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Introduction: Discursing Artworks. The Multiple Faces of Conservation Documentation

Preamble

A conservator-restorer¹ is constantly facing new and unique complex challenges, when confronted with condition assessments and eventually a treatment of cultural objects which are open to numerous interpretations and possibilities for their keeping. Success in caring for and keeping our multifaceted cultural heritage requires an academically trained professional who is able to perceive what the object to be cared for is, where it originates from, the context in which it was made, and the materials which were employed. Furthermore, this perception should be fused with a similarly sound knowledge and understanding of the deterioration and decay mechanisms of the materials and a variety of measures which could be implemented to preserve the object. By contextualising these qualities gleaned from each object or group of objects by means of close scrutiny, with the naked eye, through the stereomicroscope or by means of various photographic techniques or advanced (preferably non-destructive) scientific analyses, placing the results in the broader context of the material and technical development of the artist or craftsman, the documentation reaches a level where the information is sufficient to serve all purposes of understanding and caring for the physical materials which constitute each object.

Preface

Artists have always made, and will continuously be making, material choices in order to reach their artistic expression. This is done on the basis of the very real and tangible qualities of the matter they want to utilize, such as wood panels, copper plates, canvas, the type of ground, imprimatura and pigment composition, binding media etc. but also out of a deeper wish to express an idea that needs these physical materials to materialize and reflect precisely

the thoughts perceived in the mind of the artist.² An artist is a perceiver who pays special attention to the points of view, from which the world can be seen, and one who catches and records for the rest of us the most revealing perspectives on things.³ By trying to understand these views and choices, which for other artists in the same milieu would have been different because of their idiosyncratic wishes to reach a different expression or to experiment with the materials available, we aim to strive for sufficient understanding of their choices to enable us to make appropriate conservation decisions that do not compromise the integrity of the object.

These considerations are even more relevant and complex when we are confronted by the preservation, installation, documentation and exhibition of art works by contemporary artists who use all imaginable materials and techniques, the significance of which is often meaningless without information about the artist's intentions. Here crucial issues such as authenticity, permanence/impermanence, artistic intent, reproducibility, and longevity of artworks are demanding new forms of documentation and often in an interdisciplinary methodology.⁴ Such an approach may include interviews with artists, documentation of artists' materials, the recording of the images, words or sound of performances, the documentation of installations, temporary and 'permanent' visual art. Scientific research into the identification, composition, ageing and preservation of modern materials is especially challenging to conservators and the curatorial staff in museums with contemporary treasures. An important support and reference resource is the International Network for the

¹ The document "The Conservator-Restorer: a Definition of the Profession", adopted in 1984 by ICOM-CC and successively by ICOM, uses the term 'conservator-restorer' as a compromise, as the same professional is called 'conservator' in English-speaking countries and 'restorer' in those where Romanic and Germanic languages are spoken. In this text, for the sake of simplicity, the word 'conservator' comprises both terms and will be used throughout.

² Painting *uit den geest*, literally "from the mind", meaning creating a composition based on images of things seen and mirrored in the imagination, was regarded as the highest level within the visual arts. S. van Hoogstraeten literally compares the painter's mind with a stage on which he should pull back the curtain and paint the imagined scene. S. van Hoogstraeten, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst* (Rotterdam, 1678; ed. Utrecht, 1969), p. 178.

³ J.J. Gibson, "Pictures, Perspective, and Perception", in *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Science* 1 (1955), p. 220.

⁴ Y. Hummelen & D. Sille (eds.), *Modern Art: Who Cares?*, 1997; Jackie Heuman (ed.) *From Marble to Chocolate: the Conservation of Modern Sculpture*, London 1995.

Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) formed by professionals occupied worldwide with the conservation of modern and contemporary art.⁵

The way we care for a work of art is significant for the way the object appears and is perceived by the public.

Conservation is also about the necessity of keeping the many-layered documentary evidence that every old or recent artistic object holds. In the future, enquiries will continue to be posed in connection with new attempts of interpreting the work, and much too often essential clues have been made incomprehensible or even removed or destroyed during treatment because their meaning and relevance went unrecognised.⁶

Examples of this are the many 16th and 17th century panel paintings that in the 19th and 20th century were dramatically thinned from the reverse and cradled. Apart from making the panels even more vulnerable to environmental impact⁷ our predecessors often also removed significant information about the production and the maker of these oak boards.⁸ My research into the panel makers and their practice in producing panels and of the impact of guild regulations on branding and marking these with their individual house marks is but one example of how significant this information may be for understanding the genesis of a panel painting.⁹

It is often true that when a conservator is considering carrying out treatment of a work of art, the first question that springs to mind is *how* to do it. The greater part of conservation research still focuses on the challenges of the physical condition of the object, the deterioration of materials and possible interventions. This question is the key issue for the conservator, arising out of the need to *keep* an object. Questions such as *what* we should preserve; *why* we choose to preserve particular objects; and for *whom* we treat the objects are challenging concepts with which a conservator may not often trouble himself.

