

# STREAMLINING CONDITION REPORTING

## A new approach at the Victoria and Albert Museum

The creation of a new role within the Conservation Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), that of Condition Reporting Administrator, has resulted in dramatic improvements to the condition reporting process. Government Indemnity requires the condition of an object to be recorded before, during, and upon return from loan or touring. Last year a total of 152 short loans (involving 1,224 objects) and over 40 international and national touring exhibitions (involving 1852 objects) left the V&A. The Conservation Department has traditionally been responsible for producing condition statements to accompany each object. These can take between fifteen minutes to complete for simple two-dimensional prints and drawings to two hours for more complex three-dimensional costumes. The completion of over 3000 condition statements requires 1.25 full time equivalent conservation staff.

Loans and touring exhibitions are just one of the object-focussed priorities for the Department; preparing objects for exhibitions, gallery refurbishment, and catalogues also requires considerable input. The Department has become increasingly effective in delivering these objectives and, in doing so, has challenged traditional attitudes and practice by undertaking systematic reviews of roles and process and embracing electronic systems.

The unique importance of the role of conservator as assessor of an object's condition was highlighted during a review of the loans process. However, it was realised that the preparation of a condition statement with accompanying photographs could be undertaken by non-conservators with the appropriate skills and training, thereby releasing more conservation time for other activities. It was anticipated that increased efficiencies could

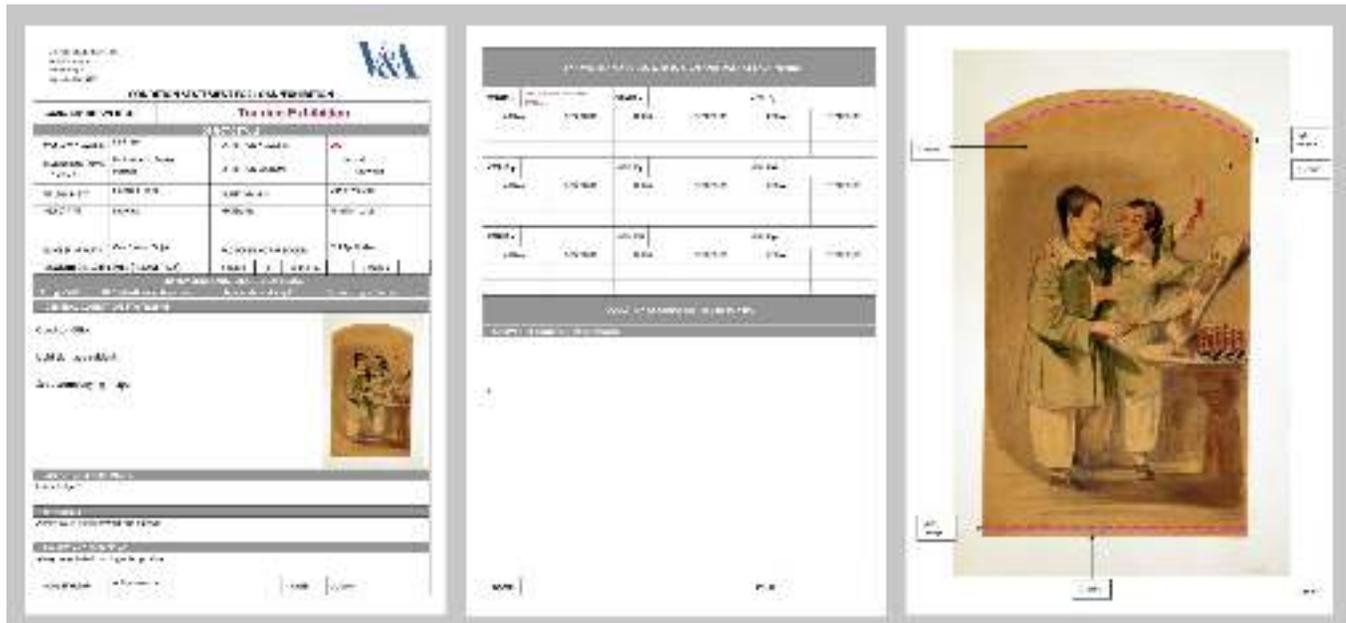
be achieved by moving away from traditional handwritten descriptions, drawings, and acetate overlays, towards electronic condition statements based on high quality digital photographs.

In August 2007 a pilot post of "Condition Reporting Administrator" (CRA) was created. Centrally located in the Administration Section, but line-managed by a conservator (Victoria Oakley) with departmental liaison responsibility for the Exhibitions and Loans departments, this post supported both the Conservation and the Exhibition departments. The job description included coordination, administration, and scheduling of condition reporting for outgoing loans and exhibitions; creation of clear high resolution digital images to record current condition; downloading images into the required format, filing, and archiving; producing condition statements (involving compiling and entering descriptive and administrative details and adding the images); undertaking condition checking of objects on loan to the V&A and training and development.

