THE LANGUAGE OF PERSUASION AND DEMONSTRATING OUR VALUE

Vicki Humphrey[1], Alys Humphrey
[1]National Museum of Australia

At a time when AICCM is looking to reposition itself for the future, it seems appropriate to examine the way we, as conservators, convey both what we do and the importance of this work. In order to do this we must examine how we communicate, both as individual professionals and as a body that represents the profession. By drawing on linguistic studies we can improve our understanding of how we might change our rhetoric to increase our influence, build trust and demonstrate our value.

In the past many conservators, although convinced of the value of their work, have not always communicated this effectively. Conservators are trained to focus on collections, and not all feel that it is necessary, or their role, to place their work in a wider corporate context. In addition, trained to report activities in an objective passive voice mode, conservators communicate that things are done to things, but not necessarily the complexity of what they do and of the decision-making process involved before commencing the 'doing'. In contrast to this objective reporting, is the emotion that many conservators inject into their language when trying to convince others what is best for collections. While things have changed over time, this has left a legacy that needs to be addressed.

As a professional body AICCM seems to communicate principally with its members and has for a number of years, struggled to develop its advocacy role. As with its members, AICCM does not seem to always take into account the context of its communications, nor who the target audience is. More attention to the profession's messages and to crafting the language used to impart those messages will have significant impacts on AICCM's influence and advocacy.

INTRODUCTION

There is a wealth of material available about the conservation profession today. Chris Caple, Salvador Muňoz Viňas and Liz Pye, to name but a few, have written thought-provoking works that deal with the development of conservation and the issues and theories that have led us to where we are today, and which frame current conservation practice. Many of us would recognise the major shifts that have taken place and could identify the legacies that we have inherited from these developments – legacies both positive and not so positive.

It is helpful to reflect on these influences on our profession when we consider the way we communicate our work to others, and the ways in which we try to influence others to support what we see as the vital work of heritage conservation. Discussion of the way in which the conservation profession communicates is not a new topic – it has been the subject of a number of papers and chapters in books and, no doubt, a great many informal discussions. It remains an important and relevant topic, and one which will continue to be relevant as our profession evolves.

It is also a topic that has been of particular interest to me as a career conservator, as a conservation manager in a number of organisations, and as someone who has been involved in professional organisations as an editor and publisher. In approaching this topic, we have chosen to reflect on my experience and draw out some of the lessons I have learned – often the hard way – about communication and persuasion and to investigate some of these personal observations from a linguist's viewpoint. This is therefore not a well-researched and highly structured academic paper, although it is very ably supported by the academic work of my co-author, a linguist.

Communication and Persuasion

Let us start with **frustration** – the frustration that conservators express when they feel that they are not being listened to, that their advice is ignored or that sufficient funds are not allocated to ensure the work of conservation can be done properly. AICCM and other organisations may also have experienced frustration when governments reduce the resources available to care for collections and close down established networks. Many conservators will have experienced, at some time in their careers, the sense of being a lone voice in the wilderness. There are some of us that have remained frustrated and puzzled, while there are others that have been able to make some headway in the wilderness.

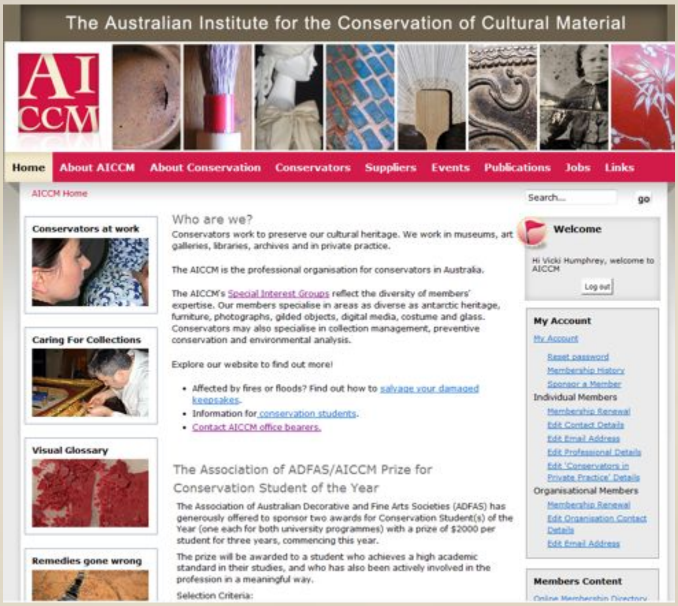

Figure 1 | AICCM home page.

