

# The last museum piece

The key to a museum's soul lies  
in the one object it would save above all others  
in its collection

BY LYNDA RUTLEDGE STEPHENSON  
PHOTOS BY JOHN DZIEKAN

**T**he scene was a curator's worst nightmare. It happened late Friday afternoon, July 11, 1986, at the corner of Clark Street and North Avenue. Everyone had either gone home or was trying to, including the workers at an excavation site beside the Chicago Historical Society.

But something went wrong at the excavation site. Very wrong. A water main burst, shooting a 25-foot geyser, and in a matter of minutes the rushing water exploded under the exposed foundation of the CHS, buckling concrete and roaring through the society's basement storage facility, carrying crates, paintings and people in its wake.

The resulting mess was the worst disaster to hit the Historical Society, Chicago's vast, treasured memory bank, since the Great Chicago Fire. Weavings, sculptures, paintings, frames, bound newspapers, architectural drawings, slides and negatives—thousands of objects—all sodden. Totally—irreparably, it seemed—soaked. A 20,000-piece costume collection had been moved only days before, or the toll would have quadrupled.

The society's restoration work is a story of herculean efforts and amazing

*Lynda Rutledge Stephenson is a Chicago free-lance writer. John Dzekan is a Tribune photographer.*

expertise and has been written about widely, even becoming the subject of an award-winning PBS documentary. And the ultimate "death" toll, after all was said and done, was incredibly minuscule; the restoration was so successful. Only two architectural drawings and 12 paintings could not be saved. As director Ellsworth Brown put it, the society was "lucky beyond belief."

Yet even now he can still see the human chain passing the wet articles from hand to hand up from the basement and feel the strong, sad attachment everyone felt to each damaged piece.

Chicago is blessed with museums full of irreplaceable objects. What happened to the Chicago Historical Society could happen anywhere. So we decided to ask 15 Chicago museum leaders a "what-if" question guaranteed to curdle their blood: If a disaster occurred, what would be the one article they'd want to save, and why?

The responses ranged from bemusement to horror. Du Sable Museum Director Ramon Price put words to most of their thoughts when he replied, "That's like asking me whether I'd save my mother or my father." Two of Chicago's giant museums were overwhelmed at the prospect, if not outright offended. The Museum of Science and Industry respectfully declined to reply. The Art Institute's public-affairs director was aghast that we could even think of asking such a question and refused to pass it on to Director James Wood. (She followed up with a letter explaining how the museum operates in a disaster.)

But the rest responded with carefully considered answers. And the objects chosen by the following Chicago museum leaders speak volumes about each museum's philosophy, purpose and vision—as well as remind us how fragile the preservation of history and memory truly is.

## ■ MUSEUM OF HOLOGRAPHY

*Loren Billings, executive director and founder*

For the first time in the history of man's endeavor, we are now able to record three-dimensionally, as our eye naturally sees. The process is called holography. A hologram is actually a recording of light waves reflecting from an object illuminated by laser light that forms a three-dimensional image of the object.

As physicists tell me, holography and its mutations will be as important to mankind as the printing press. Now, though, it is in its embryonic stage, somewhat like photography was 165 years ago, even though you've already seen it on charge cards, in magazines, even CTA bus passes, which we produced. But these are minute compared to what we'll see in our lifetime. We'll be watching holographic movies and television, using holographic X-rays and taking holographic photos.

So with the realization that we are at the very birth of a whole new communication medium, what I'd want to save for posterity is the beginning of this medium—what it was like, and what we were like.

I'd save a hologram we call "Christina," for the model in it. The hologram is large, 24 by 24 inches, and it represents a significant development in holography. Made in 1979, it was one of the first flat holograms. It shows a breakthrough in the use of color, using five distinct hues, and is fully animated. That means that when you look at "Christina," you're looking at a three-dimensional image of a human being that is actually moving, greeting you and toasting you with a glass of wine.

But more than these achievements, "Christina" would be a good example of what we were like here at the beginning.

This is why our museum is here, to protect our beginnings for future generations and to introduce everyone to the future. And maybe that's another reason why I'd choose this hologram. I like the picture's action, the look "Christina" gives the viewer and then her toast. I almost feel as if she is toasting us and at the same time toasting the future she's already a part of.



Ramon Price of the Du Sable Museum of African-American History with a powder horn used by Barzillai Lew, who served during the American Revolutionary War.



Loren Billings of the Museum of Holography with the hologram "Christina," a pioneering work done in 1979.



Bruce Guenther of the Museum of Contemporary Art with a section of "Dwellings, 1981," by Charles Simonds. Built into and occupying an entire wall 8 feet high and 44 feet long, the sculpture depicts both the world we occupy physically and the world we live in in our imagination.