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Professional Identities in Library and Archives Conservation

PANELISTS

Ellen Cunningham-Kruppa, Associate Director for Preservation and Conservation, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin

Justin P. Johnson, Senior Conservator, Books and Paper, University of Washington Libraries

Christine McCarthy, Director of Preservation and Conservation Services, Yale University Library

Karissa Muratore, Conservation Resident, Northwestern University Libraries

INTRODUCTION

In a one-hour session, four panelists presented their personal reflections and experiences that developed their professional identity in the field of library and archives conservation. A series of short self-introductions were followed by a panel discussion and Q&A session with the audience.

Over the course of roughly 50 years, the specialization of library and archives conservation has matured while withstanding a significant series of shifts that have shaped the role of the modern-day conservator.

The evolution of training and educational models—from apprenticeship, to librarianship, to art conservation programs—has imbued the field with an amalgam of perspectives, if also resulting in ambiguity. As such, the needs of the library have called for a reprioritization of the skills offered by conservators that reaches beyond the traditional model of a technically focused practitioner.

Simultaneously, the term “conservator” itself conjures debate about professional identity, institutional hierarchy,

and personal point of view. “Conservator” was initially used by the organizers as a blanket term to frame this discussion, knowing that it may not clearly define or be fully applicable to the role of each participant in this panel. We came to understand that “conservator” did not reflect the identity of some of our panelists and that this rejection of the term and identity was a distinction at the core of this discussion. We instead chose to use “conservation professional” as a catch-all term to refer more broadly to a range of roles that serve the profession. While we each have a very specific understanding of and relationship to descriptors such as conservator, technician, librarian, administrator, etc., we have yet to come to terms with these labels in a consistent way, and many find themselves straddled between these various roles. As the field of library and archives conservation continues to evolve, so too does this language used to describe our place within it.

Today’s conservators have many other “hats” to wear—scientist, photographer, advocate, scholar, etc.—that reach even further beyond more traditional roles. How do library and archives conservation professionals today define their own professional identities and values? What forces drive their impact on the collections they serve?

DISCUSSION

With over 35 years in the field, Ellen Cunningham-Kruppa described her roles as an archivist, an administrator of a large ARL preservation program, a preservation and conservation graduate education program director, a teacher, a doctoral student, and currently an Associate Director of the Harry Ransom Center (HRC). In this current role, Ellen wears two hats. First, as an Associate Director, where she is a member of a leadership team involved in every aspect of operations and strategic planning. She thinks about every operation at the HRC and needs to understand how each impacts the others. The second part of her job is as the administrator of Preservation and Conservation Division operations, which includes oversight for six conservators and four conservation technicians. Ellen described her past experience as a preservation officer of general collections and reflected on how her early experience prepared her to take on new challenges,

This open discussion took place on May 17, during the AIC 50th Annual Meeting, May 13–18, in Los Angeles, California. The moderators organized and led the discussion and recorded notes. Readers are reminded that the moderators do not necessarily endorse all the comments recorded, and that although every effort was made to record proceedings accurately, further evaluation or research is advised before putting treatment observations into practice.

such as overseeing the assessment and treatment of rare and unique collections for large-scale exhibits. The collections at the HRC are broad, consisting of books and archival materials as well as paintings, objects, photographs, motion picture film, and fine art on paper. Most recently Ellen has led planning for the move of collections for an upcoming building renovation project and has been working on the pre-planning and preparations needed to make this project successful. This is a very new experience for her in which she is learning about this process. Her role has also expanded to serve the collection treatment needs of primary cultural institutions at the University.

Justin Johnson introduced himself as representing the overseas trained cohort of conservators. He attended West Dean College in the United Kingdom and earned an MA degree through the University of Sussex before returning to the US to begin his career. Justin has worked for private and public institutions, a for-profit regional center, as well as private clients. He identifies as a West Coast conservator, having lived and worked in this region exclusively for his entire life.

