

Preventive conservation training: A partnership between the UK and Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper uses a preventive conservation training programme delivered in Myanmar as a case study to explore some universal aspects of preventive conservation and to discuss what benefits can be achieved when 'east meets west over an insect trap and data logger'. The cooperative preventive conservation development programme describes the role of Myanmar and British experts and the compromise between what was needed and what could be resourced. The paper explores how such an exchange exposes the essential nature of preventive conservation and those who enact it, working between languages, cultures and resources. Preventive conservation decisions stem from a sense of value and purpose set in a cultural context which has an impact on the collections care approach chosen.

MUSEUMS IN MYANMAR

Myanmar comprises over 130 ethnic groups, each representing long histories and diverse cultural identities. Objects representing aspects of Myanmar's heritage are now stored and displayed in museums with a view to them being available for educating the public now and in the future. These objects offer a unique and irreplaceable witness to the lives of our ancestors. The multicultural and multi-ethnic history of Myanmar combined with the current social and economic situation make the role of museums as a safe space to explore shared and distinct heritage and culture as important here as it is around the world.

Myanmar museums offer a mixed economy of public and private management; the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture in Myanmar has drawn together 32 public museums under the Department of Archaeology. National Museum Yangon (NMY) has a collection of over 10,000 objects and the largest and busiest conservation team in Myanmar. The number of museums, private museums and art galleries in the country is increasing, but these are widely geographically distributed and have significantly differing levels of resources.

Conservation in Myanmar has a central point of reference in the conservation department in NMY. The director of the conservation team is also the assistant director of the museum. Despite their collection by museums, objects remain vulnerable to human behaviour and natural disaster. Preservation assessments conducted by the conservators at NMY revealed that about 20% of the museum's objects (approximately 5,000 objects) show significant degrees of deterioration. Given the comparably good conservation resources available at NMY, and the fact that such resources do not exist elsewhere, it is likely that collections in other museums across the country are in no better condition.

The conservation audit at NMY made clear the importance of conservation and sparked discussions within and beyond the museum. To protect the collections and prepare them for an active exhibition programme, staff needed both technical knowledge and preventive conservation practices to safeguard precious and irreplaceable museum exhibits. Contact was made with the British Council who have an active culture and arts programme in the region.

THE BRITISH COUNCIL

The museum sector in Myanmar and the British Council worked together to commission conservation training for Myanmar museum staff. This

complemented a wider museum capacity-building programme by the International Museum Academy Myanmar (IMA Myanmar). IMA Myanmar was instigated and managed by the British Council following research in 2014 identifying the critical need for skills development in the sector (British Council n.d.).

Since 2014, IMA Myanmar has had a significant impact; many people have taken part, representing museums, universities and other organisations. Increased confidence in the management of collections has been demonstrated by participants and the effect is becoming more evident in museums across the country. The programme has emphasised the importance of sustaining a long-term impact through peer-to-peer learning. Support has been given to encourage participants to share newly acquired skills and expertise with those that were not directly trained. Myanmar and the United Kingdom (UK) have worked together to determine how management in Myanmar can be reflective of international museum ethics and practice. As part of this ongoing development, the British Council initiated the conservation element of the programme in 2018.

THE PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION TRAINING PROGRAMME

Two rounds of preventive conservation training were delivered in March 2018 and January 2019, with a final specialist Integrated Pest Management (IPM) programme in October 2019. The initial call for March 2018 was for archaeological and textile conservation training to be delivered to 20 students over three days in two locations. This request responded to the need highlighted by conservation practitioners in Myanmar, the NMY audit and the planned Myanmar exhibition work programmes.

On reviewing the challenges of the brief, the appointed consultants, in consultation with the Myanmar lead, shared concerns about the ethical framework in which such a curriculum could be delivered. When it became clear that there was limited access to solvents and microscopes, it was evident that a shift in vision was required. The programme aims were adapted to focus on preventive conservation with the aim of sharing an understanding of core concepts and practical skills. The content spanned activities such as labelling and marking, housekeeping and IPM. The second event was more closely focussed on preventive conservation with all sides having a clearer idea about what could be achieved. The training lasted five days at NMY and was conceived as a purely preventive conservation course, complementary to and building on the first course. With a focus on sustainable development across museums in Myanmar, the programme focussed on capacity building, which was codified in the second session with a central ‘train the trainer’ element. The programme scope and learning outcomes were encapsulated by the subsequent publication of a preventive conservation guide (Dawson et al. 2019).

