

The Conservator-Restorer: a Definition of the Profession

Foreword

This document is based on a text prepared in German by Agnes Balleström which was submitted by her as a working paper to the ICCROM Standards and Training Committee at its November 1978 meeting (ST 1/3). The Working Group for Training in Conservation and Restoration of the ICOM Committee for Conservation discussed the document for the first time at its meeting in Zagreb in 1978. A revised version was published in the pre-prints of the ICOM Committee for Conservation's triennial meeting in Ottawa, Canada in 1981, paper 81/22/0 with an introduction by H.C. von Imhoff. Eleanor McMillan and Paul N. Perrot rewrote it. The new version was presented and, with minor amendments, was unanimously adopted during the interim meeting of the Working Group for Training in Conservation and Restoration held in Dresden on 5 September 1983 and was submitted to the Committee's Directory Board at its meeting in Barcelona on 26 November 1983. The Directory Board requested further work on the wording of the Definition before the Working Group was to present it to the full Committee at its triennial meeting in Copenhagen in September 1984. This latest version is the result of revisions done by Ray Isar, Janet Bridgland and Christoph von Imhoff between November 1983 and August 1984.

1. Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this document is to set forth the basic purposes, principles, and requirements of the conservation profession.

1.2 In most countries, the profession of the conservator-restorer (1) is still undefined: whosoever conserves and restores is called a conservator or a restorer, regardless of extent and depth of training.

1.3 Concern for professional ethics and standards for the objects being treated and for the owners of these objects, has led to various attempts to define the profession, to distinguish it from related professions (2), and to establish proper training requirements. Other professions, such as those of physician, lawyer and architect, have passed through a phase of self-examination and definition and have established widely accepted standards. Such definition of the profession of conservator-restorer is now overdue. It should help the profession to achieve parity in status with disciplines such as those of the curator or the archaeologist.

2. The activity of the Conservator-Restorer

2.1 The activity of the conservator-restorer (conservation) consists of technical examination, preservation, and conservation-restoration of cultural property: Examination is the preliminary procedure taken to determine the documentary significance of an artefact; original structure and materials; the extent of its deterioration, alteration, and loss; and the documentation of these findings. Preservation is action taken to retard or prevent deterioration of or damage to cultural properties by control of their environment and/or treatment of their structure in order to maintain them as nearly as possible in an unchanging state. Restoration is action taken to make a deteriorated or damaged artefact understandable, with minimal sacrifice of aesthetic and historic integrity.

2.2 Conservator-restorer work in museums, in official heritage protection services, in private conservation enterprises or independently. Their task is to comprehend the material aspect of objects of historic and artistic significance in order to prevent their decay and to enhance our understanding of them so as further the distinction between what is original and what is spurious.

3. The Impact and Ranking of the Activities of the Conservator-Restorer

3.1 The conservator-restorer has a particular responsibility in that treatment is performed on irreplaceable originals, which are often unique and of great artistic, religious, historic, scientific, cultural, social or economic value. The value of such objects lies in the character of their fabrication, in their evidence as historical documents, and consequently in their authenticity. The objects "are a significant expression of the spiritual, religious, and artistic life of the past, often documents of a historical situation, whether they be work of the first rank or simply objects of everyday life" (3).

3.2 The documentary quality of the historic object is the basis for research in art history, ethnography, archaeology, and in other scientifically based disciplines. Hence, the importance of preserving their physical integrity.

3.3 Because the risk of harmful manipulation or transformation of the object is inherent in any measure of conservation or restoration, the conservator-restorer must work in the closest co-operation with the curator or other relevant scholar. Together they must distinguish between the necessary and the superfluous, the possible and the impossible, the intervention that enhances the qualities of the object and that which is detrimental to its integrity.

3.4 The conservator-restorer must be aware of the documentary nature of an object. Each object contains - singly or combined - historic, stylistic, iconographic, technological, intellectual, aesthetic and/or spiritual messages and data. Encountering these during research and work on the object, the conservator-restorer should be sensitive to them, be able to recognise their nature, and be guided by them in the performance of his task.

