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Citation for final published version:

Henderson, Jane , den Leeuw, Milko and Spapens, Oliver 2019. Viewpoint: Standards in conservation [Interview]. Authentication in Art Newsletter

Publishers page:

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AUTHENTICATION IN ART



Milko den Leeuw and Oliver Spapens of Authentication in Art interviewing Jane Henderson, Reader in Conservation at Cardiff University and Secretary General of the International Institute for Conservation

Can you please give a short introduction of yourself?

Conservation is and has always been my dream area of work. It has taken me on many adventures and brought me into contact with some of the world's best people and places. Right now, I am secretary general of IIC, the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic works, a member of standards committees for the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN) technical committee 346 WG 11 and the BSI B/560 conservation of tangible cultural heritage. I teach on Cardiff University's globally recognised collection care and conservation programmes.

The term standard is being used in a number of various ways with varying meanings. Could you clarify how you would define a standard?

There are many ways that people use the word: in conversation, I might be tempted to use it broadly, for example using 'standard' to describe an agreed way of doing things or to describe uniformity. Within the sector, the terms *standards* and *benchmarks* are often used interchangeably to describe a system to measure how

you are performing. In a more precise sense, a standard is not necessarily agreed by all, it can be imposed by a standard issuing authority. Ask any child taking a standardised exam, most of them don't agree with that way of doing things! A standard may specify interoperability rather than uniformity: so that distinct elements work together. The size of your mattress and a fitted sheet is an important standardisation for life. The CEN define a standard as 'a technical document designed to be used as a rule, guideline or definition'. They claim it as a 'consensus built, repeatable way of doing things'. I think the idea of standards is one of those ontological uncertainties, people don't realise that they have different conceptions when they use the same word. Where precision matters it may be useful to frame any discussion on standards with an exploration of their meaning and purpose which may usefully expose distinctions and prevent future confusion. I tend to follow the CEN route: in my paper with Shumeng Dai¹ we described a standard as a documented consensus of current best practice that helps to consistently measure ways of producing objects, processes and services.

In your publications you distinguish between a De Jure standard, a standard imposed by a public standardization organisation or government, and a De Facto standard, a standard that has been developed by a private institution or an industry. In your experience what is more effective and/or preferable a De Jure or a De Facto standard?

I think standards take hold in the consciousness of the sector for different reasons, for example in the UK archive sector BS5454, a De Jure standard, held great sway for many years partly because the archive sector was statutory but the role of an enforcement body was a significant factor. On the other hand, Garry Thomson's De Facto standard written in The Museum Environment for relative humidity, temperature, light and UV management have had an incredible endurance, with mass recognition. Both standards have been misused and abused with a dogmatic implementation that cannot be blamed on the origin of the standard. The CEN in the form of technical committee 346 are producing many standards for the conservation of cultural heritage and these are becoming recognised and some taken up within the sector.² It is widely considered that the purchase cost has become a barrier for many whereas I cannot think of a De Facto standard that has to be bought. So I have no absolute preference, only that when one is used those using it understand its origin and scope and apply it intelligently.

Going a bit more in-depth into the De Facto standard. As those standards are developed by a private institution or an industry, it is hard to regulate and enforce those standards. What do you consider to be the most efficient way for these De Facto standards to be followed and/or enforced?

De Facto standards can be adopted by a body with professional, financial or academic authority and this may lead to their establishment. In the UK, many funding bodies use membership of ICON's Conservation Register and professional accreditation as a standard for funding conservation work, in Australia much work is being undertaken by the professional bodies to revise institutional climate

requirements for galleries and museums. Although these requirements are described as guidelines, the permission or otherwise to borrow collections from an institution based on their guidelines makes them a De Facto standard. In addition to institutional support, it is clear that consensus and a means of communicating De Facto standards is helpful for their adoption. Clarity of expression and serving a clear purpose will increase the change of a De Facto standard becoming adopted. Sometimes a DeFacto standard emerges that reveals a lacuna in a sector's approach and because it meets an until recently unarticulated need it quickly gains traction. The Spectrum³ standard for documenting museums collections is a De Facto standard, championed by a professional body influencing the way museums work across the world.