While concentrating on the treatment of an object the conservators ought to address also the context in which

the object was created, how it was passed on through history, and its current function as a bearer of culturally significant messages. The intangible values can be equally important to observe and respect. W. Richard West, former founding director of the NMAI told this story a couple of years ago:

"A Song Made Visible"

A northern California basket maker named Mrs. Matt was hired to teach basket making at a local university. After three weeks, her students complained that all they had done was sing songs. When, they asked, were they going to learn to make baskets? Mrs. Matt, somewhat taken aback, replied that they were learning to make baskets. She explained that the process starts with songs that are sung so as not to insult the plants when the materials for the baskets are picked. So her students learned the songs and went to pick the grasses and plants to make their baskets.

Upon their return to the classroom, however, the students again were dismayed when Mrs. Matt began to teach them yet more songs. This time she wanted them to learn the songs that must be sung as you soften the materials in your mouth before you start to weave. Exasperated, the students protested having to learn songs instead of learning to make baskets. Mrs. Matt, perhaps a bit exasperated herself at this point, thereupon patiently explained the obvious to them: "You're missing the point," she said, "a basket is a song made visible."

'I do not know whether Mrs. Matt's students went on to become exemplary basket makers. What I do know is that her wonderfully poetic remark – which suggests the interconnectedness of everything, the symbiosis of who we are and what we do – embodies a whole philosophy of Native life and culture and speaks volumes about the nature of Native objects to Native peoples themselves'.¹⁰ I believe we need to be aware that our work is more than just a matter of preserving material and structure. Conservation also encompasses the preservation of non-tangible cultural qualities and a vast array of information. Exhibiting objects is not just a matter of putting them on

⁵ INNCA, see <http://www.incca.org/>

⁶ E. van de Wetering, "Die Oberfläche der Dinge und der museale Stil", in *Maltechnik Restauro* II (1982), pp. 98-102

⁷ See pp. 85-94.

⁸ J. Wadum, "17th c Flemish Panel Makers' Red Chalk Master Marks", in *ICOM-CC 9th Triennial Meeting Dresden Preprints* vol. II. Los Angeles 1990, pp. 663-666.

⁹ See pp. 29-52.

¹⁰ W. Richard West, Jr., Director National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), Washington, D.C. & Marian A. Kaminitz, Head of Conservation NMAI: "Making a Song Visible: NMAI and Community Consultations", lecture at the ICOM-CC seminar, PRESERVING THE INTANGIBLE: SUSTAINING THE MATERIAL AND THE SYMBOLIC, ICOM Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) Seoul 5 October 2004. The text here printed is an excerpt from W. Richard West, "A Song Made Visible," *Museum News*, September/October (2004), pp. 35-36.

display. We should be guided by an obligation and responsibility to consider what the object was, how it may have *changed* - and may *further* change. The attempt to answer these questions will naturally be influenced by the culture in which the conservator is immersed and may not be entirely appropriate, given that cultural objects are increasingly seen as elements within an international context rooted in cultural diversity.¹¹

Some cultures appraise *authenticity*, but this notion may vary from culture to culture and the word simply does not exist in many Asian languages. The Nara Document states in preamble 2 that the 'essential contribution made by the consideration of authenticity in conservation practice is to clarify and illuminate the collective memory of humanity'.¹² Although the word *documentation* is not mentioned in the Nara Document it lies embedded in the definition of conservation, which is described as 'all operations designed to understand a property, know its history and meaning, ensure its material safeguard, and, if requested, its restoration and enhancement'.¹³

We must realise that we only have the objects in our temporary care and will hand them over to new generations whose care-taking will be guided by their changing values. Our clients, the museum visitors and scholars alike, come increasingly from cultural backgrounds different from those in which the objects were created. Visitors may not be able to interpret objects that are more than a hundred years old, and the lack of historical knowledge amongst younger generations therefore places the effort and the role of the conservator in a crucial new context.¹⁴ We are approaching a situation in which conservators do not only treat and care for the objects but also serve as an important link between the objects and the public.

The crossroad between treatment (*how* and with *what*) and the visual aesthetic impact (*why* and for *whom*) is the spot

¹¹ J. Wadum, "Ravished images restored", in M. Leonard (ed.), *Personal Viewpoints – Thoughts about Paintings Conservation*. Los Angeles 2001, pp. 59-72.

¹² The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/nara94.htm>

¹³ See note 12.

