Theory, History, and Ethics of Conservation Working Group

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Theory, History, and Ethics of Conservation Working Group
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From the Coordinator

Hello my fellow members of Theory, History, and Ethics of Conservation Working Group! This year was particularly proficuous for our group. The meeting with the Directory Board in March led to a name change that allowed us to put Ethics within the name (and scope) of the group. This step was essential to make the route that this group has undertaken throughout the last few years official. This also means that hopefully we will be seeing more submissions regarding this theme in the next triennial.

In the next section of this Newsletter, called Perspectives, three contributions explore different issues of great importance for this and other Working Groups: Joyce Stoner and Rebecca Rushfield give us an update on the FAIC Oral History Project, Ayesha Fuentes explores the ethics of dealing with human remains in institutions, and Esther van Duijn provides some details about the upcoming conference on the histories of conserving Rembrandt paintings at the Rijksmuseum. I would like to thank all authors who kindly contributed to this Newsletter, and have therefore made this publication all the richer for sharing their thoughts and experiences.

As a final thought, I hope that we will be able to further develop the plans that we set forth in the beginning of this triennium. I'm very happy that at least one of the goals - including Ethics within the scope of our ICOM-CC group - has been already fulfilled and I feel truly optimistic about the upcoming years. Last but not least, I have to thank the Assistant Coordinators for all their support during this journey, and all the work they have done for this Working Group.

Hélia Marçal, Portugal
Coordinator for the Theory, History, and Ethics of Conservation Working Group
2017-2020

From the Editor

Dear fellow ICOM-CC Theory, History, and Ethics Working Group members:

First of all, welcome to the 22nd edition of the ICOM-CC Theory, History, and Ethics Working Group Newsletter. For the past year, I have served as an Assistant Coordinator for our Working Group and I am pleased to announce that I will be assisting Hélia Marçal, Coordinator for the Theory, History, and Ethics of Conservation Working Group, in editing our Newsletter.
big thank you to all those who contributed to this Newsletter! If you would like to contribute your perspective to our Newsletter, please don’t hesitate in contacting me with your thoughts and suggestions.

Davina Kuh Jakobi, USA
Editor for the Theory, History, and Ethics of Conservation Working Group Newsletter
Assistant Coordinator for the Theory, History, and Ethics of Conservation Working Group
Dear members of the ICOM-CC “Theory, History, and Ethics of Conservation” working group:

We hope you will all think about doing interviews with senior colleagues in your geographical or specialty areas for the FAIC Oral History Project. We now have over 360 interview transcripts available to researchers [for an updated list, please consult http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/FAIC_Oral_History_Project_Interviewee_List or email jhstoner@udel.edu as the list changes weekly]. Information from the file was incorporated into talks by Esther van Duijn and Joyce Hill Stoner at the Copenhagen ICOM-CC Theory and History group session in September 2017 and will be featured as one of the keynote talks at the upcoming “Rembrandt Conservation Histories” conference at the Rijksmuseum 7-9 November 2018 as well as in Rebecca Rushfield’s presentation at the “Migrants: art, artists, materials and ideas crossing borders” conference in Cambridge, 15-16 November 2018.

A little background on the file:
In 1974 Rutherford John Gettens, one of America’s pioneer conservation scientists who worked at the original technical laboratory of the Fogg Art Museum, spoke at the American Institute for Conservation meeting in Cooperstown, New York: “To come to the point quickly, I think we should begin to think about collecting material for a history of the conservation of cultural property.” He went on to remark: “Knowledge of the beginnings and growth of our profession is a necessary background for training programs in art conservation...We wouldn't really be a profession without a stepwise history of growth.” Gettens emphasized the necessity of recording personal recollections, anecdotes, and informal doings that would tie together “serious events.” After the meeting, he went to his summer home and began to make handwritten notes about his early experiences at the Fogg, but died only ten days later.

To continue Gettens’s proposal, George Stout, W. Thomas Chase, and Joyce Hill Stoner met in March 1975 and discussed the possibility of beginning an oral history project and establishing an archive to safeguard early records associated with the conservation profession. Six months later, in September, the board of directors of the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation (FAIC) approved the project under the leadership of Joyce Hill Stoner; the first interview took place on September 4, 1975 (with George Stout, Richard Buck, Mrs. Gettens, Chase, and Stoner), and in 1976 Winterthur Museum consented to house the oral histories and archives. In 2004, the files were officially transferred to the Winterthur Archives for professional management. Over the years, more than 130 international volunteer conservators and students have assisted with conducting interviews, and FAIC has provided funding on an annual basis for transcriptions. There are now more than 360 transcripts on file, most available as digital files, with signed releases and open to researchers, available by request through email: jhstoner@udel.edu. Please also email for an “instruction packet” for interviewers.
An opinion piece regarding human remains, objects and ethics in cultural institutions
Ayesha Fuentes, Objects conservator/PhD candidate
SOAS University of London

