

The restorer: key player in preventive conservation

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In this article the author presents and clarifies the concepts of preservation, preventive conservation, curative conservation and restoration. She then sets out her personal view as a practitioner of conservation/restoration about the scope for and value of integrating restorers into preventive conservation projects in French museums. Eleonore Kissel is a conservator-restorer of graphic documents and a consultant in preventive conservation. She holds a Master's degree in the sciences and techniques of conserving and restoring cultural property and a Higher Specialized Studies Diploma (DESS) in preventive conservation from the University of Paris-I Panthéon-Sorbonne. She is a specialist in preventive conservation work which she carries out mostly in archives and museums in France and Canada.

Before examining the main subject of this article, namely, the scope for integrating restorers into preventive conservation projects, I will first of all try to define the different activities covered by the disciplines whose common objective is to safeguard cultural property, and second, will briefly determine how the various responsibilities are shared by museum personnel. I should mention at the outset that this article concerns practices in French museums only; other kinds of heritage institutions such as archives, libraries and historical sites and monuments, as well as the situation in other countries are not reflected here.

What do the terms 'restoration', 'curative conservation' and 'preventive conservation' mean, and who are the individuals responsible for carrying out each of these tasks in the heritage institutions?

French popular usage gives a meaning to the term 'restoration' which is different from its technical definition, and this leads to confusion when the subject of restoration is being discussed in public. Following the definition given by the English-speaking world, 'restoration' was described in 1992 as all the work carried out on a cultural property in order to improve understanding of it.¹ The work in question is therefore optional, and executed on an object whose continued existence is not at issue. By contrast, 'curative conservation' can be defined as encompassing all the work done on a damaged object in order to rescue it from danger. None the less, both verbal and written shortcuts show how even today the term 'restoration' and, therefore, that of 'restorer' are readily used in a broader sense which takes in all the work done direct on an object. Bearing this in mind and to avoid any confusion, the term 'conservation-restoration' will be used in

this article, but together with that of 'restorer', and it is hoped that readers will accept this refusal to submit to official terminology.²

Restoration and curative conservation work both concern individual objects which have usually suffered damage, whereas preventive conservation is a different discipline whose purpose is to lessen the risks of deterioration. As a result, on the one hand, preventive conservation work is, in general, aimed primarily at the environment rather than at individual objects, although it is understood that it is the materiality of the object which determines the nature of the actions taken. On the other hand, given that action aimed at the environment often benefits several objects, justification for such action is seen in terms of its expected impact on the collection as a whole rather than on individual objects.

Adopting a broader view of material conservation issues, which are defined not in terms of a potential improvement of the state of the object but, rather, a stabilization of its present condition, requires a considerable change of perspective on the part of the restorer. This new angle of analysis leads the restorer to accept that his or her preventive conservation work will not bring back the object's lost splendour, but that, at most, it will continue to exist for the initiation and pleasure of future generations. This is what restoration work means in both psychological and concrete terms – restorers can, perhaps, merely lessen the effects of deterioration agents by ensuring the daily, although perhaps minimal, protection of the collections.

This shift in role is not without real significance, given the scale of the effects



Piling up various types of objects in the reserves without regard to their shapes or materials creates problems of access and conservation and makes an inventory extremely difficult to undertake.

of any major action aimed at a collection of objects or their environment. The actions taken and results obtained in the context of prevention and protection against damage are often unspectacular, but the responsibility is none the less heavy given that any mistake made risks affecting thousands, if not millions, of objects.

Who does what? In theory ...

These introductory remarks bring us to the question of whether restorers are the right people for the work of preventive conservation. Are they able to do such work given a training and professional activity centred on the treatment of individual objects? Can restorers justifiably claim to be specialized in preventive conservation?

