

Victoria & Albert Museum Conservation Department Ethics Checklist

2nd Edition December 2004

- A. Why is **action** needed?
- B. Have I consulted records?
- C. Have I consulted **stakeholders, peers**, other specialists?
- D. Have I considered and weighted the factors contributing to the identity and significance of the object(s)?
- E. What are my options for **action** which will produce an appropriate result with minimum intervention?
- F. What effect will my **action(s)** have on the evidence of the factors contributing to the identity and significance of the object(s)?
- G. Do I have sufficient information and skill to assess and implement **action(s)**?
- H. What are the benefits/risks of each course of **action** and how will I continue to assess these throughout the course of **action**?
- I. Can the use or environment be adapted instead of intervening on the **object(s)**?
- J. Is my intended **action(s)** the best use of resources and is it sustainable?
- K. Do established courses of **action** need to be adapted or new ones developed?
- L. How will my **action(s)** affect subsequent **action(s)**?
- M. Have I taken into account the future use and location of the object(s), and have I made recommendations accordingly?
- N. Will my **actions** be fully documented to a known and accepted standard?
- O. Will the information resulting from my **actions** be accessible?
- P. How will I assess the success of the **action(s)**, and how will I get feedback from **stakeholders** and **peers**?

Using the Ethics Checklist

This checklist of ethical considerations is intended to act as the “conscience” of the **conservator-restorer**. It raises questions, but will not necessarily provide straightforward answers. Thinking about ethics is not a separate activity and throughout any conservation **action** the list should prompt the basic question, “Am I doing the right thing?”. The checklist does not tell you what to do; nor does it ensure that you do it: it only asks you to go through a process of asking yourself certain questions. It is based on the premise that going through the process of good decision-making is fundamental to an ethical approach. The **conservator-restorer** is expected to exercise the judgement gained through education, training and experience in deciding what is reasonable and acceptable to the profession. Thereafter the aim is to reach consensus and arrive at an outcome that will be acceptable to **stakeholders**.

The checklist is applicable to a broad range of conservation activities, not just interventive treatment of individual objects. The list can be used before, during and after any **action(s)**. Apart from question A, which is the single most important question, each question is equally valid.

The final wording of each question was chosen to leave the possible factors for consideration very open. The checklist questions are supported by a commentary. In addition a Background Document records the process by which the checklist was arrived at. The checklist is supported by a raft of other relevant documents available through links on the Internet.

Glossary

Action

An **action** is any process which the **conservator-restorer** may employ and which affects the objects under consideration. These include interventive treatment, preventive conservation measures, examination and study, sampling, analysis, and **doing nothing**.

Communities

Communities can be religious, indigenous, collectors, donors and other groups.

Conservator-restorer

Conservator-restorer is the term used by the UK conservation profession.

Peers

Peers are other conservation professionals (**conservator-restorers**, conservation scientists, conservation managers and trainers), other museum and academic professionals (e.g. curators, art historians, scientists) both internal and external to the V&A.

Stakeholders

A stakeholder is anyone who has a valid interest in the outcome of the decision. **Stakeholders** can include the **conservator-restorer**, clients (curators, other museum departments including Conservation, the public, students, private owners), **peers**, artists and artists' estates, other specialists, representatives of **communities**.

Other relevant documents

It is understood that the minimum requirement of a **conservator-restorer** is to obey international and national law. In addition, the **conservator-restorer**, as an employee of the V&A, is guided by codes of ethics for museums (international and national) as well as codes of ethics for the conservation-restoration profession (international and national). Unless otherwise specified the relevant document can be found on the linked website.

ICOM International Council of Museums Code of Ethics for Museums (2002) <http://icom.museum>
(also available in V&A Staff Handbook)

MA Museums Association Code of Ethics for Museums (2002) www.museumsassociation.org

ECCO European Confederation of **Conservator-Restorers'** Organisations Professional Guidelines (1993)
<http://www.ecco-eu.info/>

Icon Institute of Conservation www.icon.org.uk

NCCR National Council for Conservation-Restoration. www.nccr.org.uk

DACS Design and Artists Copyright Society www.dacs.org.uk

V&A Victoria and Albert Museum Staff Handbook <http://intranet.int.vam.ac.uk/>

V&A Victoria and Albert Museum Collections Management Policy (procedures)
<http://intranet.int.vam.ac.uk/>

V&A Victoria and Albert Museum Emergency Response Procedures <http://intranet.int.vam.ac.uk/>

V&A Victoria and Albert Museum Conservation Department Ethics Checklist (2004)
http://www.vam.ac.uk/files/file_upload/15826_file.pdf

V&A Victoria and Albert Museum Conservation Department Background to the Ethics Checklist (2004)
http://www.vam.ac.uk/files/file_upload/15824_file.pdf

