

THE GOVERNING PRINCIPLE: DO LESS, NOT MORE

The restoration company's role is explicitly **NOT** to restore. Every intervention on fine art is potentially reversible or irreversible by conservation standards; only an AIC-qualified conservator can make that call. Generalist attempts to clean, dab, wipe, or fast-dry void scheduled inland marine insurance policies. The responder acts strictly as a **custodian**, controlling the environment and securing chain-of-custody for conservator handoff.

1. STABILIZE

Control environmental conditions around the piece without touching the piece itself. Maintain RH 40–55%, temp mid-60s°F, gentle indirect air.

2. DOCUMENT

Produce museum-standard condition photos: full-frame, edge-to-edge, front/back, and raking light before any movement or conservator arrival.

3. ISOLATE

Remove from ongoing loss mechanisms (wet walls, active leaks, soot). Default to stabilize-in-place; move only if active hazard persists.

4. HAND OFF

Transfer custody cleanly with signed forms to an AIC-qualified conservator (carrier-designated, client-preferred, or via AIC-CERT hotline).

EMERGENCY CONSERVATOR HOTLINE (AIC-CERT 24/7):

202-661-8068

American Institute for Conservation Collections Emergency Response Team

THE 6 MEDIA FAILURE MODES & HOUR-ONE STABILIZATION PROTOCOLS

Media Category	Failure Mode & Physics	Hour-One Stabilization Protocol	Strict Prohibition
Paintings on Canvas Oil, acrylic, mixed media	Water wicks through unprimed canvas back → expands fibers → pushes paint into tenting/cleavage. Face water pools grime/soot. RH cycling cracks paint.	Remove from wet wall contact if safe. Stand vertically in climate-controlled zone. Target 40–55% RH . Photograph front and back under raking light.	CRITICAL NEVER lay wet painting face-up on a flat surface (causes instant paint loss).
Works on Paper Watercolor, drawings, prints	Water-soluble media (watercolors, historic inks) bleed and migrate immediately on contact; rapid mold colonization >65% RH.	Freeze-stabilization pathway with conservator-approved transport. Keep flat in protective folders. Prepare blast freezer (<0°F) to arrest mold.	DO NOT DEFRAME Leave paper under glass in frame; conservator must deframe in lab.
Sculpture & Ceramics Bronze, stone, plaster, terracotta	Unglazed ceramics absorb water and spall on drying. Plaster/gypsum delaminates. Bronze develops bronze disease from chlorides/water. Stone stains.	Move to stable holding area. Photograph from 360° multi-angles. Gentle air circulation around base. Do not apply sealants, heat, or cleaning chemicals.	NO CHEMICALS No biocides, detergents, or forced rapid heat drying.
Wet Photographs Silver gelatin, C-prints, cyanotypes	Wet gelatin/emulsion softens and adheres permanently to glass, mounts, sleeves, or adjacent prints upon drying; irreversible emulsion loss.	COUNTERINTUITIVE PROTOCOL: Keep emulsion wet submerged in clean, cool water and IN THE DARK until conservator arrives.	NEVER AIR DRY Allowing wet photo emulsion to air-dry in field destroys image layer.
Books & Manuscripts Rare volumes, vellum, leather	Text blocks swell, warp bindings, cockle vellum; water-soluble inks feather; mold outbreaks in 48 hours.	Freeze-stabilization protocol to arrest mold. Wrap spine-supported, pack spine-down in plastic milk crates, freeze immediately.	NO FORCED HEAT Do not fan dry or bake; causes binding shrinkage and spine snap.
Decorative & Historic Stained glass, ornament, wallpaper	Gilding dissolves, historic plaster delaminates, lead caming bends, historic wallpaper adhesive fails.	Stabilize environment in-place (desiccant DH, 40–55% RH). Multi-angle baseline documentation. Immediate conservator dispatch before structural drying.	NO TEAR-OUT Do not demo or strip architectural fabric without conservator sign-off.