To be able to answer this question, we have to look into the origins of preventive conservation as a discipline in its own right. The relevant bibliography is very revealing: the basic reference works have mostly been written by restorers. Why? First, because of what I would call the physiological reason that conservation-restoration is, by far, the discipline which is closest to the materiality of the object from which it derives its *raison d'être* and substance. The second reason is linked to the specific circumstance of museum professionals, especially in North America, being faced with the problem

of both the increasing quantity of collections and increased pressure for the conservation of the works. The restorers working in museums gradually found themselves having to justify the way the funds allocated to their sector of activity were used. Public financing decreased whilst private financing increased, and the new 'investors' have been demanding the production of tangible results as they would do in the business world. In this way, it became unacceptable to use money from private foundations to finance, for instance, a specific conservation-restoration action if the conditions of storage of the restored work were unsatisfactory. This simple and consistent principle obtains whether the financing is public or private, but it is still far from being systematically applied in the domain of culture. To sum up, the foregoing informs us about both the geographic origins of preventive conservation and the existence of a literature specific to restorers, many of whom have become, officially or unofficially, fully fledged 'preservation managers' as well as personnel who work direct on individual objects.

... and in practice

Who are the people responsible for carrying out preventive conservation work in French museums in day-to-day practice, and how is it done?

Until now, only conservators had been able to do such work. Once again, the reasons for this were structural, with the management of museum collections having always been governed by the presence and decision-making of conservators, and conservators alone. Very few museums have administrators among their executives; only a few managers are

integrated into the organizational structure, and salaried restorers are extremely rare. At the same time, restorers play a prominent role in museums with which they have always maintained a tradition of co-operation, and are called to work for them when deteriorated objects require their attention. In most cases, the restorer's services are required to restore works for a specific exhibition, rather than as a routine way of ensuring the lasting value of whole collections.

Recently, there has been a marked change in the initial training of conservators which now includes courses on the material conservation of cultural property. In the past, however, educational emphasis was put on research into art history, the presentation and display and subsequent enhancement of collections. It is therefore in the professional context when, more or less abruptly depending on the given situation, the conservators are brought face to face with the collections, that they become fully aware of the extreme fragility of the objects which, as genuine artefacts and not as intangible icons, form the actual bases of their scientific work. Conservators can then begin preventive conservation work and become an integral part of it.

Thus, French museums have systematically integrated into their staffs only one socio-professional and decision-making category which can set up long-term preventive conservation programmes. Restorers, who by the very nature of their work are the occasional guarantors of the continued existence of collections are, with but rare exceptions, left out. Today, however, they are sometimes received in museums as outsiders who have come to conduct specific evaluation and consultancy work, a 'cultural audit' as it were which puts one in mind of financial audits, given their



Photo by courtesy of the author/Musée Lorrain, Nancy, France

character of being both efficient and aggressive *vis-à-vis* the enterprise concerned.

In this type of work, the restorer evaluates various aspects of the museum and its functioning, always in relation to the preservation of collections: the state of conservation and the presentation and display of objects as well as staff training and budget management. It has to be said that this activity occurs in a grey area in which the fields of competence of conservators and restorers overlap. This situation – brought to light during consultancy missions even when both parties agree that the restorer's proposals will not necessarily be endorsed by a decision of the conservator who has sole legal responsibility for the collections – might result in a conflict which could have devastating repercussions on our common professional world. What is to be done?

To what is no doubt a complex question, I would unequivocally answer that, given a context in which museum collections have increased constantly over the centuries without a like increase in budgets and often with a steadily shrinking staff, we must go for wealth rather than destitution. Using this guiding principle, three major stages of co-operation can be envisaged: to begin with, preservation work should not be seen in terms of power but of *complementarity*, its sole purpose being to safeguard cultural property. All the museum's partners should also be made aware of the value of preventive conservation by means of adapted *training*

Another example of how inappropriate storage can create conservation problems: although a number of small wooden objects were carefully placed together on shelves during the refitting of a reserve facility, other kinds were later stored among them or stacked on the floor since suitable storage fittings had not yet been created.

which, if possible, is to be given in the museum itself jointly by the restorer and conservator. The final goal should be to *integrate* the professionals of each type of activity (conservators, restorers specialized in preventive conservation and/or working on individual objects, producers, frame-makers and plinth workers, etc.) into museum structures in order to make them function more dynamically. It can reasonably be hoped that the emergence of new occupations in the museum will help its administrative structures to adapt to the requirements of preservation by granting allocations to preventive conservation, authorizing programmes for the collective purchasing of conservation-restoration supplies for museums with low budgets, making emergency funds available in case of damage, and creating consultancy posts at the national and regional levels.