Christine McCarthy has been the Director of Preservation & Conservation Services for the Yale University Library for the past five years. Nine years prior to that she served as the library's Chief Conservator, overseeing both conservation and exhibits, additionally taking general collections conservation under her leadership during this term. The Yale Library has a full gamut of collection material. Preservation & Conservation has 25 staff members overall, with activities including conservation, commercial binding, exhibitions, loans, teaching, and facilitating material culture research. Newer functions include digital preservation, such as software emulation. Yale also has a fairly robust digital reformatting program founded in the brittle books programs of the 1980s and 1990s, which now includes scanning digitization as well as audiovisual materials. Christine received her MLIS at the University of Texas at Austin and a Certificate of Advanced Study in Conservation. She followed a solid library and archives trajectory from the beginning, with her first library job at Brandeis University in 1992, and has since only worked in academic research libraries, with 30 years overall and 22 of those in postgraduate positions. Christine transitioned early in her career from freelance illustration and graphic design, with a background focused on visual interpretation, to working as a bench conservator, and then on to managerial, administrative roles, which is her primary focus at Yale.

Karissa Muratore is completing a two-year term as the Conservation Resident for Northwestern University Libraries. In 2020 she graduated from the Winterthur University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) and considers herself an emerging conservator, standing on the shoulders of those who came before her. She came to conservation later in her studies and took a while to find her entry point. Karissa was actively dissuaded from

entering the field. After exploring alternatives she decided she couldn't see herself doing anything else, so she went all in. She got a second undergraduate degree in art conservation before moving onto WUDPAC. She considers the timing fortunate as she was one of the first classes of students to receive training through the Mellon-funded Library and Archives Conservation Education (LACE) program. LACE offered a wonderful model for working together with other colleagues, creating an invaluable support network early on.

Jen Hunt Johnson presented questions for the panel:

How would you describe, or what has shaped your professional identity? How has your training program influenced this identity or not?

The educational programs of each panelist include:

Ellen – Columbia University School of Library Service Conservation Education Programs

Justin – West Dean College of Arts and Conservation

Christine – The University of Texas at Austin Preservation and Conservation Education Program

Karissa – Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) under the LACE (Library and Archives Conservation Education) consortium, funded by the Mellon Foundation.

The panelists each came to their programs from unique perspectives. Karissa began her studies thinking she would learn how to acquire all of the bench skills needed to do treatment. Instead she discovered that her program taught her how to *learn*. She learned much more than benchwork. She described this as a discovery process. Realizing that she hadn't been trained for benchwork alone, she was not initially sure where she fit into the career. *"What I thought I was supposed to do [bench conservation treatment] is [now] becoming a technician job ... being a conservator is more of an all-inclusive position in the lab ... it's great, it just took me a while to realize it was happening."*

Christine's training capitalized on her intentional trajectory to work in libraries. She deliberately chose an MLIS (Masters in Library and Information Science) educational path. *"The context of the library is what I was in love with. I chose that path specifically, and wanted to get the library degree to get a professional position, which is hard to get without it. I still draw on the five years I spent as a technician, honing and practicing skills, knowing a conservation program would be far more than benchwork."*

In terms of identity, Justin considers himself a bench conservator. The program at West Dean had a narrow focus of developing hand skills at the bench with not a lot of peripheral skills like administration. *"We studied the book as an artifact, and other values were not discussed in great detail. I developed a very narrow decision-making process. I am most comfortable as a bench conservator and have resisted anything to pull me away from that, though it seems like an unavoidable transition."*

For Ellen, a commitment to providing access to information was her draw to libraries early on. Education became a strong focus throughout her career from her own beginnings in preservation administration at Columbia University, through directing the UT Austin School of Information educational certificate in library and archives conservation and preservation administration, through working with Chela Metzger and the art conservation education programs to help get their Library and Archives programs up and running, and most recently her research and writing about the early professionalization of the field and Paul Banks' role in founding the Columbia program (Cunningham-Kruppa 2019). She has *"thought a lot about what was the trajectory of our field into higher education, and the implications of moving into higher ed., and what is disciplinary? Are we a LIS specialization or are we an art conservation specialization? I think we are in the right place now."*

Question 2: Did your pre-professional expectations of the field change post-training?