THE FIRST TWELVE HOURS ON A FINE ART LOSS: OPERATOR TIMELINE

Phase & Time	Operational Milestone	Field Execution Detail	Required Documentation
Phase 1 Hour 0 – 1	Arrival, Client & Carrier Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify client designated art contact / curator. Verify insurance structure: Scheduled Inland Marine vs Blanket vs Contents. Confirm policy loss notification made to carrier (Chubb, AXA XL, Huntington T. Block, Berkley, Lloyd's). Contact carrier-designated conservator or call AIC-CERT Hotline (202-661-8068). 	Client Art Contact Log Carrier Claim / Policy # AIC-CERT Dispatch Ticket
Phase 2 Hour 1 – 3	Environmental Stabilization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish desiccant dehumidification targeting 40% – 55% RH. Maintain ambient temperature in the mid-sixties °F (62°F – 68°F). Manage air movement gently: NO direct high-velocity fans on paintings (uneven drying causes cracking/cupping). Establish negative-air with HEPA filtration if smoke or soot contamination exists. 	Psychrometric Log (RH & Temp) DH & HEPA Equipment Tag Airflow Direction Map
Phase 3 Hour 2 – 6	Museum-Standard Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Photograph every affected piece with controlled lighting & calibrated color card. Capture full-frame face shot square to surface, edge-to-edge perimeter shots. Capture raking-light shots (light at sharp angle across surface to expose tenting, cupping, blistering, flaking). Turn 2D works safely to photograph back of canvas, stretcher bars, labels, and accession marks. Capture macro detail shots of visible waterlines, soot deposits, and frame cracks. 	Condition Photo Log Schedule Number Cross-Ref Calibrated Color Index Photographer Sign-off
Phase 4 Hour 3 – 8	Stabilize-in-Place vs. Isolate & Move	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Default rule: STABILIZE IN PLACE. Moving art on-scene carries high transit risks. Stabilize in place: remove from wet wall, stand vertically away from water path, isolate with clean barriers. Move only if active environment threatens destruction (structural collapse, sewage, running water). If moving: use conservator-specified packing (archival glassine, acid-free backing, corner protectors). 	Posture Decision Record Movement Authorization Holding Zone Location Log
Phase 5 Hour 4 – 24	Conservator Arrival & Custody Handoff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Receive AIC-qualified conservator on-site. Conduct joint walkthrough of condition logs and environmental holding conditions. Review emergency stabilization interventions performed (zero touching confirmed). Execute formal Chain-of-Custody Handoff documenting receiving conservator credentials and transit destination. 	Signed Chain-of-Custody Conservator AIC Credential Destination Manifest
Phase 6 Parallel (<24h)	Scope Documentation & Billing Package	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compile complete scope of loss: inventory of pieces with policy schedule numbers. Reconcile billable line items: commercial labor rates, desiccant DH / HEPA run time, photo documentation. Submit 10–15% project management fee coordination package; confirm conservator billing channel (direct carrier vs pass-through). 	Comprehensive Scope of Loss Photo & Psychrometric Annex Carrier Billing Summary

INSURANCE STRUCTURE QUICK-CHECK

- Scheduled Inland Marine:** Agreed-value schedule (\$2.5K–\$10K threshold). Requires recent appraisal + conservator proposal. Full conservation covered.
- Blanket Fine Art:** Aggregate policy limit + per-item sublimit. Carrier may assign listed conservator.
- Standard Contents:** Modest sublimit (often ≤\$2,500). Severely underinsured; do not promise coverage.

NATIONAL CONSERVATOR DISASTER BENCH

- AIC-CERT Hotline (24/7):** 202-661-8068 (Emergency volunteer dispatch)
- National Disaster Labs:** B.R. Howard & Associates, Fine Arts Conservancy, Stella Art Conservation.
- Regional Centers:** Williamstown Art Conservation, ICA, West Lake Conservators, University & Museum labs.