THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

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Guidelines for creating a personal statement of ethical practice

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1. Introduction

The Icon *Code of Conduct* outlines the goals of conservation actions:

> You should strive to conserve cultural heritage so that it can continue to be used for education and enjoyment, as reliable evidence of the past and as a resource for future study.

The *Code* specifically avoids dictating how those goals should be achieved:

> A conservator should be free to use his or her judgment to make a considered selection of appropriate, achievable measures that are in proportion to the significance and condition of an object or groups of objects and be free to develop new approaches.

This freedom to devise measures that you think appropriate, based on your professional practice, can also be applied to your personal interpretation of ethical principles, deriving from your knowledge and experience of conservation.

Icon has compiled a list of general principles that seek to define ethical behaviour in a conservation context. These principles suggest ideals that conservation actions should aim for, but which may not be achievable in all situations. Some of these principles are capable of a range of interpretations. A range of different actions may be allowed under one general statement of principle. You may think that some of these interpretations closely fit your ways of thinking and working. You may think that some of the possible options for action are things that you could never consider doing, even though the general principle seems to allow them. It might be helpful to you, your trainees, your colleagues or your clients to make a clear statement of your individual interpretations of the principles. This should limit the likelihood of dispute and make resolution easier if a dispute should arise.

1.1 Who should use these guidelines?

These guidelines are for anyone who feels the need for a description of ethical behaviour that is relevant to their specialist needs and is more focused and explicit than documents such as the Icon *Code of Conduct* or Icon *Professional Standards*.

The Icon *Code of Conduct* is the parent document from which the need for a list of ethical principles arises. It explains the professional requirements and obligations for all Icon members, including those who volunteer or are in training. Membership of Icon is only granted to individuals, so the basic unit of local responsibility for defining ethical behaviour is the individual conservator. It may be that several individuals are in agreement, so that a particular interpretation of a general principle could be promoted by a committee or a specialist group. In some cases, an individual, e.g. the manager of a firm or head of a department, may seek to influence other individuals to abide by the constraints of a particular interpretation. Someone with responsibility for non-members, e.g. someone in charge of volunteers or students, may feel the need for a document that explains the local conservation ethos.

1.2 The purpose of the guidelines

This guidance will help you to produce a written document expressing the ethical views that you currently hold and which you believe are likely to remain relevant to your work for an appreciable length of time. This manual provides general headings that indicate the range of possible interpretations of general principles. It indicates, but does not dictate, the structure and contents of such a document. In the long term, the use of a consistent format would allow comparison with documents produced by other conservators. If such documents were made accessible, they would form a useful teaching resource and evidence of the diversity of the profession.

The document that you write need not be long and should not be too time-consuming to prepare. However, it must be clear and in a form that can be consulted by yourself and others. There is no point in a document that merely repeats generalized principles. The minimum preparation necessary is to read Icon's *Ethical Guidance* and to have thought about your current practice. If you are not familiar with concepts of authenticity or heritage values you may have to do some reading. And If you work in an area of heritage conservation that is not entirely covered by Icon's remit, you may have to do a bit more preparatory work.

The simplest statement to write, although the most laborious to implement, would be, "Every case is different and must be judged on its own merits."

Another would be, “As long as it’s legal I do what the client asks”.

However, it is more likely that you work in a fairly consistent manner within your own well understood but unwritten boundaries. It is also likely that, working within your personal idea of ethical behaviour, you might try to persuade a client to abandon a particular approach or might refuse to undertake the work. In either case a prepared document with a considered description of your attitudes would be helpful. If you are asked to participate with other specialists and stakeholders in a discussion about a proposed intervention, it may be helpful to have written down what your personal ideals are and the limits to what you feel able to agree to.

You probably won’t need to respond to every section of the guidance, it will depend on the area and extent of your specialism. Even if you feel you don’t need to respond to every section, it may be useful to consider why you feel a particular principle is not relevant to your practice – you might change your mind.

1.3 The structure of this guidance

This document is written for individuals or groups of individuals who need to respond to requests for practical interventions and for advice on preventive care. It is not intended for those devising high-level strategies, although it might be useful to them.

It is a basic conservation principle that the option of doing nothing should be considered before options for taking action are discussed in depth. The personal statement of ethical practice will come into play during discussions with stakeholders about the options for action, after an assessment of conservation needs has already been made. Its work begins after the option of doing nothing at all has been considered and rejected.

Once the decision to do something has been made, the options can roughly be divided into two approaches:

- Intervention, doing something directly to the object.

- Prevention, doing something to the way the object is housed and used and the ways that the local environment can be altered for the object's benefit.

The two approaches complement one another and where the balance between them lies will depend on the circumstances. Without implying any relative importance to either approach the ethical problems posed by intervention are dealt with first. Preventive advice is necessary to minimise the need for re-treatment. The need for treatment is often the first indication of the need to introduce or alter preventive procedures.

Sections 3.1 to 3.10 are predominantly to do with intervention, but they may also be relevant to preventive actions that relate to individual objects. Where appropriate, the word 'object' can be extended to cover entities such as groups of objects brought together for a particular purpose or to ephemeral items such as performance.

