

# Over the edge: the future of hand skills in conservation

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## Abstract

This paper describes a continuing investigation into the development and maintenance of the hand skills used in the restoration and conservation of cultural heritage. In 2016 the preliminary stages of this investigation were reported in a conference talk and a journal paper, both with the title 'Losing the Edge'. The intended message was that the conservation profession was in danger of forgetting what distinguished it from other groups of heritage professionals. That is the ability to make a practical difference; to noticeably improve the usefulness, the longevity and the visual and educational impact, of real objects. The title of this presentation 'Over the edge' is intended as a warning that there may be a tipping point after which it would become extremely difficult to return to the situation where the necessary hand skills were valued and nurtured. People involved in teaching often seem unaware of the changes in their environment that affect what they will be able to teach. People who work in institutions such as museums often seem unaware of the slow attrition of their skills. Those in the profession who are aware of the problem often feel that there is nothing they can do as individuals to affect the situation.

## Introduction

Since this is a personal view based on my own experience I feel justified in using a first-person narrative rather than adopting a more formal impersonal academic style. When assessing the truth of my warnings about the future of hand skills it should be borne in mind that I have not worked in a museum for fourteen years and have done no practical conservation work on historic objects for forty years. However, for twenty-five of those years I was the head of a large conservation department in a large national museum. The department ran practical training courses, eventually teaming up with an institution that could award Master's level degrees. For the last five years I have been researching the risk of a loss of necessary skills during which I have had discussions with more than fifty practitioners and teachers.

What I'm going to say refers mainly to my view of the situation in the UK, but at the Ebenist meeting in Amsterdam in November 2018<sup>1</sup> and in subsequent

correspondence I have had the opportunity to learn more about what is happening in some other countries. When I talk about 'the conservation profession' I will be guided by the activities of Icon, the Institute of Conservation, which claims to be the professional body for the conservation of UK cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup> If your preferred subject is furniture you have more than one body looking after your interests in the UK. The British Antique Furniture Restorers' Association, BAFRA,<sup>3</sup> is not included under Icon's broad umbrella, which is one of the many signs of the profession's dysfunctional personality.

My own position is this: I believe that the conservation profession still needs, and will continue to need, people skilled at hands-on intervention. Importantly, opportunities to learn and maintain the necessary skills are disappearing. And if this continues the result will be a diminished (if not totally irrelevant) profession.

Not everyone agrees with all three points. Some strenuously deny that there is any truth in any of these assertions. Heads of museum departments and people in university teaching programmes often seem so close to the subject that they are unaware of what is happening in their immediate environment.

## What is at risk?

The skills needed for conservation cover a spectrum from those that are closely related to the original method of manufacture to those devised for the conservation or restoration treatment of that type of object. The following list gives a few examples, but the reader should feel free to add more or to dispute the ranking.

Closely related to the original method of manufacture

carving, gilding  
stained glass

couching fragile textiles  
handling wet paper

varnish removal  
ceramics restoration

Exclusive to processes of conservation/restoration

Furniture conservation needs skills from throughout the whole range. The modern technologies that are being proposed for conservation and restoration, for example computer numerical control of cutting and shaping, and 3D printing, fall into the lower range. The techniques are borrowed from other disciplines but do not relate to the construction of historic artefacts. Whenever you are tempted to consider adopting a new approach or a new technology you should always ask: In addition to the benefits that are promised, am I getting something that I didn't ask for and don't want? Also, am I irreversibly losing something that I really value? There are a number of phrases that are used to describe the skills needed for interventive treatment. Probably the least controversial term is 'practical' skills. I would prefer to use the word 'craft' but that word provokes such a bad reaction from some conservators. Craft used to mean more than mere handiwork. It used to include a deep knowledge of history, material, context and logistics. This broader meaning is retained in words like statecraft, witchcraft and Warcraft.<sup>4</sup> Craft should be an appropriate term for conservation treatment. The major cause of anti-craft prejudice and the increasing disconnect between academia and practical ability is the way that those who use only their brains to solve problems pour scorn on those who do things to manipulate the real world, especially those who use their hands to do so. In his book *On Craftsmanship* Christopher Frayling gives a long list of many of the modern trends that assail the development of craftsmanship: '...flexible working, portfolio careers, multitasking, short-termism, quick fix training, suspicion of expertise... the downgrading of dedication, quantitative targets and tick-boxing, the value attached to presentation skills... out-sourcing... fifteen minutes of fame, branding, ... the rapidity of technological change...'<sup>5</sup>

