



THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

## Position Statement on value of care of collections professions

August 2020

The last few months have been tough for cultural heritage professionals and for the institutions where they work. Lockdown posed many technical and financial challenges and the process of reopening will not be any easier. There are still difficult times ahead and recovery will not be simple. Loss of income on the scale that many museums and galleries have experienced cannot be replaced quickly, so uncomfortable operational decisions will have to be made. We have already seen the [impact of financial restructuring](#) in the announcements from various organisations, from regional museums through to major bodies such as the National Trust.

### **Out of sight**

As governing boards work through the process of planning the necessary steps towards a resilient and sustainable future for their organisations we want to acknowledge the hard work that has been carried out by dedicated conservators working behind the gallery doors closed by lockdown to ensure that objects and collections have remained safe and secure while the visitors were absent.

- We heard from conservators at the [Mary Rose Trust](#) and [University of Cambridge Museums](#) who had to adapt to new ways of carrying out essential monitoring and regular inspection of collections, even with limited access to sites.
- We also learned about many minor disasters that were averted by the presence of a conservator on site e.g. leaking gutters and burst pipes that were spotted quickly and remedied before precious artefacts were seriously damaged.

- We cheered for the quietly determined battles to keep pests at bay that have been waged on a daily basis across the country. Limited staff capacity and empty galleries have created a '[playground](#)' for vermin; even the [British Museum](#) is fighting invasive insects that can damage priceless objects. But the profession responded swiftly and strategically e.g. South West Museums secured funding for a new [pest management project](#) to help support those caring for collections.

**These examples show that objects and collections simply don't look after themselves.**

Without the vigilant efforts of conservators, our precious cultural heritage is at risk from a variety of threats - in fact no fewer than [10 primary agents of deterioration](#) - including water, humidity, pests, light and pollution.

Time and effort spent on routine care and housekeeping, and on dealing with issues as they arise is inevitably cheaper and more cost effective than neglecting such duties, and having to put right much more extensive and expensive damage later. The saying "a stitch in time saves nine" has never felt quite as relevant as it does today.

**...but not out of mind**

Over the last few months we have seen the enormous appetite for culture, heritage and museums evidenced in an [explosion](#) of [online opportunities](#) and [digital engagement](#). But there is also a fundamental desire for the authentic experience of gazing at original artworks, admiring objects, and visiting historic places. It is clear that people want to engage with culture and heritage in a physical sense as well as in the virtual world.

[Studies](#) have shown that being permitted to touch historical objects, for example through museum handling sessions, fosters a sense of privilege and responsibility. This has been linked to building positive feelings of personal value and self-worth. This desire to experience physical things is one reason why conservation is a fundamental tenet of good custodianship.

So, while we understand that there will be a need to tighten belts at least in the short to medium term, we make a strong plea for maintaining and supporting conservation services

and conservation activity within our cultural institutions, whether this work is carried out by in-house teams or commissioned from freelance practitioners.

### **Three pillars**

So why is conservation so important? Conservation helps us understand ourselves and the world around us, which in turn helps us make better decisions about our future as we learn valuable lessons from our past. Conservators protect and care for the things that matter most - everything from national treasures to family heirlooms and personal collectables; not to mention household items like books, furniture and childhood toys. The benefits of the work of conservators to society is far-reaching:

- Conservation builds resilience and is cost effective: prioritising early interventions prevents problems that would be much more expensive to deal with later on.
- Conservation helps the economy: contributing to business, industry, growth and employment.
- Conservation can help us live healthier and happier lives through creating opportunities to experience cultural heritage in meaningful ways.
- Conservation extends the lives of objects and encourages us to care for our possessions, favoring sustainability over throwaway culture.
- Conservation enables a broader range of objects to be put on display and made accessible to the public, offering the potential to increase visits to heritage sites and museums.
- Conservation supports diversity and inclusion: objects that are fully representative of the UK's heritage can be conserved, displayed and interpreted.

Conservation is distinct from other crafts and heritage professions, with its own Professional Standards, Ethical Guidance, and Code of Conduct. Conservators are highly trained and use their knowledge, skills and experience to understand objects before suggesting ways to protect and preserve them and - most importantly - share them with others.