¹⁴ See also B.K. Federspiel, "The definition of the conservation profession and its field of operation: issues in the 21st century", in A. Oddy & S. Smith (eds.) *Past practice: future concepts*, *British Museum Occasional Paper CXXXV* (2001), pp. 75-79.

where we find the conservator. Apart from dwelling on *how* to conserve or restore an object he must consistently include a consideration of the *impact* of a treatment on the recipients of the object, the viewers. An alteration of a painting's well-known or long-appreciated message may reshape our understanding of the past. A growing degree of professionalism, coupled with our collaboration with art historians and highly specialised conservation scientists, is forcing us to realise that our impact on objects, and the various consequences, are indeed our responsibility. It is also here that we find a new and unique and crucial role of the conservator as *bridging* the gap between people and objects. Documenting and sharing our unique and intimate relationship with historic material and transmitting it to a wider auditorium of humanity are imperative. Conservators at large will have a much more visible function than ever before in both today's and tomorrow's museums and cultural sectors. Their methodology is no longer hidden behind a veil of mysticism and alchemy, due to the gradual changes in attitude, especially in the last half of the 20th century.

Research into materials, their utilisation and artists' techniques have given the modern multidisciplinary-minded conservator new insight into past methodology and artistic technology. The further we are from the moment when objects were created, the more we must devote ourselves to analysing them in an attempt to understand them – and we believe we have a better foundation for our choices than our predecessors had. The art historian Anthony Blunt (1907-1983) once described himself as an archaeologist of paintings, a reminder to the historians who derided style as a key to chronology that in principle it was not different from the method used by archaeologists dealing with the medium of potsherds, who, in the days before Carbon-14, had no other way of dating the strata of their excavations.¹⁵

Conservators are a part of a global society which is focusing on the sustainability of our multi-cultural heritage. Boundaries between previously well-defined approaches are slowly breaking down as information becomes more abundant and more accessible. Consensus of methodology is influenced by the numerous conservation

¹⁵ From "About us. A short history of the Courtauld" on <http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/about/history.shtml>

publications, greater participation at professional conferences and our ability to communicate our ideas instantly across the world.¹⁶

Conservation Documentation

A present-day understanding of the matter described in conservation documentation is dependent on awareness that one must acquire or have adequate knowledge of the context.

The lack of ability to interpret a history painting depicting a swan making love to a woman may be caused by either the viewer being alien to the images of a culture different from his own, or simply being the child of a civilization that has lost interest in and forgotten its understanding of ancient literature. Similarly conservation documentation may often lose its meaning for a new non-professional reader in various ways: by being too brief, too stuffed with jargon or simply formatted without any consistency in vocabulary, so that the text does not transfer the meaning to the reader that was intended when the information was originally put on paper or into a computer. To a reader from outside the conservation profession the information may often carry no meaning at all - comparable to the unfamiliar image of *The rape of Leda* hinted at above.¹⁷

The art historian Alois Riegl (1858-1905) exercised the scholastic view that works of art possess certain 'values' that foster interplay between the beholder and the beheld.¹⁸ He further argued that historical value emphasises the importance of original condition and is dependent upon it for the degree of its significance. This reciprocity affects our perceptions, which in turn can have important consequences with regard to conservation and restoration.

¹⁶ ICOM Code of Ethics (2006) #6.1 "Co-operation. Museums should promote the sharing of knowledge, documentation and collections with museums and cultural organisations in the countries and communities of origin. The possibility of developing partnerships with museums in countries or areas that have lost a significant part of their heritage should be explored".

¹⁷ The metamorphoses of *Ovid I* translated and with an introduction by Mary M. Innes. Harmondsworth 1971, sixth song, verse 109.

¹⁸ M. Kirby Talley, 'Introduction to part I - The Eye's Caress: Looking, Appreciation, and Connoisseurship', in N. Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley Jr., A. Malacca Vicar (eds.), *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*. Los Angeles 1996, pp. 18-19.

Our standards reflect how we see, and want to see, works of art in the context of here and now. This could be called 'contemporary value' and it is opposed to historical value.¹⁹ Or as the art critic Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) expressed it, "Every epoch perceives with its own eyes, and nobody will contest its right to do so, but the historian must ask in each case how a thing demands to be seen in itself."²⁰ However, again the views on the values carried forward by an object are dictated by those held by a conservator. Appreciating that other disciplines may glean new and surprising information from artworks that are appreciated by some as purely aesthetic expressions, led the former head of the training of conservator-restorers in Amsterdam, Kirby Talley Jr., in the early nineteen eighties, to describe the emerging emancipation of the conservation discipline and conservation science as 'The Emperor's New Clothes'.²¹ Quoting the art historian Bernard Berenson's (1865-1959) assertion that 'every work of art has to be first and foremost a permanent joy and inspiration, and cannot be degraded to serve as document in the history of technique and taste or of civilization in general', written more than 30 years earlier,²² Kirby Talley argued that scientific research into degradation phenomena and the techniques of the makers should be kept to a minimum - conservators were 'doers' and other scholarly disciplines would perform the 'thinking'. Fortunately history proved this approach wrong and conservation science and technical art history is currently flourishing more than ever, and for the benefit not only of related academic disciplines but also of those who should benefit the most from our joint efforts - the public.

Viewed in the context of history, the preservation of our cultural past, tangible as well as intangible, has been depending rather on accident than decision. Whether the objects in the future survive by accident or design, the survival of documentation about our culture is likely to

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁰ N. Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley Jr., A. Melucco Vaccaro (eds.), *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*. Los Angeles 1996, p. 94.