Anyone working in collections management or cultural heritage knows that human remains are a unique material category that requires special handling, documentation and storage. In both the US and in the UK/Europe, there are legal protections for these objects and institutions like museums and universities are held accountable for their treatment of human remains. In many storage spaces, these materials occupy a discreet area or have a particular identifying label. There is also a specific administrative protocol to gain access to these objects as a researcher and at some larger institutions, there is a designated officer who coordinates these requests and is charged with associated obligations.

As a conservator and PhD candidate, my research examines the use of human remains in Tibetan ritual objects. When I tell this to colleagues – in both museums and academia - their first question is about ethical oversight. I’ve visited, documented and examined hundreds of skull cups and thigh-bone trumpets in cultural institutions across the US and UK. In my experience, these objects - which largely represent Buddhist ritual instruments, not relics or ancestral remains - are treated as part of the general human remains category. The ethical presumption on the part of the institution is that all human remains - and the communities from which they are sourced - are culturally sensitive in the same ways.

While the protections that exist for human remains are the product of many years of education and effort, and represent a significant display of self-
awareness on the part of cultural institutions, within this, there is still room for some discourse about motivation, interpretation and ethics. For most research institutions or cultural heritage administrators, there is little or no distinction within the category of human remains for vastly different objects, such as Victorian hair jewelry, a Chilean mummy, and a Tibetan skull drum. Rather, cultural and funerary objects, ritual instruments, relics and recovered burials are generalized for administrative purposes, despite the diversity of their functions and cultural histories they represent. Though many institutions have attempted to diversify their perspectives on the origin and acquisition of objects, it is worthwhile to reflect on how concepts of ‘responsible custodianship’ are constructed and enforced.

In my training as a conservator of archaeological and ethnographic objects, I had the sense that a consultation with a member of the source community was the best way to facilitate a resolution for a contentious object or topic. Of course, no one can expect the consensus of an entire community - or an association of communities representing a culture - from a small sample of its members. In my own work with ritual practitioners, I’ve seen skulls handled with silk scarves, used as public donation urns and filled with brandy. Therefore, the diversity of opinions on best practices for handling seems irreconcilable from an institutional perspective.

Through my research, I became aware of the complexities of this issue: for example, Tibetan ritual objects distinguish themselves by reinforcing the lessons of Buddhism through their construction. These vessels, costumes and instruments are meant to illustrate - through the use of human remains and through the identification of the handler with the object - the lesson of impermanence. Therefore, these objects represent a very different concept of materiality, one that does not hold human remains as any kind of exception.

This is not a provocation to re-write administrative protections for human remains in cultural institutions, where they exist. Rather, my observation is that the management of human remains is conditioned by the legacy of colonialism, industrialization and the intellectual cultures through which many of these institutions were developed. It is useful, perhaps, to consider this an episode in the altered life and identity of the object as it moves between bodies of institutional knowledge.

Across the history of material and artistic culture, human remains have had a variety of (albeit, niche) applications. Furthermore, they are interpreted, handled and received differently both between cultures and within them. The existing ethical standards of cultural institutions demonstrate that they are mindful of their responsibilities towards possessing and interpreting the remains of others. Though hopefully, they might yet be open to the complexity of the task.
A monk holds a skull decorated with colored dough, used as bowl to collect and hold offerings at the New Year celebration. The provenience of the skull is unknown. Photo by author.

Symposium Rembrandt Conservation Histories
Esther van Duijn

On 8 and 9 November 2018, the Rijksmuseum will host an international symposium on the history of conservation of paintings by the Dutch 17th-century master, Rembrandt van Rijn.

Occasion
The symposium is organised on the occasion of the research and treatment of the Portraits of Marten Soolmans and Oopjen Coppit by Rembrandt van Rijn, jointly acquired by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Musée du Louvre in Paris. It will be the first in a series of conferences on the history of conservation. In the future, similar conferences will be organised on the treatment history of paintings by Frans Hals, Johannes Vermeer and Jan Steen.

