

# The conservator: versatility and flexibility

R. J. Barclay

*'What does a conservator actually do?', asks R. J. Barclay, Senior Conservator in the Ethnology Section of the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa. His answer reflects the gradual evolution of a primarily technical profession into one that is at the heart of the museum's increasingly interdisciplinary vocation.*

Conservation occupies a central position in the life of the museum, and the influence of the professional conservator is felt in almost every other department. Historically, the prime focus of the museum has been artefacts, and as the conservator is dedicated to their well-being it stands to reason that he or she must occupy a key position. To define the title 'conservator' is not easy for two reasons: first, the word itself has confusing connotations; and, second, redefinition by the profession itself has loosened the terms of reference. A conflict continues between the terms 'conservator' and 'restorer', a conflict largely engendered and certainly exacerbated by language. It was in an attempt to redefine the profession's role in the museum laboratory and workshop that the term 'conservator' was first coined a generation ago. Only in English was there a distinction between conservation and restoration – an attempt to distinguish between the technical preservation of unstable and fragile objects, and mere beautification for display. This was an invidious comparison which unfortunately still draws a sharp distinction that exists nowhere in the real world. ICOM has adopted the term 'conservator/restorer', which eases this artificial polarization to a certain extent, but one finds few members of the profession so describing themselves.

A further complication of terminology arises between the hands-on and the scientific disciplines of the profession. In recent years the title 'conservator' has been applied principally to the bench-worker, the one who treats the objects in the conservation laboratory, while the title 'conservation scientist' is used for those who conduct research less directly related to the day-to-day needs of artefacts. 'Conservation managers' are also appearing as the profession diversifies and the emphasis shifts from the objects to their milieu. This

has also resulted in the emergence of preventive conservation as a specialized discipline. (The element of tautology implicit in this title is glossed over.) Nevertheless, the title 'conservator' is regarded by most people as the generic term which best encompasses the profession as a whole, at least in the English-speaking world.

But what are the terms of reference which make conservation difficult to define? What does a conservator actually do? A generation ago neither question would have been difficult to answer: the function was primarily the restoration of museum objects for purposes of enhancing presentability, function or stability. To some extent these purposes still provide the core skills of the conservator, but in the last 30 years or so they have been augmented by a wide range of other capabilities and areas of interest. Walter Angst, who was Furniture Conservator at the Smithsonian Institution for a number of years, identified over 150 divergent job skills which the conservator in his field was obliged to possess in order to master just that one discipline. Analysis might show that this is no exaggeration; it might, in fact, be even a little conservative.

Several new skills have been added to the traditional roles: analysis of artefact materials, elucidation of manufacturing techniques, research and testing of conservation products, monitoring of and research into the environment, packing and shipping, and education and training, to name but a few. The conservator's commitment to the well-being of objects, together with the intimate knowledge often gained by having them in pieces on the bench, has forced a wide understanding of the structure and function of museum objects. In many cases this knowledge exceeds that gained by the curator or historian in more classical studies of artefacts. One of the finest exemplars of this is Herbert Maryon.

Courtesy of the Numatta Sunaqtangit Museum, Iqaluit, Northwest Territories (Canada)



Whalebone sculpture by Inuit artist Henry Evaluardjuk, 1968.

