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The Smithsonian Institution and the Rise of the American Conservation Laboratory After World War II

This paper traces the history of the Smithsonian Institution's Conservation Research/Analytical Laboratory (CRL/CAL) through the tenure of its first two directors alongside the broader development of American heritage conservation. I argue that the development of the CRL/CAL—which depended on the establishment of degree programs and professional bodies for conservators, alongside ongoing challenges in accreditation—represents a general trend in the second generation of American conservation, particularly in light of the Smithsonian's ultimately unrealized efforts to develop a degree program. The CRL/CAL were intimately tied to the foundation of international and American professional associations for conservation as well as nearly every major educational program in the U.S. Rutherford John Gettens served as the direct connection to early bodies (e.g. the International Institute for Conservation) and initiatives for a national laboratory for conservation. As the chair of the committee that formed the CRL, Gettens not only built the CRL in a laboratory model reminiscent of the Fogg Museum, his first conservation department, he and his fellow committee members emphasized other scientific elements of the new field. CAL is emblematic of the American conservation laboratory in its focus on formal education and accreditation while being unique as the most prominent conservation laboratory of a museum operated by the federal government, entangling it in American bureaucracy. Under Charles Olin, the key question of CRL was establishing the activities of the lab and the scope of conservation in the SI, while under Robert Organ, CAL greatly expanded the scale of its work.