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HOURS

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Saturday
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- Craig MacInnis, THE TORONTO STAR

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Scientists seek ways to preserve artifacts

WASHINGTON (AP) — Museum experts are struggling to find ways to prevent 20th Century artifacts from becoming the dust of history. Modern materials in paintings, sculpture and even space suits are flunking the test of time, they say.

Mary T. Baker, a scientist at the Smithsonian Institution, said Wednesday that polymer-based plastics have become an important part of modern life and thousands of objects and works of art collected in the nation's museums are made of this material. And many are rapidly decomposing, she said.

"We would like to think these polymer materials would last forever," Baker said at a convention of the American Chemical Society. "Unfortunately, we are finding that polymers degrade very quickly by museum standards. Museums tend to think in centuries."

Paintings made with acrylics and other modern tints can flake and crack within a short time, she said. Efforts to protect the works can speed up the deterioration.

"Coatings can yellow or become brittle, obscuring the paintings they were meant to protect," said Baker. "Adhesives can yellow or weaken, disfiguring or endangering the object they were used to repair."

Elyse Klein, a Smithsonian expert on art preservation, said some sculptors in the 1920s and 1930s worked in plastic materials that have rapidly crumbled away.

She said a work sculpted in the 1930s in nitrocellulose seemed to be in good shape while it was stored in a glass case. But when the work was exposed to ordinary air, it quickly disintegrated.

Klein said museum curators often don't know what materials are used in a work of art and without this knowledge, efforts at preservation can actually create more problems. Some now are turning to the FBI for chemical tests to identify all the compounds present in a painting.

Acrylic paints, introduced in 1953, now are used in about 75 percent of artistic paintings. And, yet, said Klein, there is still little known for sure about the best temperature and humidity for the storage of acrylic works, or how best to protect them. Methods used to preserve and restore paintings by the great masters of earlier centuries can actually destroy acrylic paintings.

Science still doesn't the best way to store and preserve many of the plastic objects now in the inventories of museums, said Baker. The result is the wholesale loss of art and artifacts.

"We're seeing losses in things that are only 10 to 20 years old, especially if they were stored under poor conditions," she said. "Even a simple cleaning can start deterioration in some things."

Eric B. Lange of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum said an effort is being made to find the best way of preserving 88 space suits from the early days of the space program.

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