This frustration is at least partly due to the fact that communication is complex – effective communication even more so. It is a two way street: you can communicate but your audience has to want to receive the message, not just listen; the receiver of the message has to take on board what is being said. Rather than an unwillingness to listen on the part of others, some of our problems might be based on the way we are perceived, the audiences we target and how we craft our messages to those audiences.

Let us now look at **persuasion**. Linguists Halmara and Virtanen describe persuasion as "those linguistic choices that aim at changing and affecting the behaviour of others, or strengthening the existing beliefs and behaviours of those who already agree, [...] persuaders included" (2005: 5). Halmara and Virtanen see persuasion as interactive – audiences interact with and respond to persuasion, and intentional – persuasion is geared towards a well-defined discourse community or sub-section of that community (the target audience).

Aristotle was a pioneer in the development of a theory of persuasion. He divided persuasion into three components: *ethos*, concerning the credibility and moral competence of the source of the message; *logos*, concerning the rationality and logicality of the message itself; and *pathos*, the emotions of the audience. For Aristotle, in order to persuade an audience one needs to establish the author as reliable and ethical, to appeal to audience rationality and also to have an understanding of the emotions of the audience. All or some of these components may be present in a persuasive piece.

Ethos, concerning the credibility and moral competence of the source of the message, is directly related to our identity and how we are perceived. Work on identity in marketing studies assumes that an organisation's identity is something created largely by the organisation itself through its agreed purpose and aims and/or by the way it positions itself. However, in the field of organisational studies, communication and more specifically language, is seen as playing a constructive role in identity matters. Drawing on the tenets that identity is enacted and constructed through symbolism (Mead 1934), social interaction (Goffman 1959), and language (Foucault 1978, Giddens 1984, Fairclough 1995), this approach sees organisational identity as constructed by members' shared language and behaviour.

This is an important point for AICCM to consider when looking to the future. This approach places organisational identity not just in the hands of the organisation itself but also in how it is perceived by stakeholders and in the interactions it has with stakeholders. This might seem like a no-brainer, but it does warrant further examination when we look at AICCM's public faces – the website, the newsletter and the *Bulletin*.

Firstly, the website. This is now the most accessible 'front' for our professional organisation. It is AICCM's main contact with the world it is trying to communicate with … and it is a delight to see it so much improved. But is there more that can be done? Let's look at the website.

Figure 2 | Amnesty International Australia home page.

What is the interaction that AICCM has with the casual web surfer? How does it grab the attention of the surfer in those first valuable few seconds and make them want to stay? How is the identity of AICCM established as someone lands on the site?

It is instructive to compare the homepages of AICCM and Amnesty International (Figures 1 and 2). It is immediately apparent that Amnesty International is a lobbying organisation and the website, at first glance, appeals for action and involvement. The language addresses the reader directly with imperatives such as "get involved" and "act now" which act discursively as an invitation to participate. The reader participation is invited – "get involved", "join us", "join in now" – and its value is further emphasised through the inclusion of quotes from readers.

AICCM's website does not immediately invite involvement or support as does Amnesty International's. This is not surprising as they are quite different organisations. Two of AICCM's stated aims are:

> *To promote the science and art of the conservation of cultural material.*
>
> *To inform and lobby government and other organisations on matters relating to the conservation of cultural material.*

but you do not get a sense of this when landing on the website – you only get it if you stay long enough to find the aims.

AICCM is a membership organisation. As it states on the home page, *AICCM is the professional organisation for conservators in Australia* and, looking at the sum of its publications, it is clear that the audience AICCM is interacting with most is its own membership or those of like mind. There is nothing wrong with this, but it does raise questions about how AICCM might successfully lobby in future if it is not necessarily embracing "those linguistic choices that aim at changing and affecting the behaviour of others, or strengthening the existing beliefs and behaviours of those who already agree, […] persuaders included" (Halmara & Virtanen 2005).

Returning to *the credibility and moral competence of the source of the message*, it is hard to avoid the need for positioning and profile. An organisation that is not well known will not have credibility for a wide audience. This is something that has to be built up through the aforementioned linguistic choices, hard work and with resources that are not readily available to AICCM. This is one of the key dilemmas that AICCM faces: it is a relatively small voice; it has limited resources and most of the work is done on a voluntary basis. How then does it establish the gravitas to influence public opinion while at the same time delivering services to its members? Can it do both effectively?

