

CAC Publications - Selecting and Employing a Conservator in Canada

Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property (CAC) Canadian Association of Professional Conservators (CAPC)



Inpainting a Treated Painting

Introduction

Canadians are becoming increasingly appreciative of collectable objects of artistic or heritage value, and concerned with their preservation. Consequently, more and more Canadians are turning to professional conservators to enhance and preserve their collections.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to help you select a conservator with the expertise needed to preserve, repair, and restore your object or collection. Information is provided on what to expect and what not to expect in your dealings with a conservator.

What is a conservator?

A conservator is someone who is involved in the care and treatment of objects of artistic or historical significance. Qualified conservators are highly skilled practitioners with years of training and experience. Unfortunately, there are also individuals who call themselves conservators but who are unqualified or do not abide by professional standards. Consequently, it is important to be careful in selecting a conservator.

Conservation treatments can often be complex and may involve some risk to the object. Because a high degree of expertise is required, conservators generally specialize in one particular field such as paintings, books or artifacts. Experts in preventive conservation are usually qualified to provide advice or services for more than one type of collection.



Using a photo technique to infill marquetry losses

Selecting a conservator

It is your responsibility to ensure that you select a conservator who will provide the best possible care for your object or collection. To select a conservator you should first seek references from people or organizations that employ conservators, such as public galleries, museums and archives. It is best to ensure that these references are from people who have dealt directly with the conservator in question.

As a rule all conservators in Canada should:

- know and abide by the **Code of Ethics**;
- be willing to show examples of their work and discuss openly their methods and materials;
- be able to provide references;
- be willing to discuss their training and experience;

- be members of at least one conservation organization such as the Canadian Association for Conservation (CAC), the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), or the International Institute for Conservation (IIC).

Although membership in these organizations is not an assurance of professional status or competence, it does indicate an interest in keeping abreast of developments in the field.

There is an accrediting organization of conservators in Canada called the Canadian Association of Professional Conservators (CAPC). Although its membership is currently small, the CAPC is building a registry of professional conservators who have met strict entrance requirements and who adhere to the Code of Ethics. It provides a mechanism for the impartial review of consumer complaints against member conservators. Selecting a conservator who is a member of CAPC affords you the assurance that the conservator is qualified in his/her field of specialization.

Conservators may be challenged to work in many media: in this case, upholstery, and gilded surfaces on the leg of an antique chair.

What is involved once you have selected a conservator?

You should know exactly who will be doing the conservation work; it is better to deal directly with the conservator involved rather than through a third party. Before any work begins, you should discuss a contract that outlines both the scope of the work and its cost. From this discussion you should be informed of the conservator's fees and what they include. As an example, you might ask if copies of photographic documentation are included. The division of responsibility between you and the conservator for packing, transporting and insuring the object should be made clear.

The conservation of an object normally involves two phases; examination and treatment. Usually these two steps and their fees are contracted separately.

The first phase is the examination of the object to determine its condition and to propose a plan for its treatment and care. Following the examination the conservator should provide:

- a written report describing the present condition of the object;
- a written proposal for treatment (although a recommendation against treatment may be a valid outcome of an examination);

- an explanation of the expected results of treatment;

- an explanation of the potential risks involved in the proposed treatment;
- information on the type and the extent of treatment report you will receive upon completion of the work;
- a cost estimate;
- an estimated completion date.

If you accept this treatment proposal, the second phase, the treatment itself, will follow. Until a contract is signed, no treatment will be started, and you are under no obligation to have the work done by that conservator. If you have any doubts, you should seek a second opinion from another qualified conservator.

If, during treatment, new information is discovered that necessitates a significant deviation from the proposed treatment, you will be asked to sign a revised treatment proposal or contract.

When the work is completed you should receive a written treatment report which includes a description of any materials added to the object during the treatment. Photographs will be included if specified in your contract. You should also be given recommendations for the ongoing care of the object. The conservator will keep complete records of the treatment.

A conservator can also be contracted to provide expert recommendations on preventive conservation for your collection. He/she will conduct a survey of the site and the collection, and will then present a written evaluation with recommendations for improvements in environment, storage design, etc.

What not to expect of a conservator

A conservator should not be expected to provide cost estimates or treatment proposals without first seeing the object or collection. He/she should not be expected to provide free estimates or to store objects without charge after work has been completed. Do not expect a conservator to be qualified to perform appraisals or authentications, or to buy your artwork or object, since this may involve a conflict of interest.

What to do if problems arise

If you are dissatisfied with the conservator's work you should first approach the conservator to ensure that there has not been a simple misunderstanding. If the problem cannot be resolved in this way, and if the conservator is a member of CAPC, you may contact CAPC for help in mediating the dispute.



Repairing a damaged silk brocaded dress

In closing

The best way to ensure your satisfaction is to be informed of the conservator's qualifications and to have realistic expectations of the scope and outcome of any work performed.

Canada is known for its high conservation standards and has many respected professionals working in the field as practitioners, researchers, technicians, educators and consultants. Please take advantage of this expertise to provide the best care for your treasured objects or collections.

Conservation organizations in Canada

The Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property (formerly IIC-CG) is a non-profit charitable organization whose primary aim is to further the dissemination of knowledge concerning the conservation of Canada's cultural property. CAC, Suite 419, 207 Bank Street Ottawa, Ontario K2P 2N2 coordinator@cac-accr.com

The Canadian Association of Professional Conservators is a non-profit association dedicated to the maintenance of high standards for professional conservators in Canada. CAPC c/o Canadian Museums Association Suite 400, 280 Metcalfe St. Ottawa, Ontario K2P 1R7 tel.: (613) 567-0099 Copies of the "Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice for Those Involved in the Conservation of Cultural Property in Canada" may be obtained from either of the above organizations. © 1997, CAC and CAPC