A National Conservation Programme

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Introduction

Earlier speakers have already told us about the appalling state of the collections housed in their various institutions, and there is no need to enlarge on this except to confirm all that has been said and also written, in particular the recent report of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections[1].

The simple facts are:

1. In Australia there are numerous priceless collections, national, state and privately owned which are rapidly deteriorating due to lack of adequate controlled storage and conservation facilities.
2. There are very few conservators available in Australia to combat this problem.
3. There are only a handful of conservation laboratories scattered throughout Australia and these are inadequately staffed and equipped.
4. Regrettably, some governments, institutions and persons responsible for collections are either unaware or are unconcerned about the requirements for conservation.

I will now discuss what I believe are the basic steps needed to establish conservation throughout Australia. This is essentially to provide conservators and conservation facilities and is one of the priorities recommended in the report of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections[1], to quote:

"That high priority for a National Conservation program is now essential.

The nation's collections be housed in those conditions of temperature and humidity most appropriate to each class of material, thus reducing the rate of deterioration. All museums include conservation laboratories, adequately equipped and staffed at a professional level.

A central institute should be set up to investigate the reasons for the deterioration of museum artefacts under Australian conditions and to devise methods of arresting and correcting this decay, especially the decay in ethnographic materials.

The central institute should co-operate closely with laboratories in all other major museums in Australia.

A course should be set up at the Canberra College of Advanced Education to train conservators for museums."

National Conservation Programme — Progress to Date

The first major efforts in the field of conservation were carried out by the Australian National Commission for UNESCO which brought to Australia various overseas experts. These include Dr. A. E. A. Werner, then Keeper of the Research Laboratory of the British Museum, who carried out a survey in 1969 on the conservation requirements in Australia and Papua and New Guinea. Dr. Werner was the first person to suggest the establishment of a Central Conservation Institute and his proposals are detailed in his report and recommendations[2]. This visit was followed in 1971 by Dr. H. J. Plenderleith from the International Centre for Conservation in Rome who made specific recommendations on the conservation and restoration of library and archive material in the Pacific Area[3]. Another overseas expert was the architect, Mr. I. Grant, who reported in 1972 on the preservation and restoration of 19th century buildings[4]. However, although these reports and recommendations were welcomed and accepted by Australian governments and institutions, nothing positive materialised.

The next step was the first National Seminar on the Conservation of Cultural Material, held in Perth in 1973 and the Proceedings of the Seminar have just been published[5].

The main aims of the Seminar were firstly to review the present situation and discuss the funda-

mental problems concerned with conservation throughout Australia covering the basic fields of Fine and Applied Arts, Libraries and Archives, Ethnology, Archaeology, Historical Collections, Field Monuments and Sites, Historical Buildings and Biological Material, and secondly, to assess the requirements for staff and facilities and the resources available to satisfy the needs for conservation and restoration in these fields.

Following the Seminar, the Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material was established and although we have had teething troubles, due primarily to the lack of finance and the few foundation members scattered throughout the country, the Institute now has a membership of over 130 and publishes a quarterly Bulletin. In addition, a survey is being carried out on a trial basis in Canberra to determine conservation requirements and resources.

All this has been through the efforts of a few individuals and organisations. If conservation is to be firmly and adequately established in Australia the financial and moral backing of institutions and governments is required. An example of where this has been done well is in my own Conservation Laboratory in Western Australia. Here, an institution with the full backing of the State Government has taken a responsible attitude towards conservation. But even here, with a staff of 15 and a large laboratory we are unable to adequately handle all the conservation requirements of the Museum Departments.

The third stage in the development of conservation is this conference. As will be discussed later, it is impossible to create conservators and conservation facilities overnight. The immediate step is to inform curators and other persons responsible for collections of the problems they are likely to encounter with their collections and how to care for and maintain them. This is essentially preventive conservation.

Another recommendation of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections[1], was that adequate storage facilities should be provided. If curators were asked to provide details of the size and design of storage units needed for their collections, also the specifications for temperature, relative humidity and light, how many could do this? One of the important results of the Perth Seminar[5] was that curators, and many were doing so for the first time, were asked to report on their collections as regards size, storage and conservation facilities available and also required.

If curators were able to carry out basic care and maintenance of their collections with adequate storage facilities, environmental and pest control then a large percentage of our conservation problems would be overcome. Objects would not be deteriorating in our keeping and more sophisticated conservation and restoration could be done at a later date when facilities are available. Therefore, in this interim period we are asking the curators to be our conservators, in fact the information gained from this conference will, I hope, make curators fully aware of their responsibilities concerning the care of their collections particularly as they should be the first persons to see signs of deterioration. Without informed curators the task of the conservator is extremely difficult.

Future Planning — The Conservation Structure

The next stage in the development of conservation is to produce a master plan for a National Conservation Programme. This has been discussed in length by the I.C.C.M. and formed the basis of a submission[6] to the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections.