It is also important to note that the AICCM is a relatively small voice in a growing chorus. The wilderness is filling up, and in that environment the crafting of its messages becomes even more critical.

Let's return to the website and the casual surfer … if the surfer is inclined to read, he/she will discover first off that *Conservators work to preserve our cultural heritage. We work in museums, art galleries, libraries, archives and in private practice.* The same surfer visiting the Australasian Registrars Committee website (Figure 3) will discover at first hit that:

> *The Australasian Registrars Committee Inc. is a non-profit professional association of those responsible for, or interested in, the management of cultural heritage collections.*
>
> *ARC provides access to current information about the following areas in the Australasian context:*
>
> - *collection care*
> - *freight and logistics*
> - *loans management*
> - *exhibition installation*
> - *tour management*
> - *registration processes*
> - *preventive conservation*

Figure 3 | Australasian Registrars Committee home page.

Other websites in our sector establish their professional credentials fairly quickly as well (Figures 4 and 5), in effect convincing the surfer of their credibility and moral competence as the source of the message The Museums Australia website even lists conservation first in its list of commitments.

By comparison on the first hit on the website, AICCM has not achieved that. In fact, one could argue that AICCM has not provided enough information to explain what conservators actually do when they *work in museums, art galleries, libraries, archives and in private practice.*

While we are looking at the AICCM website, let's delve deeper. There are other pages on AICCM's site that do establish the organisation as expert (Figure 6). Let's take a look at the title. The organisation is asking the reader a question with the implication that the reader does not know, and that the organisation is qualified to answer, therefore contributing to the establishment of *ethos.*

Line 1 gives immediate information about conservators and their work. Again the implication is that this is new information for the reader. As such the organisation serves as the provider of expert knowledge.

In line 2 we have "the AICCM's directory allows you…". Again the organisation is providing information and resources for the reader, thus placing itself as not only knowledgeable in the field but also acknowledging the needs of the reader.

In line 5 we see "it's rare to find…". Once again the assumption here is that the reader does not know this (otherwise why say it?), another instance of the organisation establishing itself as expert.

The genre of our communication is significant as well. The website is a public face and a portal for members to access information specific to their needs. The *Bulletin*, with back copies now available on the website, is more publicly accessible than previously, but it remains essentially a professional journal. As a professional journal it is firmly established in the genre of refereed professional conservation journals the world over. The use of a scientific and dispassionate style of writing is the 'received' and accepted style of this genre and it encourages confidence in the authors' expertise – thus an appeal to *ethos*. This is good and proper in this context, however, it has crept into other areas of our communication outside this genre as well and this can be a barrier to effective communication at times. Put bluntly, it messes with our *logos* when we get (in linguistics speak) 'genre creep' or genre-mixing.

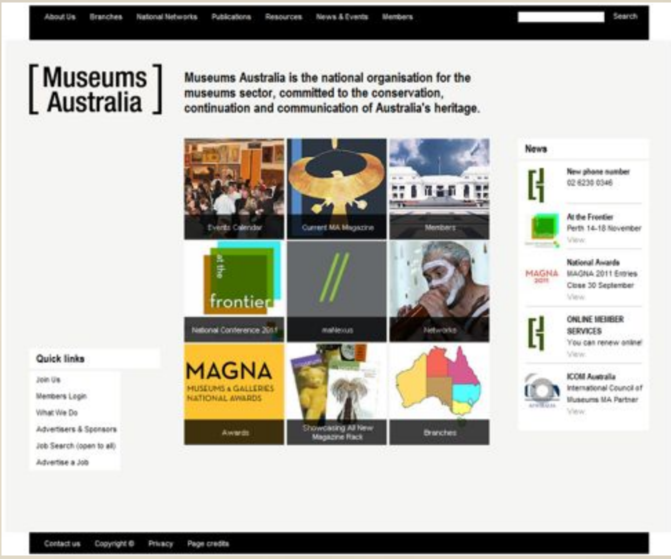

Figure 4 | Museums Australia home page.

The scientific, dispassionate reporting style is embedded in our conservation training from the beginning and it seems that some conservators have a tough time flexing their style to suit the context and the audience. When field-testing the *reCollections* training manual, the need to flex our style for the target audience came through loud and clear in the feedback. More recently as editor of IIC's *News in Conservation*, I saw 'genre creep' or genre-mixing a lot. Some conservators find it hard to write a newsy story about their work and flex their style to fit the genre of a newspaper/newsletter to appeal to a different audience. The passive voice rules supreme. There were cases when attempts to flex the style, while still using passive voice, led to the meaning being obscured or quite unintelligible. There is much to be said for plain English!

