

PRESERVING THE PAST: HOW TO ENSURE THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONSERVATION PROFESSION IN AUSTRALIA IS PRESERVED FOR THE FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

The first AICCM conference “Conservation in Australia”, which was held in Canberra in 1976 at the Australian National University, was organised by the few conservators located in Canberra. The intervening 35 years have seen changes in the organisation and conservation profession. This 2011 AICCM National Conference, “Conservation in Australia: Past, Present and Future”, now back in Canberra, will allow us to view where we have come from, and examine the challenges for the future development of the AICCM and Australian conservation profession.

IN THE BEGINNING

To quote Sue Walston, editor of the 1976 Conference Proceedings (Walston 1976):

*In 1973 the First National Conservation Seminar (organised by Colin Pearson of the WA Museum), was held (in Perth) with the aim of assessing the problems affecting cultural material in Australia and the resources available for combating these problems. The information gathered was depressing; a story of massive collections jammed into disreputable storage structures, of buildings, monuments and archaeological sites totally neglected, and of conservation laboratories that could be counted on the fingers of one hand. In 1975 the Committee of Inquiry into Museums and National Collections published its report, *Museums in Australia 1975* (Pigott 1975), which further detailed the (appalling) state of cultural material, and made*

strong recommendations for the development of conservation resources at state and national levels.

The purpose of the 1976 Canberra Conference was to follow up this information by concentrating on three main topics. Firstly, on the development of conservation in terms of staffing, laboratory facilities and training. Secondly, to examine in some detail the nature of deterioration of the different collections housed in museums, libraries, art galleries and archives. Thirdly, to suggest ways in which this deterioration could be slowed down or eliminated, particularly by improving the physical and environmental conditions for stored collections – by promoting the adoption of ‘preventive conservation’.

Preventive conservation is still of major concern to the conservation profession, and the AICCM has set up a taskforce under Julian Bickersteth to develop a set of environmental guidelines to be published shortly.

In the first topic, ‘Development of Conservation’, there were 11 speakers including Garry Thomson, Scientific Adviser, National Gallery, London and author of the classic text “*The Museum Environment*” (Thomson 1978). Another internationally renowned conservator was Tony Werner, past Keeper of Conservation at the British Museum, then Chairman of the Pacific Regional Conservation Centre in Honolulu, Hawaii, who with Harold Plenderleith are joint authors of the also-classic *Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art*. The second topic, ‘Deterioration of Collections’, saw seven papers presented by conservators and scientists; while the third topic, ‘Standards for Environmental Control and Storage Design’, contained 10 papers by curators and

conservators. There were a total of 28 presentations, with 12 being from conservators. The 1976 conference signalled the increased interest in conservation. Of the 52 papers presented at the National Seminar on the Conservation of Cultural Material held in Perth in 1973 (Pearson *et al* 1973), 17 were by conservators. Proportionally, the number of presentations by conservators in 1976 was higher, but there were still not many active conservators at that time. Today, by far the majority of speakers at conservation conferences and seminars held in Australia are practising conservators.

The AICCM has also established Special Interest Groups covering topics such as books and paper, paintings, conservation science and preventive conservation. Some of these SIGs hold regular specialized meetings, and the Paintings Group has produced a history of painting conservation in Australia from the nineteenth century to the present: *Connecting the past to the future* (Villis & Ellem (eds) 2008).

So, 35 years ago there were many conservation problems facing cultural institutions, but a start had been made. The ICCM now (AICCM) had then been in existence for three years and was becoming active Australia-wide. Today the Australian conservation profession is highly developed and also respected within the cultural heritage field, both nationally and internationally.

The processes of recording and documenting historical information and its resources will now be discussed, followed by a summary of the historical development of conservation and the AICCM in Australia.

HISTORY OF THE AICCM

A brief and incomplete chronological history of the AICCM was put together by the Victorian Division of the AICCM in 2010 during the *Off the Record* Session to discuss the future directions of the AICCM, and was published in the AICCM National Newsletter (2010). This is being updated on a regular basis, and AICCM members are encouraged to support this initiative

through the AICCM website editor at website@aiccm.org.au. The additional discussion on what conservators value about the AICCM and its future directions is relevant to this conference.

The AICCM Archivist is Ian Batterham, Assistant Director, Preservation, National Archives of Australia. The records of the AICCM are lodged at the National Library of Australia and are being updated on a regular basis (Batterham, I 2011: pers. comm.). The current records from 1972–2008, occupy 12.84m of shelf space in 78 boxes, details of which can be found using the ‘Trove’ Search Engine at the National Library of Australia at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/35133239> (Lyll, J 2011: pers. comm.).