²¹ M. Kirby Talley Jr., "Bemerkungen zu zeitgenössischen Tendenzen in der Kunstgeschichte und in der Restaurierungspraxis: Des Kaisers neue Kleider", in *Maltechnik Restaura II* (1982), pp. 103-111.

²² B. Berenson, *Aesthetics and History in the Visual Arts*, New York 1948 (reprinted 1979), p. 100.

become increasingly important to a growing segment of the population.²³

Definitions of the terms documentation and conservation

Although documentation of heritage objects is an interdisciplinary exercise applied to the description of the objects in our care, the primary focus in this paper concerns the contributions offered by conservators. A clear definition of both the terms *conservation* and *conservation research* is desirable in order to place this discipline within the interdisciplinary context. A common and accepted definition of the terms does not currently exist, though attempts are constantly being made to outline a common understanding of the profession.²⁴ The conservation of our cultural heritage is a multifaceted task and involves a huge number of actions, which makes a common terminology shared by the varied groups of disciplines within our profession essential.²⁵

Under the auspices of the European Commission a number of attempts to create a common terminology have been supported. Currently the European Committee for Standardization (CEN) for the Conservation of Cultural Property is aiming at defining standards for preservation-related fields by creating general guidelines & terminology, considering the materials constituting cultural property, the evaluation of methods and products for conservation works, of environment, and transportation and packaging methods.²⁶ The question remains how many initiatives we will need to reach this common terminology. The Art & Architecture Thesaurus ® (AAT), which began in the late

1970s, is a structured vocabulary that can be used to improve access to information about art, architecture, and material culture, and it has been in place for several years. It has already been translated from English into Dutch and part of the AAT will soon be available in French.²⁷ Another ambitious Conservation Dictionary was completed in 2001, financed by the European Commission, and contains around 3000 terms and definitions in English, Dutch, French, Italian, German, Greek, and Hungarian.²⁸ This multilingual dictionary of conservation/restoration terminology is supposed to exist in print and on a CD-rom; however, at the time of writing this essay it was not traceable via the Internet.

It is in this respect of paramount importance to remember that a common terminology within the conservation community may not have the required impact on the understanding of the context for other disciplines outside the profession. If the conservation terminology is not widely understood within the museum and heritage sector at large, we may end up in an even greater Babylonian turmoil.

Documentation

In general terms, *documentation* is any communicable material (such as text, video, audio, etc., or combinations thereof) that is used to describe, explain or instruct regarding some attributes of an object, system or procedure, such as its parts, materials, assembly, installation, preservation and use. Documentation can mean different things in different contexts. For example, there are major differences in documentation for a legal case, a scientific study, an art collection, or computer software. And documentation can take many different forms even in a single context.²⁹

²³ S. Ross, "Changing Trains at Wigan: Digital Preservation and the Future of Scholarship", in *National Preservation Office, Occasional Papers*, University of Glasgow, 2000. See also: www.leeds.ac.uk/cedars/OTHER/SRoss.htm

²⁴ *The Conservator-Restorer: a Definition of the Profession*. Copenhagen, September 1984© ICOM Committee for Conservation (<http://icom-cc.icom.museum/About/DefinitionOfProfession/>)

²⁵ ICOM Code of Ethics (2006) #2.20 "Documentation of Collections. Museum collections should be documented according to accepted professional standards. Such documentation should include a full identification and description of each item, its associations, provenance, condition, treatment and present location. Such data should be kept in a secure environment and be supported by retrieval systems providing access to the information by the museum personnel and other legitimate users".

²⁶ European Committee for Standardisation (CEN) aims at setting standards for Conservation of Cultural Property through its Technical Committee (TC) 346.

²⁷ Currently a Spanish version is being initiated in collaboration between the Getty Research Institute and the Centro de Documentación de Bienes Patrimoniales in Chile.

²⁸ Project No. CONNECT99/A2/83. The coordinating body was, Technological Educational Institution of Athens (T.E.I. Athens), Greece; The University of Manchester, United Kingdom; Fachhochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft Berlin (FHTW), Germany; Instituut Collectie Nederland (ICN), The Netherlands; EVTEK Institute of Art and Design, Vantaa, Finland; P.K. Net Informatics Ltd., Greece.

