

The adolescence of the profession

Jonathan Ashley-Smith

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Introduction

Adolescence, and by association the conservation profession, is shown in Fig. 1 as reflective, potentially creative, and moody. Although the word conservation does not appear in the title it is the conservation profession that I want to talk about. I will not attempt a definition of conservation. The idea that you can describe a complex subject such as conservation in a single sentence or concise mission statement is probably one cause of the internal arguments that keep conservation in an adolescent state. Obviously it is something to do with activities like mending, cleaning, restoring, through to preserving, and these days to sustaining.

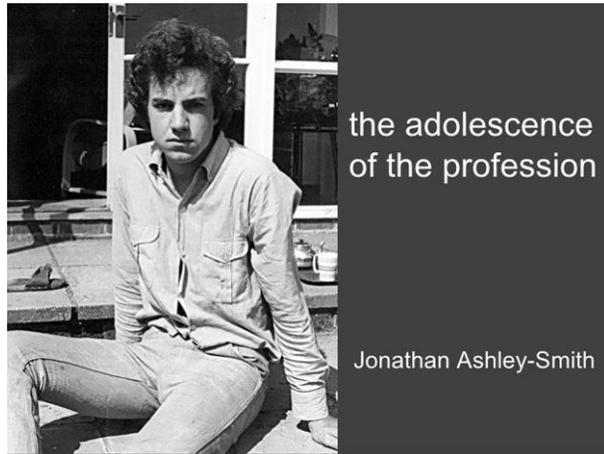


Fig. 1

My thesis is that the conservation profession is adolescent. But that is not meant as a criticism. Personally I have remained adolescent for the last half century and have yet to be persuaded of the value of maturity. My qualifications for talking about this subject are long experience and deep and meaningful research for a couple of days on the internet. As far as conservation is concerned I have, for thirty five years, worn the colours of one of the many gangs that roam the streets of conservation. As far as professionalism goes, my father was a chartered architect, my wife is a chartered accountant and I am a chartered chemist. And I have read the definition of a profession on Wikipedia.

As far as adolescence is concerned, obviously I have been there (Fig. 2). My wife and I met when we were young and were married when we were chronologically adolescent. We are shown here demonstrating mock aggressive behaviour, rebels without a clue, typical of the conservation profession in the UK during the late 1970s and early 80s.

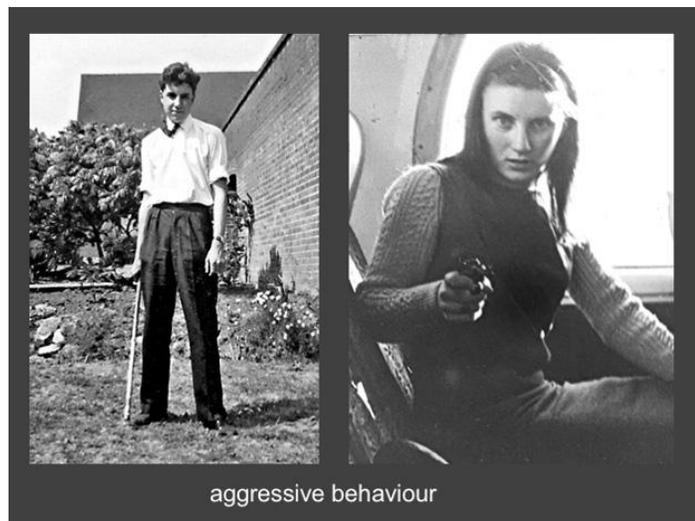


Fig. 2

Together we have spawned and released into the wild two further adolescents (Fig. 3), shown here demonstrating inertia and indifference, typical of much of the UK profession in the 1990s.



Fig. 3

The meaning of the word

When we use the word 'conservation' we can mean a number of different things. It is used to describe an action, people say 'I conserved this', having no idea whether they have conserved it or not. They have merely treated it, and have no notion of the future outcome. In an institution the word 'Conservation' refers to a department, that group of people who are somewhat 'other' (Fig. 4) who live at the back of the museum. (And who in the days when there were parties were reputed to hold the best parties in the museum). The point I am trying to make here is that the profession, as it exists now, consists of people. We are not like other professions that can be identified by obvious physical symbols such as churches, law courts, or hospitals. There is no statue of a blindfold lady holding aloft a cotton bud to represent our ethical principles.

