

HOW DID WE GET HERE? THE EVOLUTION OF CONSERVATION AT THE AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

Colin Macgregor
Australian Museum

Reviewing the history of the conservation programmes at the Australian Museum over a 40 year period, it becomes clear that it is not a linear development, but rather a series of expansions and contractions. Resources devoted to research increase and diminish. Engagement with Indigenous communities grows and dwindles. The emphasis placed on revenue earning waxes and wanes due to several factors. The reasons for these periods of growth and shrinkage seem to be combination of management turn-over, structural changes, available resources and external political trends. Recording of broad trends within an institution allows periodic reviews of strengths and weaknesses

Recently the Materials Conservation Unit was emptied to allow the first major refit in 23 years. Relocating all the records and project files brought to light a wealth of old information that is not currently associated with the collection database. Loss of corporate knowledge due to staff turnover, changes in filing structures and changes of office technology results in knowledge previously gained not being easily accessible. Similar conservation and research questions come up periodically and, without knowledge of previous research, work may be duplicated rather than enhanced. Consolidating paper and electronic records relating to research and collection items in a form that will survive the next technological innovations remains a challenge for the present and future.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2011, the Materials Conservation Unit underwent its first major refit in 23 years. The task of moving all the files and archives and culling those that were no longer relevant was a chance to revisit files that have not been opened for many years. This presented an opportunity to gain some insight into the trends in conservation in one Museum over a 40 year period. Far from being a linear growth, it was clear that there was a series of peaks and troughs and some important themes are rediscovered periodically. In fact, for a natural history museum, there are some parallels with the evolutionary history of life on earth that our scientists study daily – there are periods of rapid growth and activity followed by contraction and loss.

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

In 1971, the Australian Museum employed Sue Walston, who was the first tertiary qualified conservator to be employed in Australia, having graduated from the Institute of Archaeology in London. At that time as the Museum's sole conservator, she was attached to the Anthropology Department. When a separate department of Materials Conservation was formed it steadily expanded through the 70s and had a staff of six by the mid-80s. The main emphasis of the department was generally towards the Cultural Collections but by the 90s there was work being carried out on all the collections in some form, including the natural sciences, library and archives.

PROJECT PLANNING AND STAFFING

In 1986, a thorough review of Materials Conservation (Lyll 1986) identified issue with the management of exhibition projects which still resonate today. The review suggested that resources were inadequate for the intense workload of that period. The major impending projects were the gallery renewals and temporary exhibitions planned for the Bicentennial celebrations in 1988. Other major commitments of that period included relocation of the cultural collections and the conservation lab into a new building, a major research project investigating the consolidation of flaking and powdery pigments (Horton-James *et al* 1991) and the planning of the ICOM-CC conference in 1987 hosted by Sydney. In order to remedy the staff shortages, three new positions were appointed which was less than recommended by the external reviewer. There were also recommendations for an improved exhibitions planning process and this took the form of the Guidelines for Exhibition Projects which gave the exhibition project managers a clear and detailed process to follow.

Staff levels in conservation peaked around 1990, with 12 staff including clerical assistance, a pest control officer and a research assistant. During the 90s temporary were lost as research output declined and ancillary staff were moved to other departments.

Two redundancy programmes since 2000 resulted in the loss of 3 other staff members. Even though the redundancies were voluntary, the choice of senior management to accept the loss of these positions, as opposed to natural science positions, reflects an attitude that conservation could afford to shed some of its capacity.

Indigenous staff

There have been several occasions where Indigenous staff have been employed or trained in the department. This first occurred as early as 1972, at the embryonic stages of conservation, when Sandra

McGinnis was trained by Sue Walston. Aboriginal staff were again employed and trained during the 80s and 90s. Training courses and internships were also carried out for Pacific Island staff during the last two decades. This is currently a neglected area which needs to be reinstated.

INDIGENOUS ACCESS

The engagement of Indigenous communities with the collections has come in waves and is not a new thing. Fieldtrips to the Northern territory and Papua New Guinea in the 70s and 80s resulted in a close cooperation with the makers of the cultural materials during the development of exhibitions. The Materials Conservation and Anthropology departments at the Australian Museum engaged in projects involving Aboriginal and Pacific communities for over 3 decades. In the 90s the Aboriginal Outreach Programme regularly travelled to Cultural Centres to install loans and teach collection management and conservation principles. The use of museum collections for appropriate cultural activities has been a regular feature of activities. After a decline post-2000, recent initiatives in the Pacific have been more a reactivation than discovery a discovery of Indigenous engagement.