Expectations either changed or were clarified for all panelists following their educational programs. Karissa felt her expectations were definitely changed as she had different ideas of what her program would prepare her for after graduation. As noted earlier, she went into school intending to be a book conservator but now feels less comfortable with that label and more comfortable with the title "library and archives conservator." *"I think the distinction lies in the fact that I feel like I know a little about many things (e.g., materials, treatments, collection-care, preventive conservation, photography, research, data-management, writing, presenting, outreach, fundraising, etc.) ... versus being a specialist in any one area."* Karissa sees this as having given her the preparation to contribute to the development of the field as it continues to grow.

Early in Christine's training she wondered if she had made the right choice. She felt overwhelmed by the range of roles she felt she needed to know to be successful in a library environment. Her third-year internship with Jan Paris helped her to focus on where she fit by seeing how Jan made things work in the reality of a small lab. The shift from theoretical knowledge to working within the realities on the ground was what changed most for Christine.

Having grown up isolated from a conservation presence, Justin had no expectations when beginning his education at West Dean. He thought about becoming a librarian but decided that wasn't for him. He went into conservation without having ever met a conservator. Justin began with a lot of self-study in repairing books pre-program, and West Dean agreed to take him with this limited experience. During his time at West Dean he participated in a number of site visits to conservation labs, but none were representative of the environment he ended up in. *"[I] still don't know what to expect. It is always changing."*

Ellen went into a program with altruistic ideas but after graduation landed her first job *"as head of the fifth largest (ARL)*

research library in the US, starting a new preservation program, 27 years old, 13 people reporting to me, all of whom are older than me, and trying to pretend like I knew what the hell I was doing." She describes how different her job was from learning about preservation management in class. Ellen also noted her preference to use the term *"educational program"* to describe formal study in conservation, *"not training program, we are all knowledge workers."*

Question 3: How do you feel your personal identity intersects with being a conservation professional? For example, one might take an unpaid position for the experience and feel taken for granted, or one might feel fulfilled or informed by doing community work, volunteer service or other personal pursuits. The panel was evenly split in their responses to this question. Karissa and Christine spoke of experiencing their work as all consuming, with sacrifices being made in the form of excessive student loans, relocation away from families, feeling the need to postpone personal goals like home ownership, or pursuit of personal interests to prioritize work. Each was clear to state that the career has been a good fit for them personally, and neither expressed regrets, but acknowledged that finding balance between personal and professional identity is an ongoing process.

As Christine progressed in her career she learned that conservation is a marathon, not a sprint. *"You have to take it down a notch and figure out how to continue to be effective, without allowing every loss, every setback to take its toll, and to not feel like you have to make the difference up when, say, an institution can't afford to do something or is not willing to do something. This has been the hardest piece for me in separating myself and work."*

On a positive note, Karissa spoke about the support she received from numerous mentors in the field, in particular the relationship she had with Vicki Cassman whom she met prior to beginning her studies at WUDPAC.

"She was the first person to say 'yes' to me, which she followed up with helpful advice and continued support. Not only did she shape my foundational concepts of what conservation is but also what kind of conservator I want to be. The joy and love for the work and her students was so inspiring, it was literally life changing for me. I would not be where I am without her and all the wonderful mentors I have had since. Thinking about it now, I believe it is the people I have been lucky to meet along the way that have most significantly shaped my identity as a conservator. Everyone in the field has been amazingly supportive, but yes it has been all consuming and it is taking its toll, and I'm not going to lie about that."

Justin and Ellen acknowledged privileges in their lives including financial and family support they have received that made their careers possible. In Justin's words,

"I am extremely lucky to not have gone through the slog as a pre-program intern, and fit through the very narrow funnel to become a

conservator in this country. That is not the experience that I had, but I have been witness to it, and that has shaped my own perspective and identity and I don't know how much of that was luck as much as it was privilege that I wasn't able to recognize until later in life. I want to acknowledge that. Much of what has gotten me to where I am today is as a result of privilege."

Ellen echoed Justin's comments and acknowledged the support she received from her family throughout her career, as well as acknowledging she works at a privileged institution, alongside fabulous conservators and technicians who are masters of their work. She also spoke about how her relationships in the field have shaped her,

"I have so many friends in this field including my best friend. How many professions can say that about their colleagues? We are collegial, we are collaborative, we care for each other, we give information to each other, and we support each other. So that is also a part of my identity and what I try to do as a mentor—to bring people in, have them feel well supported, loved, and confident that their career is going to be brilliant."