Commentary

- A. Why is **action** needed? This question appears first because this is the single most important question. If a user gets no further than this, the Checklist will still have been useful.
- B. Have I consulted records? The **conservator-restorer** should be able to judge what is necessary/relevant, but only after thinking about everything that might be available. Records can include written, image-based, derived from maker, owner, collector/collection, conservator.
- C. Have I consulted **stakeholders**, **peers**, other specialists? Recent codes put focus on public service and social inclusion, on the museum's obligation to promote access and in so doing consult and involve **communities**, users and supporters, among others.
- D. Have I considered and weighted the factors contributing to the identity and significance of the object(s)? The **conservator-restorer** has a significant and distinctive role in interpreting the past. It is important to keep in mind that decision making occurs within a cultural context and the **conservator-restorer** should acknowledge the subjectivity inherent in conservation. Values shift over time and there are a range of values for different individuals and groups. Factors – tangible and intangible - include historical, aesthetic, technical, associations, sacred, and maker's intentions.
- E. What are my options for **action** which will produce an appropriate result with minimum intervention? The **conservator-restorer** is expected to exercise the judgement gained through education and experience in deciding what is reasonable and acceptable to the profession. Thereafter the aim is to reach consensus with **stakeholders**. Reaching consensus is a valid aim, although not necessary or achievable in every case. Alternatively, it is up to the conservator to have the judgement to know what would be acceptable to others. If there are conflicting views it is up to the conservator to use their judgement. Minimum intervention is assumed to be a guiding principle. Preventive conservation measures should be considered first. In the case of modern or contemporary works, conservation treatment may have ramifications in terms of copyright and for the artist's moral rights.
- F. What effect will my **action(s)** have on the evidence of the factors contributing to the identity and significance of the object(s)? It is important to identify the implications of any potential conservation-restoration measures. Risk assessment methodologies can be used to assess the impact on factors.

G. Do I have sufficient information and skill to assess and implement action(s) ?	This question can help to identify development needs of the individual or lead to a transfer of responsibility to another with the required skills, knowledge and understanding to do the job.
H. What are the benefits/risks of each course of action and how will I continue to assess these throughout each course of action ?	Risk assessment aids decision-making and prioritisation of conservation-restoration measures. Continuous assessment of actions helps the conservator keep options open for changing approach or abandoning action altogether. Equally, the Checklist can be used to check the decision against the consequences afterwards, and to give insight into the justification at a later date.
I. Can the use or environment be adapted instead of intervening on the object(s)?	Alternatives to intervention should be considered as early on in the process as possible, and should be selected in favour of intervention, if this will produce an appropriate result.
J. Is my intended action(s) the best use of resources and is it sustainable?	Resources are only among ethical considerations in so far as they affect the object; but they are a realistic constraint on the amount of work that can be done. In the ethical context a balance between the actions which <i>should</i> be done and actions which <i>can</i> be done within the available resources is sought. In general, optimum use of resources results in economically and environmentally sustainable action . Resources include time, people, money, equipment, space and materials.
K. Do established courses of action need to be adapted or new ones developed?	The profession can only advance through research and innovation, and every practitioner has some responsibility to contribute towards this. In addition, the conservator should be asking whether he/she needs to develop skills, knowledge or understanding.
L. How will my action(s) affect subsequent action(s) ?	It is important to identify the implications of any potential conservation-restoration measures. Risk assessment methodologies can be used to assess the impact on potential future actions .
M. Have I taken into account the future use and location of the object(s), and have I made recommendations accordingly?	Risk assessment methodologies can be used to assess the impact of the environment on the object or collection. Objects may require different action if being sent on a lengthy touring exhibition than if being placed in storage; both courses of action should be equally ethical.
N. Will all my actions be fully documented to a known and	The future tense has been used to encourage the conservator-restorer to decide on the type and standard of documentation

accepted standard? *before action* is taken. Standards have not yet been developed for all documentation. Standards are both national and international, and include those of the profession, institution, material specialism.

O. Will the information resulting from my **actions** be accessible? Legislation regarding freedom of information and issues of confidentiality need to be considered. **Conservator-restorers** have an obligation to disseminate their knowledge.

P. How will I assess the success of the **action(s)**, and how will I get feedback from **stakeholders** and **peers**? It is always advisable to review performance in order to innovate and improve and **conservator-restorers** should be proactive in seeking feedback that will influence future developments. Feedback may be elicited through discussion, publication or presentation.

This version of the Checklist is recognised by the Victoria and Albert Museum as the current version. It is the outcome of a review process involving the Conservation Department and documented in the 2004 Background Document. The Ethics Checklist and Background Document of 1994 are archived in the Conservation Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

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