

Technical skills in conservation education and practice: (why) do we care?

■ **Andreas Sampatakos & Dimitrios Chatzigiannis**

Introduction

This paper demonstrates the authors' views regarding technical skills in contemporary conservation. It aims to present a holistic perception of manual skills and to set them in a wider context. A major part of this paper will cover the efforts undertaken in the Department of Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art (University of West Attica) towards enhancing the existing educational model by insisting on construction and decorative techniques and by investing in the essential hand skills required for conservation. This perspective will be associated with broader social concepts.

The wider context

Being aware of the trap of generalisation, it is rather obvious that a contemporary conservator is operating within a context of a consumerist, mass-productive and continuously technologically progressing society. Inevitably, this context influences material heritage and the way people perceive it and of course determines the way conservation is applied. Especially in the case of wooden artifacts and furniture, the influence of this broader social context is quite obvious: aesthetic homogenisation, ephemeral tastes and low-cost materials. Old crafts demanded and reflected a set of values related with patience, apprenticeship or time investment that now seem outdated.

It is clear that within the frame of contemporary conservation there is a decline in the conservator's technical knowledge and skills, an issue also pointed out by other scholars.^{1, 2, 3} The conservation discipline, moving towards professionalisation and 'scientification' in the last decades, paid extra attention to issues related to materials analy-

sis, monitoring and preventive conservation, and maybe undervalued more technical issues. At the same time, craftspeople who were the keepers of technical knowledge acquired through the ages have been isolated either by their own disability to follow contemporary developments or by the snobism of the newborn professionals. Contemporary educational models started to create conservators that abandoned older artistic or empiric conservation in favour of more holistic, systematic and criteria-based approaches.^{4, 5}

Undoubtedly, the developments of the last decades constitute positive steps towards a more overall perception of cultural heritage and especially of wooden artifacts. However, technical knowledge and skills were neglected leaving a gap in contemporary theory and practice of conservation. Obviously, a call for return to the old days would be pointless. Nevertheless, a focus on traditional materials and techniques and investment in hand skills should be present in contemporary conservation education and practice.

In this paper it is argued that it would be a challenge for the conservation community to preserve technical skills and knowledge and assign them the same academic status with other now established conservation standards (scientific examination, preventive conservation etc.) and set them back in the core of the profession.

Conservation education at the University of West Attica

The existing four-year bachelor of arts (BA) educational program in the Department of Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art at the University of West Attica has the basic characteristics of a

Table 1 The fields of specialisation at the Department of Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art at the University of West Attica.

| The two fields of specialisation that students choose to follow in the third year | |
|---|------------------|
| Conservation of: | Conservation of: |
| Stone | Panel paintings |
| Mosaic | Wooden artifacts |
| Metal artifacts | Book and paper |
| Ceram & glassware | Easel paintings |
| Organic materials | Wall paintings |
| Textiles | Photographs |

contemporary conservation syllabus. It is a department that covers the whole spectrum of objects and materials that a conservator deals with. During the third year of their studies and after having attended common and general classes the students have to choose one of the two directions of the table 1.

The syllabus of the module of the conservation of wooden artifacts was updated in 2003 by Professor Anastasia Pournou. The module offers both conservation theory and practice in a ratio of one to three. The practical session is divided in two parts, one dedicated to experimental processes and one on actual treatment of authentic objects.

The experimental part of the session focuses on the scientific understanding of wooden artifacts like wood identification, material properties and deterioration factors. In the treatment session, objects are the focus of a problem-based learning procedure. Students have to identify the object's materials and construction techniques, combining the theoretical and analytical background and understand the significance of the object in its context. A broad spectrum of objects is included in the workshop as to reflect the various conservation aspects in order to initiate debates and enhance critical thinking.

Pedagogical principles and methods

The pedagogical philosophy that characterises the module of conservation of wooden artifacts is learner-centred and based on principles of constructivist methods. Through a problem-based learning activity students are motivated to recall, enhance and synthesise their theoretical knowledge and also to find solutions and ways to improve their performance. The aim is to move from the guided tutorials that take place in early teaching level into open guidance where students take more responsibility of their own learning outcomes.⁶ The ultimate goal is to teach students how to think and develop their broader skills in a problem-solving context. Respectively, in the field of practical skills, students get experience in specific areas but are expected to develop these skills in their future activities.

For these reasons the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations (E.C.C.O.) guidelines for conservators' competences are taken into consideration.^{7, 8, 9} According to these, the skills related to the technical aspects of conservation have to reach an intermediate level. However, as the department offers a four-year program, more emphasis is given on the conceptual dimension of technical aspects of conservation.

