

Accreditation in Conservation: Towards Professional Status

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Accreditation in Conservation: Towards Professional Status

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The issue of accreditation or certification of professional conservators is discussed in relation to various definitions of a "profession," reasons for the emergence of professions in our society, and criteria for "professional status." The provision of professional services entails the protection of "vulnerable interests" including those of the professionals themselves, the client, and the general public who may ultimately be affected by the quality of that service. Distinctions are made between "licensing" and "certification or accreditation," with respect to mandatory qualifications in order to practice in the former, and voluntary assessment and self-regulation in the latter. The status of the conservator relies to a large degree on the public perception of the profession, depending upon a reputation for both integrity and high standards of practice. The importance of a self-regulatory professional body is underlined. Some of the benefits and problems associated with accreditation are presented.

La question de l'attestation professionnelle des restaurateurs est discutée par rapport à diverses définitions du terme "profession", à l'émergence des professions dans notre société et aux critères du "statut professionnel". Des services professionnels doivent par définition protéger les "intérêts vulnérables" des professionnels eux-mêmes, du client, ainsi que du grand public qui peut être affecté en bout de ligne par la qualité de ces services. L'octroi de licences, un système qui rend certaines qualifications obligatoires pour exercer la profession, se distingue de l'attestation professionnelle, un système fondé sur l'évaluation volontaire des praticiens et l'autoréglementation au sein du corps professionnel. Le statut des restaurateurs dépend dans une large mesure de la perception qu'a le public de la profession, et celle-ci sera favorable si les professionnels ont une réputation d'intégrité et des normes élevées de pratique. L'importance d'un corps professionnel autoréglementé est soulignée. Quelques-uns des avantages et des problèmes reliés à l'attestation sont présentés.

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"It is not sufficient that we are simply good conservators, important as that may be. If we feel that we are truly members of a profession it is not sufficient to put in so many hours a week, and leave the rest to others, even should the alternative entail some personal sacrifices. The fact of *being* in itself is not enough: we must be *seen* to exist. How we elect to see ourselves is one matter: how we are perceived by others is quite a different question, and one that . . . is equally or even more important than the view we take of ourselves. . . . Our public image, alas, we may find to be not precisely as we might want it."¹

These words were spoken by Professor Henry Hodges, during the Per Guldbeck Memorial Lecture given at the IIC-Canadian Group Conference of 1983, as he addressed the question of the "state of the profession in Canada." Since that time, conservation in Canada has developed quite considerably. As conservators, we have defined ourselves and our responsibilities more clearly. An awareness of the role of the conservator has improved over the years, but one cannot say that the conservator has yet achieved a *professional status* in Canada — although we may be closer to that here than in many parts of the world.

The concepts of *profession* and *professional status*, of *accreditation* or *certification* of professionals, and how these relate to conservation in Canada in the 1990s will be the focus of this paper. The author has brought into this discussion certain issues addressed in the context of other professional organizations in Canada. The reader is requested to consider how this compares with his/her own perception of conservators, the conservation profession, and the public served by conservators. In this paper, "the public" refers to the general public as well as other professionals within museums, archives, historic sites, and related disciplines.

What constitutes a profession?

A range of interpretations of what constitutes a "profession" has been put forward from different contexts, a few of which will be presented here.

In "Professions and Occupations" (1993), Lesser states that "a 'profession' in the present use of language involves the idea of an occupation requiring either purely intellectual skill, or manual skill controlled by the intellectual skill of the operator. The word 'profession' used to be confined to the three learned professions, the church, medicine and law. It has now a wider meaning."²

Professionals are "expected to be possessed of reasonably competent skill in the exercise of their particular calling." Also expected of them is "the exercise of reasonable care and prudence in the light of scientific knowledge at the time, of which they should be aware."³

Among the many definitions of "profession" is the following rather comprehensive one from Webster's *Third New International Dictionary Unabridged*:⁴

A Profession is "a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation including instruction in skills and methods as well as in scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods, maintaining — by force of organization or concerted opinion — high standards of achievement and conduct, and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work which has, for its prime purpose, the rendering of a public service."

According to Lesser,⁵ "The question of what constitutes a profession is not easily answered. It may be a matter of law or a matter of fact. . . . Some importance must be attached . . . to the fact that a [particular individual] is a member of an organised professional body with a recognized standard of ability enforced before he can enter it and a recognized standard of conduct enforced while he is practising it. Professionals are required not only to exercise reasonable care in what they do, but also to possess a minimum standard of special knowledge and ability."

Why have professions emerged?

The reasons for professions coming into being are many and varied.⁶ Apart from the needs within a group to associate and communicate with peers, from the public perspective the *raison d'être* is the "protection of vulnerable interests."⁷ *The Report of the Professional Organizations Committee* (RPOC) to the Ministry of the Attorney General, Ontario, April 1980 has provided a useful discussion of this subject.