The people of conservation can be old and somewhat formal (Fig. 5). Spot the odd one out. Or young and relaxed (Fig. 6). Spot the odd one out. Conservators are not like doctors or policemen who seem to get younger every year. Conservators always seem to get older, or maybe just individually more mature.

So Conservation consists of a group of people who like to meet and have group photos taken. They belong to a movement composed of professional people, they do not necessarily belong to a mature profession. The people shown in Fig. 7 are obviously professional, they are shown here at the end of a gruelling few days of continuing professional development. But one look confirms that they are not doctors, accountants or lawyers. They do not belong to one of the mature 'brass nameplate' professions.

Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Supporting evidence



At an international conference in the year 2000, Jane Henderson (Fig. 8), someone who has spent a great deal of her time and effort trying to professionalise conservation, asked the question “Is Conservation a profession?”. She gave the answer that, at least in the UK, we are not a profession. She was using a checklist similar to the one that can be found on Wikipedia today describing the various attributes that define a profession. The UK movement at that time could not tick all the boxes.

Fig. 8

You may think that the accusation that conservation is not mature is rather unfair, after all we have been going for quite a long time. The International Institute for Conservation was founded more than fifty years ago. The UK group of IIC, later UKIC, was formed in 1958, the American group a few years before that. The Conservation Committee of ICOM was formed in the early 1960s. However, neither of the two major international bodies qualify as ‘professional’, IIC is not exclusive, anyone can join. Yet neither is it totally inclusive, you can write for the IIC journal (*Studies in Conservation*), speak at an IIC conference, even win one of the Institute’s prestigious prizes, without being a member. By formal definition ICOM-CC excludes those that do not work in museums, thus excluding a large proportion of the conservation movement as voting members.

One of the qualifications for status as a profession is some form of control over the provision and standards of professional education and training. In 2009 UK conservation lost two major training programmes without being able in any way to influence the people responsible for the closures.

Yet, if you look at the ICOM-CC website there is a definition of a professional conservator-restorer, written in 1978 and adopted in 1984. So there has been a definition of a profession for 25 years. Still that is not very long if you consider that most of the ‘brass nameplate’ professions had received their royal charters by the middle of the 19th century. So we are very young even if we feel we are mature. However, the ICOM-CC definition is not actually the definition of a profession, but rather a definition of an individual working in a professional manner within a particular area of expertise.

From the 1980s conservators thought that they could define professional status in terms of codes of ethics. So in Europe we have the ECCO (European Confederation of Conservator-Restorer Organisations) professional guidelines and code of ethics. Even in the UK, where we have opted out of ECCO, conservators who wish to become accredited still have to swear allegiance to this code. On the ECCO website there is evidence that the profession is not yet mature in that ECCO ‘seeks to develop ... the profession’. We are not yet fully developed.

If you want your code of ethics to cover all the diverse activities in a large and complex movement then much of the guidance will be generic, defining easily recognised good behaviour; smile at people, don't steal, don't tell lies. Yet even when it comes to the areas that are specific to this one activity the guidance is bound to be vague to the point of uselessness.

Foundational principles

The ethics of conservation has several well-rehearsed foundational principles, whose limitations are recognised yet which have been adopted as ideals. However it is so easy to pick holes in them that they seem an unwise choice for a foundation.

For instance Article 8 of the ECCO code deals with 'minimal intervention':

The Conservator-Restorer ... should limit the treatment to only that which is necessary.

Necessary for what? To please me, to please you, to please the boss? Necessary to create a bright shiny new looking working object or necessary to leave it as a pathetic neglected hulk?

Article 15 deals with the sacredness of original material, and indeed the sanctity of the status quo. You should not remove material from cultural heritage items. But if you do, you should keep and document what you remove. So if you want to do what most practical conservators have to do at some time, clean an object, you shouldn't remove the dirt. But if you do, you should keep it.

The killer clause in the ECCO guidance appears in Article 3 of the General Principles:

The conservator/restorer has the right in all circumstances to refuse any request which s/he believes is contrary to the terms or spirit of this Code.

Tell that to your tutor, your section head, your head of department, your director. It will not wash. You have the right to believe you have that right, you just don't have the right to exercise that right.