THE COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK

To structure the training, assess pre- and post-training skills and knowledge, and measure the impact of the project, a competency framework was developed. It was important that course content mapped both UK and

Myanmar standards and approaches. The competency framework covered five areas of conservation practice (ethics, collections care, environmental management, housekeeping and IPM) with three subcategories in each. Learning outcomes for the training were targeted at competency levels. For each of the 15 categories, seven levels of practice were described, ranging from a Pre-Novice level (1) to an Expert level (7). These levels were loosely mapped to UK and European educational levels (CQWF 2009) and were more carefully mapped onto the Dreyfus-influenced novice-to-expert scale used by the UK Institute for Conservation (Icon) for accreditation (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986, Icon 2008; Table 1). An entry level was added preceding Icon's first level to capture the experience of participants on their first engagement with preventive conservation.

Table 1. The competency framework: levels of practice

1	2 Novice	3 Informed beginner	4 Advanced beginner	5 Competent	6 Proficient	7 Expert
No awareness	Basic awareness of issues	Knowledge of core concepts	Ability to enact under direction	Sees activities as a distinct series of steps	Sees holistically without supervision using own quality control	Ability to identify needs & specify & deliver strategic solutions

Prior to the first training, an attempt was made to collect data on pre-course experience, but this had limited success due to the timescales involved and communication problems. On completion of the training, participants were asked to assess their skills and knowledge prior to and on completion of the training against a selection of the 15 categories offering options from level 1 (pre-novice), through level 2 (novice) and 3 (informed beginner) (Table 2). The results of self-assessment showed that participants increased in confidence over the course of the training from a mean of level 1 to level 3.

Table 2. Extract from the competency framework

		Handling and physical protection of collections	Materials for packaging and storage
1	No awareness	Does not demonstrate awareness of the vulnerabilities of an object during handling	Not aware of the need for careful selection of packaging, storage and display materials
2 Novice	Basic awareness of issues	Able to identify some factors that make an object vulnerable to physical damage	Aware of some criteria for the selection of materials
3 Informed beginner	Knowledge of core concepts	Able to identify vulnerable combinations of artefacts and environment	Understands concepts such as 'inert' and recognises conservation materials

THE TEAM

The team that shaped and delivered the course and supported post-course knowledge sharing consisted of six lead actors.

Jane Henderson of Cardiff University led on development of the competency framework used to measure the impact, international policy framework, significance and value in conservation decisions and environmental



Figure 1. Participants undertake a pest inspection and identification session

management of light and RH. Amy Crossman, a consultant IPM expert, led on pest management issues, with the emphasis on housekeeping and sourcing and supplying essential tools and equipment to support the continued delivery of post-training conservation practice. Daw Nu Mra Zan, a freelance heritage consultant based in Myanmar, advised on the skills gaps, content and the Myanmar context. Kyaw Shin Naung, a conservator, Assistant Director of NMY and conservation lead on the Diploma in Museology/ Museum Studies course, National University of Arts and Culture (Yangon), helped interpret and contextualise the UK perspective, took a lead in the two site-based benchmark assessments and coordinated post-course knowledge sharing. Alex Dawson, a UK consultant, led on developing the ‘train the trainer’ aspect, building sustainable networks and skills sharing and was more formally integrated into the conservation training in the second stage. Course development and delivery was supported by British Council colleagues in London and Yangon.

DELIVERING BETTER PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION IN MYANMAR

Museums in Myanmar began late with the application of preventive conservation, and as such the field had no related systematic theory. The early history of preventive conservation in Myanmar is characterised by the progressive integration of IMA Myanmar and the strengthening of collaboration between NMY, the British Council and Myanmar and UK experts. In the past two years, awareness of preventive conservation has been raised, with preventive conservation strategies first focusing on temperature, humidity and ventilation, and then working to reduce the degradation of museum collections through monitoring and controlling of environmental conditions within exhibition areas and stores in the NMY. Preventive conservation is fast becoming the main task of conservation professionals in Myanmar. Beginning in 2018, the NMY, the Department of Archaeology and National Museum, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture started to make specifications for museum environments and collections care based on the training provided. In addition, the knowledge on preventive conservation was cascaded to other museums such as the National Museum Naypyitaw, Bagan Archaeological Museum, Mandalay Cultural Museum, Hpa-An Cultural Museum, Dawei Cultural Museum and the Department of Archaeology, Yangon Branch, highlighting routine tasks for staff working in their museums. As a result of the IMA Myanmar programme, there have been several immediate outcomes which have contributed to the embedding of preventive conservation principles into Myanmar museum culture. Conservators at NMY continue to translate and share preventive conservation advice with colleagues using formal workplace training and social media channels.