RECURRENT FUNDING

Overall, this has remained remarkably static over the past 20 years for conservation programmes. However a reallocation of where the money is spent regularly occurs. Less is now spent on disaster preparedness which was a major budget component in the 90s. The largest increase in our recurrent budget was to compensate for the loss of the pest control officer position and effectively is much smaller than the salary previously allocated to this position. So in the past 25 years, budget allocations have failed to keep pace with inflation and have, in fact, fallen well behind it.

REVENUE EARNING

At present there seems to be a new emphasis on diversifying funding sources as government funding fails to keep pace with inflation and salaries. Reviewing previous decades, there have been several periods when charging for services has been a priority. However the conflicting pressures of providing service to our various customers, against the need to raise cash result in an ebb and flow in this area. For example, the charges placed on loans can be seen as a labour intensive service and should incur realistic cost recovery charges. However the negative reaction of small cash-poor institutions soon results in discounting of the service in order to ensure access to the collections for communities outside the centre of Sydney.

RESEARCH

There has been a great decline in large scale research projects carried out now. This reflects the change in the work patterns and the loss of specialist research staff. As with most other institutions, the exhibition schedules have expanded and the lead times shortened. Accommodating a large investigative programme has become impractical. Research now involves predominantly smaller well-focused investigations looking at questions with immediate relevance to current problems. However the speed of getting results has increased as new analytical tools have become affordable (e.g. PXRF and digital radiography). Collaboration with universities has also become more important in order to get access to facilities and students who will contribute to the research work.

ACCESS TO PRE-DIGITAL RESEARCH AND RECORDS

Staff turnover has highlighted how easy it is to lose touch with knowledge that has been amassed in the predigital age. Previous research projects into materials, deterioration and treatment methods, that are still highly relevant, sit in box files of which

current staff may be totally unaware. In order to avoid investigations being needlessly duplicated, linking this information to the collection material through the databases is one of the great challenges of the next decade before much useful material gets forgotten.

CURRENT VIEWS OF CONSERVATION

By 2000, conservation seemed to have a less positive image in some quarters. Conservators are sometimes portrayed as impediments to collection initiatives and only have the welfare of the object at heart to the detriment of the community. Currently it is essential to emphasise that effective conservation programmes creative improved access to collections without endangering the objects. Access is the watchword.

We are also currently seen as promoting standards that are environmentally and economically unsustainable, as the air-conditioning systems that serve our collection areas and galleries are the most energy-hungry part of the Museum. That is why we need to be in the forefront of the debate to find solutions that maintain the collections adequately and at the same time are less energy intensive.

SUMMARY

- What appears to be new initiative may be a rediscovered idea that was explored by previous management – e.g. access to collections for indigenous communities.
- Consolidation of old records and research and cross-referencing it with our digital archives needs to be tackled before they are lost and forgotten.
- The rapid expansion and then later a contraction of conservation may have occurred due to the perceived need at the time of undoing of years of poor storage and neglect.

- We need to align ourselves with the current political priorities such as improved collection access and environmentally sustainable collection care in order to maintain a prominent role in the institution.

REFERENCES

Lyall, J (1986) *A Review of Materials Conservation*, unpublished internal report for Australian Museum management.

Horton-James, D, Walston S and Zounis, S (1991) "Evaluation of resins for the adhesion of flaking paint on ethnographic objects". *Studies in Conservation* 36.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Colin Macgregor has been working with the Australian Museum's ethnographic, archaeological and natural history collections since 1989 and has been Manager of Materials Conservation since 2001. He has been involved with the museum's disaster planning since the early '90s and worked on a number of major temporary exhibitions. Before moving to Australia, he worked with the Scottish Museums Council, Sheffield City Museums and the National Museum of Scotland. He qualified with a post-graduate diploma in Archaeological Conservation at Durham University in 1981. Field experience includes working on archaeological projects in the UK, Italy, Cyprus, Australia and Vanuatu and also working on the conservation and relocation of Aboriginal carved and scarred trees throughout NSW.