When we step outside the professional journal context, our continued use of the passive voice has a number of consequences in our communications. At its most basic, there is the fact that conservators **do** stuff. When an object *is gently cleaned using a smoke sponge*, it is actually done by *SOMEONE*, but we remove ourselves from the picture. I think it affects the way we see ourselves and the way others see us. This is quite well illustrated visually by the disembodied hands on AIC's website (Figure 7). Language is powerful. Depersonalising is perhaps appropriate for professional journals but not necessarily elsewhere and we need to put ourselves in the picture.

In contrast to this objective reporting, is the emotion that many conservators inject into their language when trying to convince others what is best for collections. Many of us, particularly those of us who have worked mainly in collecting institutions, will have witnessed the emotive and sometimes quite aggressive language that conservators fall back on in trying convince others to do as they advise. *You cannot do that… If you do that you will cause damage. If we don't get the money to repair that there could be a major disaster. Our history will be lost forever.* Consider what happens to **our *logos*** when the person on the receiving end of our communication is suddenly exposed to the passion we feel for our work, when previously they have received a depersonalised message steeped in the scientific reporting genre. And what happens to their *pathos – their emotions.*

We should also be concerned about the *rationality and logicality of our message* (*logos*) when our rhetoric is framed around the welfare of the object alone. This may not happen as frequently now as it did in the past, but the tendency for conservators to take objects out of context – such as their corporate business context – and to personify them, has had a legacy in the way others see our profession and could certainly raise questions about our rationality. As Muñoz Viñas (2005: 155) says:

> *...it is not infrequent to hear or read that the conservator has a responsibility not to the affected people, but to the object itself. By unconsciously taking the conservation-as-medicine metaphor to the point of personifying the treated object, the notion of objectivity is also moved a step further: an objective conservation is that in which the object is 'listened to' and its needs catered to. If the object 'requests' a treatment, if an object 'speaks', then a conservator who listens and follows those indications is not actually taking subjective choices, but just doing what the object requests. Those decisions cannot be questioned ...as the conservator actually had no choice but to follow the object's directives. This is a sort of* rhetorical objectivism *that is based on benevolent visions of animated objects. However, as Pye put it, the object is neither the 'client' of the conservator (Pye 2001) nor is the conservator accountable to it.*

Figure 5 | Australian Society of Archivists home page.

This is quite complex. Although this is a form of objectivity – a case where conservators are supposedly not making subjective judgements and choices – it is also another aspect of the emotive language that has been used to try to win support. The inanimate is personified and its needs **must** be met, the implication being, in most cases when this approach is used, that if they are not met something undesirable will happen. While we may be trying to appeal to the emotions of our audience, we are probably more likely to be creating doubt in their minds about our rationality. We also dupe ourselves with this sort of language – we turn choices about levels of treatment and priorities for treatment into imperatives dictated by the object and because we are object-focussed we ratchet up our emotional investment in the outcome we are seeking.

So how can the individual conservator become more influential? It has to be by looking at their audience and engaging with the context in which they work. If we work in a collecting institution, we are hopefully not working in an environment constantly charged with emotion. Using emotive arguments will not usually win friends and influence people. Using conservation jargon and a pseudo-scientific objective language is not likely to serve us well either. We have to engage with the language of the organisations we work in and use that language, and influence it where necessary, so that there is a shared language that is understood by all.

Conservators are trained to focus on collections, and not all feel that it is their role to place their work in a wider corporate context. But it is actually vital that we do, whether it is the context of our employers or our clients, and it is vital that we understand the work of others in our organisations and the links between what they do and what we do. We are far better equipment to appeal to *pathos* if we do this.

Enterprise-wide risk management is a very good tool for communicating conservation issues within an organisation. In any organisation that has a sound risk management framework and agreed risk management approach, communication of risks across finance, OHS, public programs, investments, collections, building programs and projects can be reported using a shared and agreed language. The impact of the mitigation strategies, for example, conservation treatments or preventive programs, can be communicated, measured and assessed for their effectiveness. The value of the mitigation strategies, and thus of conservation work, is communicated in a language and via a genre that is shared by all.