²⁹ The word 'documentation' is often used to mean engineering or software documentation, which is usually paper books or computer readable files (such as HTML pages) that describe the structure and components, or operation of a

In some European countries, *documentation* in an academic context is an obsolete term for the field of study that is now known as *library science*³⁰ or *information science*, which studies the application and usage of knowledge in organizations, and the interaction between people, organizations and information systems. The vast array of information that we would/could add to our documentation requires, however, a well-planned *information management* of the data. It is essential to get the right information to the right person at the right place at the right time. As information management does not address the question of what constitutes the 'right information' we have to look at the requirements of the stakeholders in conservation documentation. However, as the heritage community and conservation in particular, is only on the verge of automation we need to address this issue separately.³¹

Within information science attention is given to human-computer interaction, groupware, the semantic web, value sensitive design, iterative design processes and to the ways people generate, use and find information.³²

The International Documentation Committee (CIDOC) of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has created a Conceptual Reference Model (CRM), which provides definitions and a formal structure for describing the implicit and explicit concepts and relationships used in cultural heritage documentation.³³

system/product. See also The Linux Information Project at <http://www.linfo.org/documentation.html>

³⁰ Library science is an interdisciplinary science incorporating the humanities, law and applied science to study topics related to libraries, the collection, organization, preservation and dissemination of information resources, and the political economy of information. Library science is constantly evolving, incorporating new topics like Database Management, Information Architecture and Knowledge Management, for example.

³¹ See *Issues in Conservation Documentation: Digital formats, institutional priorities, and public access. May 25, 2007*. Edited transcripts of the meeting. British Museum, London.

³² The ICOM Code of Ethics (2006) states "Museums have the duty to acquire, preserve and promote their collections as a contribution to safeguarding the natural, cultural and scientific heritage. Their collections are a significant public inheritance, have a special position in law and are protected by international legislation. Inherent in this public trust is the notion of stewardship that includes rightful ownership, permanence, documentation, accessibility and responsible disposal".

³³ ICOM Code of Ethics (2006) #1.1 "Enabling documentation. The governing body should ensure that the museum has a written and published constitution, statute or other public

The CIDOC CRM is "intended to promote a shared understanding of cultural heritage information by providing a common and extensible semantic framework that any cultural heritage information can be mapped to. It is intended to be a common language for domain experts and implementers to formulate requirements for information systems and to serve as a guide for good practice of conceptual modelling. In this way, it can provide the "semantic glue" needed to mediate between different sources of cultural heritage information, such as that published by museums, libraries and archives."³⁴

However, reaching a level where the *documentation* is presented and provided in an adequate manner requires a shared approach to what is called *Informational management*. This implies that we must determine what information it is necessary to gather, what to do with the information and how to pass it on.³⁵ It is therefore necessary to indicate accurately the information requirements that an intended system must deliver and who the clients are, internally in a specialized conservation department but also beyond, within the entire heritage sector – and in society at large.

With the aid of information science studying the application and usage of knowledge in organizations and the interaction between people, organisations and information systems, we might reach a common understanding of what conservation documentation should cover. Regarding conservation documentation as part of information studies within the heritage sector, it could be defined as an interdisciplinary science concerned with the collection, classification, manipulation, storage, preservation, retrieval and dissemination of information of the objects in our care.

Conservation

Conservation can be described as a discipline involving examination, documentation, preventive care, and

document, in accordance with national laws which clearly states the museum's legal status, mission, permanence, and non-profit nature".

³⁴ CIDOC CRM Home page

³⁵ Paraphrasing Kahn and Swanborough, 'Knowing what information to gather, knowing what to do with information when you get it, knowing what information to pass on, and knowing how to value the result'. M. Kahn, R. Swanborough, "Information Systems for Public Sector Management". *Working Paper Series Paper No. IIX: Information Management, IT and Government Transformation: Innovative Approaches in the New South Africa*. University of Manchester, United Kingdom, 1999.

research directed toward the long-term safekeeping of cultural and natural heritage objects. Conservation further embraces preventive conservation, remedial conservation and restoration.³⁶ As in all cases conservation consists of indirect and direct actions aiming at retarding deterioration and preventing damage by creating conditions optimal for the preservation of cultural heritage, as far as is compatible with its social use. Especially acknowledging that preventive conservation also encompasses correct handling, transport, use, storage and display, all aspects that require guidelines and procedures based on the physical behaviour and condition of the objects in question.³⁷

Restoration is strongly related to both preventive and remedial conservation and covers processes of performing changes to an object or structure with the aim of facilitating its perception, appreciation and understanding so that it will closely approximate its state at a specific time in its history, while respecting as far as possible its aesthetic, historical and physical properties.³⁸ We hardly need to explain that also these actions require a significant amount of documentation in order to warrant any such crucial intervention on any cultural heritage object. Also decisions about actions taken would ideally need to be reached in a common understanding with other heritage disciplines such as the curatorial staff, and the treatment proposals should describe the impact on the objects. Further, the educational departments and exhibition departments would need information and documentation from the conservation

³⁶ An ICOM-CC *Task Force on Terminology* on 7-8 March 2008 produced a document, accepted by a large majority of the members attending the ICOM-CC 15th Triennial Conference, New Delhi, 22-26 September 2008, in which the terminology characterising conservation of tangible cultural heritage is described. The Task Force Members were C. Antomarchi, M. Berducou, G. de Guichen, F. Hansen-Bauer, D. Leigh, J.L. Pedersoli Jr., M. te Marvelde, K. Sibul, R. Varoli-Piazza, and J. Wadum.