The restorer: a professional profile

But while waiting for this ideal evolution of cultural institutions, what are the strengths – and weaknesses – of restorers with respect to preventive conservation? First of all, they derive unquestionable benefit from their constant contact with the works and their great sensitivity to their materiality. Their initial training and professional practice give restorers a particular capacity for viewing the object from all angles (and not merely going round it in circles). In this way, they can appreciate both its state of conservation and potential for deterioration, see the improvements which could be made by modifying its environment, and establish the procedures required to lessen the risks of deterioration, both static (climate, inadapted furniture or packaging) and dynamic (types of transport and exhibition, risky consultation work, etc.).

At the same time, restorers can also be inhibited in the work of preventing deterioration by their familiarity with the object. Their closeness to the material object together with their frequent ignorance of the workings of government and institutional ‘corporate culture’ can lead restorers to overlook the practical difficulties that museum personnel can encounter in trying to implement their recommendations. For example, following an evaluation of conservation conditions, the restorer decides that each object in the collection should be placed individually in a protective container. First, will the financial sponsor accept that the supplies for packaging be included in the budget under investments and not operations, provisions for the latter having already been exhausted by the needs of the administration? Second, what action should be taken if the personnel concerned believe that this type of task does not form part of their duties? Recruit a student on short-term contract who will come during the holidays? Well and good, but who is going to train the student and make half an office available to him or her to work? Buying cardboard and foam rubber to make one’s own low-price containers is certainly a great idea, but where are the supplies going to be kept during the academic year when the student will be absent? This shows that if restorers are not to lose all professional credibility, the projects they make in the context of a consultancy mission should be firmly based on the spatial, administrative and financial realities of the museum concerned. Moreover, they should be careful not to ruffle the feathers of the museum’s staff, which is not always easy when one’s stay is short and little time is available to convince people of the need for the changes one is proposing.

On the other hand, restorers sometimes suffer as a result of their attachment to the

objects, and can be accused of frowning each time that the subject of an exhibition or loan is raised. But the rationale of the museum's conservator calls for the presentation and display of collections, and it would be inept to think that the purpose of preventive conservation is to keep the objects out of public view because of their fragility! So, there should be co-operation from all sides.

Restorers specialized in preventive conservation can offer their services as consultants in two types of situation: individual studies and long-term engagements. Individual studies are requested by conservators either for the establishment of a global evaluation, or for the provision of answers to specific questions.

When making a global evaluation, consultants analyse the functioning of the museum as a whole: the state of collections; conservation conditions, protection against accidents and human malice; the reproduction and/or conservation-restoration work carried out; the ways in which the works are presented and displayed; the activities of the staff as a whole and the role they play in the protection of collections; budgetary provisions for preservation, etc. A comprehensive file resulting from this study is submitted which includes an analytical section as well as the restorer's recommendations. These primarily concern main lines of action spread out over time, budgeted and authorized for payment on the basis of the priorities identified by the restorer. But where to begin and in what order should preservation activities be programmed, given budgetary limitations? Is it more useful for the protection of collections to buy climate-measuring equipment or mobile humidifiers? Would it be better to begin by a campaign of dust removal or by repackaging? If the



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collections suffer from deterioration in the reserves, is it preferable to have a structural analysis done of the building in which they are housed or to make a fresh start by looking for reserve facilities outside the museum?

When a conservator is faced with a technical problem such as the physical monitoring of collections when a removal takes place or when reserve facilities are being outfitted, a restorer can be engaged to address a specific issue. When this happens, the consultant examines the parameters of the problem and finds the most suitable solutions, and puts them forward together with financial estimates which are often much more precise than the orders of magnitude indicated in a global evaluation.

Very often, it is in the context of global evaluations that conflicts occur between restorers and museum personnel, and inevitably so, to go by financial auditors who are in the habit of saying that 'any imposed change will be a rejected

Had the conservator-restorer inserted foam padding around their gilded wood frames, these mirrors, which were simply stacked against each other, would have resisted considerable damage.



