

Careers and Training in Conservation in the UK

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A large, light blue, stylized logo consisting of the letters 'V', '&', and 'A' in a serif font. The logo is centered horizontally and occupies the lower half of the page. The 'V' and 'A' are tall and narrow, while the '&' is shorter and wider, with a decorative flourish at the bottom right.

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What is conservation?

Conservation is concerned with the care and preservation of a huge range of works of artistic and historical importance. Conservation involves the understanding of materials and technology as well as the historical and social significance of these works. All works of art and artefacts are deteriorating - some more quickly than others. The first duty of the conservator is to slow down the rate of deterioration either by manipulating its environment (preventive conservation) or by intervening in the object itself. Conservators treat objects, physically and chemically, in order to preserve them. Conservators work with curators, historians and scientists to interpret objects and reveal their narratives. It is sometimes necessary to restore to a presumed previous state in order to facilitate understanding. The work of conservators enables us to understand and enjoy our patrimony while at the same time ensuring that it will be preserved for future generations. Conservators work in the public interest and their activities are therefore governed by codes of ethics.

The Profession

The conservation profession has evolved into two main groups: one for moveable cultural property, for example museum collections, and another for built heritage. (This article focuses on the former.)

Conservation professionals can be found in museums, in large heritage organisations, such as English Heritage and The National Trust, and in private businesses ranging in size from single individuals to a few with as many as 30-40 personnel. While twenty years ago museum conservators were mainly to be found in studios, workshops and laboratories (“at the bench”), nowadays conservators take their place alongside other museum colleagues in teams which plan, prepare and execute gallery installations and temporary exhibitions, educational programmes and public events. Many conservators who are trained to work on objects find themselves more and more often dealing with people and resources. Some leave the studio altogether and dedicate themselves to management. Other conservators spend most of their time dealing with preventive conservation programmes. Still others have moved from practical conservation to conservation education. Another group of conservation professionals, conservation scientists, are qualified chemists or physicists who study and advise on the materials and deterioration of art and artefacts. Conservators working in private practices may do much of their work for the art market, however, they may also tender for work that museums and other heritage groups contract out. In this way the interface between the public and private sectors is becoming more fluid. The knowledge base of the profession is continuously developed; conservation research ranges from publishing observations made during treatments to taking part in international research projects, such as those funded by the European Commission.

Specialist disciplines

Conservation (and conservation education) is generally divided into areas of specialisation, although there is a current trend towards generalisation in the growth of preventive conservation. Specialisations vary across institutions. There are institutions that view themselves as dealing, in the main, with archaeological artefacts (The British Museum), while others are mainly ethnographical (The Horniman Museum), and others are dedicated to the fine (The National Gallery) and decorative arts and design (Victoria & Albert Museum). Within these are further divisions of materials or types of object. Some of the main ones are: organic/inorganic, paper, books, paintings, textiles, furniture, metalwork etc. In smaller museums or businesses, where there may be only one conservator, it may be necessary to work across a range of materials or object types.

Conservation Education in the UK

It is still possible to gain conservation expertise through a period of apprenticeship and this is the case with some of the building crafts, such as the conservation of exterior stonework and architectural features. However, a course in higher education is now the preferred route for most specialist areas. There are a small number of BA programmes in the UK, but the generally accepted qualification for entering employment is fast becoming an MA (or another post-graduate qualification such as the diploma offered by some of the easel paintings conservation courses). A small number of institutions also offer research degrees of MPhil and PhD. Courses usually have both an academic and a practical element. BA, MA and Diploma courses tend to be vocational, in that they prepare the student to enter the workforce as practical conservators. Entry requirements vary enormously and it is difficult to generalise; each discipline usually has particular skill requirements, such as metalworking or woodworking skills. Among the possible prerequisites for entry to MA courses: a BA in a relevant subject (for example, conservation, art history, archaeology, fine art/craft, physics/chemistry etc) art/craft skills, chemistry/physics A level, understanding and experience of conservation gained through a BA or work experience are just some of the possible prerequisites. The field of conservation is enriched by the fact that conservators come from many different backgrounds and conservation is a second career for many. This is excellent preparation for working in this multidisciplinary field.

Professional Accreditation

The conservation profession has instituted accreditation, based on a set of standards, as the portal through which the fully-fledged professional conservator emerges. This is a competence-based system and is assessed by means of peer review. It is not intended to replace formal education and assessment normally takes place approximately seven years after starting education or training. It does not proscribe any particular route of entry and allows for diversity in training and education.

Continuous Professional Development

CPD is now a requirement for all accredited conservators. Keeping up to date with technical information and current thinking, reflecting on one's own learning, and recording one's progress, are all part of the life-long learning of the professional. The professional body ensures that standards are maintained throughout the conservator's career by auditing their members' CPD records.

Work experience

Work experience in conservation is a thorny issue. On the one hand, it is strongly recommended before applying for a higher degree, and on the other it is very difficult to get experience if you are not registered on a course or do not already have a qualification. The UK's professional body, Icon, has set up a bursary scheme funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Half of these funded bursaries are dedicated to "new starters" in conservation. In addition, work experience in the form of an internship is now considered by the profession to be an essential part of the formative process, whether formally part of a course, or following graduation. Work experience ranges from informal and irregular periods of volunteer work to well-defined internships which can last as long as a year. The tasks will also vary enormously. Nevertheless, people do still manage to get experience working in conservation departments and businesses.

Getting a job

The museum market currently takes the form of a mixed economy of permanent and short-term contract posts to enable museums to deal with the continuously changing demands of large projects. Many conservators today have to be prepared to move from one job to the next every few years. The private sector is equally flexible, many businesses hiring in staff to deal with projects requiring specific skills. Jobs in national museums are generally advertised in the national press. It is also worth looking on the websites of the professional bodies (some are listed below) and in the conservation publications which carry classified advertising.

Finally, a brief word about pay

As a museum employee your pay will be determined by the rules governing public sector spending. Research has shown that museum employees are less well paid than their counterparts in the private sector and that increases in salaries over the past thirty years have only just exceeded inflation. It is not all bad news, however. The baseline for employees starting out on their careers has risen considerably over the last decade or so. Nevertheless, it is probably fair to say that most conservators feel that the benefits of having direct involvement with real artefacts and works of art outweigh any of the disadvantages.

Further Information

- ICOM-CC International Council of Museums Committee for Conservation (triennial conferences and publications)
www.icom-cc.org
- ICCROM International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (runs short courses and has a Training Directory of conservation courses all over the world)
www.iccrom.org
- IIC The International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (biennial conferences and publications)
www.iiconservation.org
- GCI Getty Conservation Institute
<http://www.getty.edu/grants/education/>
- Icon Institute of Conservation (professional body, the lead voice for the conservation of cultural heritage in the UK)
www.icon.org.uk
- CoOL Conservation Online (offers a free dist-list)
<http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/>
- PACR Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers
www.pacr.org.uk

Further Reading

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- Price, Nicholas Stanley et al. Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1996.
- Pye, Elizabeth. Caring for the Past: Issues in conservation for archaeology and museums. London James and James. 2000.
- Pye, Elizabeth and Dean Sully. "Evolving challenges, developing skills". The Conservator. 2000 Vol 30 19-38.

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