³⁷ ICOM Code of Ethics (2006) #2.23 "Preventive Conservation. Preventive conservation is an important element of museum policy and collections care. It is an essential responsibility of members of the museum profession to create and maintain a protective environment for the collections in their care, whether in store, on display, or in transit".

³⁸ ICOM Code of Ethics (2006) #2.24 "Collection Conservation and Restoration. The museum should carefully monitor the condition of collections to determine when an object or specimen may require conservation-restoration work and the services of a qualified conservator-restorer. The principal goal should be the stabilisation of the object or specimen. All conservation procedures should be documented and as reversible as possible, and all alterations should be clearly distinguishable from the original object or specimen".

records in order to present and explain the objects to a varied group of stakeholders, our visitors from junior schools to senior citizens.³⁹

Conservation therefore appears to be much more than examination, analysis, treatment and physical care of objects but rather a profession that is becoming an increasingly active player in museum policy programming and facilities development. This leads to a function that could well be regarded as collections care, regardless of professional delimitation. Thus the act of conservation, in whatever context of collections care it takes place, appears as a matter of shared responsibility amongst many disciplines such as conservation and conservation science, curatorial work, registration, collections management, education, building and maintenance, security, in-house and external exhibition, etc.⁴⁰ All these potential roles for the conservator within the heritage institutions each offers a potential for contributions to information and documentation about the objects in custody. Public conservation projects have been launched in several countries and prompted increasing community interest in the complexity of understanding and keeping our past for the future.⁴¹

Seen in this light, and given the wider understanding of conservation and how it is interconnected with many other areas of information-recording disciplines and requirements in a heritage institute, *conservation documentation* plays a major part, not only within the physical managing and caring, but also for the understanding of our cultural heritage.

Acknowledging that *documentation* and *conservation* both are words that have been given a multitude of definitions and that offer extensive overlapping with related

³⁹ ICOM Code of Ethics (2006) #4.1 "Displays, Exhibitions and Special Activities. Displays and temporary exhibitions, physical or electronic, should be in accordance with the stated mission, policy and purpose of the museum. They should not compromise either the quality or the proper care and conservation of the collections".

⁴⁰ J. Douglas, *Conservation Documentation Research Project*, Ottawa 1995.

⁴¹ Public outreach in conservation has been advocated and honoured by ICOM, ICOM-CC, ICCROM, IIC, AIC and many more. My own experience has been the two Johannes Vermeer treatments (1994), Carel Fabritius (2003) both in the Mauritshuis, and Jacob Jordaens (2007-08) at Statens Museum for Kunst.

disciplines, from information science and management to education and research in (art) history and the natural sciences, it is important to understand that all stakeholders within the cultural sector, institutional or private, must expand their current definition of and need for *conservation documentation*. This definition covers photographic documentation (analogue, on x-ray films, digital etc.), drawings, schematic recordings, scientific samples and analytical charts, written texts with a narrative summary and much more.

Conservation documentation and its importance

Conservation treatments could result in falsifying objects for future scholars if the original is not recognised and described prior to treatments that by their nature may alter the presentation or part of the presentation of the object. Therefore it is essential to document the objects based on a sound historical and scientific knowledge of the period in which the object was created, before any intervention is proposed.

Current conservation training emphasise documentation – but the museums and private customers have been reluctant to invest in and stimulate this time-consuming aspect, demanding a large turnover in the studio - quantity has weighed more than quality. Further, the increasing number of exhibition programmes takes precious time off from actually caring for, reflecting on and studying thoroughly the objects in a collection, based on a long-term program for its preservation.

With the academically trained masters in conservation, museums and private customers are offered a most spectacular academic orchestration, conservators being able to assess the objects in a scholarly manner as well as mastering the complicated craft of treating them. The most challenging (art) historical and scientific developments in the understanding of our cultural heritage are taking place at interdisciplinary interfaces combining the research of curators, conservators and conservation scientists. In a growing number of museums this staff partnership has taught us to appreciate the mass of information gleaned from pooling the resources of this variety of disciplines. Collaborative interdisciplinary projects with participants from both the humanities and the natural sciences (art historians, historians, conservators and conservation

scientists) can repair the misconception that these disciplines counteract each other, and actually function as a torch of light for others.

Throughout the last century the advance of the scientific examination of works of art has completely transformed the way in which we evaluate objects. Employing an increasingly wide range of analytical tools, researchers from the fields of art history, conservation, and conservation science have in many instances demonstrated the significance of working together in an interdisciplinary manner. Originally simply called "technical studies" (a reference to the early Fogg Art Museum publications from the 1930's), these collaborative efforts now compose a rapidly increasing field of study described as Technical Art History.^{42, 43}

The creation and permanent preservation of conservation documentation, both textual, graphic and by means of a variety of photographic techniques are hallmarks for the current conservation profession – both in museums and private practice.