Alienation

If you find yourself in this unfair position, where you think you are allowed to think something but you aren't actually allowed to do so, you are bound to end up, like adolescents, in a state of alienation. Something I came across during my internet research is this:

the alienated person carries conflicting self images
e.g. strong/weak, (or in our case, justified and over-ruled)
and is never happy in any environment.

Lets look at the conflicting self images of the conservator. Originally there were people who, armed with cotton buds and scalpels, did things to objects. Then, worried that they were not being scientific enough called in the scientists. Eventually the two amalgamated and you had a scientifically trained person, wielding a scalpel, who still did physical things to objects. (Fig. 9).

And then people thought that doing really useful things was a bit dangerous, and so they began to 'care' for objects, maybe gently remove the dust, or even become a manager of dusters (Fig. 10). But there was still a grounding in science. However the scientific view has been overtaken by the

beliefs indigenous people, first nations, people who believe in the spiritual values of objects to the exclusion of rational science.

So it is no wonder that conservation, as a group of people, has become confused by these conflicting images of what conservation, as a subject, really is. However, another thing I learned on the internet is that adolescents are exceptionally good at coping with such conflicts.

conflicting self images

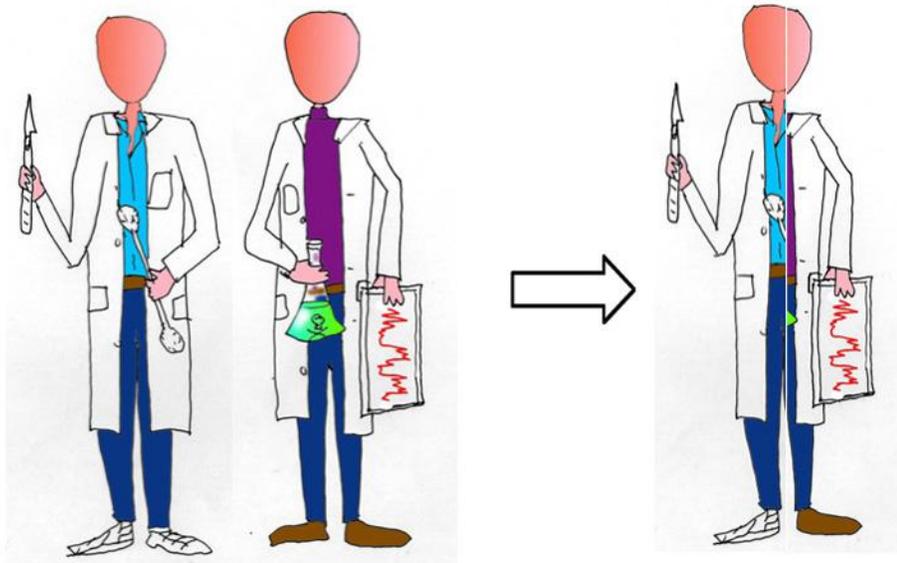


Fig. 9

conflicting self images

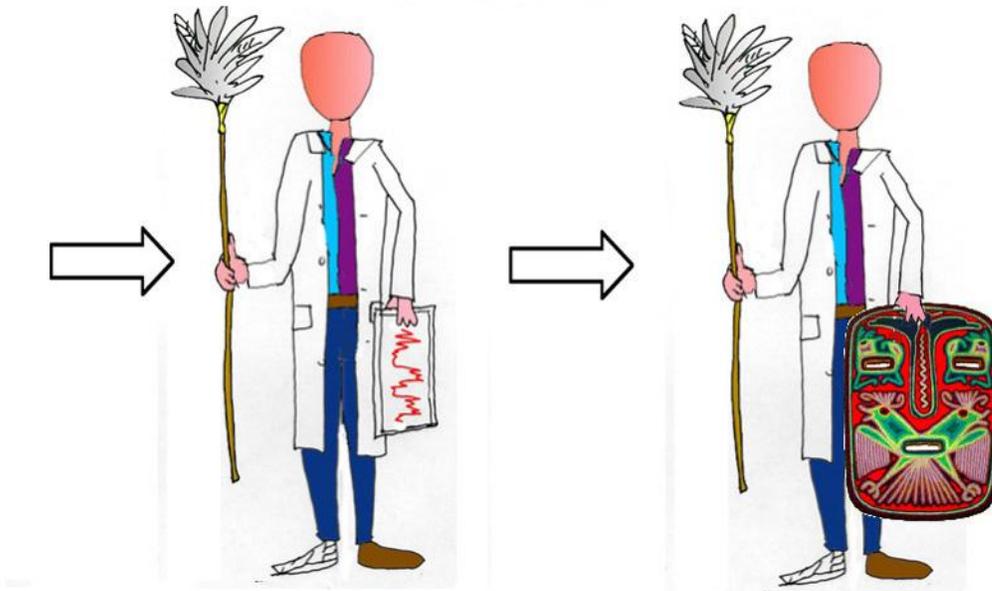


Fig. 10

Adolescent behaviour

Below is a list of typical adolescent behaviours. If you are familiar with conservators, or conservation departments or institutions will recognize some or all of these.