Question 4: Today's conservators have many "hats" to wear: technician, project manager, scientist, photographer, advocate, scholar, historian, manager/administrator, etc. Do you feel like you need to master other skills or crafts in order for you to be successful in your role? And how?

All of the panelists agreed that constant learning was a critical part of the profession, particularly to develop skill sets that reach beyond conservation work. Skills in the areas of administrative management, marketing, working with donors, public speaking, persuasive communication (both written and oral), writing grants, librarianship, and project management were among those named.

Ellen spoke about her leadership role at the HRC and her need to understand as much as possible every aspect of what happens within the organization, especially how programs work together to move the organization forward.

Justin has had to learn how to communicate effectively with his librarian colleagues, as librarianship was not a part of his formal education. Librarians have *"their own language and speak in acronyms. Often after many years of working with them I still have to stop them in the middle of a meeting and ask them what they're talking about."*

Christine emphasized the importance of understanding conversations and being able to facilitate on behalf of her team. *"I need to understand just enough to be able to advocate for them, bring back and forth different understandings and things. I think there is tremendous pressure in conservation that we either close in and stay focused on a narrow kind of universe or we have to try to embrace expanding out and really understanding the work of everyone around us."*

As someone just starting her career, Karissa noted the pressure she has felt to learn all of the skills she may need.

In the past few years she has begun to reach out to other professionals (both within the field and adjacent fields, e.g., librarians, scientists, data analysts, etc.) with questions, realizing she does not need to be proficient in everything. *"[I] have to be aware and proactive in going out and getting answers, but I do feel that there's a lot to know and I'm never going to catch up."*

AUDIENCE QUESTIONS

Question 5 from the session chat: What career paths are available to bench-trained conservators who can't afford an advanced degree?

Ellen mentioned that many positions will consider other relevant training and experience aside from a specific advanced degree. She advised bench-trained conservators not to be discouraged from applying for positions when the job posting allows.

Christine went further and suggested looking at lots of different institutional contexts for positions as requirements can differ significantly.

"Some places like my institution have strict and hierarchical systems for how those positions are graded ... that can create a real tension about who is a conservator and who is a technician. Our techs do amazing work, they do conservation work, so our system doesn't really work to provide the full spectrum of opportunities, but that can vary and one has to be aggressive in finding those opportunities until bigger institutions catch up and figure out how to make it work."

Questions 6 and 7 from a live audience member: "I have two very different questions, one has to do with identity in terms of the collections that you work with. Do you ever work with things that you don't feel even slightly connected to, in terms of your background, your family, socioeconomic? And then the other question is more like, I'm hearing that some of you have tried to pick up a lot of different skills because it's really what's been necessitated, and others have tried to really focus more in on your skillset, and I was wondering how that was reflected in your specific workplaces like how is work delegated when you're not comfortable ... doing certain things, how is that picked up by other staff, or is that entire project dropped by your department?"

Three of the four panelists responded and discussed their strategies for working with materials that fall outside of their technical expertise or cultural familiarity. They each acknowledged the limitations of their training in comparison to the extensive collections they encounter in research library settings and recognize they can't know everything they might need to ethically engage in treatment for certain materials.

Christine described how her institution is fortunate enough to have money for outsourcing and lab space where she can bring in specialists to work onsite when needed. She

cited a collection of Tibetan thangka materials as an example: “[you] go out and see who that expert is for collections and bring them in, because none of us have that background or connection either culturally or spiritually to those materials. You can’t do it all, you can’t know it all. It’s impossible.”

Even after aggressively pursuing experience in treating materials from all over the world during her training, Karissa realized that she couldn’t know it all, and may not even know enough to ask the right questions. Her strategy in this situation is to lean on her preventive conservation skills to offer the object protection until it can get the appropriate care. “Sometimes the best you can do is not touch it.”

Working in a research library environment, Justin has frequently had to care for things to which he didn’t have a connection. He discussed his limited experience with paper conservation and how he has negotiated what he is willing to do in terms of treatment for works on paper. He continues to learn and has developed a greater spectrum of approaches in order to provide more options for treatment, “While I won’t necessarily do what you have in mind, I can come up with a few options that can at least hold it over until the right person comes along.” Justin also noted that with a greater acquisition of works on paper, his institution was able to hire a paper conservator to focus on these materials.