"The provision of professional services involves three broad categories of interests, all of which are potentially vulnerable:

- i) *First party interests* are those of the *providers* of professional services [in our field, conservators and related professionals];
- ii) *Second party interests* are those of the *clients* for professional services [for example, historic sites, museums, archives, dealers, private and corporate collectors];
- iii) *Third party interests* are those of the *general public* who "have neither provided nor purchased professional services

but are liable to be affected by the result."⁸ [these "innocent bystanders" may include future collectors or collecting institutions, historians, researchers, students, curators, archaeologists, site and museum visitors, and artists or the creators of cultural property].

One cannot undertake research into "the professions" without encountering the subject of "regulation," be it control by statute (or law), or self-regulation by professional bodies.

In the eyes of the state, professions affecting the stake of *third* party interests justifies their regulation,⁹ for example, architecture, engineering, accounting, and law.

"The vulnerability of *second* party interests is more variable. The more a client is knowledgeable and experienced, the less he is in need of the protection that regulation affords. The sophisticated client can discriminate among the providers of professional services and can gauge their competence for performing the task at hand."¹⁰ (As conservators, we might ask ourselves to what extent the Canadian public has this degree of awareness or experience when it comes to assessing conservation needs, services, or end products.)

"The vulnerability of *second* and *third* party interests is often deemed to constitute the entire case for professional regulation."¹¹

It is essential to take account of the *first* party interests as well. It is in the interest of the providers of professional services to be distinguished from allied and supporting occupations where there is the potential for exploitation or to ill-defined lines of responsibility.¹²

Spence, in *Entry, Conduct and Regulation in Professional Markets* (1979) states that "Society has a long term interest in attracting high quality people to the professions, especially to the segments where quality is imperfectly perceived by consumers."¹³ "Quality is always a vulnerable commodity and becomes the ground where the desirability of protecting first, second and third party interests coincides."¹⁴

What is meant by "professional status"?

A group of practitioners may identify itself as a profession, but unless the public perception reflects that image, true "professional status" has not really been attained.

Over the past twenty to thirty years, throughout the world, groups of conservators have taken steps to establish conservation as a recognized profession. Professionalism has been encouraged through the establishment of national associations that promote the advancement and dissemination of knowledge, the exchange of information, and the maintenance of high standards of practice in conservation.

It is interesting to note that, as part of this process, many groups have attempted to initiate some form of regulation of conservators. For example, in the USA in the early 1970s, the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) established a certification program for Paper Conservators. More recently, AIC has implemented a Professional Associate membership category (while not specifically intended to regulate, now is viewed as a means of distinguishing professional from non-professional members). On a more broad level, there have been long-standing and ongoing discussions within AIC regarding certification.¹⁵ The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials (AICCM) has instituted what is referred to as accreditation for conservators through Associate Membership. The United Kingdom Institute for Conservation (UKIC) has developed a comprehensive Accreditation scheme brought forward in 1988 but not yet implemented.¹⁶ In Canada, the Canadian Association of Professional Conservators (CAPC) is actively certifying professional conservators and conservation scientists by means of a comprehensive peer review system.¹⁷

In the past few years, a new association has emerged, the European Confederation of Conservators-Restorers' Organizations (ECCO), whose purpose is to develop and promote the profession of conservator-restorer of cultural property. One of its objectives is to ". . . obtain recognition of the professional status of *Conservator-Restorer* at the national and European level."¹⁸

As recently as March 1993, AIC published its "Long Range Goals for the Conservation Profession"¹⁹ in which to "increase professionalism in the conservation field" ranked as number one.

It appears from all of this activity that conservators do not feel that they have achieved the status or recognition strived for. Perhaps part of the problem lies in our understanding of what professional status entails.

At the IIC-CG Conference in Banff in 1983, Dean Doris Badir from the University of Alberta spoke to us about "Professionalism and the Professional Continuum." She invited conservators to rank their association in the appropriate position on the continuum of professional status according to our having satisfied specific criteria.²⁰ At that time, as a professional body, conservators in Canada ranked quite low, not even having developed a code of ethics.

From an examination of writings on the subject,²¹ certain common criteria emerge as prerequisites for professional status, among them:

1. A primary orientation to public service or the interests of society.
2. A systematic and theoretical body of knowledge.
3. Systems of education, training, and ongoing development.
4. A representative professional body or bodies.
5. Self-definition and evaluation.
6. An ethical code.
7. Self-regulation by a professional body.
8. Perceived authority.
9. Community sanction.

A review of this list confirms the fact that conservation in Canada has now fulfilled many of these criteria. Attention will now be focused on the criterion of "self-regulation."