The role also involved liaison between the Conservation Department, Registrars, and Exhibitions teams, overseeing the schedules of colleagues and working with external couriers. The post holder needed good organisational, time management, and team working skills as well as technical proficiency in producing high quality digital images of objects and Adobe Photoshop™ skills. Training was provided by conservators, in-house photographers, and exhibitions staff in order to familiarise the post holder with internal systems.

Helen Nodding was appointed to the post in August 2007. Her previous work in the Technical Services Depart-

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum London



ment, combined with a good understanding of museum processes and experience in the use of electronic systems, helped her to rapidly develop within this role. Within four months, savings and efficiencies had been identified to such a level that a successful business case was made to make this post permanent. The CRA has now been in post for 12 months and has been in a unique position to view the condition reporting process holistically. With no precedent for the position, the role of CRA has evolved in response to the needs of conservators and exhibitions staff and the condition reporting process has been streamlined, saving time (and money) for both departments.

Efficiencies resulting from the CRA post

- Creation of standardised condition statements

The lack of consistency in condition statements across the different studios of the Conservation Department made object assessment unnecessarily complex for couriers on multi-media touring exhibitions. By working alongside conservators, exhibitions staff, and couriers, as well as drawing upon her own experiences and reviewing practice in other establishments, Helen has been able to identify best practice and so develop a more “user friendly” version of the condition statement. A template has been created which includes standardised fonts, colours, layout, and the inclusion of a thumbnail image on the front of the statement to act as a quick reference guide. She has also contributed to the training workshops for couriers, highlighting aspects of checking objects which might be confusing for non-conservators.

- Use of digital images

Several members of the staff may be involved as couriers in the installation and de-installation of objects during multi-venue exhibition tours. In the past, they have often found it difficult to distinguish between old and new damage using statements with written descriptions. At the end of a long tour, the statements were often so heavily annotated that they became difficult to read making it difficult to assess the final condition of the object. The CRA has developed excellent skills in digital photography, photo-editing software (Adobe Photoshop™), and Microsoft® Office, and now creates condition statements based on high quality digital images that highlight areas of damage and reduce the need for annotation. A hard paper copy of the statement is printed out to accompany the objects during the loan or exhibition. The improved format saves time during the assessment and condition checking stages. If necessary, the electronic files of condition statements can be re-used to form the basis of future condition statements more quickly and efficiently than old paper versions.

- Simplifying and clarifying the process

Traditionally, at the start and end of an exhibition, all objects were condition checked by conservators. Exhibitions staff would coordinate appointments for the different materials specialists to view objects as they were unpacked or de-installed. This process was disruptive and inefficient

with each conservator often having to make several trips to the preparation area. The CRA, having undertaken training in condition checking now applies this skill to a wide range of materials, reducing the involvement of conservators. The lead conservator for the exhibition *China Design Now* estimated that Helen has saved her equivalent to a month’s work over the installation period.

- Resource usage and financial saving

A review of the work undertaken by the CRA in the first full year of the post has shown that 69% of her time is spent on Conservation Department-focussed activities, 24% on work in the Exhibitions Department with the remaining 7% being spent on training and developing skills necessary for the post and passing on those skills to other members of staff.

Job evaluation grading support (JEGS) confirmed that the CRA’s roles and main duties correspond to a salary grade two bands below that of a conservator and one below exhibitions staff. Introducing the CRA post therefore is not only more efficient for the Museum in terms of releasing professional conservation expertise, but has also reduced the costs of delivering loans, exhibitions, and their subsequent tours. A saving of at least £6.82 per hour is made on employing the CRA to undertake the work. The approximate total time saving during the last 12 months for Exhibitions and Conservation amounts to 1,456 hours (380 and 1076 respectively) which represents a saving of £9,257 (£1,919 and £7,338 respectively) for the museum.

### Conclusion

Through the development of a specialist post, it has been possible to improve long standing practice and to rapidly implement museum-wide improvements to the loans and exhibition process. Separating out administrative functions from professional conservation expertise has made the process increasingly efficient as the CRA has developed skills in digital imaging, processing, and associated systems that exceed the abilities of conservators, who would otherwise undertake this role, but on a less frequent basis. Whilst conservators remain an essential part of the loans process, their involvement has been noticeably reduced and the Department has recovered almost half a year of professional conservation time to focus on other object-based activities.

The establishment of this post is also enabling the museum to look for further improvements to the loans and exhibition process. By the end of the 2008, with the help of training from the CRA, it is proposed that the Department will have changed to using completely electronic-based condition statements. The potential for having a central, digital administration point for condition statements is also being assessed in view of the level of success achieved so far.

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