Over 40 participants from across Myanmar attended the training. In Myanmar’s present situation, preventing damage to museum objects is much more cost-effective than allowing damage to happen and then treating it. A benchmark assessment was conducted in one museum store during both the first and second training event (Collections Trust 2018). At the first event, there was an opportunity for a significant debate as to what practices were considered good or acceptable. With less tradition of preventive



Figure 2. Participants undertake a condition survey prior to preparing handling instructions

conservation, the initial assessments were quite divergent, causing lively collective discussions. The impact of these peer-to-peer exchanges was writ large on the second visit, where considerable improvements had been made. Moreover, many of the participants returned to their home museum and initiated store organisation programmes. These featured extensively on the museums' Facebook pages bringing 'behind the scenes' activity to the forefront of the museum's public-facing work. Sharing access to areas previously treated as private can only serve to improve conservation outcomes in a museum.

The programme also contributed knowledge and impetus to the setting up of a mini-laboratory in the NMY in 2018 by the Department of Archaeology and National Museum. The NMY conservation team has initiated a new era with a clean and stable environment and conserved rare costumes and oil paintings from other museums in Myanmar. The conservation process to prepare for exhibitions is shared with the public within the exhibition, in its associated publication, via newspaper reports and in social media. NMY has also been conducting temperature and relative humidity monitoring of its store and some important exhibits and has established a database for future environmental management.

Preventive conservation learning has been cascaded to non-attendees in eight regional museums using knowledge-sharing techniques learned on the course. Kyaw Shin Naung now offers three levels of preventive conservation training to museum professionals. The first level is an induction to students and newly appointed staff at NMY about the value and core concepts of preventive conservation. At the second level, this learning is applied in action with demonstrations and skills training on issues such as handling and physical protection of museum collections, packaging materials and storage. There is a third more advanced level of training offered in which concepts such as agents of deterioration, IPM, light management, etc. are examined in theory and practice. In addition to this regular series of training, Kyaw Shin Naung has been invited as a visiting teacher to other museums, such as the Saundar's Museum of Art & Crafts.

The programme has taken the first steps in developing a Myanmar Museum Standards Framework in the form of toolkits and supporting resources. These resources, based on UK and international good practice and adapted to a Myanmar context, reflect the standards and practice taught and shared throughout the programme. A Preventive Conservation Toolkit handbook, with supporting videos, was an integral output from the second round of training and will be circulated to Myanmar museums in hard copy. The toolkit is used in induction training rolled out to students and new museum staff. Designed primarily for an audience in Myanmar, the short videos demonstrate basic conservation skills such as handling, packing and dusting (Collections Care 2019).

IPM training

IPM has been highlighted as a priority area by the British Council for Myanmar's museums. Little entomological study has been conducted on pest species in Myanmar, let alone for the more restricted museum context. The emphasis, therefore, was to develop trapping and monitoring practices

with the expectation that datasets could be developed to inform targeted future practice. For initial training purposes, this proved problematic, as developing an effective IPM training programme is dependent on having some knowledge of the species being dealt with. A follow-up session with a specialist focus on ‘A risk-based approach to IPM’ delivered a course comprising three days of intensive training to a group of five delegates. This industry standard intense approach forms the basis of continued development and implementation of IPM into the future. In planning the training, consideration was given to paring down course content to be as concise as possible to allow for more rigorous translation, ensuring sufficient time to overcome comprehension barriers. The training was targeted at providing participants with the ability to make informed decisions based on the evidence available. The aim is to empower delegates to avoid the ‘generic one system fits all approach’, ensuring staff are able to identify a suitable course of action based on the pest species found. The aim is to produce sustainable learning that allows delegates to pass on their knowledge at their home institutions for a sustainable and continuous implementation of IPM. This was supported by a post-training bilingual guide to IPM (Crossman 2019). The report contained a tailored action plan that ensures training transitions from general to specific advice depending on the context. The training and support meant that staff actively implemented IPM procedures during the pre-Covid-19 lockdown of NMY.

LESSONS LEARNED

The content of the training was shaped by local needs, resources and trainers’ estimates of priorities. A significant lesson is that conservation needs, even when clearly understood by one party, can become diffuse when passed through partners and funders. For those outside the profession, a request for conservation training may seem quite specific and set out an obvious course of action. It is only when conservators talk to conservators that the detailed exchange of ideas and practice can become focussed, specific and pragmatic. Conservation is a niche discipline, and we should not expect others to follow our intricacies. We should prepare for a degree of information loss when needs are communicated between other parties. Informal communication such as Skype calls proved a more effective way to clarify need than analysis of formal training needs. Determining training programmes according to the needs of collections may seem like an obvious decision, but preventive conservation training should be focussed on the needs of the participants.