Respectively, several educational tools and means are applied:

- Visualisation of the information using real objects
- Experiential learning
- Incorporation of multidimensional objects
- Collaborative work
- Peer learning
- Engagement of senior students
- Open and continuous access to the conservation workshops
- Additional thematic courses
- Internships in specialised workshops and museums

The visualisation of the taught information with real objects and mockups is probably one of the best tools in teaching technical skills. It is obvious that real objects give a clearer and richer picture, than, for example, Powerpoint presentations, and that they serve various aims. Students are able to use all of their senses in approach of a wooden object (sight, touch, smell, hearing) and feel its texture or weight. They become familiar with the direct observation and the ways that objects should be handled. It is also very important, both for the tutor and the student, to have immediate access to tangible references for any topic that might rise during classes. Experiential learning is a supportive tool to the use of real objects in classes.¹⁰ Construction and decorative techniques like wood carving, finishing techniques or gilding methods can only be taught through demonstration by the tutor and then repetition by the students. However, it is crucial that this knowledge is not just demonstrated and repeated, but set in a wider context of concept and process; in other words, it is important to be connected with other conservation elements such as scientific examination, intangible aspects of the object or even health and safety issues.^{11, 12} Objects that 'tell stories' are incorporated during the course. For example, objects that touch upon structural, ethical or historical issues are selected. By studying these objects similarities and contradictions are emphasised. Collaborative and peer (mutual) learning is an essential process in the module.¹³ Each student has to be able to transmit the knowledge gained to fellow students, both during classes and at the end of the semester by presenting her/his work to the rest of the class. This process evaluates the learning outcome of each student, and at the same time turns the student from a passive into an active agent in the teaching procedure.

The involvement of senior students in the teaching process is also encouraged. They are expected to be present as much as possible in the workshop, and

assist in the teaching of juniors while working on their own dissertation projects. This approach is based on the concept of a continuously operating workshop that could serve students when they are not engaged in scheduled classes. This unofficial status of a workshop that is continuously accessible to the students offers a lot to the communication and exchange of ideas among students, and between students and tutors. It is a great contribution to the broader conceptual and procedural consciousness of conservation.

Additional thematic courses are organised in which students are able to go deeper into issues related to traditional materials, techniques and hand skills. These courses are offered as the existing program - unfortunately - hardly covers the need for enhancing technical skills.

Student internships are obligatory for all conservation students. Via internships in museum and specialised workshops, students are able to invest more in their skill development according to their needs.

The new generation

Many of the characteristics of the current student generation play a crucial role in the teaching methods applied in the Conservation Department of the University of West Attica. Students attending the course are youngsters that more or less grew up in a today's consumerist society of prosperity. The digital world constitutes a great part of their everyday life and this deeply influences their perception of the analogue world of manual skills. The real and tactile act is not always a conceivable part of the digital reality. Due to this - not absolutely problematic but definitely one-dimensional - characteristic, students stay bemused when they deal with traditional craftsmanship and the way it is applied. They cannot easily follow the line that connects raw materials, manufacturing process and final result, and they underestimate issues related to time, effort or difficulty. Additionally, the use of gadgets has minimised their dexterity skills but also their patience. When confronted with the mentality of the traditional techniques, where time and potential result follow different timelines, they become impatient or even disappointed.

These characteristics have to be considered when scheduling a teaching model. It is clear that the relation of the students with digital technology actually is a mandatory tool for reaching high levels of competence and improve their technical background. However, sometimes this engagement with the digital world may lead to a belief that knowledge is something easy to acquire. In

these terms, familiarity with manual skills is a great resource for a student to realise that deep knowledge needs time, patience and mostly experiential approach. It is a challenge for us to convert these contradictions of the modern world into tools for enhancing our educational approach.

Why teaching skills?

A question that someone should ask is: why have skills declined? An answer could be that the needs of the discipline through the last decades were different. And this is quite true: conservation had to build a scientific *modus operandi* and create the infrastructures (both theoretical and practical) in order to be established into the new world of studying and preserving cultural heritage. In these years, insisting on traditional techniques and technical skills might have looked unprogressive. Additionally, conservation theory of the era, paying extra attention to principles like minimum intervention, accompanied by a more and more extensive and detailed documentation, limited the needs for remedial conservation. The role of the conservator, especially in the great museums, changed and drifted away from traditional duties. If one addresses broader issues like unemployment and the general decrease of large conservation projects, it becomes clear how technical skills have become a victim in this situation. However, social needs and values that demand high skill and sophisticated interventions are still actual and the conservator often has to serve them. Nowadays though, with many technical aspects of conservation in hibernation, and considering the retirement of experienced and skilled conservators, it seems obvious why teaching technical skills must be a crucial element of a contemporary conservation educational program.