Although it is acknowledged that the primary concern at present within Australia is for the basic care and maintenance of collections, it is important that all aspects of conservation are developed in an integrated fashion to ensure that no particular aspect is neglected when a National Conservation Programme has been fully implemented.

The proposed conservation structure is based on a Central Conservation Institute which will work in close co-operation with Regional Laboratories in each State or wherever major collections are held. These in turn will provide a service to all other conservation laboratories in the region.

Central Conservation Institute. The Central Conservation Institute will be the headquarters of the established conservation structure in Australia and it must be government financed, and in order that it is not influenced by other institutions it must be an independent organisation. It is very important, however, that it is involved with collections and, as the logical place for establishing the Institute is in Canberra, it will be in the centre of the national collections which cover every aspect of conservation. This association with collections is essential if the Central Conservation Institute is not to become an 'ivory tower' as has happened in a number of overseas cases. I have recently visited a large number of overseas conservation organisations and laboratories, and all too often there is at the top a sophisticated conservation research laboratory and the next in line is a small conservation laboratory with a staff of 3 to handle vast collections and dealing with all materials. Very soon the two cease to relate to each other and go their different ways. The criticism of the research-type conservation laboratory is that they are unaware of the day to day problems of conservation, they rarely do routine conservation work, they use expensive and sophisticated equipment outside the budget of a

small laboratory. In addition, when very valuable objects have been sent in for specialised treatment this has invariably taken a long time, many years sometimes, and is usually also very costly.

The main role of the Central Conservation Institute will be to provide documentation, information and analytical services. It will be a training centre, in particular for the students attending the proposed conservation training course at the Canberra College of Advanced Education. In addition, short courses will be held at all levels and in all fields of conservation.

The research aspects of the Institute will be very important, but, as mentioned previously, these must be related to the requirements of the conservator. There are many such problems currently confronting conservators in Australia and examples are listed in the submission of the I.C.C.M. to the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections[6].

To foster this relationship between the Central Institute and other laboratories it is recommended that a National Advisory Council on conservation is established to advise the Central Institute on all conservation matters. The Regional Laboratories should be represented on this Council and its members must be practising conservators.

Regional Laboratories. The Regional Laboratory would be attached to one of the major institutions and work essentially on its collections but also provide analytical, advisory and practical assistance to all other laboratories in the region. The other major institutions would have smaller laboratories, down to the one conservator and assistant at a small local museum. In addition to providing a conservation service, the Regional Laboratory would store and supply conservation materials which are normally not available locally or only available in bulk.

As regards the research aspect, it is expected that each Regional Conservation Laboratory will specialise in some particular aspect of conservation, depending on the local requirements and collections. It is also expected that training courses will be organised by the Regional Laboratories in conjunction with local education authorities, specialising in the requirements of the trainee and technician conservator.

Institutional Laboratories. Of equal importance to the Central and Regional Laboratories is the urgent necessity for laboratories at all cultural institutions and wherever collections are housed. These will vary in size depending on the requirements of the collections. It is in these Laboratories that the majority of routine conservation work is carried out and due to the size of Australia, these laboratories must be established as a priority. Some will require specialist conservators, others more general work, but without them any National Conservation Programme will be ineffectual.

Conservators

Having discussed the plan for a National Conservation Programme throughout Australia the next step is to produce conservators.

The requirements of a conservator are many and varied. He must advise on the environment for storage and display of objects, be able to carry out routine conservation and restoration treatments, be able to analyse materials for authentication and conservation requirements, be able to do research into new conservation processes, be a materials scientist but also have artistic ability. Conservators are, therefore, required at many levels and as the national conservation programme must be implemented at all levels, such a range of conservators is required immediately.

Conservators can be provided by different means:

Training. Training of conservators will be detailed in the following papers and it has also been discussed in the I.C.C.M. submission to the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections[6]. However, I must mention one thing. Conservators are required at all levels in Australia and, therefore, consideration must be given to training facilities and courses for the technician as well as the graduate – "what about the workers", to quote a recent article in the Bulletin[7].

Funds must also be provided, particularly for technical staff, to enable them to attend conservation courses both here in Australia and overseas. Recently, two of my staff attended the "Fundamental Principles of Conservation" course at the International Centre for Conservation in Rome, and another member is currently undertaking training in paper conservation at the National Library of Australia in Canberra, and all this is at their own expense – a very unsatisfactory state of affairs.

Imported conservators. There are not many overseas conservators available, particularly in the field of ethnographic conservation which is probably the main requirement in Australia. In addition there can be difficulties in bringing outside conservators into a new environment with its different conservation problems. There is a possibility, however, of short term contracts which might be a solution to the problem during the first few years.