The prejudice against people who are skilled with their hands has a long history. Richard Sennet in his book *The Craftsman*<sup>6</sup> notes that in Homeric Greece craftspeople were treated as valued members of society but three centuries later, during the time of Aristotle, the style of language changed and the respected craftspeople were now referred using the lower status term 'hand-workers'. Robert Campbell writing in *The London Tradesman*, published in 1747, gives details of the necessary education and practical skills of a variety of trades as well as the level of remuneration.<sup>7</sup> Needless to say an attorney earns ten times what a book-binder, watchmaker or frame

gilder can hope for. A banker earns fifteen times what a craftsman does. In the novel *The Nether World*, published in 1889, George Gissing describes how even very skilled craftsmen could not hope to buy the products of their own labour.<sup>8</sup>

There are many stages during the life-long development of a conservator where this prejudice has an effect. The two periods where this battle against practicality are most obvious are during early schooling and at university. These were dealt with at some length in my paper 'Losing the edge: the risk of a decline in practical conservation skills'.<sup>9</sup>

### Schools

In the UK, schooling in practical subjects is changing. Children are not encouraged to create physical things with their hands. There are several causes including the politics and perception of progress. One sign of the collateral damage of progress is that the influence of digital media in the classroom deprives children of the sense of how the physical world can be manipulated. This trend has been noted by several people who are concerned about the supply of practically able students going into higher education.

The fact that schools are not equipping children with suitable practical skills and that the UK government's education policy deliberately discourages schools from teaching physical creative subjects has been a matter of concern for the Crafts Council, a body initially set up to advance and encourage the creation and conservation of works of fine craftsmanship. In the recently published report, 'A pipeline problem: exploring policy disconnect in craft higher education', Lauren England notes that the marketisation of universities means that courses that do not make a profit may disappear under the guise of 'efficiency savings'.<sup>10</sup> It is more difficult for craft and practical conservation courses at any stage of education to 'make a profit' compared to other subjects because of the need for space, special equipment and close supervision. These costs must be minimised while student numbers, student fees and principals' salaries are allowed to increase.

The style of education, where children do not make things with their hands, and are increasing reliant on mobile digital devices, is a worry to Professor Roger Kneebone, a surgery professor. He claims that students are arriving at medical school without the hand strength and skill to perform basic medical tasks. He says that the focus on academic knowledge has come at the expense of craftsmanship.<sup>11</sup> His critics say that people have always unjustly blamed new technology for the world's troubles.

And anyway ‘why worry?’ when all surgery will soon be done by robots. Although artificial intelligence and robots are blamed for the loss of jobs they are in fact mere tools rather than the actual villains. It is not robots who will take your jobs, it is greedy capitalists who want to eliminate the costly use of humans, and techy nerds who can’t resist a challenge and love solving problems, oblivious to the long-term consequences. At the moment robots are not surgeons, but they are a useful tool to assist surgeons.

The paradox is that when everyone is out of a job, people will try to fill their time with rewarding hobbies. Repairing dirty broken old stuff comes to mind. Perhaps the robots will be able to teach them the necessary skills.

### University

The need to go to a university to undertake conservation training has developed as a result of the ambition of conservators to become respected members of a serious profession. However, learning about conservation is not the same thing as doing it. There are several difficulties with university training as a means of learning practical skills. The first has already been hinted at in the last section. Practical training needs space and time, both of which can be seen as unwelcome costs. ‘Efficiency’ savings led to the closure of furniture conservation courses at Bucks New University in 2014.<sup>12</sup>

Another course under threat is the paper conservation course at Camberwell College in London. The cost per student is deemed excessive, largely because of the high ratio of staff to students and the space needed for practical training. However, the college proposes a solution. The college can take larger numbers of students who can be packed into lecture theatres. While the costly practical training and supervision can be provided by museums, or private practice.<sup>13</sup>

It is a clever idea but not very original. The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) ran a scheme for twenty years that involved the Royal College of Art (RCA), Imperial College, the National Trust, some London museums and several private practises. The impetus came from the two major partners, the V&A and the RCA. Science teaching and research support was provided by Imperial College. Partnerships with other institutions and workshops were negotiated on an ad hoc basis depending on the specialism to be taught. The programme ran until 2009 when there was no longer a senior member of V&A staff interested in protecting its funding. It does

not sound as though Camberwell College intends to seek the necessary partners but merely offers to provide the theoretical teaching if someone else (the Institute of Conservation?) coordinates the practical training.