But this more or less practical reason is not the actual one that forces us to insist on technical skills. Investing in technical skills and knowledge of historical materials and techniques offers a broader perspective that redefines our relationship with the material environment. Objects around us are not just commodities for use or aesthetic admiration. They are the work of humans (even if they are machine-made!) and of knowledge acquired through generations. By learning how something was made we might re-think about the value of matter, time or effort. Through this way of thinking, material objects - and in our case wooden artifacts - could pave the way for broader concerns, related obviously to conservation but of course in touch with the broader social network.

Apart from this general, intellectual approach, we have observed that dealing with technical skills in conservation works beneficially for the students in a wider sense. They become more passionate and excited about the field. They spend extra time in the workshop and they become more productive. They become aware of the connection between conservation theory and science to the actual object. And of course, they become more patient and methodic. Their observation skills will improve and they are more capable in setting specific questions and goals regarding conservation approaches. Therefore, we emphasise that conservation without this technical aspect is fragmentary.

Future perspectives and necessities

It has been argued that technical skills are considered an important part of conservation education and it has been demonstrated that the teaching of skills is not only an educational goal but also an educational means. Additionally, it became clear that technical skills are a neglected, but definitely a fundamental part of contemporary conservation. However, we need to ask ourselves: do we all share this preoccupation? Should we worry about the closing of conservation departments? Do we believe that investing in technical skills is mandatory today? If yes, maybe we have to re-organise our approach and move forward to collective actions towards this goal. We conclude with a proposal for the creation of a network among academic institutions, museums and the private sector, with applied conservation and technical skills in its core, in the aim of exchanging knowledge, expertise and experience both on teaching and the practice of conservation.

Andreas Sampatakos

Panel paintings and decorative wood conservator,
tutor Department of Conservation of Antiquities
and Works of Art, University of West Attica,
Athens, Greece
asampatak@gmail.com

Dimitrios Chatzigiannis

Conservator of antiquities and works of art,
freelance conservator,
Athens, Greece
hatzijohn84@yahoo.gr

² M. Kennedy, 'National Gallery Wins Grant to Help Save Art Conservation Skills', *The Guardian*, August 1st, 2018.

³ A.M. Wilmering, 'The Getty's Panel Paintings Initiative: an overview', *OPD Restauro*, 2013, No. 25, pp. 89-98, Centro Di Della Edifimi SRL.

⁴ S. Munoz-Vinaz, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, 2004, Butterworth-Heinemann.

⁵ A.M. Wilmering, 'Traditions and Trends in Furniture Conservation', *Reviews in Conservation*, 2004, Vol. 5, pp. 22-37.

⁶ S. Foskett, K. Thomson, 'An Evaluation of the Teaching and Learning of Reflective Practice at the Centre for Textile Conservation', University of Glasgow, ICOM-CC 18th Triennial Conference, Copenhagen, 2017.

⁷ E.C.C.O., 'Competences for Access to the Conservation – Restoration Profession', 2011.

⁸ J. Hutchings, 'Educating the Conservator-Restorer. Evaluating Education Delivery in Terms of the New ECCO Competence Framework for Access to the Profession – The Oslo University Case Study', ICOM-CC Triennial Conference, Lisbon, 2011.

⁹ J. Hutchings, S. Corr, 'A Framework for Access to the Conservation – Restoration Profession via the Mapping of its Specialist Competencies', *Journal of Higher Education*, 2012, Vol. 63, pp. 439-454.

¹⁰ K. Seymour, 'Balancing Knowledge and Practice Through Repetition and Reflection', 2014, Ceroart.

¹¹ R. Larsen, C.K. Andersen, 'Research as an Integral Part of Conservation-Restoration Education', 2017, Ceroart.

¹² J. Henderson, 'University Teaching in the Development of Conservation Professionals', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, 2016, Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 98-109.

¹³ G. Panagiaris, E. Malea, S. Rapti, A. Pournou, 'Enhancing Education in Conservation through Research and Innovation Projects', *CeROArt*, 2014.

References

¹ J. Ashley-Smith, 'Losing the edge: The Risk of a Decline in Practical Conservation Skills', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, 2016, Vol. 39, No 2, pp. 119-132.