One of the downfalls of De Facto standards is that once implemented, it is very hard to change them. The emotional investment of people into the current standards is leading to a reluctance to change and acceptance of new standards. This has led to a plethora of outdated standards. In your opinion, how can this reluctance to necessary change in the applied standards be overcome?

That is such a good question, I think the misuse and persistence of poor De Facto standards stems from ignorance. Conservation and technical art history are emerging professions and unfortunately, some members of the profession believe that the profession can be promoted by gate-keeping: implementing inflexible rules and elevating pointless distinctions. In these cases, standards are used both as tool for control and as a mask for ignorance. Instead of broadening a welcome to the profession, celebrating newcomers and new learning some choose to create fortresses of rules. Another problem is there is no limit to the number of De Facto standards that can exist. A cycle of reviewing standards, finding out there are too many and building a new one as a response has plagued the sector. In my own research in Wales with Phil Parkes of Cardiff University we found more than 20 different standards in operation for the care and management of archaeological archives in Wales alone⁴ and a more recent study by Stephanie Whitehead found a multiplicity of standards and guidance in operation simply for the storage of archaeological iron. The Oddy test method to determine whether materials are safe for use in galleries and display cases have been carefully evolved in London, yet a brief literature search will reveal a plethora of varieties. It can only be a process of informed professionalism that rectifies this. A profession mature enough to undertake their own research, to engage in constructive debate and to be secure enough to recognise that you grow from change is needed to find useful commonalities and to fully embrace the concept of informed standardisation.

In your opinion what area, or specific topic, within the art world has the most urgent need of a standard being developed?

There are different areas of work needed. For analytical work, more protocols for describing process would be welcome. Where identification is used to inform statements of value about cultural heritage it is essential that outputs purporting to

describe a feature are replicable and consistently understood. I am often disappointed to hear surface measurements from an XRF used as a proxy for a composition or best fit being used to interpret FTIR, the strengths and limitations of methods could be well described by a standardised procedure. There is much work to be done on this, as a paper I wrote with Yiota Manti⁵ set out we have not even standardised procedures for sampling before we even arrive at interpretation and communication. In the sector, we could benefit from a series of standards that describe data collection procedures for environmental management. A very dull De Jure standard that I would welcome would regulate contact with mould, an aspect of Health Safety and Environment that I believe is overlooked in the heritage sector.

Personally, (if I may stretch the definition) I would love to build a common thesaurus for the art world that covers technical expressions in multiple languages. This would be a considerable extension from the already monumental task of CEN to derive an agreed three language terminology for conservation and I would like to imagine this as a new form of crowd-sourced standards.

Jane, thank you so much for your time and patience in answering questions for AiA.

Milko den Leeuw and Oliver Spapens for Authentication in Art - Newsletter June 2019©

1. Henderson, J. and Dai, S. 2013. [Towards a common understanding of standards?](#). In: Ashley-Smith, J., Burmester, A. and Eibl, M. eds. *Climate for Collections, Standards and Uncertainties..* Munich: Doerner Institut and Archetype Publications Limited, pp. 11-24.

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2. CEN website: https://standards.cen.eu/dyn/www/f?p=204:7:0::::FSP_ORG_ID:411453&cs=11079A55D70F8377E3942E1C6704C7664

3. <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum/>

4. Henderson, Jane and Parkes, Phillip 2007. What's in store? – towards a Welsh strategy for the management of, and access to, archaeological collections. *The Museum Archaeologist Volume 30* , pp. 1-11.

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5. Henderson, J. and Manti, P. 2008. [Improving access to collections for sampling](#). Presented at: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works Congress, London, UK, 15-19 September 2008 Presented at Saunders, D., Townsend, J. H. and Woodcock, S. eds. *Conservation and Access. Contributions to the IIC London Congress, 15-19 September 2008*. London: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works pp. 115-119.

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