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EMINENT CONSERVATOR WINS FIRST PLOWDEN GOLD MEDAL

Garry Thomson CBE, the man who transformed the philosophy and methods of conservation of works of art worldwide, has been awarded the first Plowden Medal by The Royal Warrant Holders Association in recognition of his lifetime of commitment and achievement within the field of conservation. The Award citation records that “Without his work... many historical objects would not have survived as they do today.” Garry Thomson was presented with the Medal by The Lord Mayor of London, The Lord Levene at The Royal Warrant Holders luncheon in London on 1 June.

The gold medal, inaugurated this year, is awarded by The Royal Warrant Holders Association in memory of the late Hon. Anna Plowden, CBE, the leading conservator who was President Elect of the Association at the time of her death in 1997. The medal will be awarded annually to recognise the individual who has made the most significant recent contribution to the advancement of the conservation profession. It can also be awarded to recognise a lifetime of commitment and achievement within the profession.

Garry Thomson, 73, is the originator of preventive conservation as we know it today. His pioneering work on preventive care has changed fundamentally attitudes and procedures for preserving our moveable heritage. Methods he laid down have been almost universally adopted by the world’s museums and

galleries for the care of their collections. His contribution to painting conservation research included work on the safe transportation of paintings, and colour measurement of paintings.

He drew together the early thinking on damaging effects of light, pollution and incorrect temperatures and humidity on all types of artefact in his book 'The Museum Environment'. Written in 1978 it is still the 'bible' for preventive conservation. He also played a major part in the communication of conservation through his work for the International Institute for Conservation and his editorship of its journal, 'Studies in Conservation'.

Comments Roger Mitchell, President of The Royal Warrant Holders Association, "We are proud to make the first award of the Plowden medal to a conservator of such stature. His contribution to the practice of conservation and to the profession itself has been truly significant. His research, publications and guidance have been the stimuli and motivation behind the past 40 years of scientific and environmental activity in the world's galleries and museums. The choice of Garry Thomson as the first recipient of the medal sets the highest standard for future awards."

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Note to Editors:

Anna Plowden was a founding partner of Plowden & Smith Ltd, one of the world's largest commercial conservation enterprises. Granted a Royal Warrant of Appointment to HM The Queen in 1982 and to HM Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother then years later, Anna was elected to the Council of the Royal Warrant Holders Association in 1990.

Garry Thomson CBE

After graduating from Cambridge Garry Thomson joined the National Gallery in London as a research chemist in 1955 and from 1960 until his retirement in 1986 was Scientific Adviser to the Trustees and Head of the Scientific Department.

When he joined the Gallery his task was to assess damage to paintings after storage in quarries during the World War II. Realising this apparently local difficulty affected collections worldwide, he brought an entirely new approach and philosophy to the formerly purely 'restoration and repair' methods then adopted in the art and museum world.

With his eminent colleagues Joyce Plesters and Dr John Mills, he fostered a truly interdisciplinary approach to the conservation of paintings between art historian, conservator and scientist that has become the aspiration of museums throughout the world. This collaboration of disciplines, which had previously worked in isolation, opened a new chapter in the study and understanding of paintings.

Recognising that one of the greatest causes of damage to historic objects and paintings is their movement and transportation for exhibitions, he initiated the use of instruments within travelling cases to measure vibration, shock and climate change. He also designed packing cases where the type and density of protective packaging materials were calculated against the size and weight of the work of art. From this a science has developed on the effects of travel and transport on all forms of artefact. Protective packing and air-ride suspension vehicles are now the accepted norm. Plowden & Smith were at the forefront of implementing many of his innovations in their work with international exhibitions.

In 1977, with powerful support from the then Director of the National Gallery, Sir Michael Levey, he originated and edited the 'National Gallery Technical Bulletin' to bring together articles by the Gallery's restorers and scientists.

Garry Thomson was President of the International Institute for Conservation from 1983 to 1986 and editor of its journal 'Studies in Conservation' from 1959 to 1967. He lectured extensively to groups of students both in the UK and overseas. One of his regular engagements was the ICCROM 'Scientific Principles of Conservation' course in Rome, which drew many of its students from museums in the developing world. From 1986 to 1991 he also served as a Trustee of the National Museums and Galleries of Merseyside.

He was appointed CBE in 1983.

Publications: Recent Advances in Conservation (ed) – 1963

Museum Climatology (ed) – 1967

Museum Environment: 1978 2nd edition 1986