What does professional regulation involve?

It has been stated that the principle of the protection of vulnerable interests favours professional regulation, and "does much to uphold the validity of self-regulation by the professional bodies themselves."²²

Self-regulation applies to the situation in which a professional body sets entry requirements and maintains professional standards within the membership. For the purposes of discussion of self-regulation, the following distinctions should be made between "licensing," on the one hand, and "certification" or "accreditation," on the other. The latter terms, although having different meanings in some contexts, will be used interchangeably in this paper.

Licensing refers to the act of "creating [professional bodies] by legislative action, in which membership is compulsory in order to practise a profession or to use a particular title, and to which powers of public authority . . . have been granted, with a view to self-administration for the profession. Their main function is to regulate and to supervise the practise of professions, with a view to ensuring the protection of the public . . . Their autonomy is tempered by a large number of controls over their administration and management."²³

Certification is a "voluntary procedure by which a non-governmental organization attests to the professional qualifications of specific individuals To become certified, the person must demonstrate that he or she meets minimum standards of professional education and/or experience."²⁴ The professional body has the right to confer a designation called a "reserved title," which by law cannot be used by an unauthorized person.

Licensing or certification may be appropriate under different circumstances, depending upon several factors. For example, the justification given as to why the legal profession is licensed rather than certified is that "legal services are provided to a wide spectrum of the public including a substantial household sector that, in the absence of licensing, would be highly vulnerable to unqualified providers supplying unsatisfactory services." It is difficult and costly to determine "when legal services are required and, once they have been provided, whether they have been competently performed. In addition, third party interests are often at stake."²⁵

The Report of the Professional Organizations Committee recommended in 1980 that no claim for licensing should be granted without a thorough public review and unless it is proven to be in the public interest.²⁶ Licensing of professional bodies in Ontario has been increasingly rare since that time.

"The state could choose to regulate professional services directly through licensing, but it . . . is less costly to place the responsibility for regulation in the hands of the professions themselves. Most important, the vesting of this responsibility in the professions mirrors and reinforces the trust relationship that must exist between professionals and their clients."²⁷

Certification, as distinct from licensing, plays an important role in professional regulation. As mentioned, "reserved titles" can be conferred by certifying bodies to identify qualified or accredited individuals. "Although these titles do not restrict the right of any individual to practise an occupation, they do provide quality signals that enhance the protection of the public."²⁸

The 1980 report recommended that there be enacted a certification statute to be called *The Professional Designations Act* which would provide for the statutory registration of "reserved titles" through a Registrar.²⁹ (For example, "certified professional conservator" could be a reserved title to be used only by accredited practitioners.) This recommendation has not been acted upon in Ontario to date, but it is possible to secure authority to issue reserved titles through a private member's bill on the provincial level, following an established procedure.³⁰ CAPC, although involved in certification, does not confer reserved titles, and most likely would not consider doing so until a majority of conservators in Canada are represented by the association.

Where a regulatory body confers certification as distinct from licensing, its degree of autonomy is significantly greater.

How does accreditation or certification relate to professional status?

Barber, in "Some Problems in the Sociology of the Professions" (1965) states that "One of the essential attributes of the professional role . . . is autonomy, or self-control by the professionals themselves with regard to the development and application of the body of knowledge and skills in which they alone are expert."³¹ This involves peer review and judgment on technical and ethical matters, at the time of admission to a profession, with respect to maintaining competency levels, and during any complaints or disciplinary processes.

Another element of importance is the professional-client relationship. It is one that "above all must be based on mutual trust."³² "Professionals must be trusted to act for their clients rather than for themselves, and they must be trusted to be sensitive to the interests of affected third parties."³³ "Certification helps to ensure that public confidence in the professions that serve them will be equal to the confidence that the professions justly deserve."³⁴

During the 1993 IIC-CG Conference in Halifax, several speakers alluded to the harsh economic realities that had forced rapid changes in the structures and programmes of heritage institutions in Canada. In order not to lose ground after so many advances have been made in conservation, the conservator must not only adapt to these changes, but also influence their direction. Looking again to our American colleagues, we see listed among the long-range goals identified by AIC in 1993,³⁵ and I believe shared by many in the conservation field, the following:

- i) To ensure that conservators are involved in the philosophical and intellectual decisions regarding the preservation and conservation of cultural property.
- ii) To ensure that preservation is a fundamental function of the guardians of cultural property.
- iii) To educate others about the conservation field.

If conservators can be recognized as possessing special knowledge and skills not possessed by the lay public; if we can be seen to engage in a respected form of self-regulation that supports the principle of the protection of vulnerable interests; if we can be perceived as true professionals by the Canadian public, I feel that as conservators we will be able to make more significant advances toward achieving these and other of our goals.