These large-sized textiles, carefully rolled and protected against dust in linen coverings, are nevertheless at risk on the floor of a room with no air-conditioning and where direct sunlight streams through a window. The conservator-restorer has directed that the facility be isolated and supplied with proper fittings for this type of material.

change'. The often very short stay *in situ* of consultants, and the access they must have to documents such as the administrative chart and the budget, sometimes make them seem like a threat in the eyes of staff, who may well ask, 'What right has an intruder to come here to teach us how to do our work, we who have been coming here every day for the last ten years? And what can he possibly see that the chief conservator has not already seen?'

In practice, it would seem that the coming of an outsider can reveal, if not unsuspected problems, at least viable solutions to situations which seemed to be deadlocked. A museum's past must never be overlooked because it throws light on the existence of situations which are sometimes absurd although none the less historical. Dust does not protect (yes, we might, in passing, explode one of the most widespread myths in the world of conservation) and, in the same way, the fact that a particular situation developed and stabilized over time in a given establishment does not necessarily imply

that it is advantageous and should therefore be maintained. Without wishing to offend or upset long-standing professionals, it is important that museum personnel understand that the consultant restorer has been brought in to foster the creation of new habits which will lead to the enhanced protection of cultural heritage, given the principle that any situation can be improved if good will and financial resources, of whatever magnitude, are mobilized to this end. It might be pointed out that harmony and openness between consultants and personnel can be greatly facilitated by the head of the establishment, for example, by convening a meeting of the entire staff in order to introduce the newcomer and to set out the purpose of the project for which the consultant has been engaged. Lastly, it should be noted that these problems of professional relationships are less common when restorers are engaged in order to solve a specific problem. They are then perceived as experts on the matter (in the strict sense of the term), and their coming does not usually lead to questions being asked by staff.

Long-term missions are ongoing experimental projects about which conclusions cannot yet be drawn. They are based on a system whereby self-employed restorers are attached to an institution and work not on a full-time basis but for a number of hours per month or year during a fairly long period of, for example, two to three years. This system has been used for a long time in conservation-restoration work, with some restorers being employed each year to work, in their private workshops, on a fraction of a museum's collection. But it is innovative with respect to preventive conservation, and requires the making of specific working-time arrangements whose modalities still have

to be examined, especially as it implies the frequent presence of the restorer in the museum. It would be interesting to follow the evolution – in terms of the efficacy of the work done and the professional recognition given to the consultant restorer – of this possibility of having preventive conservation activities supervised by an outsider for whom the museum has opened an ‘hours account’.

From conservation to preservation

The term ‘preservation’ which has already been employed several times in this article, covers all the activities carried out on and around collections with the aim of ensuring their continued material and/or documentary existence. This discipline covers a vast area whose ramifications include management, logistics, statistics, informatics and – why not? – human psychology.

The evaluation of the state of collections, recommendation of actions to limit the scale of deterioration, establishment of budgets with provisions for conservation-restoration – these tasks are all within the scope of restorers when they are integrated into preventive conservation projects. When restorers are part and parcel of a truly dynamic policy of preservation, they could also alert the personnel of cultural institutions and the public to the unquestionable fragility of the objects, pool energies in order to protect collections from deterioration agents, encourage the authorities or

private bodies to invest in this backroom but indispensable, work – in short, fully play their role, at last, in a cultural landscape in which all are able to do their utmost in the collective task of ensuring that the cultural heritage is here to stay. ■

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Notes

1. Guillemard, Denis ‘Éditorial’ *La conservation préventive* (proceedings of the Symposium on Preventive Conservation), pp.13–18, Paris, Association des Restaurateurs d’Art et d’Archéologie de Formation Universitaire (ARAFU), 1992.
2. The official term for professionals working directly on cultural property is ‘conservator-restorer’. It means simply that these professionals take both preventive or curative conservation steps and also carry out restoration work. It in no way implies that the professionals in question want to encroach on the field of competence of conservators. The term ‘conservator-restorer’ has been endorsed by the document *La profession de restaurateur – Code d’éthique et formation* [The Profession of Restorer – Code of Ethics and Training], adopted by the General Assembly of the European Confederation of Conservators-Restorers’ Organizations (ECCO) on 11 June 1993.