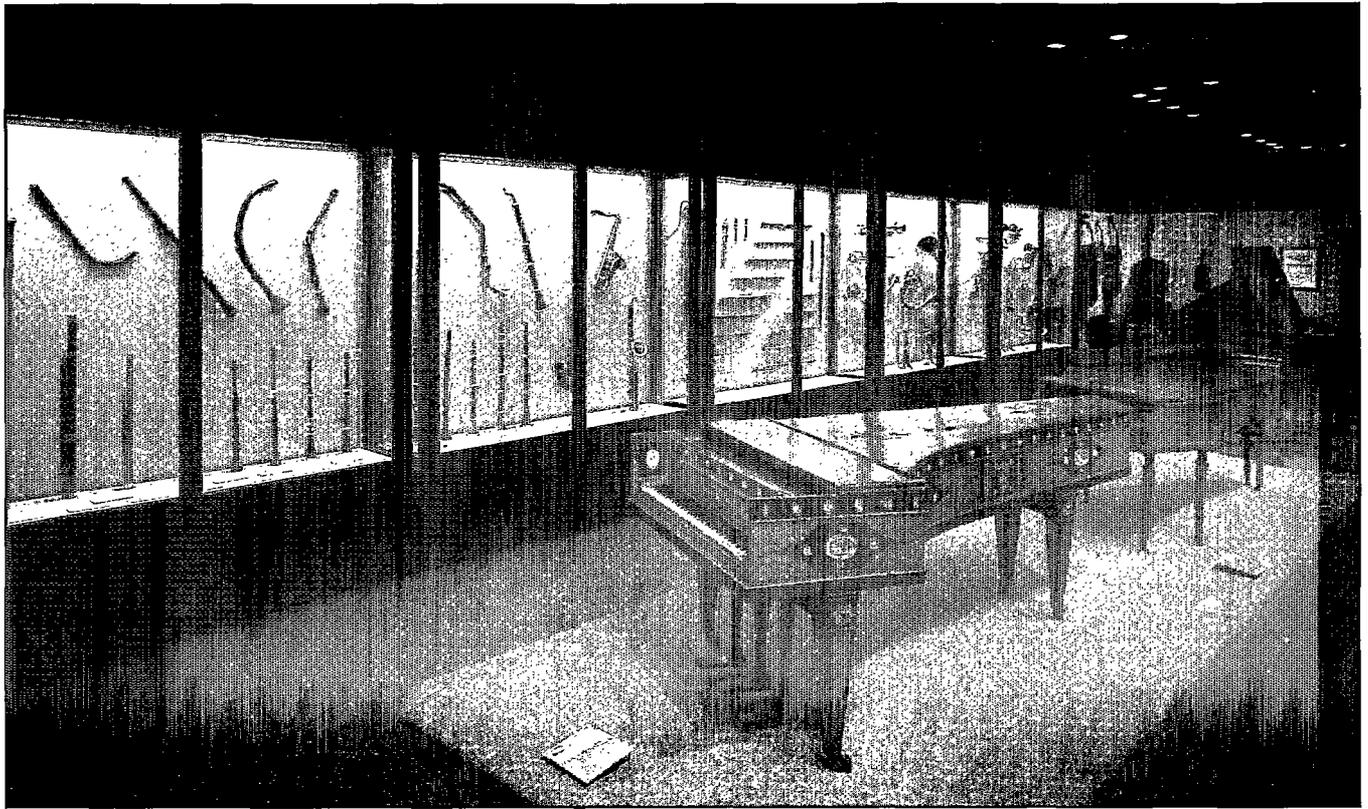
He described himself modestly as 'a backroom boy somewhere in the British Museum', but through his long and close association with the treatment of metal objects he became a world authority on early metalworking techniques. His book on metalworking and enamelling has not been equalled.

Artefacts are indeed the *raison d'être* of the museum. However, as more and more museums tend to break away from this classical artefact-centred model, and rely

less and less upon material from their own collections, the focus in future may be found elsewhere. For the present, and assuming continuing life for the more classical model, conservation has a primary function, influencing all others. It therefore stands to reason that the staff member who takes daily care of museum objects ought, in an ideal situation, to play a central role. As professionals in other museum disciplines might be inclined to contest such a sweeping statement, there is a need to justify this point of view. Perhaps the best way to examine the role of the conservator, and to highlight interaction with the policies and pursuits of the museum at large, is through a series of small case-studies or vignettes. In these we can examine the conservator as materials scientist, the conservator's often essential assistance in exhibitions, and the conservator's role in historical studies.

### From jawbones to firearms

In order to treat materials successfully, for repair, stabilization or replacement, one must be conversant with their properties. It is necessary to know whether incipient problems within the material may manifest themselves only when it is manipulated, physically or chemically. In short, it is essential to be fully appraised of the presence of sleeping dogs. The sculpture shown in the illustration was carved from the fresh jaw-bone of a whale. It was not long before the sculpture became surrounded by an offensive aura of putrid whale oil. There was little need to place 'Do not touch' signs near the object; it soon became unexhibitible. Removal of the oil would entail the use of a large quantity of strong solvent, and the whole sculpture would probably need immersion. What effect would this treatment have on the structure and stability of the bone? What changes



Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (United States)

might take place on the surface? And would such a radical and technically difficult treatment prove effective? The conservator and his colleagues were obliged not only to answer all these questions, but to pose them in the first place. Although the curator or historian might have a reasonable end product in mind, the route towards that end and the questions that might arise on the way are the conservator's province. A full understanding of the structure, anatomy and function of bone was a prerequisite of successful treatment.

Artefacts on display and in travelling exhibitions need very special attention. When an object becomes the property of a museum, the conditions under which it is handled, displayed or stored should obviously be aimed at extending its longevity. In many cases, it is necessary to create custom-made mounts or supports for objects which will either remain in the same position for extended periods or be transported for long distances. An understanding of the inherent weakness of objects, and the materials from which they are made, assists the decision-making process.