3.5 Therefore, all interventions must be preceded by a methodical and scientific examination aimed at understanding the object in all its aspects, and the consequences of each manipulation must be fully considered. Whoever, for lack of training, is unable to carry out such examinations or whoever, for lack of interest or other reason neglects to proceed in this way cannot be entrusted with the responsibility for treatment. Only a well-trained experienced conservator-restorer can correctly interpret the results of such examinations and foresee the consequences of the decisions made.

3.6 An intervention on an historic or artistic object must follow the sequence common to all scientific methodology: investigation of source, analysis, interpretation and synthesis. Only then can the completed treatment preserve the physical integrity of the object, and make its significance accessible. Most importantly, this approach enhances our ability to decipher the object's scientific message and thereby contribute new knowledge.

3.7 The conservator-restorer works on the object itself. His work, like that of the surgeon, is above all a manual art/skill. Yet, as in the case of the surgeon, manual skill must be linked to theoretical knowledge and the capacity simultaneously to assess a situation, to act upon it immediately and to evaluate its impact.

3.8 Interdisciplinary co-operation is of paramount importance, for today the conservator-restorer must work as part of a team. Just as the surgeon cannot be simultaneously a radiologist, pathologist and psychologist, the conservator-restorer cannot be an expert in art or cultural history, chemistry, and/or other natural or human sciences. Like that of the surgeon, the work of the conservator-restorer can and should be complemented by the analytical and research findings of scholars. Such co-operation will function well if the conservator-restorer is able to formulate his questions scientifically and precisely, and to interpret the answers in the proper context.

4. Distinction from Related Professions

4.1 The conservator-restorer's professional activities are distinct from those of the artistic or craft professions. A basic criterion of this distinction is that, by their activities, conservator-restorers do not create new cultural objects. It is the province of the craft and artistic professions such as metal-smiths, gilders, cabinet-makers, decorators, and others to reconstruct physically what no longer exists or what cannot be preserved. However, they too can benefit immeasurably from the findings of conservator-restorers, and from their guidance.

4.2 The recommendation as to whether intervention on any object of historic and/or artistic significance should be undertaken by an artist, a craftsman, or a conservator-restorer can be made only by a well trained, well educated, experienced and highly sensitive conservator-restorer. This individual alone, in concert with the curator or other specialist, has the means to examine the object, determine its condition, and assess its material documentary significance.

5. Training and Education of the Conservator-Restorer

5.1 To conform to the above professional characteristics and specifications, conservator-restorer must receive artistic, technical and scientific training based upon a well rounded, general education.

5.2 Training should involve the development of sensitivity and manual skill, the acquisition of theoretical knowledge about materials and techniques, and rigorous grounding in scientific methodology to foster the capacity to solve conservation problems by following a systematic approach, using precise research and critically interpreting the results.

5.3 Theoretical training and education should include the following subjects:

- History of art and civilisations;

- Methods of research and documentation;
- Knowledge of technology and materials;
- Conservation theory and ethics;
- Conservation-restoration history and technology;
- Chemistry, biology and physics of deterioration processes and of conservation methods.

5.4 It is understood that an internship is an essential part of any training programme. A thesis or diploma paper should terminate training, and its completion recognised by the equivalent of a university graduate degree.

5.5 At all stages in this training, major emphasis should be placed on practice, but sight should never be lost of the need to develop and sharpen an understanding of technical, scientific, historical, and aesthetic factors. The ultimate aim of training is to develop thoroughly rounded professionals, able thoughtfully to perform highly complex conservation interventions and to thoroughly document them in order that the work and the records contribute not only to preservation but to a deeper understanding of historical and artistic events related to the objects under treatment.

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- (1) This term is used throughout this text, as a compromise, since the same professional is called, "conservator" in the English speaking countries, and "restorer" in those where Romance and Germanic languages are spoken.
- (2) Certain professions related to conservation, Conservation Architects, Scientists, and Engineers, and all other who contribute to conservation, are not mentioned in this document since they are already governed by accepted professional standards.
- (3) G.S. Graf Adelman, "Restaurator und Denkmalpflege" in Nachrichtenblatt der Denkmalpflege in Baden-Württemberg, Vol. 8 No. 3, 1965.