2. What does a local code look like?

The written document would probably contain the following sections.

2.1 Preliminaries

2.1.1 Ownership: Who is putting their name to the document?

2.1.2 Intended readership: Who are the people the author(s) represent or intend to influence.

2.2 Context

There should be an indication of the context in which decisions are made.

2.2.1 The area of activity, e.g. metals, books, industrial objects, contemporary art.

2.2.2 The organisational environment: Choices for possible action may depend on whether the statement is written for use by an accredited conservator working alone or for use in an organisation dependent on volunteers with varying degrees of skill and experience.

2.2.3 Personal vision: Some boundaries to your approach could be signalled by a general statement of intent. You could use the sentence from the *Code of Conduct*, “To conserve cultural heritage so that it can continue to be used for education and enjoyment, as reliable evidence of the past and as a resource for future study”. You may know of, or create, some other wording more appropriate to your needs, that reflects your own values.

2.3 Sources of authority

It may be useful to cite the major influences on your views.

There may be documents or publications that you rely on for your guidance that do not come directly from Icon. Other national or international codes may provide nuances that match your own views more closely. Some specialist areas rely on key texts by noted practitioners to guide their ethical behaviour.

3. Ranges of interpretation

The aim of this section is to elicit your usual approach to objects, recognizing that this may vary somewhat with the needs of the object and the client, but assumes that you do not radically alter your beliefs or your approach with every new project. (Even if you do assess each object as requiring a different approach every time, you will need to run through some of the considerations listed below on every occasion.)

3.1 Conservation/restoration

Although Icon allows all types of approaches you may wish to state that you carry out remedial work only, that is making an object stable without altering its appearance, leaving small surface damage untreated. You may intervene to the extent that the object is allowed to function as intended e.g. making a clock keep time, making a book capable of being read. Or you may be proud to restore an object to a state closely related to its original, undamaged appearance.

You should make clear the range of actions you are willing to undertake along the spectrum from no intervention to full restoration. Your definition of minimal necessary intervention (least interventive means) will depend on your stated aim.

3.2 Hierarchies of authenticity.

There are many types of authenticity. One view is that there are three main contributions to authenticity: material, historical and conceptual. Ethical behaviour used to be defined mostly in terms of material authenticity, but contemporary art, objects from different cultures and the increasing appreciation of intangible heritage mean that there are occasions when materiality can be less important.

In your specialist area you may be more concerned with preserving a concept and less concerned with preserving physical material. There may be reasons such as rapid deterioration, or the unavailability of electronic components, that prevent the preservation

of material if the conceptual purpose is to be maintained. You should make your own hierarchy of authenticities clear.

3.3 Preservation of skills

Maintenance of conceptual authenticity and historic appearance is often dependent on ensuring the continued availability of specialist skills.

You should make clear which skills are needed and how you intend to procure them and ensure their future availability.

3.4 Hierarchy of values

A related area is the relative importance of different values or contributions to significance. There are lists of terms in the literature such as historic, aesthetic, scientific, research, social, spiritual, educational, that describe aspects of an object that may be enhanced or diminished by treatment (or by neglect). You may frequently have to decide which is most important and justify why others are not. Some conservators will always put spiritual considerations above any other contributions to value, but that may not reflect the beliefs of the owner or curator which also need consideration.

You should make clear if your preferred options for treatment favour one type of value over another.

3.5 Respect for original material

Even if your dominant aim is to conserve the original material properties of the object, there may be occasions when some part of the original has to be sacrificed e.g. samples for analysis, holes drilled for dowels, replacement of structural members weakened by severe insect damage.

You should be clear about the circumstances in which you will remove material and how much may need to be removed.

When original material or significant later additions are removed, some codes require that the material that has been removed should be preserved and its new location documented.

You should explain what your policy is for archiving removed material, bearing in mind that a client or curator may not be interested in it.

3.6 Reversibility and re-treatment

Treatments such as consolidation may not succeed as planned. Replacement of worn or missing parts may, at a later date, be considered unsightly or unethical. In theory no treatment should be undertaken that prevents any further treatments. This would include avoiding treatments that make the object more susceptible to environmental fluctuations in future displays. Reversibility is a special case of re-treatability, since in theory the object is returned to the state it was in before the first treatment. However, reversibility is not always possible (fragile object) or desirable (removal of dirt).

You should make clear your justifications if you select a treatment that would be difficult to reverse or might prevent any future treatments.

3.7 Removal of surface accretions

Removal of some types of dust may be necessary to prevent degradation of the underlying surface, but total removal of dirt or corrosion products is not always desirable. ‘Over-cleaning’ might be considered unethical. Yet leaving a surface untouched might also be seen as unethical. It shows a lack of respect for the creator of the piece or for the audience that is deprived of the full aesthetic or educational experience. During cleaning there are a number of stages at which the process might be stopped between these two extremes. Your choice may be dictated by the context in which the object is displayed or by an aesthetic preference. You should make clear your general approach to complete or partial cleaning.