- Don't do homework
- Do follow the latest craze
- Spend money irrationally
- Recite "its not fair"
- Blame anyone but yourself
- Believe you can find anything on the internet
- Join a gang

I am only going to discuss one of these: 'join a gang'. As I said, I have for a long time worn the colours of just one of the gangs of conservation. There are many of them. Unfortunately these gangs do not engage with each other in the colourful and boisterous fashion of the Sharks and Jets in West Side Story (Fig. 11). They are more inclined to sit and mope in dejected isolation (Fig. 12).

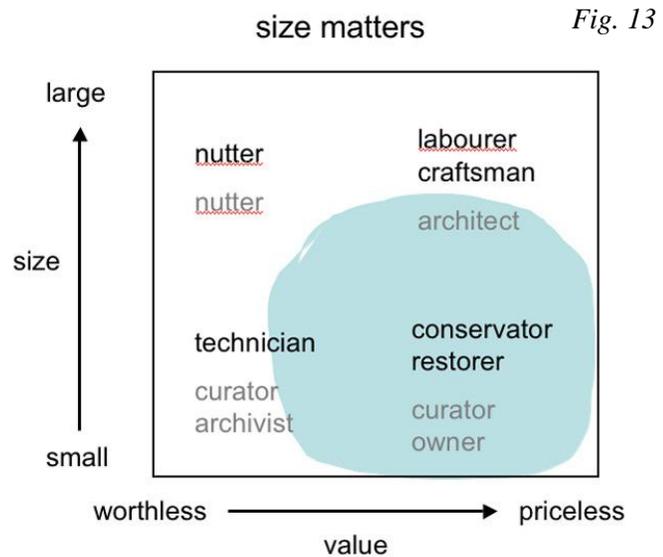


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

The thing that distinguishes these gangs is size. Size matters. Fig. 13 shows a graphic with 'size' as one axis and 'value' as the other, size from small to large, value from worthless to priceless. The bottom right hand corner is populated by objects that are small enough to be carried by one or two people and have high individual value. Conservation work on these objects is carried out by conservators and restorers. The people who ask for the work to be done are curators or owners. Moving over to small but worthless, the work usually done by technicians who work for an archivist or curator.



In the area of very large, but not greatly valued objects the work is requested by, and carried out by, nutters. Nutter is the technical term for enthusiasts, often people with a great deal of technical knowledge and skill, and a great deal of time on their hands. For very large and highly valued object the work is very often done by labourers and craftsmen. The work is organized by architects. Architects are a profession, and have, unlike conservators, chosen to do things that really matter and to make things change.

The shaded area marks the territory of the gang that I am proud to be a member of, but even in this limited area there are rival gangs.

The quick and the dead

What I have described refers only to dead things. There is a very much larger and well organised gang that uses the same title and the same vocabulary but has nothing to do with people like us. This is the Nature conservation gang. The website for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has a section for 'Conservation Professionals'. So Nature conservation has professionals but it does not necessarily define itself as a profession.

Back with the dead, the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC) promotes itself as "the home of the conservation professional", but my gang would never think of that as home. The IHBC website makes no attempt to define the profession.

Convergence and Diversity

Returning to Jane Henderson, in 2000 she said " we must realise that what unites us as conservators is far more significant than what divides us". This was an attempt to promote the idea of the unification of the proliferation of small diverse gangs that existed in the UK. The idea was accepted and now we have one major organisation, the Institute of Conservation (ICON). ICON claims to be "the lead voice for the conservation of the cultural heritage". (With the possible exclusion of architecture and historic sites as they are still run by other more powerful gangs.) ICON does not loudly or openly claim to be the voice or the home of a profession.

The danger of believing that we are one united group is thinking that we should therefore all believe in exactly the same things and all work in exactly the same way.