Conservation is therefore a core element of the work of cultural and heritage institutions and is one of three pillars that support the care of collections, alongside our fellow professionals in the curatorial and collections management disciplines. Each pillar offers distinct skills and brings a wealth of professional knowledge, expertise and judgement to the challenges faced by institutions as they develop and implement new strategies for the future.

The combined expertise of our three professions is essential to ensure that collections are safeguarded (and in some cases temporarily ‘mothballed’) during the period of recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic. But we must look to the future too, and offer up our professional skills to help identify, develop and implement new means of access and engagement that will help to build a stronger and brighter future for cultural heritage.



### **An investment in the future**

Icon believes that conservation and collections care skills are more important now than ever and will be fundamental to ensuring that museums, galleries and historic sites can delight and engage the public to their fullest potential as we emerge from lockdown. The successful reopening of cultural institutions will rely on skilled conservation teams who are able to carefully assess the likelihood of risks, propose solutions, undertake appropriate treatment to repair damage and ensure that objects are safely displayed.

But there is also a responsibility to the future to retain an appropriate number of skilled conservators within our institutions. These specialists are needed to train the next generation of conservators and to ensure the continuity of specialist knowledge and expertise. Major institutions play a key leadership role too; they support high professional standards, champion good practice, and set the direction of travel that others follow. Even at this challenging time these organisations must continue to demonstrate their ongoing commitment to conservation and collections care.

We should also be mindful that much of the nation's cultural heritage is held in trust by smaller organisations including regional museums and galleries. These much-loved and valuable institutions share the national responsibility to safeguard our cultural heritage even though many are unable to maintain an in-house conservation service. It is essential that those charged with stewardship of these collections ensure that conservation and collections care is adequately resourced.

The skills and expertise of the self-employed and freelance conservators play a vital role providing institutions with not only conservation services but also supporting public engagement and other specialist services. Without regular commissions, private practices may be forced to stop trading, with the risk of further loss of important conservation skills from the sector. Unless the ecosystem of small conservation businesses is supported, clients will find it increasingly difficult to source suitable professionals to undertake conservation projects.

### **Time for transformation**

We know that the cultural heritage sector will have to transform itself in order to address the challenges brought by the Coronavirus pandemic, but we believe that conservators are well placed to support and enable this change.

Conservators have the skills to advise on the full breadth of conservation work. On a practical level this ranges from managing the routine daily care of collections to prevent damage; to small scale repairs and stabilisation; through to more complex restoration projects. Importantly, conservators can also play a key role in the creation of the high level strategies that set priorities for long term collections care, ongoing display and public

engagement. At a time when budgets are under threat, it is vital that decisions are made holistically - and conservation should have a voice in these discussions.

We also note that as part of the coming Spending Review the Government is [inviting solutions](#) to address the challenging social and economic issues facing our society.

Conservators have a role to play here too. The UK's expertise in conservation and heritage science is routinely sought internationally and plays a valuable role both in terms of soft power, supporting the Government's ambition to strengthen the UK's place in the world. As leading bodies of heritage science and research, major institutions help drive innovation, contributing to the Government's vision of the UK as a scientific superpower. Investing in conservation supports plans to level up economic opportunity across all nations and regions too, as many conservation businesses are based in rural areas supporting their regional museums and local visitor attractions.

**Investing in conservation demonstrates that we care about our cultural heritage and embrace our duty to be responsible custodians. But it offers much more than simply safeguarding the past. Conservation is forward-looking and creative. Investing in conservation will support people and the places they care about as we face a challenging and uncertain post-Covid future.**

Icon 2020

Radisson Court, Unit 2, Long Lane, London, SE1 4PR  
020 3142 6799 219  
[www.icon.org.uk](http://www.icon.org.uk)

The Institute of Conservation is a company limited by guarantee registered in England No. 5201058. VAT No. 885387955 The Institute is a charity registered in England & Wales (No. 1108380) and Scotland (SC039336).