Self training. This is how the Laboratory at the W.A. Museum developed[8]. We have had to specialise, and from the beginning, therefore, have appointed persons with particular background experience and qualifications e.g. a metallurgist and physical chemist for metal conservation, an

organic/biochemist for organic material, a potter for ceramics, silversmith for metal restoration and so on. With the basic knowledge, plus general assistance in conservation principles and practice, plus the literature, these persons have trained themselves to a level of expertise which I believe, having seen a lot of overseas conservation, is of equal standard to any other laboratory dealing with comparable material. However, it must be remembered that this produces specialists, not general conservators. Without established courses in conservation it is difficult to train the specialist in other aspects of conservation although we attempt to do this to some extent by inservice lectures and practical classes; the specialist trains the others in his particular field.

Apprenticeship. This is one way of training persons directly from school, however, it requires a lot of time and ability from the conservator. This has been done very successfully in the past by Bill Boustead at the Art Gallery of N.S.W., in Sydney, and his apprentices are now heading some of the main conservation laboratories in Australia. This is where the Regional Laboratories could play a major role.

All of these sources of conservators must be exploited fully to provide the wide range of conservators at present required in Australia.

Implementation of a National Conservation Programme

The immediate implementation of a National Conservation Programme is essential, however, what is important is that firstly all aspects and levels of conservation should be covered and secondly, whatever is established as regards laboratories and training facilities etc., should be done slowly and carefully. There have been a number of recent overseas examples where training courses and conservation institutions were set up rapidly without adequate preparation and facilities and this has produced a large number of problems. The recommendations[6] in the submission of the I.C.C.M. to the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections for the implementation of a National Conservation Programme are, I believe, well prepared and I would like to quote from them.

"A National Conservation Programme will necessarily take some time to establish. Nevertheless there is an order of priorities which calls for an immediate start in some areas. The general sequence of events which ensures the implementation of the total programme could be scheduled as follows:

1. Immediate establishment of a conservation course for conservators at a tertiary level, which would provide at least 10 conservators within three years.
2. At the same time the establishment of a Planning Committee to draw up specifications for a Central Conservation Institute. The planning should include considerations of the policy and functions of the centre with respect to services to other museums and collections as well as staffing, accommodation, equipment and a national conservation policy. This Committee should consist of 4 experts including conservators who would be joined by the Central Conservation Institute Director, when appointed.
3. Funds should be provided to upgrade existing conservation facilities so that they can accommodate the student conservators during the initial years of the training programme.
4. An additional urgent and essential requirement is for a National Survey to be carried out to determine in detail the storage and conservation requirements of all institutions and persons holding cultural collections. This should preferably be carried out by persons experienced in conservation matters otherwise many problems could arise with persons having different backgrounds and also fields of responsibility providing the information required. Such a survey should be carried out with the assistance and cooperation of the various organisations such as the Museums Association, Art Galleries Association, Archives Association and the Library Association. Conservation is a subject that embraces all these disciplines and it is important that they are all involved in the survey of the conservation requirements in their field.
5. The second stage, commencing in about 3 years time, would be the provision of funds for the appointment of trained conservators to major collections. At the same time a rapid increase in the numbers of technical assistants should be provided for.

During the second stage, building of a Central Conservation Institute should commence.

6. Completion of the Central Conservation Institute in 4-5 years time and the initiation of building programmes to improve the quality of housing for conservation sections and storage facilities in museums with deficiencies in these areas.

There is of course no reason why specialist conservators cannot be employed immediately when they are available. However, the improvement of housing and installations for conservation in major collections could best be done when permanent, trained conservators have had the opportunity for assessing the needs of the collections in question."

Conclusions

Conservation is materials science and the artistic ability to work with materials. It covers all materials whether originating from an historic building, an Aboriginal spear, vintage car or bird skin; all cultural institutions including libraries, archives, art galleries and museums and also private collections.

We have in Australia priceless, irreplaceable collections and we must make the effort now to preserve these collections in perpetuity. Action is needed now – conservators are needed now – an integrated conservation organisation to cover Australia is needed now.

To persons who are unsympathetic towards conservation, I urge you to look closely at the collections in your charge, their deterioration is your responsibility, your fault. I urge everyone to study in detail the reports of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections[1], and of the I.C.C.M.[5, 6]. The former I would personally like to see dedicated to the late Bill Boswell. He was, I know very instrumental in setting up the Committee of Inquiry and was very concerned about the state of our collections. He once said to me that if he could start his career again he would like to be an anthropologist or a conservator – this from a person who reached the top in both the diplomatic and scientific worlds. He died without seeing the efforts of his work for conservation being implemented. I sincerely hope that his efforts and our efforts now are not in vain. I hope all of you will support conservation in Australia so that instead of following, nay shamefully hardly existing in the world of conservation, we will soon be among the world leaders in the preservation of our cultural heritage.

References

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