Look at the relative success of the two major organisations IIC and ICOM-CC. IIC does not have a specialist focus, except perhaps a tendency towards science, and has a declining membership. ICOM-CC seems to glory in diversity, the main Directory Board has the devil of a time trying to herd together the various specialist working groups. At the moment the membership of ICOM-CC is increasing. What divides us is important, the different specialisms should not be lost in the face of universal ideas such as sustainability and climate change. We should be concentrating on the specialist needs of the objects. What distinguishes us is important, our unique selling point (USP) is that we can make a difference. We shouldn't let ourselves, as we seem to be, slide into this generic 'care' mode and abandon physical intervention and other useful activities.

You might imagine that with long established international conservation bodies we now have total global diversity and fully appreciate all of the possible views that ever could be about

approaches to the conservation of cultural heritage. But the conservation map of the world is an unusual shape (Fig. 14), there are whole areas of experience and skills, of attitudes to conservation, that are yet to be explored.

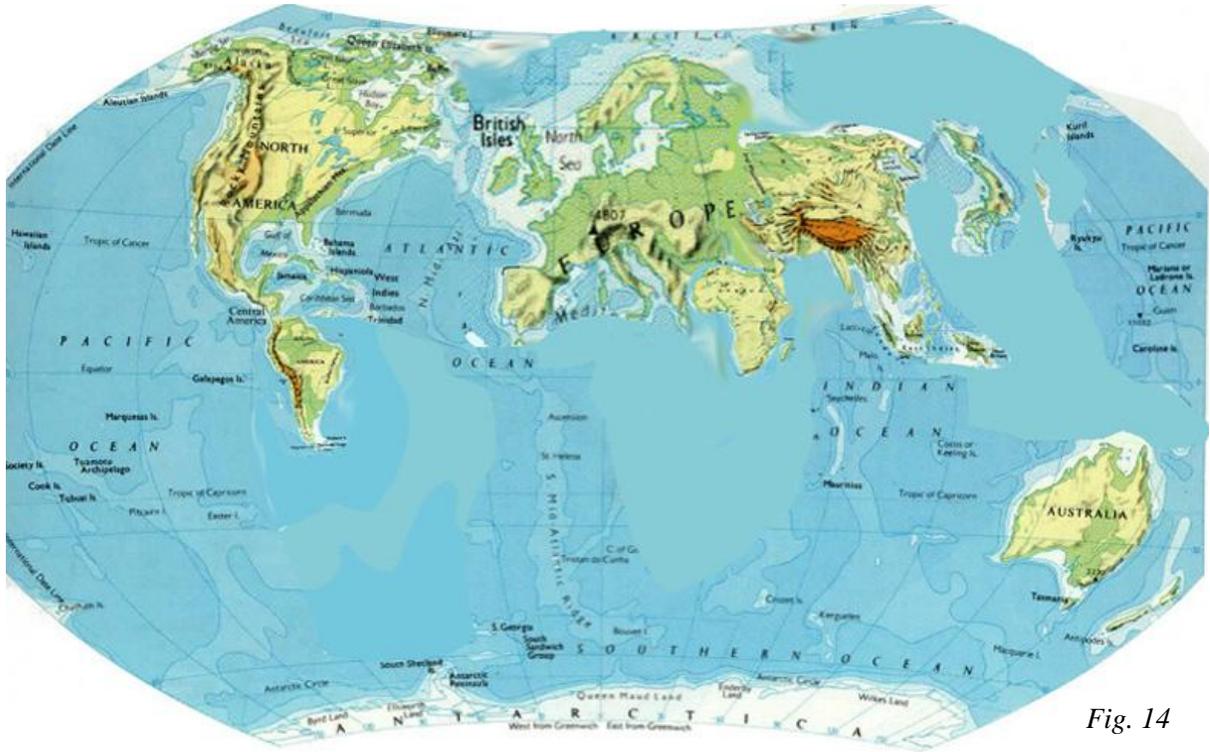


Fig. 14

Conclusion

There is ample evidence to show that we still have a long way to go, we are not yet mature. But we will be OK if we remember:

professional individuals do not have to belong to a ‘profession’

the USP of Conservation is using specialist skills to make a difference

there are many ways to achieve the same ends - embrace diversity

stay young!

There is no pressure to grow up too quickly.