It is here that the conservator's familiarity with materials can be especially important. Each one of the musical instruments illustrated has a custom-designed supporting mount, taking into account the instrument's structure and load-bearing capability derived from close examination and analysis. The conservator's expertise in the handling of materials can often be co-opted for assistance in mounting such displays, or for advising on secure and artefact-friendly techniques.

The gun shown in the illustration required conservation treatment, including stabilization and cleaning. It was thought by the owners simply to be a trade musket of British manufacture, and little else of historical value was discernible. The conversion of the weapon from flintlock to caplock indicated that it had been valued sufficiently by its owner to continue in use long after its style was outmoded. During treatment heavy layers of corrosion were removed from the steel barrel, revealing the stamps of the English ordnance department and the crown of King George IV. Above them was a fox in a circle, the mark of the North West Trading

*A musical instrument gallery, showing the wide range of mounting techniques used for secure presentation.*

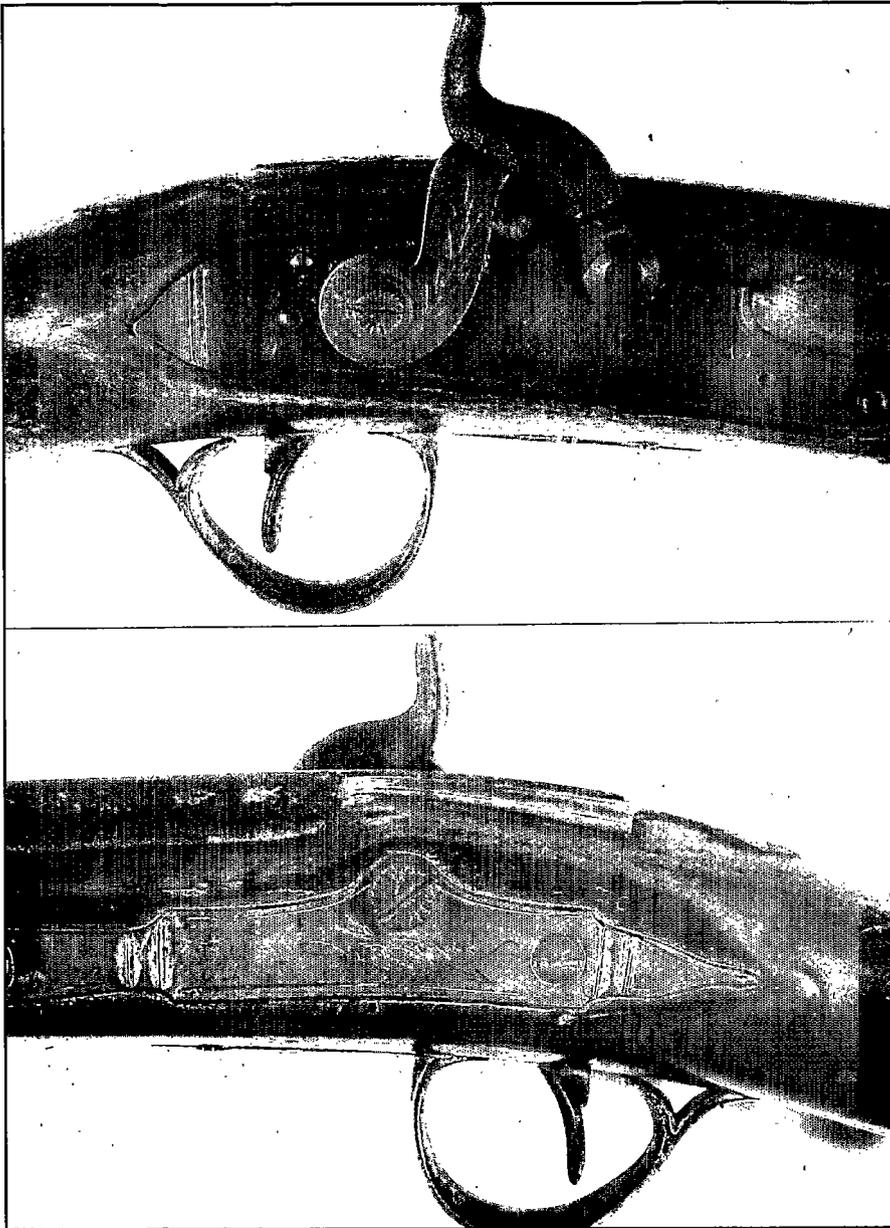
Company which came into being after the war of 1812. The barrel also had 'London' stamped on it. The lock, when also cleaned of corrosion, showed the maker's name, Moxham. Thomas Moxham was a Birmingham gunsmith who lived from 1762 to 1837. On the left side of the stock, stamped into the wood, were the initials 'T.C.'. These were probably the mark of the maker of the stock and possibly the person who assembled the gun in Moxham's workshop. The symbol of a boar in a circle, also stamped on the lock, appeared on all guns presented to Indian chiefs in North America. Furthermore, a blackened plaque on the stock proved to be a silver cartouche bearing the bust of an Indian chief. The foresight also proved to be of silver. All these features taken together indicated that the weapon was a presentation gun, rather than one made simply for trade. The process of conservation treatment therefore enhanced considerably the curatorial information on the object, and increased its historical value.