What are some of the benefits of accreditation or certification?

Possible advantages and disadvantages of accreditation have been offered in the literature.³⁶ On the positive side, there are many benefits to be realized by the professional and the profession itself, as well as by the client, the public, and the cultural property. Among these are the following:

Accreditation acknowledges the authority of members of the profession to carry out certain specialized activities that cannot (or should not) be undertaken by the lay person or by specialists with inadequate or inappropriate training and experience.³⁷

As a visible and recognized act of self-regulation, certification grants individual conservators and the profession an enhanced credibility in the eyes of other professions and the public.

Accreditation helps to ensure client trust in conservators in the making of professional decisions.

It serves to reinforce and enforce the commitment of practitioners to the principles of the *Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice*.³⁸ Being accountable to the certifying association for ensuring the maintenance of standards of practice exemplifies the taking of professional responsibility.

Certification provides a system within which a formal complaint filed against a professional member can be addressed within the profession, by those having expertise appropriate to both technical and ethical matters, in lieu of costly legal action.

It provides the owner or custodian of cultural property with a means of distinguishing between practitioners who have demonstrated their qualifications and accountability to a professional body and those who have not. It can generate a directory of accredited individuals for referral purposes.

Accreditation could have positive implications for conservators in the workforce. With respect to employment within the federal public service, the current classification system incorporates conservators and conservation scientists in the General Technical (GT) category. It has been inferred that conservators have not been eligible for inclusion in the Scientific and Professional category due to inconsistent academic qualifications and the absence of a recognized affiliation with a professional body.³⁹ The move from a technical to a professional category would no doubt alter the public perception of the role and responsibilities of the conservator.

Certification can help facilitate the acceptance of shared responsibility for the preservation of cultural property. In light of our current trend of diminishing resources, the credibility and status of the conservator may determine to what extent we will be included in decision-making and the setting of priorities in our heritage and cultural institutions as well as by governmental agencies.

Overall, accreditation provides the conservation profession with a more firm foundation on which to stand when promoting a greater awareness of what a conservator is and does.

Ultimately, certification can help to protect cultural property from the hands of the untrained, the inexperienced, or the incompetent.

What problems can be associated with accreditation or certification?

In addition to the perceived benefits of accreditation, some of the real and potential problems can be mentioned:

As opposed to a licensing situation, in which the individual cannot practise without a license, certification is based on voluntary application for membership. Undoubtedly, but regrettably, this means that not all qualified persons may become certified, for a variety of reasons.

Accreditation cannot prevent unqualified individuals from practising as conservators or restorers. It can only identify those who have demonstrated an acceptable level of knowledge, competence, and commitment as determined by peer review. (However, as more conservators become accredited, and as the public is further educated, fewer incompetent or unethical persons should have access to our cultural heritage.)

The success of accreditation is dependent upon the individual's endorsement of the Code of Ethics and the honour of the certified individual to maintain competency levels. (But, in cases of perceived violation of principles of the code, there will be a mechanism to enable an impartial review by the professionals themselves, and to discipline as appropriate when formal complaints are lodged).

A majority of qualified conservators must be certified by the professional body in order to legitimize the jurisdiction and voice of the association, and to provide useful referral lists for clients.

Accreditation can be a time-intensive, costly process to be administered by the professional body. It relies upon the commitment and good will of the professionals involved, as well as on its demonstrated importance to the welfare of the public and of the cultural property.

Certification relies upon a "systematic body of knowledge" that may still be somewhat ill-defined, that is constantly evolving, and must be incorporated into the professional assessment process.

As in any self-regulatory situation, care must be taken to ensure against over-regulation of the profession. The association must remain current, relevant, and responsive to its membership and to the public.

Conclusion

In conclusion, professions can establish themselves in many forms, and the extent of public or legal recognition varies widely. It is those groups engaged in self-regulation, for example through accreditation, that cross the boundary into the realm of "professional" in the eyes of the public.

Conservators and the quality of service we provide must be able to command the confidence and respect of the public. To accomplish this, conservators must establish and maintain a reputation for both integrity and high standards of practice.⁴⁰ In Canada, an individual conservator is expected to uphold the principles of our *Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice*. However, if the conservator is also accountable to a self-regulatory professional body, and subject to review and possible disciplinary action in the event of demonstrated incompetence or unethical conduct, a higher standard of conservation care will be protected, and the public perception of the "profession" will be significantly enhanced.

* This paper is the edited version of Part I of a presentation made by the author at the IIC-CG Conference in Halifax, 30 May 1993. Part II outlined the aims of the Canadian Association of Professional Conservators (CAPC), described CAPC structure, criteria for admission, and the current process of accreditation.

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