Risk management is not fully objective but it can be quite a powerful means of helping people to consider, within a wider context, the consequences and likelihood of something happening rather than "catastrophising" (Cognitive Distortion 2011). Catastrophising is likely to result in negative emotions; repeated catastrophising, with no catastrophe in evidence, will result in the message and the messenger being ignored – the boy who cried wolf! In contrast, messages based on shared language and based on shared values are more likely to be taken on board even if they are not necessarily positive messages. Even better: a problem identified and presented with a range of options for its solution, is far more palatable than a problem identified. Conservators are, after all, problem solvers.

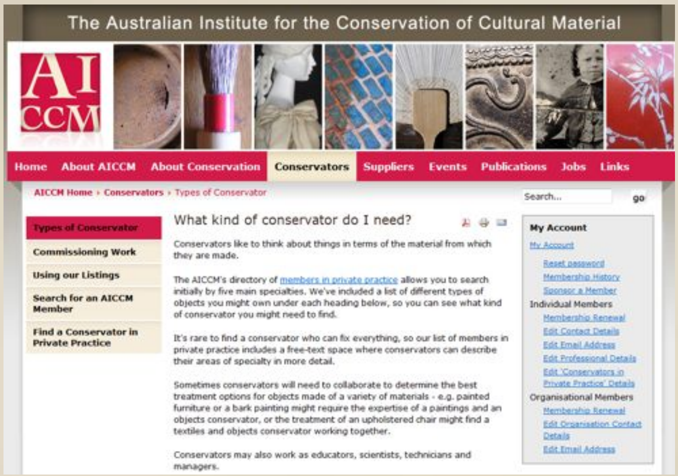

Figure 6 | AICCM Types of Conservators page.

In her article *The importance of being less earnest: Communicating conservation,* Helen Jones quotes Tim Schadla Hall, an archaeologist at University College London as saying that "'... there is a failure on the part of conservation to make their profession sexy enough'. It was interesting to read that this non-conservator saw conservation as being held in 'relatively low esteem'. He felt this was due in part to 'conservators' anxiety to convey their professionalism and protect their exclusive knowledge at the expense of being interesting and at the risk of being sidelined" (Jones 2002). Although this was said in the UK in 2001, Schadla Hall's comments are still relevant and provide food for thought.

Since Schadla Hall's comments and Liz Pye's chapter *Communicating conservation* (Pye 2001), the conservation profession has been much more 'on show' and much more directly engaged with the public. In Australia there are also many examples of this earlier than 2001. We know people are interested in conservation, but we remain cautious about the amount of information we provide, fearing the liability issues and damage to heritage items should people try our techniques without the knowledge we have. But we rarely demonstrate the complexity behind what we do. Conservation is often showcased using 'befores' and 'afters', demonstrations, by providing advice and describing the causes of deterioration.

The decision-making behind our work is much less frequently highlighted and this is a pity as it provides a much more rounded picture of conservation. Conservation decision-making involves the consideration of the object and the materials it is made from; the significances attached to object and hence its story-telling potential; the uses to which the object might be put; the available budget; and the object's potential life-cycle. There are opportunities here to demonstrate the complexity of conservation, its relevance and its value to organisations and audiences, and the dedication conservators bring to their work. Recording and demonstrating our decision-making processes could not only convey our professionalism, but also show how our knowledge makes a positive contribution and how interesting and valuable conservation work can be. It would also be a very valuable resource for conservators in the future.

Schadla Hall's comments about the risk of being sidelined are interesting – we do run that risk. As noted previously, the wilderness is filling up with voices calling for the protection of heritage. It is ironic that some of these other voices actually show how effectively we have communicated conservation messages in the past. As the conservation profession matures and becomes more flexible in its approaches, for example taking on board issues such as sustainability and re-evaluating environmental control parameters, there have been questions from other parts of our sector about the advisability of this new flexibility and the resulting actions, and about the professional responsibility of those conservators that are taking those actions.

Figure 7 | AIC home page.

Yes, communication is complex. But in this case, it just may be that we are victims of our own communication style. The use of a scientific communication style has given some level of gravitas and certainty to what we have said in the past. Muñoz Viñas (2005: 87) notes that:

> *Scientific knowledge ... is based on hard facts, precise measurements and repeatable experiments developed under controlled conditions ... (it is) of nearly universal validity as it is not contaminated by the personal biases, preferences and beliefs of the observer – or of anyone discussing its findings.*

But now **we are** discussing – even questioning - the findings and we appear a lot less certain.

For AICCM, a key question considering the growing number of voices calling for the protection of heritage, is whether AICCM has a strong enough voice to sing a solo, or whether it should join the chorus and embrace the strength in numbers. In other words, maybe we have to revisit some of those tough questions about whether we remain a stand-alone organisation or not, as far as lobbying is concerned at least.

