



The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material

AICCM Statement on Conservators in an Australian Context, November 2015

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Purpose

This document aims to clarify the role of conservators in an Australian context. It describes a range of skills, knowledge and activities that conservators may undertake in the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage.

Background

This document updates the 2009 *AICCM Definition of a Conservator*. It draws heavily on key international resources such as the International Council of Museums - Committee for Conservation, *The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession Competencies (1984)* and *Conservation: Who, What & Why (2008)*¹, American Institute for Conservation, *Defining the Conservator: Essential Competencies*; The Institute for Conservation, *Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers Professional Standards*; The European Confederation of Conservator-Restorer's Organisations, *Professional Guidelines*. It has been aligned to an Australian context, primarily via a study of Australian Position descriptions, and the Public Service Board of NSW, *Conservators Cultural Institutions Agreement No 2504 of 1987*.

Role: what a conservator does

In Australia, conservators work in a range of settings from large cultural institutions and commercial organisations through to one person private practices. As a profession, conservation is characterised by its collaborative and cross disciplinary nature, requiring conservators to utilise a range of skills across traditional professions within an area of material or cultural specialisation. The day-to-day work undertaken by a conservator will be influenced by the setting and needs of the organisation and the type of heritage materials.

¹ In 2008 ICOM-CC updated their now historic 1984 definitions document and developed an interactive model '*Conservation: who, what & why?*' to reflect that conservation work involves many players and stakeholders.

Conservators have the education, training and/or experience which provide the tools, advanced knowledge and critical thinking for decision-making that carries the responsibility of long-term preservation and mitigation of the risks to cultural property. In short, conservators have the necessary education in science, properties of materials, conservation treatment, ethical and aesthetic issues, as well as in the legal ramifications that may result from decisions they make².

Conservators possess the expertise to preserve cultural heritage in a way that retains the integrity of the concept, object, building or site, including its cultural and historical significance, context and aesthetic or visual aspects³. They often have the particular responsibility in that treatment is performed on irreplaceable originals, which are often unique and of great artistic, religious, historic, scientific, cultural, social or economic value⁴.

As their expertise develops, conservators are able to undertake complex conservation treatments and large scale projects. Depending on their role and level of experience, conservators may be guided by a senior conservator or may be involved in the supervision of junior staff, assistants/technicians or volunteers. Conservators can also lead complex projects and develop skills as project managers where they direct the work of colleagues and other professionals.

Many skills are specific to a particular position, however, there are a number of skills that are common to conservators in Australia, with a varying degree of autonomy, complexity and outcomes that are commensurate with the level of the position.

Knowledge and skills

The work of a conservator requires sound knowledge and skills which typically include the following:

Knowledge

- adherence to conservation and preservation terminology, philosophy, principles and ethics as outlined in the *AICCM Code of Ethics and Code of Practice (2002)*
- knowledge of current conservation and preservation practices and processes, including knowledge of long term trends and issues
- additional knowledge in an area of specialisation including conservation treatment and understanding of historical material and practices

² AIC p.5 Also ICOM-CC, 2008; 1984 section 4.2

³ AIC p.4

⁴ ICOM-CC, 1984, p.1

- ability to apply scientific principles including technical analysis of materials, together with capacity to analyse problems, be innovative and formulate creative and effective solutions
- understanding the processes and impact of deterioration and change on cultural material, taking into account its significance and context⁵ and the capacity to estimate future deterioration based on this knowledge
- knowledge of preventive conservation requirements including: collection housing, storage and transport requirements, environmental monitoring, integrated pest management (IPM), housekeeping, disaster preparedness planning and recovery techniques
- ability to integrate cultural considerations, significance, values, context and use of cultural material into the conservation process⁶. This includes awareness of cultural considerations and protocols for the handling, storage and display of cultural heritage particularly related to Indigenous material, and an awareness of the context and meaning of objects to individuals and communities and how to engender appropriate, context-relevant responses.
- knowledge of workplace health and safety, including sound laboratory practices, and their role in conservation planning and practice
- understanding copyright, moral rights and intellectual property legislation that impacts on displaying, moving, storing and preserving cultural material
- knowledge of risk assessment and management in relation to cultural material

Skills

- ability to apply appropriate conservation treatments in an area of specialisation including well-developed ability to handle delicate objects in accordance with the *AICCM Code of Ethics and Code of Practice*
- ability to evaluate and document the condition of cultural heritage and conservation processes in accordance with the *AICCM Code of Ethics and Code of Practice*
- ability to develop and implement an integrated approach to conservation that may involve a range of strategies such as condition assessment, collection surveys, treatment, exhibition preparation, rehousing and environmental management at item and collection level
- oral and written communication, research and public engagement skills (including report writing, conducting training and demonstrations)
- ability to work autonomously, together with the capacity to work cooperatively as a member of a team
- project management skills, and the ability to make sound decisions
- competence in the use of information and communication technology

⁵ AIC p.8

⁶ AIC p.6-8

- flexibility in decision-making in order to make decisions that are relevant to custodians and stakeholders
- the ability to update knowledge and conduct research that extends current knowledge, and to share this knowledge in ways that are timely and effective
- other skills that may be considered for more senior positions include leadership, managerial and financial management, strategic planning and participation in broader issues that affect conservation (new government policies, organisational issues)

AICCM Education policy statement

The AICCM is the peak industry body for cultural material conservators in Australia. AICCM recognises that professional knowledge, ability and skill are gained by both practical and formal training and that participation by conservation professionals with a wide range of educational backgrounds enriches the field. Conservation educators are encouraged to map curriculum against the AICCM *Code of Ethics and Code of Practice* (2002), the *AICCM Statement on conservators in an Australian context* (2015) and international benchmarks, to enable appropriate knowledge, ability and skill for graduates. Education providers should also provide curriculum and learning pathways to enable students to meet AICCM Professional membership criteria, which enables graduates to be endorsed as professional conservators by the AICCM.

References

American Institute for the Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC) 2003, *Defining the Conservator: Essential Competencies*, AIC, Washington

<http://www.conservation-us.org/docs/default-source/governance/defining-the-conservator-essential-competencies.pdf?sfvrsn=1>

Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) 2002, *Code of Ethics and Code of Practice*

European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations 2002 *Professional Guidelines*

http://www.icon.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&id=121

Institute of Conservation (ICON) *Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers (PACR) Professional Standards*

http://www.icon.org.uk/images/new_pacr_professional_standards_2.pdf

International Council of Museums - Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC), 2008, *Conservation: who, what & why?* <http://www.icom-cc.org/330/about-icom-cc/what-is-conservation/conservation:-who,-what-amp;-why/#.VD932ouUeYk>

International Council of Museums - Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) 1984, *The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession Competencies*

http://www.icom-cc.org/47/history-of-icom-cc/definition-of-profession-1984/#.VOSDPUuH_7A.

Note that this document is now part of ICOM-CC historical documents, and has been superseded by the interactive model *Conservation: who, what & why?* 2008.

Public Service Board of NSW, *Conservators Cultural Institutions Agreement No 2504 of 1987*.