Another example of a university providing basic theory training while not allowing much time to develop practical skills is given by the furniture restoration short course at London Metropolitan University. Over ten weeks the students are offered thirty contact hours during which they will ‘acquire new skills using a range of traditional and modern materials and techniques’ and ‘identify, plan and choose appropriate ethical treatment to undertake the repair of a piece of furniture’.<sup>14</sup>

The attitudes of current students to the task of developing practical skills has changed for a number of reasons. Andreas Sampatakos, from the University of West Attica, describes how today’s students growing up in a prosperous consumerist society are totally at ease with the digital world. Speaking at the 2018 Ebenist symposium, he explained how this upbringing deeply influences their perception of the analogue world of technical conservation skills. They tend to underestimate issues related to time, effort or difficulty. The constant use of gadgets has affected their dexterity and also their patience. When confronted with the mind-set needed for traditional techniques they become impatient or even disappointed.<sup>15</sup>

There may be other causes of disappointment. Even when the opportunity for practical work is provided, and even when the students are not in thrall to the digital, there is always someone willing to complain that they learned skills despite the teaching rather than because of it. One such student stated on the ConsDist List: ‘In the United Kingdom conservation training courses in public institutions, such as universities, in the domain of furniture and decorative arts, which is a highly-skilled wood-based discipline, award the honour of “Master of Arts” and/or “Bachelor of Arts” to students who do not know how to sharpen their tools. Even some of the teachers do not know how to sharpen their tools.’<sup>16</sup>

### Pathways

I became a conservator with no training at all. I moved from post-doctoral chemistry research to practical metalwork conservation. I effectively became the apprentice to two craftsman/conservators who taught me the basic techniques. Because I had practical hobbies such as drawing and paint-

ing, and had done some simple jewellery making and enamelling, I was able to tackle simple conservation work without doing too much damage. Once I had become familiar with practical conservation I then moved on to management, again without any specialist training. I became the head of the department, in charge of my metalwork tutors and forty other conservators and scientists. My point here is not that I am brilliant or was very lucky, but that in the right environment someone with intelligence and basic practical aptitude can make reasonable progress without relevant academic qualifications.

Many furniture conservators will be familiar with the names Nick Umney and Shayne Rivers, editors and authors of *Conservation of Furniture*, published in 2003.<sup>17</sup> Both were students in the V&A conservation department while I was department head. During my period as head of conservation they were recruited as staff members and collaborated on the production of the book. Both of them wanted to study and carry out practical conservation, specialising in furniture. Both followed paths that are no longer available. It is instructive to look at differences in their training to learn something about the changing environment of conservation.

In around 1980 Nick Umney did a four-year studentship at the V&A, following on from a Bachelor of Science in pharmacology. At that time the course was about 90% practical experience with very little compulsory academic input. The diploma awarded had no international standing. Shayne Rivers (at that time Shayne Lang) started her RCA/V&A training in around 1995 after a series of courses at various institutions most of which are no longer available in their original form. The teaching was around 60% practical, 40% academic. Theoretically the Master's qualification is internationally recognised. Shayne opted for the maximum three-year Master's course although a two-year option was available. We see here the effect of becoming associated with an academic institution (RCA), a concern with how quickly a student can qualify, rather than how long it takes to master a subject. Before entering a partnership with the RCA I should have asked myself 'Am I getting something that I didn't ask for? Am I irreversibly losing something that I value?'

Both Shayne and Nick were eventually lured into management positions. Nick stayed at the V&A long enough to supervise the closure of the RCA/V&A course. Now retired, he has returned to working with wood. Shayne's LinkedIn profile still identifies her as a practical person even though

her days must mostly be filled with management and research. The important thing about their two paths is that they wanted specialist practical training and were able to find it. The opportunities they had are no longer available.

