



Bridging the divide

How cultural heritage conservation spans the arts and sciences, universities and museums

"...conservators use their knowledge of art history, architecture, changing fashions and lifestyles to understand the context of the objects they work with, and to conserve them sensitively and appropriately."

Institute of Conservation

Cultural heritage conservation bridges the arts and sciences, creating an environment in which to examine both the composition of objects as well as their wider cultural and historical significance.

It is a wide ranging field with a remit that includes the care of paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, objects of decorative art and architecture. It is multidisciplinary, with conservators coming from a range of backgrounds, including the fine arts, art history and archaeology, chemistry, biology and materials science.

"Conservation – all that concerns the condition and the preservation of the work of art, the control of its environment and its restoration."

**1972 Training in the Conservation of Paintings
Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation**

Conservators work to maintain, preserve and protect objects from future damage and deterioration. Modern conservators abide by a strict code of conservation ethics, where the underlying principle is to preserve as much of the original work as possible.

For the Victoria and Albert Museum there are two sides to conservation, the "how" of choosing appropriate materials and techniques and the "why" of understanding "what is valued about an object so that, when conservation is finished, the underlying significance of the object is enhanced rather than diminished".

Why is conservation important?

Through the protection of historical objects, art conservators contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage both for us and for future generations. By preserving cultural objects and artifacts of importance to our shared understanding of our history and heritage, conservators help to create a sense of shared human identity, contributing to the quality of life of those who engage with it.

Conservation falls into two categories:

'preventive' and 'interventive' conservation.

Preventive conservation acts to slow down the rate of deterioration while interventive conservation aims to improve an object's stability, for example, restoring an object more closely to its original appearance and making it more intelligible to the public.

Research into the context and significance of an object can help the public understand and identify with the object. In this way the conservator can be seen as more than merely a protector or guardian of cultural heritage but as someone who works actively to promote public access and engagement with artefacts.

"Conservation makes an essential contribution to the whole of society, to education, to the advancement of knowledge, to tourism and to the economy; it ensures that our shared heritage is cared for and protected for the benefit, use and enjoyment of the public today and for generations to come."

Institute of Conservation

Arts and humanities research

Research helps to develop methods for the conservation and display of objects, maximising opportunities for public engagement with our cultural heritage. The treatment of the fore topsail of HMS Victory, used at the Battle of Trafalgar, is an example of the integration of conservation and research. The University of Southampton Textile Conservation Centre was involved in research to determine the best way to conserve and present the topsail.

Authenticity is a fundamental concept in conservation, crucial in determining a course of action for an object's treatment and art historians play a key role in establishing this. Archival research may be undertaken, for example in order to ascertain the history and prior treatment of an object, in order to inform choice of the most appropriate conservation methods. Documentary research and technical examination provide information about methods of construction, materials and artistic technique, give evidence of authenticity and confirm the attribution of an object, which adds value to the object on display.

Research and conservation often go hand in hand. For example, research conducted as part of the Victoria and Albert Museum project 'Medieval Tabernacle from Cologne' has increased understanding of the object, revealing it to be largely original, while preparing it for public display.



An example of recent conservation and research:

The 'Mazarin Chest Project' is a collaborative venture at the V&A, in association with colleagues in Japan, Germany and Poland. The project aims to develop an integrated approach to the conservation of lacquer objects and to apply this to the stabilisation of the Chest. Art historical research is being conducted to further understanding of the circumstances of the chest's production and its history, along with scientific research to inform the choice of conservation treatment.

Integrating research and practice

A great deal of active new research takes place outside of Higher Education, in major museums and galleries, such as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Heritage organisations, such as the National Trust and English Heritage, also have an active research element. There is considerable overlap between practice and research in these organisations, with practicing conservators often developing techniques and publishing papers to disseminate their research to both practicing conservators and the general public.

Recognising that significant research takes place outside of higher education institutions, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) gives museums and galleries the opportunity to apply for AHRC funding. The British Museum, the Tate and the Victoria and Albert Museum are among the ten organisations currently with AHRC 'Independent Research Organisation (IRO) status, bridging the gap between Higher Education Institutions and the practicing conservation sector.

Research also takes place, of course, within Higher Education Institutions, for example at the Courtauld Institute of Art, the AHRC Research Centre for Textile Conservation and Textile Studies, University of Southampton, and at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge. The Hamilton Kerr Institute has an active policy of publication and research, with staff and students contributing to academic journals and conference papers. The Royal College of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum collaboratively run an MA Conservation course that demonstrates the intersection between academic research and practice while other postgraduate courses include those at University College London, the University of Lincoln, and Cardiff University.

"Our research seeks out values that impinge on the material, cultural, historical and economical character of artefacts, and no avenue is out of bounds."

RCA/V&A MA Conservation course

The future of cultural heritage conservation

Research into the context of an object, the methods of its creator and its value to those at the time helps to communicate an object to the public. Arts and humanities research therefore has a key role to play in establishing and promoting an understanding of the values and cultural and historical significance of a conserved object and applying this to the conservation treatment.

