultaneously in 3 languages was a powerful statement that the language of caring
for of cultural heritage and cultural identity is universal. Under the leadership of Beatriz Haspo and Amparo Rueda, APOYOnline will continue to embrace the challenges ahead in leading such initiatives to integrate and support professional development and exchange in Latin America and the Caribbean. APOYOnline is already planning and organizing the next APOYOnline Regional Conference entitled “Managing Disasters in Cultural Heritage: Sharing Experiences and Building Networks,” which will take place in Guatemala in October 2018.

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