Question 8 from the session chat: What type of continuing education have you found most useful to you, and what kind of mid-career learning opportunities do you think are lacking?

Two of the panelists responded to this question, commenting on the limitations of time and money to make use of the available opportunities out there.

Christine sees AIC providing many great opportunities from beginner to advanced level skills, but as an administrator struggles to find the time and funds for people to take advantage of them. “There are always more opportunities than we feel we have the money, the time, or the means to do, so that’s an important thing to think about.”

Ellen recommended asking about continuing education support when applying for positions and to make use of that as a bargaining chip. In her recent experience, learning effective communication strategies has been most helpful for her to communicate with a variety of audiences. “We’ve got to translate what we do, get away from our lingo, talk to people in real terms about the meaning of cultural records to their lives, to their enjoyment, and research. Communicating effectively with provosts and people like that, you have to make a case, the elevator speeches [are critical].”

CONCLUSIONS

Topics that emerged from this small panel touched upon broad themes in library and archives conservation. Even here, the importance of professional identity was apparent. The panel was originally conceived to focus solely on conservation

and conservators, but two of the panelists clearly indicated they do not identify as conservators, even though their roles have great impact on conservation and the conservators they serve to mentor. This distinction indicates the weight placed on identifying as a “conservator” with respect given to the technical expertise required for hands-on treatment. Library and archives conservation, perhaps more than other conservation specialties, navigates a conglomeration of professional expertise including librarianship, archival methodology, administration, and management, etc., to meet the needs of research institutions. Defining one’s identity within this environment is personally significant but also crucial to accurately communicating one’s role within the institution.

Despite their different paths and professional experiences, each of the panelists expressed deeply personal considerations in making the decision to pursue their careers. Panelists were strongly driven to follow their career path, in spite of discouragement in some cases, recognizing conservation, preservation, and librarianship respectively, to fit their personal skills and attributes. For these panelists remuneration in conservation is as much personal as it is practical.

Panelists spoke about deeply rooted personal connections and relationships they have developed throughout their careers, from impactful early career mentors to their own service in mentorship roles, as well as the willingness of colleagues across the field to offer support to one another. Respect for teammates and colleagues within their institutions was of significant importance to success. The strength of these relationships was identified as unique to the conservation field.

The impact of privilege was acknowledged in panelists’ ability to pursue education and career opportunities. Two panelists specifically spoke about costs, both personal and financial, in pursuit of their conservation careers.

The following areas for further exploration may indicate where the next evolutions in the field arise:

Issues regarding equity were raised in a couple of different ways, the most familiar being limited access to the field and the cost of pursuing the required education and credentials. This is a concern most professionals are well aware of, though we are only at the very beginning of creating meaningful actions for change.

Inequity of institutional hierarchies between “professional” and “nonprofessional” roles was noted, including limitations this may put on the valuation of technician roles in particular. Many emphasized the exceptional talent of technicians, yet limited opportunities for career growth exist. Like many fields, management and administrative roles provide the predominant path to advancement, though the skills needed for success in these roles are often different from the skills that make a successful bench technician. Communication skills, for example, were considered vital

among the panelists, particularly to managerial positions, but these skills were in no way exclusive to these roles. The need to negotiate treatment and collaborate with colleagues having unique professional cultures (librarians, archivists, curators) affects conservation professionals across all levels. This can be a challenge for those conservators who find their fulfillment and professional identity in bench-focused roles. Rapidly shifting education models don't always prepare students for the realities of the work they will be asked to prioritize as they progress in their careers. Reexamining the hierarchy of limited position classifications, particularly in large academic institutions, was noted as a possible next step to create more openness and allow for differences in education trajectories.

Each of the panelists approached their path uniquely, utilizing their own personal strengths. This sits at the heart of the extent of conservation identities and highlights the diverse expertise each person brings to the field. By embracing our distinctive qualities and capitalizing on the fact that we are a sharing and generous cohort, we create a field that is stronger, more nimble, and adaptable to change in new technologies or shifts in our field, but also in how we define ourselves.

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