However, "...like reversibility, documentation is primarily discussed by conservators *with* conservators, because it is of a relatively minor interest to other people involved in treatments or dealing with treated objects".⁴⁴ The author of this quote continues by stating that among conservators it is a constant frustration that other museum professionals are not more interested in these issues and in the conservation reports. However, if written in a language only intelligible to conservators, the museum professionals not accustomed to the specific jargon of the conservation department naturally may not be willing to embark on lengthy recordings of a treatment. A survey at the Tate Museum revealed that the statistics of activity-types have

⁴² M.W. Ainsworth, "From Connoisseurship to Technical Art History: The Evolution of the Interdisciplinary Study of Art", in *GCI Newsletter XX*, no. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 4-10.

⁴³ The term 'Technical art history' was possibly for the first time the focus of J. Beckmann (1739-1811) in his book *Einleitung zur Technologie oder zur Kenntniß der Handwerke, Fabriken und Manufakturen.....nebst Beiträgen zur Kunstgeschichte, Göttingen 1777*. See M. Koller, 'Technische Kunstgeschichte' in *Forschung, Lehre und Praxis*, in *Kunstgeschichte aktuell, Der Verband österreichischer Kunsthistorikerinnen und Kunsthistoriker*, vol. XXII (2005) web-publication: <http://kunsthistoriker.at/artikel.php?itemid=323&menuid=5&rikid=1&pubid=38#top>.

⁴⁴ B. Appelbaum, *Conservation Treatment Methodology*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann 2007.

changed significantly from 1984 to 1999. In 1984 75% was spent on interventive conservation, 15% on preventive conservation measures and 10% on documentation. In 1999 the figures are 30% for interventive and 40% for preventive conservation and 30% of the conservators' activities go into documentation.⁴⁵

Nancy Hushion, a private museums consultant in Canada, once stated that the reason why conservators often were not involved together with other museum professionals and stakeholders in discussing the effectiveness of cultural programmes and their funding is a simple one: conservators only talk to conservators.⁴⁶ She continues by explaining this rather introvert approach to the outside world by noting the focussed nature of conservation work as well as the fact that the conservation studios are often remote from other museum staff premises, which often is the case.

Hushion also recalls how the roles of the director and curator have changed during the past decades. The director as scholar has now become a full-time fundraiser and the curators are blockbuster-exhibition-managers together with new staff types such as educators etc. There is less time for research into the objects of the collection – and contrary to the conservators, the research that curators are often trained to carry out is often of a theoretical character. Conservation, therefore, is the primary museum or heritage discipline with the unique focus on the objects themselves, their behaviour, preservation and construction and their character as carriers of a vast array of information on the artistic creation of a tangible object, depending on numerous choices of materials and resources of knowledge.

It is desirable that conservation documentation also describes the composition and condition of the object, how it may have changed over time, and if necessary presents a treatment strategy. The outcome of the observations and the eventual treatment should be put into narrative form in order to form the basis for an understanding of the

documentation accessible to others than the strict professionals in the conservation studio. Documentation is not only done for future conservators so that they will know as precisely as possible what was done and perhaps how to reverse the actions if necessary. Different heritage disciplines, historians and art historians are to be seen as important recipients of the information.

There are still protests from some quarters that paying for conservation documentation, especially in relation to low-profile treatments, is irrelevant. However, I believe that it is not the importance of the artist or craftsman that defines the importance of the information within the object. Numerous are the lesser artworks that have stayed clear of major conservation/restoration treatments in the past. These still fairly pristine works may contain better preserved information about our past – information that can assist in the interpretation of greater masters' often more frequently treated works.

It is genuinely important for each individual conservator and institution to decide upon the format for conservation documentation. Its accessibility is equally an issue to be carefully considered. Retrieval comes next to permanency in regard to the documentation in its analogue form and in databases with sufficient back-up.

But how can we make our conservation documentation relevant if it is either in-bred techno-language or invisible to others both within and without the heritage world? With no computerised databases to assist in spreading the meta-data of what has been achieved, the invisibility may continue – with the one exception of the INCCA network.⁴⁷ Collaborative projects between smaller regional museums could facilitate a better documentation practice by instigating shared databases or documentation programs. Such constructions may assist the museums in answering questions like how we keep funding the conservation documentation in its broadest sense when museums are constantly being put under economical pressure from governments. Collaboration between different institutions, museums and universities and the industries, often offers opportunities for new results and innovation. Fundraising in collaboration and for interdisciplinary projects has a much better chance of success.

⁴⁵ J. Ridge, "The Tate brand: Its consequences for the care and presentation of Tate collections", in *The Object in Context: Crossing Conservation Boundries. Contributions to the IIC Munich Congress 28 August-1 September 2006*, pp. 23-29.

⁴⁶ N. Hushion, "Conservators: Relevant or Redundant?", in *ICOM news*, LVI, no. 2 (2003), pp. 5, 8.

⁴⁷ See note 5.