Whatever the answer to the above question, the conservation profession in Australia would benefit from looking more closely at the ways in which it can make its communication more effective. As an organisation that aims to *...inform and lobby government and other organisations on matters relating to the conservation of cultural material,* AICCM could be seen to have common ground with non-government organisations (NGOs) that advocate and monitor public policy on a not-for-profit basis, many taking a specific issue, or geographical area as the focus of their efforts. Venable *et al* (2005) investigated which perceived organisational identity traits were important for non-governmental organisations to gain public support. Those that proved fundamental in garnering support for non-governmental organisations were integrity, nurturance, sophistication and ruggedness. This means that respondents were more likely to lend support to those non-governmental organisations that they deemed to be honest and committed (integrity); compassionate and caring (nurturance); well-presented and prestigious (sophistication); and tough and reliable (ruggedness). Since it is through communication and language that identity attributes are established, the discursive and rhetorical strategies that AICCM adopts will influence whether the organisation is seen as worthy of the public's support, be it financial or moral.

This holds true for all of us as individual professionals as well, so attend to your *ethos* and *logos* and know your audience in order to appeal to their *pathos* appropriately.

REFERENCES

AICCM. Home page. [online: http://www.aiccm.org.au/ Accessed 10.10.2011]

AICCM. Types of Conservators page. [online: http://www.aiccm.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=758&Itemid=75 Accessed 11.10.2011]

American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC). Home page. [online: http://www.conservation-us.org/ Accessed 11.10.2011]

Amnesty International Australia. Home page. [online: http://www.amnesty.org.au/ Accessed 10.10.2011]

Australian Registrars Committee. Home page. [online: http://www.registrars.org.au/home/ Accessed 10.10.2011]

Australian Society of Archivists. Home page. [online: http://www.archivists.org.au/ Accessed 12.10.2011]

CAPLE, C (2000) *Conservation Skills: Judgement, Method and Decision Making*. Routledge: London

Cognitive distortion (2011) In: *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. [online: //en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cognitive_distortion&oldid=45495235 Accessed 13.10.2011]

FAIRCLOUGH, N (1992) "Discourse and Text: Linguistic Intertextual Analysis within Discourse Analysis". *Discourse and Society* 3(2). 193-217.

FOUCAULT, M (1978) *Politics and the Study of Discourse, Ideology and Consciousness* Vol 3. 7-26

GIDDENS, A (1984) *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Polity: Cambridge.

GOFFMAN, E (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday: New York.

HALMARI, H and VIRTANEN, T (eds) (2005) *Persuasion across Genres: a Linguistic Approach*. John Benjamins: Amsterdam and Philadelphia.

JONES, H (2002) "The importance of being less earnest: Communicating conservation". *V&A Conservation Journal* Summer 2002, Issue 41. [online: http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/conservation-journal/issue-41/the-importance-of-being-less-earnest-communicating-conservation/ Accessed 11.10.2011]

MEAD, GH (1934) *Mind, Self and Society*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

MUNOZ VINAS, S (2005) *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*. Elsevier: Oxford and Burlington.

Museums Australia. Home page. [online: http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au/site/ Accessed 10.10.2011]

PYE, E (2001) *Caring for the Past: Issues in Conservation for Archaeology and Museums*. James and James: London.

VENABLE, BT, ROSE, GM, BUSH, VD and GILBERT, FW (2005) "The Role of Brand Personality in Charitable Giving". *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 33. 295-312.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Vicki Humphrey has worked in conservation for over 25 years and has been fortunate enough to work in a wide range of organisations. After competing her training at Camberwell School of Art and crafts in the UK, Vicki set up a conservation unit at Kew Gardens. Following this, she moved to Artlab Australia and headed up the book and paper conservation programs. In 2003, Vicki became the Head of Conservation at the British Library. On her return from the UK, she became a consultant to the National Library of New Zealand and editor of IIC's *News in Conservation*. In May this year, Vicki took up the role of Head of Conservation at the National Museum of Australia. She remains active on various ICON committees in the UK and has recently undertaken training in Risk Management and Project Management.

Alys Humphrey has a Master's degree in Linguistics from Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey. Her Masters thesis "Establishing Legitimacy: Persuasion and Organisational Identity" (2010) was a linguistic study of how two large NGOs established their legitimacy and credibility through discourse. Alys completed her undergraduate degree in Linguistics at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.