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Review of ICOM Committee for Conservation Preprints of the 12th Triennial Meeting August / September 1999 in Conservation News March 2000 UKIC London 2000 pp 13-14

When I was a student the ICOM-CC conference pre prints were always in demand and articles going back many years remained definitive these publications have a reputation for being one of the best source of high quality current conservation thought across a breadth of specialisms. This latest edition is no exception, with articles that range from how to remove stains caused by mercuric chloride from herbarium sheet labels to how to remove stains caused by lipstick from pictures by Andy Warhol.

Due to the enormous diversity of papers in this publication any review is bound to reflect the interests of the author. Almost everyone in conservation however, would find several papers directly relevant to their work and many others which explore issues that they have considered.

The papers included are generally brief which works well when they focus on specific conservation problems but sometimes it restricts articles to a narrative of how a treatment has been conducted leaving the reader with less understanding of the options that were considered and rejected, the limitations of a treatment and outstanding concerns. The short space allowed highlights Lukas Rosenthaler et al's achievement in reviewing the conservation implications of digitisation of archives so succinctly. Their three point summary of the different layers of vulnerability of digitised collections was extremely memorable..

Some of the papers that I particularly enjoyed were the ones that attempted to work in new areas and look for non traditional solutions. Standing back and taking a long look at communication and conservation Laura Drysdale has produced a thought provoking article that deals with the perennial question 'why aren't conservators liked and respected?'. Drysdale offers one indicator in the form of the 'us and them' language used in reports which unconsciously reflects polarisation of attitudes between conservators and those they work with. More articles like this would be appreciated. Ysbrand Hummelen et al write about conservators conducting interviews with artists to ask about the meaning of the materials used. Looking at the questions that we would ask living artists, to inform conservation in the future encourages you to wonder what it is specifically about an artist's intentions that governs conservation treatment.

It was good to see a long term review by Bradley and Thickett of the effectiveness of the British Museum's material testing program running from 1975 to present. Much of conservation science appears to focus on absolute terms, such as ppm of pollutants when in reality questions such as 'are the objects being harmed?' get closer to the more fundamental issues. This paper shows that the specific measures adopted by the British Museum have resulted in the successful achievement of their original goals. The authors conclude that the measures taken have worked, but the paper could also have asked whether the same results could have been achieved in cheaper or simpler ways. Bradley's paper reflecting on the success of past work stands in stark contrast with so many of the papers which focus on the removal of failed conservation treatments, not all of which are from the long distant past. If so much conservation time is concerned with reversing the actions of our predecessors then the profession has to question much more robustly whether current interventions will stand the test of time.

It is something of a relief to see that it is not just the ancestors of conservators who are responsible for damage to collections. Aleth Lorne's paper covered the problems caused by previous documentation projects which left many of the PMMA (perspex or Plexiglas) collections partially obscured by stickers with classification information. The article gave useful advice on how to get stickers off and suggested alternative lines of research in the conservation of PMMA such as filling of scratches rather than polishing.

The apparent limitations of remedial conservation are perhaps an indicator why preventive conservation strategies continue to move towards centre stage. The publication reflects this trend with 21 papers on preventive conservation issues included.

A thoughtful paper by Wendler and Prasartset (in the Stone Section) that researched the question of whether it was good for stone work to have lichen removed, provided yet another argument towards the emergent conservation ideology that stable and sustained environmental conditions are better than artificially achieved and unstable 'correct' conditions.

It was also encouraging to see an article by Sarah Staniforth that questioned whether the removal of U/V filters is causing damage to historic window glass. It is healthy that conservators who may be seen to have such a stake in introducing U/V filters also have the ethical consistency to question whether this has negative consequences.

One of the strengths of ICOM -CC papers is that by retaining a multi disciplinary approach there is better chance for cross fertilisation. If I would level a criticism at the publication it is that ICOM-CC do not seem to capitalise on this opportunity to its maximum advantage. As I read I wondered whether paper conservators looking at ethylene oxide had looked at papers that have been written about ethylene oxide and ethnographic collections or whether authors of articles on surveying photographic collections had looked at work surveying archaeological collections. Perhaps the working groups should attempt to more systematically cross fertilise their review procedures? Could the chair of ICCOM CC try to ensure that the groups generate a little more synergy?

That said this is undoubtedly a useful publication. At £95 I am not sure how many individuals can afford, it but no library should be without a copy. The rest of us should ensure we make the time to pop in to give it a read. Inspired by Drysdale's paper I am now going to de construct my own paper to reveal my own subconscious meanings.