3.8 Replacement of losses

There are many possible approaches to the replacement of losses. To some extent these are matters of personal taste and technical skill not ethics. Ethical arguments arise when the replacement prevents appreciation of the piece, when the restoration is speculative rather than based on evidence, or when the repair is not detectable. The material used for replacement could be the same as the original or deliberately different. This choice may be

personal or may be imposed by current legal restrictions on the use of some historic materials, e.g. ivory.

Some approaches deliberately make repairs and replacement parts very obvious. Some approaches, such as tratteggio and the use of neutral tones for filling gaps, avoid arguments about speculation and fakery. The evidence that guides a restoration toward recreating original appearance could be: physical evidence from the object itself, evidence from photographs of the complete object, physical evidence from similar objects, photographs of similar objects, or personal knowledge of the maker's style and technique.

You should make clear the degree to which you will replace missing parts and the techniques you would use. You should describe the evidence you might use to guide a restoration.

3.9 Detectability of restorations

There are many different approaches to detectability. At one extreme is making all alterations very obvious, at the other end is making it impossible to see that there have been repairs. In between there are options such as making repairs or replacements visible on the back or inner surfaces of an object. There are ways of ensuring that new coatings or varnishes will be visible under ultraviolet radiation. Some people have rules about the viewing distance at which repairs are invisible and the distance at which they can be detected by the unaided eye. Some people think that thorough documentation is sufficient to ensure that nobody is misled.

You should make clear what methods or rules you will use the ensure that the alterations you make can be detected in the future.

3.10 Unsustainable solutions

Some natural materials come from unsustainable sources which may not yet be protected by law. Some synthetic materials and some solvents are not quickly or safely broken down in the environment. The use of these materials might be considered unethical even though they are not yet subject to regulation. There are everyday practices that could be modified

by adopting systems of reuse, re-purposing and recycling, but failure to adopt them is not yet considered unethical.

You should make clear if there are any treatment options that you would not carry out because they are not in tune with your views on sustainability.

3.11 Prevention or intervention

You may automatically propose a preventive approach because you consider any interventive option unethical. If this is the case, you should make your objections clear.

You do not have the option of withholding preventive advice if you have undertaken interventive work.

3.12 Collection environments and sustainability

Some preventive conservation decisions have an impact on local use of resources and on the world beyond your direct and immediate influence. Issues of economy and sustainability arise. Some approaches might be seen as unethical if they incur costs and environmental impacts greater than those of equally effective alternatives.

The complexity of the decision context is made clear by the wording in the document PAS 198:2010 p. 15 (later adopted within EN 16893 p.12) about creating a locally relevant environmental strategy.

> The strategy shall include a statement of the expected collection lifetime and the energy demand arising from the environmental conditions needed to achieve this, taking into account the sensitivity, significance and use of individual collection items. The strategy should make clear the balance the organization intends to aim for between preservation requirements, usage and display, and energy economy.

When considering any preventive measure, especially one involving mechanized climate control, you should place it within your own views on the object's or collection's significance, sensitivity, longevity and future use. Most importantly you should be aware of national and local policies on sustainable energy use.

You should explain how you would justify proposals in the light of these factors and to what extent these are modified by limits on the available finance.

3.13 Control of lighting

One of the ethical dilemmas of preventive conservation is choosing a balance between the rights of current users of the collection and the rights of potential users in the future. Lighting is an obvious example. Failure to minimize the changes caused to heritage objects by light might be thought unethical. On sustainability grounds, failure to minimize energy use might be considered unethical. Light damage can be regulated by using control parameters such as total annual light dose and acceptable rate of fading. The numerical values for these factors are arbitrary and negotiable and depend somewhat on the effect you want to achieve. There is uncertainty about the definition of damage.

You should explain which system you use and justify the lighting regime you follow.

4. The future of this manual

This is a first attempt to help conservators develop their own specific locally relevant statements of ethical practice. Once a few people have tried to use this guidance it will be possible to make changes to improve it. It has been suggested that the discussions on preventive conservation could be extended. Eventually it should be possible to separate the commentary and the decision-process. In theory, section 3 (ranges of interpretation) could become an on-screen series of multiple-choice questions. Compiling the written document would then become a quick push-button task. But then there is the danger that this might eliminate the very necessary stage of thinking deeply about what you believe is allowable and what is not.

If you would like to comment on your attempts to use this guidance, or to suggest changes or additions to this document, please send an email to feedback@icon.org.uk with the subject line 'Ethics DIY comments'.

5. Acknowledgements

The idea for this type of guidance was proposed in the article *A Role for Bespoke Codes of Ethics* by Jonathan Ashley-Smith (*ICOM-CC I8th Triennial Conference*, 2017, Copenhagen).

Jonathan wrote the first draft of this guidance in 2019 and submitted it to the Icon Ethics Task and Finish Group. It has been through several redrafts following suggestions made by Edward Cheese ACR, Lorraine Finch ACR, Matt Hancock ACR, Katy Lithgow ACR, Deborah Walton ACR and Adam Webster ACR.

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