It was encouraging that UK models for assessing training needs were viable in other contexts with only minor adaptations to reflect the level of development of the sector. When entering a relatively new aspect of conservation, namely preventive conservation, delegates were comfortable in identifying their level of knowledge accurately. This self-awareness is an excellent basis on which to build preventive conservation training. The entry to a new discipline did present significant challenges, not least the need to adjust the approach to IPM in recognition of the lack of knowledge about the specific biology of pest threats to collections.

Peer-to-peer discussions about acceptability or otherwise of preventive conservation practice were highly effective in leading to significant improvement. This is remarkable because the introduction of change always has the potential to be interpreted as criticism of previous practice. Avoiding the judgement of outsiders and replacing it with the empowerment of the critical actors overcame any psychological issues that may have mitigated against change.

Conservators as advocates

Sharing one's collection care skills is a requirement of the ICOM Code of Ethics (2017), and skills development is relevant for everyone across a museum. Conservators are noticeable in their expertise and willingness to undertake skill sharing. The extent to which advocacy is a normal part of the conservation discourse is positive. With a strong integration of the wants and needs of past, present and future users, advocacy skills are integral to how we protect collections. During the training there were several seminar style discussions to raise problems, challenges and solutions. Repeatedly, the issue of 'how do I get X to listen to my conservation advice' arose, as well as 'how do I show the value of preventive conservation' and 'how do you generate the resources necessary for behind the scenes activities'. These questions are familiar to trainers from both the UK and Myanmar, perhaps undermining the sense that 'eastern' and 'western' traditions are entirely distinct. Preventive conservation consists of strategies and activities carried out and supported by all staff across the organisation. Whatever you try to do in preventive conservation, wherever you are in the world, it comes back to an ability to influence. To implement preventive conservation in museums requires support and recognition from the organisational hierarchy, so training must always move beyond the technical and embrace aspects of advocacy.

Role of standards

Standards have a vital role in setting and monitoring expectations and can support advocacy. Standards alone are just books on a shelf and have even sometimes been used as tools to bludgeon discussions. Implementing preventive conservation works best when individuals and organisations take ownership of standards and the practice necessary to develop and implement them. Incorporating evidence-based decisions to work towards agreed and sustainable preventive conservation standards requires a consideration of the context and collecting of data to inform and evaluate performance, which takes time. There is no quick fix or magic bullet. Collection care strategies evolve over time and are about continuous improvement.

In some museums in Myanmar, there is evidence of abandoned or partially performing high-tech solutions developed in other contexts and imposed in the guise of international best practice. Without an understanding of the infrastructure and resources available and with ill-considered installation, fixes from one country can be damaging in another. Low-tech solutions are effective and high-tech is not necessarily 'better'. Lessons learned from one country (such as Wales) can be adapted to another (such as Myanmar), as both countries are adept at devising strategies where there is a shortage

of materials. A make-do and mend culture to deliver effective preventive conservation solutions contributes to sustainable practice.

Cascading learning

Cascading learning is an integral aspect of IMA Myanmar and was built into the second preventive conservation training as an output that was supported, post training, in the regions by a Myanmar-based conservator. Cascading learning appears to have been very effective particularly where there is a local advocate and a support structure of some kind. Networks do not run themselves and need support, but peer support can be developed through informal sharing tools such as Facebook and flow from critical individuals. Participants responded well to the idea of communicating knowledge to their colleagues, particularly in sharing very practical skills such as packing boxes or cleaning objects. Individual delegates have taken on board the learning and passed it on, for example providing a translation of museum handling guidance on their own personal Facebook pages.

CONCLUSION

The programme has helped individuals to develop their collaborative, reflective and critical thinking skills. Following initial training, conservators in Myanmar have returned to their museums and adapted and adopted the learning to their own contexts. Housekeeping has become more recognised as a vital preventive conservation activity and the smallest of tasks, such as preparing acid-free tissue puffs, can become an enjoyable focus of a training event which delivers serious messages about how museum staff carefully engage in practice with their collections. Conservators worldwide should seek out and develop the necessary skills to be effective advocates for preventive conservation.

The introduction of preventive conservation for cultural heritage requires a change in attitudes and habits. The first level of awareness is simply to understand what preventive conservation is; the second is to accept it is an essential strategy in museums. The most important and final stage is when preventive conservation becomes an integral part of a museum's consciousness and is put into practice routinely. In bringing this to a new audience, communication, peer discussion and collaboration are essential for the effective founding of a new discipline.

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