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Growing Pains – the development of a conservation profession

Jane Henderson and Diane Dollery

ABSTRACT

In developing from a craft to a profession, individual conservators have evolved their intellectual and manual skills in many specialist fields. However as many conservators primarily define themselves by their specialisms, defining conservation as a unified profession is problematic. This in turn restricts the ability of the profession to influence the wider world.

Recent events in the UK such as the development of a professional accreditation scheme have returned the focus to the standards and core functions of conservation. This remind us that all conservators want to achieve the same thing albeit in many different ways.

By examining the defining characteristics of ‘professions’, and analysing the activities of conservation bodies, this paper considers what is required to develop fully-fledged professional bodies for conservation. A number of case studies are used to illustrate how co-operative initiatives focussed on clearly articulated professional goals is the most efficient way to develop the profession and that attempts to pursue conservation through a federation of material specialisms holds it back.

INTRODUCTION

Conservation as a profession is, by any standards, young. Although the first reference to ‘restorers’ working professionally dates from the middle of the 18th century [1], conservators have struggled to establish themselves as a separate profession. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conservators were seen as subsets of other professions [2, 3]: painting restorers as a subset of artists, furniture restorers as a subset of cabinetmakers, and so on. This association, where individuals developed manual and intellectual skills appropriate to the objects they were dealing with, has had a strong influence on shaping the world of conservation. Specialist training courses developed focusing on technical skills and it was left to the newly emerging professional bodies in the 1950’s and 1960’s to produce conventions on professional conservation practice, such as the Murray Pease Report produced in 1963 by the American group of IIC. However, conservators are still struggling to achieve the professional status that is afforded to architects, doctors or lawyers. This paper will argue

that the reason for this lies in the fact that many individuals still tend to define themselves primarily in terms of their specialist knowledge. It aims to show that the future of conservation lies in the recognition that what unites conservators is more significant than what divides them.

PROFESSIONS – WHAT ARE THEY?

The process of ‘professionalisation’ began in the early part of the nineteenth century. Groups of workers engaged in a common occupation could, through their own efforts, gain status through work [4]. Members of ‘professions’ were experts who, having undergone extensive training, conducted their affairs in accordance with codes of ethics and standards [5]. Whilst in some countries the standards are defined by the practitioners themselves, and elsewhere they result from a contract between the state and the practitioner [6], professionalism is fundamentally about expertise and integrity.

Webster’s Third New International Dictionary defines a ‘profession’ as:

A calling requiring specialised knowledge and often long and intensive preparation including instruction in skills and methods as well as in scientific, historical or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods, maintaining by force of organisation or concerted opinion high standards of achievement and conduct, and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work which has for its prime purpose the rendering of a public service.

In the light of this definition, it is easy to consider conservation *as a potential* profession. A substantial number of individuals now entering the field do so through a course of academic study at tertiary level that results in a degree or equivalent qualification. These days, many also undergo further instruction in the form of post-graduate or mid-career internships. The conservators’ technical capabilities are in little doubt. The fact that conservators work on often irreplaceable heritage material has been collectively recognised through the creation and publication of documents by professional bodies that define accepted standards of work. These have also helped to achieve a growing harmonisation in the international world of conservation. Many European groups are working hard for the legal protection of the title ‘conservator’, and there have been some notable achievements [7]. In 1990, a German court ruled that conservation was neither a craft nor an artistic occupation and in Greece in 1997

the title of conservator was preserved in law [8]. This is significant because it recognises conservation as a separate entity rather than as a sub-set of related professions such as art history or architecture. As ‘freedom of decision and autonomy’ [9] are important requirements for professionals, conservation needs to establish a distinct identity independent from the professions that gave it birth.

So, why are conservators in the UK and elsewhere still struggling to achieve the professional status that they feel they deserve? Firstly, the group of individuals in any country who define themselves as conservators is relatively small. Secondly, conservators are still unclear how to define themselves. This, in turn, has an impact on the role that they perceive for their professional bodies. Given the relatively insignificant number of conservators and the fact that their activities service cultural rather than economic need, governments generally see little need to protect their status [10]. This makes it imperative that a profession which wishes to generate professional recognition has a clear identity and sense of purpose.

HOW DO CONSERVATORS DEFINE THEMSELVES?

