

What is Conservation?

Conserving objects from the past for the future

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

Many people have objects of historical, artistic or sentimental value. Over time, these may deteriorate, or accidents may happen, causing damage. Tarnished silverware, moth-eaten army uniforms, broken furniture and paintings covered with a network of cracks and yellowed varnish are examples. The conservator is a specialist who can treat damaged objects, and who can help collectors and custodians care for them in the future. This brochure gives an overview of the type of work done by a conservator. Conservators:

- detectives?
- scientists?
- artists?
- object doctors?

A conservator has the training, knowledge and expertise to perform a variety of conservation activities within a specialty, for example, in paintings, textiles, or furniture. These include examinations and condition assessments of objects, treatments, documentation and preventive conservation.

What is it made from? How was it put together?

Examining an object is the first step to determine its composition, structure, and how it was put together. A conservator's trained eye and experience with similar objects are the most important tools at this stage. The conservator may also need to study relevant historical and present-day information. A thorough examination of the object ensures that sound conservation decisions are made during the condition assessment and treatment.

How much damage has occurred? Why?

A condition assessment involves determining and recording the extent and location of damage on an object and, if possible, what caused the damage. The conservator also estimates whether the damage is ongoing or not. From this information, treatment options and preventive measures for the future care of the object can be proposed.

What to do? How to do it?

Conservation treatments are intended to stop ongoing damage, and often to repair damages or reveal aesthetic, historical and other important qualities of the object. A single treatment may have all of these purposes. For example, a torn silk dress may require fine hand stitching to attach it to a new backing fabric in order to stabilize it and to enhance its meaning and public appreciation. There can be a range of treatment options for a given object and condition.

Based on their training and experience, and guided by a Code of Ethics, conservators are able to propose how best to treat the object in a given situation, and how far a treatment should go. Amateur restorations, on the other hand, may not follow ethical principles. They can destroy valuable information and obscure the object's authenticity. They may also cause further damage. The following are a few examples of ethical principles in conservation:

- Less is more: Too much conservation work may lead to a loss of information about how an object was made and what has happened to it. Conservation does not imply putting the object back into pristine condition. The degree of intervention is decided in consultation with the owner or custodian.
- Respecting the object's history: Preservation of the object is not necessarily limited to the original materials. Early repairs and modifications, or traces of use such as wear marks on tools, may have historical significance.
- Stability of conservation materials: Materials used by a conservator must, as much as possible, be removable in the future and must not contribute to future damage. Most materials on the market, including many plastics, papers, glues, fillers, coatings, and detergents, do not meet these criteria.
- Distinguishing conservation repairs from the original: Although treatments are often inconspicuous, it should always be possible to recognize, upon close examination or by other means, the difference between the original material and a repair. Treatment documentation also plays an important role in this respect.

Documentation

Conservators produce written and photographic records of their work to document the condition of the object before and after a treatment, as well as the treatment itself. This information serves as a reference for the owner, custodian, researchers or future conservators.

An ounce of prevention

Preventive conservation includes actions taken on the object's surroundings to prevent damage from fire, theft, vandalism, shocks and vibrations, water, dust, pollutants, pests, light, ultraviolet radiation, temperature or humidity. Conservators can choose from a variety of preventive storage, transit or display measures. Designing and building a shipping crate tailored to an object's needs, or a climate-controlled, dust-free display case, are examples of preventive strategies.

Who is responsible for conservation?

Conservation decisions are the shared responsibility of conservators and owners or custodians. Preventive conservation activities, such as matting and framing, can be performed by the non-specialist. Only conservators, however, have the training and expertise to perform treatment conservation.

Conservation organizations in Canada

The Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property (CAC) is a non-profit organization with the main purpose of disseminating knowledge about the conservation of cultural property. Its membership is open to anyone interested in heritage and conservation. For more information on CAC publications, membership or activities, contact:

CAC
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Ottawa, Ontario K2P 2N2
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The Canadian Association of Professional Conservators (CAPC) is a non-profit association dedicated to the accreditation of professional conservators and the maintenance of high standards in conservation in Canada. Membership is open to conservators and conservation scientists through defined professional membership requirements. CAPC can be contacted by writing to:

CAPC
c/o Canadian Museums Association
280 Metcalfe Street, Suite 400
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 1X0
tel.: (613) 567-0099

The following documents are published jointly by the above organizations and may be obtained from either:

"Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice for Those Involved in the Conservation of Cultural Property in Canada."
"Selecting and Employing a Conservator in Canada."

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