### Specialisation

Judging by the separate groups that form within organisations such as the Institute of Conservation (Icon), the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) and the Conservation Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-CC), there is a certain inevitability to specialisation and segregation into specialist disciplines. The debate about conservation education has to involve the question: when is the appropriate time during a student's development to begin to concentrate on one material or one type of object?

Yet maybe the concept of specialisation is a bit old fashioned and does not account for the multiple pressures on a modern conservator's time. In a paper published in 2018, Emily M. Williams asks whether cross-disciplinary conservation is the way forward. She argues that, in the face of the changing demands, conservators need to be more versatile in order to work with a broader range of objects and materials.<sup>18</sup>

My own view is that, to achieve high levels of practical skill, specialisation is essential. When I was head of conservation at the V&A I deliberately developed and tried to maintain a very flat departmental structure consisting of eleven specialist practical sections. I hoped this would encourage specialist learning and development. Conservators would not be burdened by an unnecessary hierarchy and mindless bureaucracy. However, towards the end of my period as senior manager the museum was developing a taste for mindless bureaucracy. After a couple of inspections by management consultants instigated by the deputy director, I was forced to adopt a more conventional multi-layered structure of larger groupings, thus guaranteeing that at least three experienced senior conservators would never do practical work again. I was not given the opportunity to question whether I was getting something that I didn't ask for, or whether I was irreversibly losing something that I valued.

Christine Palmer runs Carvers and Gilders, a successful private business with a Royal Warrant. For a long time she taught gilding restoration at City and Guilds Art School in London. In 2016 she said of conservation training institutions 'Walking off the edge of a cliff in a fog of bureaucracy is not a sensible way to go'. In October 2018 she told me

'We're now off the cliff and in free fall'. She asks 'How are conservators who wish to specialise going to get the tuition and extensive practical experience they need?'.<sup>19</sup> This is a recognition that university training is changing in ways that do not allow for the teaching of specialist practical skills.

### Expectations

Many 'old hands' do not think that universities are providing what is needed, but do we know what young people are seeking when they opt to study conservation? MaryJo Lelyveld, former president of AICCM (Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material) wrote in 2016 that 'Interventive treatments are still a core reason that students are drawn to the profession'.<sup>20</sup>

Hannah Clare, Head of Preventive Conservation at British Museum, spoke to forty conservation professionals asking what had attracted them to conservation: 'Overwhelmingly, people agreed on three reasons: wanting a close and detailed interaction with objects of significance or beauty, being practical or wanting to work with their hands, and wanting a connection to the past. A significant number also talked about the attraction of mixing art and science or the practical and academic'.<sup>21</sup>

So it seems that people start their education looking for a hands-on experience with individual objects, wanting to do something practical. I got one view of what they actually get during a conversation with university lecturer, colleague and friend, Dean Sully. Dean told me that the main aim was to teach decision-making. The practical work would be done by technicians and volunteers.<sup>22</sup> In these circumstances it is quite possible (though not essential) to leave a university after three years with two Master's degrees and no mastery of any practical skills. A further sign of the profession's personality problems.

### Conclusion

Is there an appropriate therapy? Firstly, avoid long and dangerous words like 'marketization'. Beware of deskilling, which may be one of the unintended consequences of unthinkingly adopting new technologies. Don't be fooled into thinking that higher education is always preferable to further education. Two years ago a UK private studio advertised for new staff that they would train themselves, saying they didn't want fresh graduates from academic courses. Theoretically it is possible to get Icon professional accreditation without a university degree. So there should be routes into the practical side of the profession that are not totally dependent

on time spent in a university. Apprenticeships are one possibility that Icon is exploring. Which is very brave because 'apprenticeship' is almost as much a dirty word as 'craft' to some conservators. But it seems as though they may have lost their nerve. Apprenticeship has got to be linked to a Master's degree.<sup>23</sup> So even though universities are following a different and dangerous agenda we apparently can't live without them.

If we want to address the needs and expectations of would-be conservators, if we want to conserve the part of the profession that actually makes a practical difference, that noticeably improves the usefulness and the visual and educational impact of real objects, we need to be very cautious about irrevocable links between professional practice and academic institutions. Otherwise we risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. You may not be familiar with this traditional saying, but it is definitely about a tipping point. The allusion is to someone enthusiastically yet carelessly adopting change without recognising the irreversible downside of their actions.

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