If the day-to-day duties of conservators do not permit them to devote much time to in-depth research on the object in the studio, the conservation documentation will not evolve above basic information in shorthand about the choices of materials during treatments. However, if conservators, curators and conservation scientists would overcome their traditional profession-orientated communication in favour of an interdisciplinary approach and collaboration, when examining and working with museum objects, they would gain significantly in understanding the objects they all work and care for. In this way the documentation records gathered at the conservation department will also become a new challenging resource for all.

Conclusion

In 1999 a professional survey of the composition and interest of the ICOM-CC membership was conducted.⁴⁸ It showed with all clarity that *Preventive Conservation* was the overall number one priority of the members. Almost at the other end of the scale we find *Documentation*. The survey did not offer an explanation of this, and many factors may have pushed this issue so far back in the interest of the membership. The activity level of the Working Group on Documentation at that time could be an explanation, but also the fact that conservation documentation is still so relatively unstructured in the way it is performed, described, viewed and appreciated in general within the museum world.

Documentation is, however, an integral part of the conservation process; therefore, it must be encouraged and the recordings preserved so that the information will be available to all heritage disciplines. In addition, it expands our appreciation and understanding of the object even if it is lost, destroyed, or otherwise made inaccessible. More generally, the documentation may be used to evaluate treatment methods and materials, support scholarly research, the study of the history of the conservation profession and the thought processes and rationales applied to the care of cultural property. Documentation reduces the need for direct intervention (e.g. sampling,

handling, re-excavation, pre-treatment testing). It can serve as an important educational tool for owners/custodians, students, scholars, and the general public. Further, it serves as a record that can help avoid misunderstanding and unnecessary litigation, and conservation documentation enhances the credibility of the conservation profession by setting a positive example for allied professionals and the public.⁴⁹

In many museums research-curators conduct research on a high level of sophistication. The same could be said about research-conservators – a job description until now not often encountered in the museum world. Conservation scientist, found only in few museums, will be expected to carry out research in order to understand the *how* of objects and in order to come up with solutions to their safekeeping. Conservators may have a more nuanced view on the material complexities, surface peculiarities etc. of an object, and are therefore in a unique position to describe it, compared to anyone else in the museum. So when establishing the research qualifications of a museum the conservation staff should naturally be involved in its estimation. Obviously the physical care of collections should not be jeopardised by conservators only carrying out documentation. The balance between a continued focus on developing and exercising hands-on treatments and the academically generated documentation should be seen as the single integrated aim of the conservator. The employer – private or public – will benefit from having the results of both when treatments are undertaken.

The influx of educators and exhibition managers, relatively new disciplines in the museum environment, not traditionally accustomed to search for information in the conservation documentation files may, however, generate a whole new array of possibilities for the use of conservation documentation. With the increasingly important web-dissemination of information on museum objects, also the conservation documentation records will with time prove of immense value, and more and more museums will aim at making this vast resource of knowledge accessible. However, even if many museums in the past three decades have established digital collections

⁴⁸ D. Grattan, "Professional survey of ICOM-CC members 1999", in *Conservation at the End of the 20th Century. Plenary Sessions from the 12th Triennial Meeting of ICOM-CC, Lyon, France*. Rome 1999, pp. 3-6.

⁴⁹ This paragraph is based on the "Commentaries to the Guidelines for Practice of the AIC", see <http://aic.stanford.edu/pubs/comment28.html>

management systems facilitating the day-to-day tracking and management of institutional holdings, these automated systems typically do not yet incorporate conservation information - either because it has not been digitized at all, or because it is held in isolated databases or files which therefore are likely to become increasingly isolated and unavailable for study.⁵⁰

Perhaps it is too early to suggest that conservators should take on hermeneutic responsibilities in terms of interpreting the meaning of culture and objects of culture in a wider sense as reflections of the human experience.⁵¹ It is, however, important that we realise that by having the conservation profession document not only their actions on objects but also all observations made in solitude or in collaboration with scholars in the sciences and/or humanities, with museums and private practitioners, it will be possible to offer great and challenging insights in fascinating aspects of the making and meaning of our past.

This will greatly assist in shaping the future understanding between the cultures of the Earth. Even in times of strong political impetus to isolate people from others by borders, physical or psychological, these have for artists and artisans to some degree been permeable for the sharing of knowledge and craftsmanship. Therefore each object in our museums is the fruit of the evolving sophistication of man. While combining and shaping materials to reflect his ideas of varied complexity based on his intellectual considerations, the objects remain carriers of the results of these intricate choices of resources and craftsmanship. With Berenson we shall continue to acknowledge that works of art should be viewed first and foremost for the joy and inspiration they offer and that they simultaneously and without precluding pleasure and reflection will also remain extraordinary resources for a broader understanding of civilization.

⁵⁰ A.Z. Rudenstine and T.P. Whalen, 'Conservation Documentation in Digital Form: A Dialogue about the Issues', in the *GCI Newsletter* XXI, no. 2 (Summer 2006), pp. 26-28.

⁵¹ See note 14.