State branches of the AICCM will hopefully be keeping their own records but there is no information on this, and guidelines are probably required to ensure records are properly archived and maintained.

Ian Batterham has been collecting photographs of conservators in the 1950s–1980s from the Australian Overseas Information Service, held at the National Archives of Australia. These are being identified and added to the AICCM database (Batterham, I 2011: pers. comm.). Jan Lyll has done a brief search and found photographs of conservators at the NLA, NAA and Monash University (Lyll, J 2011: pers. comm.). There must be many more, and conservators are encouraged to forward details to Ian Batterham at ian.batterham@naa.gov.au.

HISTORY OF THE CONSERVATION PROFESSION

The National Library of Australia has embarked on an oral history project to record the history of the conservation profession in Australia. This commenced in 2001 and is being managed by Jan Lyll, who has interviewed a range of people who have been instrumental in shaping the conservation profession.

The project is divided into two phases:

- The formative period 1960–1980
- The growth period 1980–present

In addition to conservators, some non-conservators involved with, or who have had influence on, the profession have been interviewed.

To date, 25 interviews have been completed, two are in progress and a number of others are planned. This is not, however, an open ended project so suggestions for the future would be welcome. Those interviewed to date are:

The formative period

Wallace Ambrose, Allan Byrne, Ian Cook, Alan Lloyd, Colin Pearson, Sue Walston, Anthony Werner.

The growth period

Conservators: Eric Archer, Julian Bickersteth, Lynda Black, Tom Dixon, Andrew Durham, Jude Fraser, Ian Godfrey, John Hooke, Alan Howell, Tamara Lavrencic, Ian MacLeod, Kerry McInnis, Robyn Sloggett, Cathy Lillico Thompson.

Non-conservators: Dawn Casey, Harry Haxton, Janine Schmidt, Chris Tassell.

Access to the recordings of the interviews and transcripts can again easily be found through the Trove search engine of the NLA (<http://trove.nla.gov.au>). Type in the person's name and access to all the information about the individual held at the NLA, including the oral history data (under Music, Sound and Video), is available. Currently this can only be obtained by a visit to the Petherick Reading Room (Oral History) at the NLA, but hopefully this information will be available online in the near future.

Much of this oral history information was used to compile a history of the conservation profession in Australia, "Conservation in Australian Museums" written by Ian Cook, Jan Lyall, Colin Pearson and Robyn Sloggett. This is a chapter in the National

Museum of Australia online publication *Understanding Museums: Australian Museums and Museology* (Cook *et al* 2011).

The publication as a whole focuses on the changes that have taken place in Australian museums of all kinds since the 1970s, taking as a source of inspiration the Pigott Report into Australian Museums published in 1975 (Pigott 1975). The section "Issues in Museology", includes the chapter detailing the historical developments in conservation. These will now be summarized as all of the information is available on the NMA website.

To quote from the introduction (Cook *et al* 2011):

In Australia the concept of conservation can be traced back to 1827 when the Australian Museum in Sydney was established to collect and preserve 'many rare and curious specimens of Natural History' [the development of conservation at the Australian Museum is being presented later by Colin Macgregor]. However, it was not until the 1960s that conservation began to be regarded as a discipline in its own right. It is now a truly interdisciplinary profession strongly informed by cultural context, and with a major scientific element.

Today the role of the conservator is integral to museum management and conservators are engaged with movable, immovable and virtual heritage collections. Many events have led to the incorporation of conservators into mainstream collections management positions. Contributing factors include research, disasters, application of the concept of significance, adoption of risk management strategy, economic factors, enhanced emphasis on access, increase in the number of loans of important material, travelling exhibitions, and the opportunities and challenges presented by modern technology.

Whereas in the 1960s there was only a handful of conservators, today there are over 600 employed in Australia in cultural institutions and the private sector (the latter will be discussed elsewhere during the current conference by Julian Bickersteth).

This chapter (Cook *et al* 2011) first looks at how a genuine conservation profession was created. This was initially through the conservation cadetship program run by Bill Boustead at the Art Gallery of

NSW in the early 1960s. Alan Lloyd, past Head of Conservation at the Art Gallery, wrote in 1981 about the history of art restoration/conservation at the gallery over the past 100 years (Lloyd 1981). The trained cadet conservators moved to other cultural institutions, and coupled with a few other conservators, some from overseas, conservation was soon being practiced at the Art Gallery of NSW, Australian Museum, National Library of Australia, Australian War Memorial, National Gallery of Australia, Australian National University, National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of South Australia and the WA Museum. Today the vast majority of Commonwealth and State cultural institutions have conservation departments.