In the UK, conservators have been fighting for professional recognition since at least the middle of this century. Whilst there has undoubtedly been some progress in this time [11], the process has been seriously undermined by the determination of conservators to define themselves by their material specialism i.e. physical activities rather than by more abstract standards and ethics. The ‘can do’ has repeatedly taken preference over the ‘will do’. For many, the ‘dedication to becoming a master’ is more important than ‘commitment to the occupational organisation’ [12].

This situation is not unique to the UK. When the Canadian IIC moved towards establishing accreditation they created a category of ‘Professional Member’. This is *hobbled* by the caveat that ‘Professional Members’ are accredited in one or more area(s) of specialism’ [13]. On the one hand the definition of a profession requires a common code of ethics and standards of practice, yet whilst establishing a ‘Professional Member’ the Canadians add a specialism tag as if to suggest that there is still some fundamental difference between the members. The distinction of the ‘can do’ overrides the unity of the ‘will do’. The German groups who are equally focused on developing a profession have ended up with a similar ludicrous state, ‘it can be clearly seen that Germany has a highly diversified system of conservators associations. There is an association for almost every particular interest! There are many in

Germany who see this particular diversity as a cause for the failure of the overriding issue of the past: the protection of the profession.’ [14].

CONSERVATORS AND THEIR PROFESSIONAL BODIES

The tendency for conservators to define themselves by what they do rather than by what they represent has, not surprisingly, had an impact on what they expect from their professional bodies. In established professions, a primary function of the professional body is to define the ethical standards and codes of practice they expect from those who wish to be considered ‘professional’. They earn public respect for the profession by promoting these standards and respect within the profession by disciplining those members who have been found to be flaunting the standards. Professional bodies also provide a forum for the exchange of technical and other specialist information between members. Many professional bodies start life as internal forums and then develop into vehicles for external promotion. The shape and activities of the professional body will therefore depend on the relative importance the members place on these two functions: external promotion or internal forum.

For many conservators, the exchange of technical information and the organisation of conferences would seem to be the proper priority for their professional body, as was demonstrated in a 1986 survey of UK conservators [15]. The respondents were least interested in accreditation and the establishment of a register of conservators. Yet the same sample identified that their first priority for the protection of collections was better awareness of conservation needs by curators and museum managers. Those activities of the professional body which were afforded the highest priority are those which are least likely to help conservators achieve what they individually considered to be their highest priority. Whilst the exchange of technical information could be undertaken by any group of like-minded individuals, the creation of universally applicable and acceptable standards, which would help raise awareness of conservation through such mechanisms as accreditation and recognition of title, require a single, unified, professional body.

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

The concept of professional standards in conservation is not new [16]. Where they have been developed they have concentrated, in the main, on technical aspects of conservation, their primary function being to provide guidance to fellow conservators [17]. To the public, this information is of limited value. They are less concerned with the differences between

particular specialisms but would welcome a single reliable source of information on where they could take their treasures and know that they would be safe. For the public, the distinction between a tradesman-restorer and a conservator working to professional standards is the key issue. The public expects that if they approach a professional they will be properly advised, even if the advice is to go to another member of that profession. The title 'Doctor' is not diminished by the fact that no doctor is qualified to work on every condition. Instead the title 'Doctor' is widely recognised and respected.

Professions are about defining and maintaining, through widely recognised standards, levels of expertise and integrity. Either a group identifies by a unified set of standards and agreed codes of behaviour, or they define themselves by their technical skills and physical activities. For example, university lecturers in chemistry and in English would agree that one of their key functions was to impart knowledge to students, but neither would be able to transmit the content of the others teaching schedules. The difference in content however, is of lesser importance than the guiding principles. Their profession defines ethics and standards for the philosophy that guides their practice and the quality and rigour expected of their work without requiring that they have interchangeable skills. On the other hand, plumbers are different from electricians because of what they physically do. If conservators are to win the public appreciation, esteem (and pay!) which they feel they deserve, they must start defining themselves by their ethics and philosophy, rather than by what they physically do. If conservators define themselves by what they do, 'I conserve textiles, you conserve paintings' then surely they are only 'advanced tradesm(e)n with brains' [18].