Rembrandt
Rembrandt’s paintings are distributed all over the world throughout major collections. Some works have been in the same city or collection for centuries. The Night Watch has never left the city of Amsterdam apart from its peregrinations during World War II. Other paintings, such as the Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) have travelled widely and changed ownership several times. Every country has its own traditions, developments and approaches to conservation, with important restorers who have played a key role in the treatment and appearance of Rembrandt paintings. These important masterpieces often have the dubious honour of having undergone numerous conservation treatments in the past. Because of the significance of the paintings, these treatments are generally well documented. For instance, The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp (Mauritshuis, The Hague) has undergone twenty-three documented treatments, while those of The Night Watch (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) total twenty-five.

Scope
The aim of this conference is to heighten awareness of how the appearance and condition of paintings by Rembrandt can (partly) be explained by their treatment history.

The program in short
- On the afternoon of Wednesday 7 November we offer a tour through the Rijksmuseum Conservation Altelier during pre-registration.
- On Thursday 8 November the symposium kicks off with poster pitch sessions and presentations, including a keynote lecture by Gregor Weber (Head of Fine and Decorative Arts, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) as well as presentations on the conservation histories of Marten & Oopjen and The Night Watch. The day will conclude with drinks in the Foyer.
- On Friday 9 November poster pitch sessions and presentations continue, includ-
Opportunities

Call for papers
“New Perspectives: Contemporary Conservation Thinking and Practice”
Belfast Waterfront, Belfast, Northern Ireland on 12-14 June 2019
Deadline: 31 October 2018

The Institute of Conservation is inviting contributions for the 4th international triennial conference to be held 12-14 June 2019 at the Belfast Waterfront, Northern Ireland. The theme of the conference is “New Perspectives: Contemporary Conservation Thinking and Practice” and will explore the latest research, practical applications and innovative thinking in conservation. It will bring together conservators of all specialities and disciplines, and wide-ranging professionals from across the breadth of the heritage sector. Preference will be given to papers that address at least one of the following topics:

Conservation science informing practical solutions
Collaborations outside the heritage sector informing conservation solutions
Theoretical approaches in current conservation practice
Application and refinement of published treatments
Scientific research supporting regional and national heritage collections
Failed treatments and lessons learned informing current conservation practice
Updates on traditional treatments and methods
The evolution and role of new technologies
New materials: new treatment strategies
Taking samples: justified means of understanding and resolving practical issues
Outdoor surfaces and treatments
Nanotechnology and conservation
Conservation of modern design processes
Perspectives on conserving the intended 'look', 'surface', 'structure', 'purpose'

Dealing with complex installations with multi-media components
Having it large: monumental treatments
Treating multi-layered structures/surfaces
The realm of digital craft and smart technology informing conservation thinking and practice

Extended themes for relevant, strategic and sustainable conservation thinking in the 21st century:
Relevant leadership skills in conservation for a sustainable, predominant and effective presence in the wider cultural and creative sectors and beyond
Developing new platforms and support mechanisms for ambitious conservators with innovative ideas and leadership skills
Strategic partnerships and campaigns working in conservation
Promoting conservation to heritage/cultural leaders, directors and policy-makers
Connectivity: challenges in connecting to relevant sectors, building collaborations and increasing significance and awareness of conservation to the wider environment
Challenges in supporting and leading diversity and socio-economic groups in the conservation sector
Relevance of grassroots thinking towards a progressive conservation movement
Sustainability of the profession: conserving the conservation role
Keeping up with societal cultural consumption: barriers in connecting conservation to the wider social, economic and political environment
Developing accessible career pathways for newcomers to conservation
Contemporary skills required for the contemporary conservation practitioner
The role and responsibilities of the next generation of conservation thinkers and practitioners, and identifying barriers between them and the current heritage and cultural environments
Evolving conservation teaching, training and apprenticeships: combating barriers in diversifying entry routes into conservation training/educational systems
Widening social representation: strengthening the ‘personality’ and ‘voice’ of the conservation sector and the value of different perspectives
Website: https://icon.org.uk/icon-conference-2019

Abstract submission: Plenary and Group sessions should aim to be 20 minutes long with 10 minutes for questions at the end of each talk. Please submit an abstract of max. 250 words in English via the abstract portal https://icon.org.uk/events/icon-conference-2019/call-for-papers by 31 October 2018.

