

Conservation in Progress – conservation treatments on public display

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Introduction

Conservation is usually something that happens behind closed doors, well away from the public eye. However, there are a growing number of examples of conservation treatments and activities undertaken on objects while on public display. When a large, well-loved sculpture at the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) was in need of some care and maintenance, conservators from Artlab Australia seized on the opportunity to introduce conservation to the Gallery's visitors and the sculpture, *Eros*, was treated during opening hours within the public gallery space. The treatment was simple and didn't require the use of harmful chemicals. In consultation with conservation management and AGSA staff, a plan for both the treatment and a number of related events was developed. The commitment required for this additional activity was considered to be relatively minor and worthwhile. The treatment was completed successfully, and the feedback from both the Gallery staff and members of the public was positive and enthusiastic. This example illustrates the way in which routine conservation activities can be successfully utilized in order to increase public engagement with the profession, as well as contribute positively to the public life of an institution.

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Background

Over the last twenty years or so, larger cultural institutions have increasingly embraced the benefits associated with making more visible the activities of collection management and research that have traditionally taken place out of the public eye. 'Behind the scenes' tours and curator talks are now as much a part of many museums and galleries as the interpretation panels and glass showcases. Conservation departments have not been exempt from this movement. Large organisations such as the Getty Conservation Institute, the National Conservation Institute in Liverpool and the Lunder Conservation Centre have led the way in bringing conservators out from their labs into the bright exhibition lights (Staniforth and Lloyd, 2012). Ranging from small information text panels to full-scale conservation themed exhibitions, conservation is proving to be valuable beyond its traditional remit. One of the most interesting, and challenging forms of this activity is the open display of 'live' conservation within public spaces, or what the National Trust for England, Wales and Ireland call 'Conservation in action' (Lithgow, Boden, Hill, Lithgow, Measure, 2012).



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Recent examples

In Australia's major cultural institutions today, public display of live conservation is generally not a common sight. Equally, not all overseas museums and galleries are consistently engaged in this kind of activity. Many conservation treatments are unsuitable, or are just plain uninteresting. However a quick survey of a few institutions provides some current examples. At the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the iconic Cast Courts are undergoing a major renovation of both the historic building interiors and of the casts themselves. The walkway above provides windows through the hoarding, where visitors can watch conservators at work. Similarly, at the Natural History Museum in Oxford, major building works are allowing conservators the chance to clean and repair the whale skeletons on display for the first time in 100 years. Patrons can peer through windows to see working conservators, as well as follow the project on a well-maintained blog (Oxford University, 2013). At the Palace of Versailles, Paris, the significant Latona Fountain is currently undergoing massive restoration. All work is being done in the full view of the public. A viewing platform and sets of information panels have been installed, along with a windowed workshop nearby. Visitors can chat to conservators and craftsmen who are set-up at a show-and-tell tent.

The sculpture & the treatment

Eros, by Alfred Gilbert, is a cast of the figure from the Shaftsbury monument in Piccadilly Circus, London. The monument was designed in 1893 to honour the great Victorian philanthropist, Lord Shaftesbury. Further casts of the sculpture were produced in 1932 and several more between 1986 and 1988, when the original plaster casts were rediscovered. A 1986-88 sculpture was acquired by the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1992 and has been a firm favourite for visitors ever since. When the Australian and European permanent collection wings were closed for redevelopment, *Eros* was placed in storage until 2012, when it was returned to a new position in one of the grand heritage galleries. However, *Eros* was in need of some general maintenance cleaning. Surfaces were dusty, with some insect spots and small accretions, and the protective wax coating on the bronze base required redistribution. A thorough condition report of the whole objects would also contribute to its long-term preservation.

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Working it out

At over two and a half meters tall, scaffolding was required to reach the majority of the aluminium figure and the top part of the bronze base. Rather than build hoarding around the sculpture, or temporarily close the newly-opened wing, conservators at Artlab Australia proposed that treatment occur in public view over the period of several days. The treatment did not require the use of hazardous chemicals or equipment. A safe working area around the portable scaffolding was roped off and signs informed the public about what was occurring. Information was provided to the Gallery for use on their website and Facebook page and, when possible, conservators could converse with interested passers-by while they were working (AGSA, 2012). In addition, Artlab director Andrew Durham presented a public lecture about the sculpture during the work and an image of the treatment was included in the gallery's quarterly magazine.



Images (clockwise from top left): Kasi Albert and Nick Flood treating *Eros*, photo S Steed, AGSA, 2012; Kasi Albert and Nick Flood treating *Eros*, photo L Murphy, Artlab, 2012; Screenshot AGSA Facebook page, AGSA, 2012; Andrew Durham presenting to AGSA visitors, photo N Flood, 2012; Image from "Once in a whale" blog, Oxford University Museum of Natural History, 2013; Kasi Albert at viewing window at V&A Museum, photo N Flood, 2013; View of Casting Court at V&A Museum, photo N Flood, 2013; Show-and-tell tent on Latona Fountain at Palace of Versailles, photo N Flood, 2013; Kasi Albert reading information panel at Palace of Versailles, photo N Flood, 2013.

Benefits and outcomes

Although the treatment was relatively simple, feedback from the project as a whole was positive. For many members of the public, encountering "conservation in progress" was an unexpected bonus, providing them with a sense of experiencing something outside of the ordinary. This was possible without major additional time or resources. Research undertaken by the National Trust about their 'Conservation in action' program recorded that visitors felt a deeper sense of connection with collections because of the opportunity to see conservators at work (Lithgow et al., 2012). Most importantly, conservation undertaken in public is a powerful agent for conservation advocacy. In a profession that chiefly works behind the scenes and usually aims for their work to ultimately be invisible, putting conservation activities on show can be an important tool for promoting the importance of what we do.

Keep communicating

Presenting live conservation is not practicable in most situations, due to restrictions of time, resources and requirements of tools and materials. However, there are other ways of successfully communicating conservation activities that can last long after the last swab has been put down. Across many museums and galleries, information panels and interactive displays explaining conservation are becoming more popular. Videos of conservators at work hold the attention of many visitors and are especially useful when the object itself is obscured or not currently on display. Scientific analysis of materials that gives visitors an insight into the creation of an item is also a popular topic for text panels. And, in an increasingly technology-savvy world, websites, social media and blogging are allowing the public to connect with the ongoing conservation of cultural objects from anywhere in the world.

References

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