Conservators seem to know what they want in abstract terms, recognition, respect and reward, but have not yet agreed on the best route to achieve these. Whilst the process is being helped by the adoption of, for example, the ECCO definition of a conservator by more and more professional bodies, it seems that conservators are not quite ready to leave the comfort of their specialist divisions and form into a truly unified profession [19]. As a previous Chairman of UKIC observed: 'UKIC sometimes seems to represent little more than an indistinct feeling amongst conservators that they must have something in common' [20].

NEW APPROACHES

Corfield et al, wrote in 1987:

‘Conservation as a profession consists of collections of people who, severally, deal with an impossibly large range of diverse materials from fine fans to majestic machinery. It is therefore not easy to devise a care philosophy to encompass the ethics, skills and attitudes required for the conservation of everything ranging from the working locomotive to the safely stored dinosaur fossil. Nor can we be sure that those engaged on such varied activities necessarily agree that they are following similar paths.’ [21]

The difficult task of devising a care philosophy to cover conservation of divergent materials has been successful. Most of the authors of the 1987 report quoted above have been instrumental in achieving this. There are many practical examples from the UK that show how new attitudes and initiatives have reflected the ability of the conservation to develop as a common profession. Four examples are discussed in detail to illustrate this process but many others exist. The Conservation Department of the British Museum, for example, have been running a series of conferences on general issues such as reversibility, which pull together the familiar case study type presentation with papers which attempt to question the philosophical rigour of conservation practitioners.

UKIC

In 1957, the United Kingdom Group of IIC (IIC-UKG) was established, which, in 1979, became UKIC. In 1977, the Archaeology Section was established and the Paper Group seceded, prompting the secretary to observe:

‘... it is hoped that conservators will look beyond the exchange of information on immediate interests and see the need for a national body representing the interests of the whole profession’ [22].

By 1985, there were five specialist sections, their formation largely driven by conservators who wanted meetings devoted to the exchange of specialist technical information and who felt the needs of their particular field of conservation were not being represented. Meanwhile, those charged by the members with running the organisation have called consistently for unity and that precedence should be given to issues that effect the whole of the profession. The response of the specialist sections to the publication of UKIC’s first Code of Conservation Practice by the Ethics Sub-Committee in 1982 serves to highlight these conflicting views. The committee saw the document as a ‘universal approach to the ethics of

conservation' that would do 'nothing but strengthen the profession'. However, at least one of the then extant specialist sections chose not to adopt it, but rather to produce their own, albeit based on the UKIC document [23]. The difficulties that surrounded the establishment of a permanent office can at least in part be attributed to this divergence of opinions, and led the chairman to observe:

'.. that UKIC was a collection of small groups of people who can, and do, work independently of each other, and independently of any centralised institute called UKIC.....UKIC is a small band of people divided into groups with few common interests' [24].

It is only in recent years that UKIC has developed the structures that are necessary to support a professional body rather than those of a 'club with good publications' [25]. Even then, the protracted debates that surrounded the restructuring of the organisation in 1996 were generated primarily by a reluctance of some individuals to see their specialist sections as components of UKIC [26]. Fortunately the visionary view prevailed. UKIC has been able to reap the benefits of this rather painful period of adolescence through the establishment of an accreditation system. This saw the first members accredited within a single category of 'professional conservator' in 1999.

Accreditation

Acknowledging that 'the profession has lacked a single widely recognised professional designation' [27] has led to the development in the UK of a professional accreditation scheme. This scheme organised under the auspices of the National Council for Conservation-Restoration (NCC-R) (formerly The Conservation Forum) and developed in co-operation between the Society of Archivists, the Institute of Paper Conservators and UKIC, has been a great leap forward for the profession.

In defining a standard for conservation, the Joint Accreditation Group (JAG) was guided by the need to make a public statement about conservation competence so that the public will be able to commission conservation work with confidence in the capabilities of the conservator that they engage. This goal of a publicly understandable standard has resulted in the creation of standards that avoid any tendency to 'hedge the bets' between defining conservators by endless and seemingly unsatisfactory lists of specialisms and the single definition of a conservator-restorer. Whilst it is appropriate for conservators to develop specialisms, to

attempt to define the profession on this basis is to fragment a small profession into a myriad of minuscule groups. Furthermore the accreditation scheme does not fall into the trap of making a differentiation between conservators with different employment arrangements. The point that the standard is applicable to all specialisms is made repeatedly in the publicised documents.