The management of our cultural heritage has to adapt to changing social, economic and environmental conditions. The impact of climate change is, for example, a factor of central importance in a consideration of the future of the field. The aims, methods and approaches of conservation are, however, constantly evolving to address changing priorities and policy requirements while conservators themselves are adapting to meet new challenges. Engagement with the public, for example, is becoming increasingly important as conservators come to play a central role in developing widespread awareness of the importance of conservation in preserving our cultural capital.



The Hamilton Kerr Institute in the department of the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge. Established in 1976, the Institute is concerned with the conservation of easel paintings for public and publicly shown collections. The Institute was set up with the aim of "supplementing but not replacing the conservation and scientific departments in public museums and galleries". The Institute holds a number of archives relating to conservation and artistic practice. The Hamilton Kerr Institute provides conservation services for the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Royal Collection and the National Trust.

Science and Heritage Programme

The perceived importance of the arts and humanities researcher is demonstrated through the collaboration of the AHRC with the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) to jointly fund the Science and Heritage Programme, launched in 2008. The programme aims to build capacity through opportunities for collaboration among disciplines ranging from arts and humanities to science, engineering and technology and to fund interdisciplinary research. The programme is a response to the recommendations made by the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee report on Science and Heritage (2006).

AHRC Research Centre for Textile

Conservation and Textile Studies was established in 2002 with AHRC funding for 5 years. Based at the Textile Conservation Centre, at the University of Southampton's Winchester School of Art, the Centre is a leader internationally for the education of textile conservators and research into textile conservation. The Centre aims "to improve the care and interpretation of historic textiles by enhancing knowledge and understanding of textiles and textile conservation." Research at the Centre includes investigation of the links between surviving textiles and written records, including research into liturgical textiles of the Reformation and dress at Henry VIII's court. The protection of vulnerable textiles is a speciality of the Centre.

Cultural heritage conservation timeline

- 18th Century:** Restoration of classical statues fashionable – often involving crude and damaging methods.
- 1751** Society of Antiquaries founded by Royal Charter.
- 1849** John Ruskin's 'The Seven Lamps of Architecture' published.
- By the mid-19th Century:** specialists in restoration were employed by the British Museum.
- 1920** Research Laboratory founded at the British Museum.
- 1940** Manual on the Conservation of Paintings published in English.
- 1946** National Gallery Conservation Department established. Prior to this all conservation was carried out by contracted experts.
- 1947** 'Cleaned Pictures' exhibition at the National Gallery – showing the 74 paintings cleaned since 1936, accompanied by photographs.
- 1947** Weaver Committee appointed to report on the question of conservation at the National Gallery.
- 1948** Weaver Report mentions that only 32 paintings from the National Gallery were cleaned between 1900 and 1933.
- 1950** International Institute for Conservation founded.
- 1966** Art historian John Shearman was one of the art historians to help assess damage to art due to the Arno River flood in Florence and advised on restorations.
- 1969** The Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation commissioned a committee of enquiry to investigate the issue of training in the conservation of works of art, particularly paintings.
- 1972** Training in the Conservation of Paintings published [Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries].
- 1975** Department of Conservation established at the British Museum alongside the Department of Scientific Research – bringing together conservators from the Museum's antiquities departments and conservation scientists.
- 1976** Hamilton Kerr Institute founded in response to the 1972 Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation report on the conservation of paintings.
- 1980-94** Restoration of the Sistine Chapel – undertaken by a group of experts from the Vatican museums; art historian Professor Fabrizio Mancinelli supervises the work.
- 1985** Courtauld Institute of Art establishes Department for the Conservation of Wall Paintings.
- 1989** RCA/V&A Conservation MA established – offering "postgraduate learning and research opportunities through partnership and collaboration with leading museums and heritage organisations in London, and in association with Imperial College London."
- 1991** V&A Conservation Journal founded – includes information about research in the Museum's Conservation Department.
- 1992** Professor James Beck founds ArtWatch to "protect the integrity of works of art from increasingly ambitious and injurious restoration/conservation treatments."
- 2003** 'Art and Design History and Conservation Group' established at London Metropolitan University.
- 2005** Institute of Conservation created by amalgamation of a number of smaller organisations.
- 2006** House of Lords Science and Technology Committee report on Science and Heritage.
- 2008** Science and Heritage Programme launched – funded by the AHRC and EPSRC.
- 2008** 12 June: Textile Conservation Centre Foundation and Institute of Conservation (ICON) organise a summit on the challenges facing conservation education in Britain – an important first step towards development of a national UK strategy for education and training in conservation.
- 2008** Textile Conservation Centre Foundation commissions John Holden of Demos to undertake research exploring the cultural value of conservation: 'Saved for the Nation: the cultural value of conservation.'