The cases described briefly above indicate how conservation impinges to a greater or lesser extent upon other museum disciplines. As can be seen from the box on page 40, conservators are often asked to advise on handling techniques, new acquisitions, the museum environment, cataloguing and identification, storage practices, training of personnel, authenticity, and even the detection of forgeries. Because conservation laboratories are often adjacent to workshops, the conservator's skills in fabrication may also be called upon. In reciting this catalogue of skills and expertise, there is of course the danger of overlooking the fact that one person cannot be all things to all people. Implicit within the title 'jack-of-all-trades' is the rejoinder, 'master of none'. Indeed, there is the very real danger of stretching interdisciplinary input and technical capability beyond their respective breaking-points. No conservator could boast

expertise on any but a small number of the above conflicting technical specializations, but the nature of the education, training and background required does often lead to a useful versatility.

#### **A central conservation facility**

So far, the discussion has centred on conservators working in museums where the personnel and the objects are in the same location, and the interaction demanded by long-term care of collections is guaranteed. Where a central facility exists for a conservation service over a wide geographical area, the situation is very different. The Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) is a case in point, being a federally operated body which must service the museums of a very large and diverse country. The CCI's mandate is to address conservation research, specialized treatment strategies, seminars, workshops, and the development of information systems such as publications, computer networks and electronic and written consultations. In many ways, such a dedicated central facility provides the museum profession with a wide-ranging and specialized resource unobtainable in all but the most well-endowed national museums. The staff of an institute like the CCI naturally do not have the direct, everyday contact with the well-being of individual artefacts that the museum conservator enjoys. Although such intimate contact is not normally required, there are cases where artefacts which have undergone time-consuming and complex treatment must be monitored after being returned to their place of origin. In these cases the staff of the central facility must make an extra effort to establish closer and longer-lasting contacts with their clients. Isolation from the day-to-day concerns of the museum provides an obvious trade-off to the staff of such an institute in a freer development of specialization that is impossible in the museum context.



Courtesy of Lundy's Lane Historical Museum, Niagara Falls, Ontario (Canada)

*Details of a British trade musket enhanced in historical value after conservation treatment.*

The development of the conservation profession over the last few decades, and its fuller integration with the professional museum functions, has resulted in a heightened awareness of the museum object in its context, an increased focus on maintenance, and an emphasis on the generation and dissemination of information. Taken together, these trends have undoubtedly resulted in more and more conservators doing less and less

interventive treatment or, at the least, to treatments being generally of a minor nature consistent with preparation for display or storage. In this regard, the centralized conservation facilities have their place in undertaking more complex work which can only be performed with special facilities and expertise.

Perhaps the key features of the conservation profession as a whole are versatility

and flexibility: the capacity to embrace new technical and philosophical directions and to react positively to change. Conservators are anything but conservative. Even so, the greatest challenge is yet to come: the twentieth century can be characterized by the widespread use of synthetic materials in the creation of artefacts and works of art coupled

with an abandonment, or at least a subjugation, of traditional techniques. These two facts together will oblige the discipline of museum conservation to face wider and more diverse demands in the next century – provided, of course, that the artefacts of our material culture continue to occupy centre stage in our museums. ■

The conservator's chief areas of responsibility in the daily operation of the museum and their primary or secondary nature. (The close working relationship with all other disciplines is evident.)

<b>Conservation function</b>	<b>Primary responsibility</b>	<b>Secondary responsibility</b>
Preventive: environmental monitoring, condition surveys, inspections, preventive actions	Conservator	Conservation technician, curator, collections manager
Treatment: major treatment of objects (restoration, repair, stabilization);  Examination: (condition, authenticity, materials of fabrication, technique of manufacture)	Conservator	Curator, conservation technician
Training and supervision: museum staff, interns, contractors, volunteers	Conservator	Conservation technician
Management: advice on acquisitions, budgets for department, supplies	Conservator	Director, curator, all other staff
Exhibitions: mount-making, environment monitoring and control, handling, minor treatment, condition reporting, packing and shipping	Display technician, curator, preparator, registrar	Conservator, conservation technician