

25 YEARS OF PRIVATE CONSERVATION IN AUSTRALIA: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Julian Bickersteth

International Conservation Services

International Conservation Services (ICS) is celebrating 25 years in business in 2011. As the largest private conservation entity in Australia, it has conserved an estimated 40,000 items, employed in that time over 100 conservators, and worked on objects as small as an ornamental button and as large as Sydney's Capitol Theatre auditorium, in places as geographically diverse as Hanoi and Antarctica. As a result ICS has a unique perspective on the private conservation scene and the broader cultural heritage sector in Australia.

Using ICS's experiences as a background, this paper will particularly explore the interfaces that have been established over those 25 years with allied professionals, working in interdisciplinary teams. It will focus on how conservation needs to be constantly viewed in the context of wider decision-making on the care and interpretation of cultural material.

INTRODUCTION

My first thought in putting this paper together was "is it really 25 years?" We all know how the older you get the faster time flies, but it does seem amazing to me that it is 25 years since I decided to make the leap from the Powerhouse Museum to establish Campbell Conservation, the entity that five years later became International Conservation Services.

What I want to do in this paper is give a quick overview of how ICS came to be, briefly talk to 25 iconic projects we have selected as representative of our 25 years in business, which we hope illustrate the range and diversity of what we have worked on, and then draw together some thoughts on where the conservation profession is at in the context of those 25 years I have spent in private practice.

So let us begin at the very beginning, as the song goes. ICS, which was Campbell Conservation until 1991, was borne from a confluence of circumstance. It was 1986 and I was acting Curator of Conservation at the Powerhouse, looking for the next stage in my career. Interest in the heritage sector was increasing with the approaching Bicentennial in 1988. With that there was not only a focus on the extent of cultural heritage that 200 years of western colonisation and

60,000 years of Indigenous occupation had created, but also the funding to do something about looking after it rather better. Whilst much of this cultural heritage resided in collecting institutions, there were substantial parts of it outside these bodies – since referred to as the Distributed National Collection – unable to access conservation expertise.

In the same week I was offered both the head of conservation role at the still to be built Australian National Maritime Museum and the chance to establish a new private conservation facility as part of the Campbell Group. After much consideration I opted for the latter. Both were exciting options but on reflection there was something of the entrepreneur in me that found the chance to build a new offering in the private sector an extraordinary attractive one, particularly when it formed part of a larger company (the Campbell Group included exhibition construction, design, publishing and merchandising and project management companies). From the start, therefore, my introduction to the world of private conservation involved collaboration with allied professionals. That has always been a critical part of our modus operandi: building teams around of us of partner organisations and sub-contractors to provide total solutions to conservation problems.

And so the company was formed and the process of building a multidisciplinary conservation facility began. We've inevitably had our highs and lows, but 25 years on, with a dozen or so heritage awards, over 100 conservators having worked for us and, we reckon, over 40,000 items conserved, I believe we can be justifiably proud of what we have achieved. Let me give you a quick snapshot of 25 significant projects:

- Antarctic Ross Island Project
- Arts Victoria Risk Assessment
- Australian War Memorial Hall of Memory
- Bushell's Building industrial machinery
- Capitol Theatre Sydney
- Children's Chapel, St James Anglican Church Sydney
- City of Sydney bronze statues
- Commonwealth Bank art collection
- Dunbar anchor
- Fabrication of a Lucien Henri chair for the Powerhouse Museum
- Great Synagogue Sydney
- Grissell Building Alexandria
- Hamilton Inn sofa
- City of Kalgoorlie Boulder theatre curtains,
- Museum of Old and New Art
- National Trust of Australia (NSW)
- Old Parliament House Canberra
- Parliament House Canberra key elements artwork conservation
- Parramatta Justice Precinct heritage interpretation
- Sydney Harbour Bridge maintenance cranes
- Gary Shead mural Ultimo
- St Constantine's Cathedral Perth
- Swifts Mansion Darling Point
- World Expo 88 'Treasures of the Holy See' exhibition
- Sydney Harbour YHA

25 YEARS ON

So 25 years on what have I learnt? Firstly that we are immensely lucky to work in this profession. The old test of whether one wants to get out of bed in the morning to go to work is a good one. Whilst I may not have exactly leapt out everyday, I have always been keen to see what the day will bring, because in conservation no one day is ever the same. And that has been driven by two issues: the people and the stories, the how and the why. The "who" is critical. This has not been about one or a number of individuals conserving objects, it has been about a group of us, changing over the years, working together as a unit to achieve often innovative and invariably satisfying results. Last year we took a day out to think about where we are as company, and to check what was making us all want to come to work each day. Conservators, I have decided, are not terribly demonstrable people, but the single-minded passion for what we do and why we do it that came out that day reaffirmed why we are in this profession and we should never forget it. ICS is fundamentally all about the people, their individual skills, their passion and their joint purpose in working together.