The chapter then discusses the creation of the AICCM, from its development as a consequence of the 1973 national seminar on conservation held in Perth (see above), through the first meeting as the ICCM in 1976, until the present. Today the AICCM with professional codes and charters has approximately 500 members. It publishes the internationally recognized *AICCM Bulletin* containing refereed papers, the *AICCM National Newsletter*, and has an informative and well maintained website: www.aiccm.org.au.

Another focus in the chapter is the development of a Conservation Training Program at the Canberra College of Advanced Education (now the University of Canberra) in 1978, following the recommendations of the Pigott report (Pigott 1975). From that time the growth of the profession is charted through the development of institutional conservation facilities, private conservation practices and regional conservation programs.

Research has always been an essential component of the development of conservation and Australian conservators have made significant contributions here and overseas. To quote (Cook *et al* 2011):

Examples include the Western Australian Museum in maritime archaeological conservation (and rock art conservation); the National Museum of Australia, the Australian War Memorial and the Powerhouse Museum in research on large items of technology; and the Australian Museum in its treatment of bark

paintings and other Indigenous cultural items. The National Library of Australia, the National Archives of Australia and the National Film and Sound Archive are active in the newer field of digital preservation.

The University of Melbourne Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation in particular, the WA Museum and the University of Canberra have been successful in obtaining Australian Research Council grants for a number of research projects. Research into integrated pest management (IPM) and the museum environment at the Australian Museum and National Museum of Australia has led to better and alternative means of controlling pests, light, temperature and relative humidity in cultural institutions.

Other aspects covered in this chapter (Cook *et al* 2011) that have influenced conservation practices include disaster preparedness, occupational health and safety, significance assessments and risk management methodology, economic factors, the emphasis on access to collections through regional museum programs and travelling exhibitions, and finally the problems created by modern technologies in particular digital preservation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Finally, and in summary, the chapter examines and discusses future directions and challenges facing conservators in the 21st century (Cook *et al* 2011); some key challenges include:

The complex and costly problems of caring for late twentieth and twenty-first century technological objects from computers to machinery, vehicles, aircraft and vessels;

The management of collections and objects broadly dispersed as a result of repatriation to originating communities, especially if this happens on a global scale;

Cultural impacts resulting from increased community dependence on digital technologies; and

The costs of conserving collections and providing access to them in a world of global economics, fuel crises and global warming.

The authors of this summary history of the conservation profession in Australia firmly believe that with 40 years of experience and a pool of university-trained conservators, the profession is now in a strong position to tackle these challenges.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Colin Pearson was born in the Midlands in England and studied Chemical Engineering at the University of Manchester. This was followed by a Masters Degree and PhD in Corrosion Science. In 1967 he came to Australia for a three year contract as a corrosion scientist working at the Materials Research Laboratories in Maribyrnong, Melbourne. In 1970 Colin was awarded an MBE for his contribution to corrosion science.

The following year, Colin joined the WA Museum and established their conservation program specialising in the recovery and conservation of artefacts from shipwrecks. In 1978, he moved to the Canberra College of Advanced Education (now the University of Canberra) to direct a training program for the next 25 years, in conservation of works of art, artefacts and library and archive collections. In 1994 Colin was appointed Professor of Heritage Conservation and in the same year made an Officer of the Order of Australia, AO. The following year he was elected as Fellow of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering. Colin resigned from the University of Canberra in 2002, and is now Emeritus Professor (retired). He has over 120 publications to his name.

During his career as a conservator, Colin's achievements include: Foundation President of the Australian Institute for Conservation of Cultural Materials; Council Member of the International Centre for Conservation in Rome (ICCROM) for 11 years, and in 2002 awarded the ICCROM medal; Board Member of the ICOM Committee for Conservation and coordinator of three of its international working

groups; Fellow, also Council Member, then Vice President of the International Institute for Conservation, London; Advisor to the World Monuments Fund and the Global Heritage Fund; Commissioner, Australian National Commission for UNESCO. Colin is a Consultant to UNESCO, UNDP and ICCROM for the development of conservation in south east Asia and the Pacific.