‘the purpose of the accreditation framework is to apply an explicit common standard across the profession, regardless of the route taken to reach a professional level of capability, the discipline or specialism of the conservator -restorer, or the context he or she practises in.’ [28].

A core feature of the accreditation scheme is that it assesses conservators against two sets of criteria: functional criteria that describe the work carried out and professional criteria that describe the ethical and behavioural requirements of a conservator working at a professional level [29]. By using this elegant definition, all conservators can expect to be judged in the same way against the professional criteria, illustrating once again the existence of common and unifying ‘will do’ elements that can shape and govern unified ‘can do’ tasks. The notion of unity also underlies the functional criteria; assessment is against activities such as the evaluation of problems and the development of conservation strategies, which are common to all conservators regardless of their material specialism.

The accreditation scheme successfully incorporates the complexity and diversity of the profession into a simple single category. It demonstrates that conservation has matured into a grown-up profession, able to define itself within its own terms through answering the question ‘what should a conservator be able to do and know’ [30] without reducing the elements of conservation to a ‘dull little list’ [31]. In addition the professional bodies can claim to be committing their members to high standards, with the prime purpose of rendering a service to the public.

Conservation in Wales

The informal forum ‘Conservation in Wales’ was established in 1994 under the auspices of the Council of Museums in Wales (CMW) to develop standards of conservation practice whilst overcoming the genuine geographical barriers of those whose work involves the preservation of heritage in Wales. Without establishing yet another professional body

conservators have been able to develop a forum in which to support and develop each other's work. In co-operation with conservators from the National Museums & Galleries of Wales, regular meetings have been organised which are sometimes specific to artefact materials, such as wood, but are more often on issues such as standards, professionalism and the market. These are regularly attended by over fifty delegates and always contain curators and conservators from a range of specialisms, museums, art galleries, libraries and archives, as well as the public and private sectors, students and teachers. This co-ordination has contributed to the development of a culture of professionalism in Wales and an atmosphere of excellence. This can be seen in the high take up rate for accreditation and the large number of conservation awards won by conservators from Wales. Although started on the initiative of a small number of conservators, the conferences are now organised by a co-ordinating group of a mixture of conservators and even a curator(!). Other regional areas, such as East Anglia, have developed similar forums.

Care and conservation of industrial collections

Recognising that the conservation of industrial collections is the responsibility of a diverse group of people - split by 'blue' / 'white' collar, conservator / restorer, curator / engineer divisions - UKIC and CMW set out to draw together, at a single conference, all those whose common goal is the effective preservation of industrial collections. The aim of the conference was to raise standards of care of industrial collections by deliberately drawing the widest possible range of those involved into one room to engage in one debate. Contributors were selected who could describe the standards to which they operate, whilst questioning the aims of their work. All the papers presented, whether by conservators, mine managers, architects or engineers were able to contribute to a general and productive discussion [32]. The endless drawing of divisions has served in the past to place both the strengths and weaknesses of each group into quarantine, avoiding both productive exchange and critical review. The common goal of heritage preservation produced a constructive atmosphere from which few people would have left without the ability to review and reconsider their practice against commonly agreed professional standards.

THE FUTURE (INTO THE THIRD MILLENNIUM)

In 1960 Philippot asked for 'increased mutual understanding between the various disciplines working in the field of conservation' [33]. Whilst significant progress has been made, a truly unified profession remains an aspiration. Although international ethical standards have been

agreed, there remain sceptics who will argue that the ethics of a painting conservator are different from those of an archaeological conservator. Professional bodies are establishing accreditation schemes that recognise a single category of professional conservator, yet there are many that still feel that this should be further qualified by material specialism.

As conservation moves tentatively towards becoming a profession it will occasionally stumble. As professional bodies increasingly adopt new professional goals, those who wish to pursue different objectives will be obliged to do so through different forums. Yet we can be optimistic. In only a few decades, conservators have established their own identity and defined their own standards of practice.

‘The cultural heritage is part of the inheritance of all people...the conservation profession...has to ensure that its standards are clear, comprehensible and understood by all.’[34]. If conservators really wish to achieve public recognition and respect, they must recognise that their greatest strength lies in what unites them rather than what divides them.

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