“Conservation Matters in Wales December 2018: More than an object? Conserving our intangible heritage”
Insole Court, Cardiff, Wales on 19 December 2018
Deadline: 2 November 2018

A one day conference “Conservation Matters in Wales December 2018: More than an object? Conserving our intangible heritage” organised by Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales, The Federation of Museums and Art Galleries of Wales, and Cardiff University will explore the relationship between the conservation of tangible heritage and its associated intangible values.
Conservation has been traditionally associated with the “do not touch” message generated by a desire to protect but this approach can also erect barriers between communities and their cultural heritage. The conference celebrates the work of collections care professionals that breaks down this barrier and reconnects communities with their heritage. Papers are welcomed that demonstrate a conservation approach informed by a combination of preservation of intangible and tangible heritage values. These may include:
Public consultation
Conservation of skills
Community participation
Memory
Effective sustainable practice
Lessons learned
Object’s significance and value

Contributors are also sought to launch the discussion with thoughts or case studies for a 2 minute presentation (no PowerPoint) that explores the question: “How do those in collections care contribute to the wider mission of an organisation.”
The conference hashtag will be #consinwales and welcomes suggestions for presentations that may be shared virtually. The conference will conclude with an open floor discussion.

Website: http://conservatorswales.blogspot.co.uk

Abstract submission:
Proposals are invited for 20 minute presentations, 5 minute shorts, workshops or discussions that explore the conference’s broad theme. If you are interested in speaking please send a brief summary of your proposal to William Tregaskes at ad-
“Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in the Conservation of Contemporary Art”
Maastricht, the Netherlands on 24–27 March 2019
Deadline: 10 November 2018

NACCA (New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art) is hosting a symposium on “Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in the Conservation of Contemporary Art” which will aim to strengthen the exchange between theory and practice in the conservation of contemporary art by exploring promising practices (and failures) and by critically questioning its conditions and drawbacks. It is a collaboration between the EU funded Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (NACCA), the Maastricht Centre for Arts and Culture, Conservation and Heritage (MACCH) and the Bonnefantenmuseum Maastricht. Next to the presentation of the 15 NACCA PhD projects, it will host several keynote lectures, panels and round tables.

Papers addressing one of the following themes are welcome:

Theoretical attempts to rethink the artwork and artist intent and their implications for conservation ethics and decision-making
New modes of production, new modes of collecting
New materials and materiality
New approaches to documentation and archiving
Challenging professional and institutional roles and responsibilities; expanded networks: collaborations and controversies
Art, law and the market

Website: http://nacca.eu/symposium-2019-call/
Abstract Submission: Maximum length of the papers will be 15 minutes. Please send an abstract (max. 200 words) with a short bio (100 words max) to Yleen Simonis at nacca-fasos@maastrichtuniversity.nl by 10 November 2018.

“Conservation of Canvas Paintings”
Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA 15-16 October 2019
Deadline: 12 November 2018

With funding from the Getty Foundation as part of its Conserving Canvas initiative, the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage (IPCH) at Yale University will hold an international symposium on the conservation of canvas paintings on October 15-18, 2019, in New Haven, Connecticut, USA. The symposium will address historical approaches to and theories of the structural treatment of canvas paintings; current methods, materials, and research, both practical and scientific; and the challenges facing the structural conservation of modern and contemporary works. It aims to add to the critical thinking cultivated by the highly influential conference on Comparative Lining Techniques that was organised by the International Institute for Conservation (IIC) and held at the Greenwich Maritime Museum in 1974, and the more recent United Kingdom Institute for Conservation (UKIC) conference Lining and Backing held in London in 1995.

Submissions for 20-minute presentations and posters are invited from relevant topics, with a special interest in the following:
“Living Matter (the preservation of biological materials used in contemporary art)/La Materia Viva (conservación de materiales orgánicos en el arte contemporáneo)”

Mexico City, Mexico 3-4 June 2019

Deadline: 15 November 2018

The Getty Conservation Institute, the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma Mexico, and ENCRyM (Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía “Manuel del Castillo Negrete”) of the National Institute of Anthropology and History are organising the symposium “Living Matter/ La Materia Viva”, which will discuss the broad implications and challenges (conceptual, ethical, and practical) associated with collecting, displaying, and preserving contemporary works that include biological materials. It will explore how the initial intention for the work might conflict with museum policies and the ways this might impact both the nature and lifespan of the work, present a range of possible solutions through case studies, and give an overview of current thinking and practices on this topic.

Papers dealing with philosophical and ethical considerations, historical perspectives, collaborations with artists and across disciplines, case studies, updates on research projects, documentation strategies, as well as papers presenting innovative solutions and approaches are welcomed.

The symposium languages will be English and Spanish.

Abstract submission: Abstracts will be accepted in English and Spanish; however the
symposium proceedings will be English language. Abstracts should include the full title of the paper, a summary of 350 words max., and should include the author’s name, affiliation, and contact details. Please submit abstracts to livingmatter@getty.edu by 15 November 2018.