But the "why" has been equally important. We do not conserve at ICS purely to extend the life of an object. We do so to allow objects to tell their stories. I believe this is a vital part of how we approach conservation and one that as conservators we do not always remember. I am reminded of a story that Anna Somers-Cocks told at the IIC Dialogue "Conservation in Crisis" last year of a conservation presentation that she went to about a crucifix, having helped to fund the treatment. The process of conservation was described in great and rather dull detail with no explanation of what the crucifix was used for. Only later did Anna discover that it was the crucifix carried in front of condemned men being marched from prison to the place of execution in Venice, and was thus the last thing they looked upon. Our training as conservators teaches us to focus on the detail to understand why an object has deteriorated and what we can do to arrest that deterioration. But in doing so, we can be guilty of losing sight of the

bigger picture. That has not always helped us as a profession. I am a great one for seeking to understand context, and the best way to do that is to seek out the story that an object can tell.

Secondly the business of conservation – that is, the operations and development of a commercial conservation entity – is something that cannot be taken lightly. On the face of it, in ICS's case this is about providing a safe working environment for 25 to 30 people, and ensuring there is enough cash in the bank each month to pay them and also the other bills that day in day out keep arriving. But to make this happen, there needs to be behind this, systems and processes to ensure that the company remains financially sound, is appropriately insured, and has in place marketing plans and growth strategies that will provide ongoing secure employment, and most importantly all of turn a profit. This is fundamentally because none of us should be in business if we are not there to make a profit.

Profit has not always been a word that sits easily in a profession where there is this admirable but commercially impractical view that we should really be doing all this work for the love of it, or at least for no more than it actually costs us. But the reality is that without profit we cannot increase salaries, buy more equipment or afford to chase new opportunities.

With somewhere between a quarter and a third of the conservation profession working privately, turning over some where in the region of \$12 to \$18 million a year, where is this so-necessary business training coming from? We operate in a legislative framework with more and more compliance requirements and increasingly onerous penalties for failing to meet these. The current training courses are flat out teaching the basics of the theory and practice of conservation, and cannot be expected to add business training to their curricula. Just as in other professions, those who choose to enter the private sector need to look at graduate business training but show me currently a conservator with a MBA (that said, I understand one of the current graduate students at Melbourne University holds one, which

bodes well for the future). If we are going to be serious about building an ongoing sustainable private conservation sector we also need to be serious about running our businesses well.

Finally what has the last 25 years NOT been about? It has not been about a series of ethical dilemmas. The development of AICCM's Code of Ethics and Practice was an important one in our maturing as a profession, and it is a great fall back to have behind us to back up our treatment recommendations. But the reality is that in 25 years I have never had to produce it to justify a treatment and only very rarely refer to its existence. That I think reflects that the ethical decisions we need to make are clear-cut. It has not been about making a lot of money. Who has ever heard of a wealthy conservator? Tony Chadwick, the pioneer of private paintings conservation in NSW once gave a paper at an AICCM conference with the memorable title of "Seven years on and the Porsche has still not arrived". Well, I could say much the same 25 years on. Why? Because, as our strategy day showed, we are here for the passion of what we do. We come into this profession not to make money or even to fund our lifestyles, but for the fascination and allure of working on beautiful and intriguing objects, getting to know them, understanding and revealing their stories, and delighting in what we can achieve in extending their lives for future generations.

AND SO WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

A highlight of my early career was the 1986 ICCM (as it was then) national conference in Adelaide. It was heady days in the world of conservation. There was an international cast of speakers with three parallel sessions, and we were ready to conquer the world, not least because the world was indeed coming to Sydney the following year for ICOM-CC in 1987.

With ICOM-CC once again about to grace our shores in Melbourne in 2014, 27 years later, it is interesting to reflect on where the conservation profession is now heading. At one level we are great survivors. We've survived the collapse of the Canberra Uni

course and seen not one but two courses rise in its place. We've survived the decision not to become part of Museums Australia, and shown we can establish our own professional accreditation system.

But we need to be more than survivors. We need to grow our role in the broader cultural heritage sector, confirm our place amongst the heritage planners, archaeologists, conservation architects, artists and curators and see our contribution as being equally important as theirs. And the part of the profession that most easily undertake this is going to be the private sector. We can speak more freely, move more nimbly and network more diversely than our publicly employed counterparts. It is up to us to lead. I am excited. Bring on the next 25 years!

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Julian Bickersteth is the Managing Director of International Conservation Services, which he founded 25 years ago after working at the Powerhouse Museum. Julian is an AICCM Professional Member and was AICCM Conservator of the Year in 2002. He is a Fellow and currently Vice President of IIC. He is also Vice President of the Australian Decorative and Fine Art Societies (ADFAS) and on the Board of the National Trust of Australia (NSW).

