

# TEXTILE section

**COMPROMISING SITUATIONS:  
PRINCIPLES IN EVERYDAY PRACTICE**

**POSTPRINTS OF THE FORUM**

**HELD AT THE MUSEUM OF LONDON**

**ON MONDAY MARCH 1ST, 1993**



**Organised by Frances Lennard and Zenzie Tinker**

ISBN No: 1 871 656 20 6

Copyright © 1993, Individual authors.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under the copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without prior written permission of the copyright owner and the UKIC Textile Section.



## CONTENTS

	<u>Page No.</u>
<b>FOREWORD</b> Mary Brooks	(i)
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> Dinah Eastop	1
<b>ECCO: AN INTRODUCTION</b> Valentine Walsh	7
<b>SSCR &amp; ECCO</b> Clare Meredith	13
<b>THE IMPLICATIONS OF COMPETITIVE TENDERING FOR CONSERVATORS</b> David Leigh	15
<b>THE CHOICE OF CLEANING</b> Nicola Gentle	23
<b>PROGRESS ON OPERATION WETCLEAN</b> David Howell	27
<b>TEXTS OF POSTERS DISPLAYED AT THE FORUM:</b>	
<b>Asian Buddhist Textiles - Western Concepts and Ethics</b> Anne Amos	29
<b>Suffragette Banner 'The Office', Early 20th Century</b> May Berkouwer	30
<b>Too Fragile to Conserve?</b> Fiona Hutton & Frances Lennard	32
<b>All or Nothing .... or Something</b> Ksynia Marko	33
<b>The Thangka - Functional Religious Art</b> Gill Owens	35
<b>Problems in the Conservation of a Set of I.S.T.C. Banners</b> Conservation Services, General Department The Textile Conservation Centre	36
<b>The Conservation of an Early 16th Century Flemish Tapestry</b> Conservation Services, Tapestry Department The Textile Conservation Centre	37
<b>Considerations of Protocol when Treating Ceremonial Textiles</b> Tracey Wedge	38
<b>FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS</b> Frances Lennard	41



## INTRODUCTION

*DINAH EASTOP, Conservator Tutor, The Textile Conservation Centre*

The title, "COMPROMISING SITUATIONS: PRINCIPLES IN EVERYDAY PRACTICE", veils the main topic of the forum, which is ethics and professional practice.

My objectives for the day are to:

1. Discuss key issues of textile conservation practice as they relate to ethics.
2. Determine if there is a unity of view within the textile conservation profession; to identify areas of difference, as well as areas of common ground. I hope we will have time to analyse the diversity of views.
3. Contribute to the current debate within UKIC about ethics and professional practice. I suggest that the success of the forum will be judged by our ability and willingness to contribute to this debate.

To achieve these objectives the programme is divided into three main parts: developments in our working environment; key issues of practice and research; and discussion of objects which could present potential problems in particular situations.

Two questions seem important to place the forum in a wider context and to provide a framework for discussion.

### **Firstly, Why Now?**

Why is the Textile Section of UKIC considering the issue of ethics and professional practice in March 1993?

There are many reasons; all of them are highly significant to the forum.

Some relate directly to the Textile Section of UKIC. Others relate to a much wider context.

For example, last year's forum, on Mixed Media Objects, raised many ethical questions. As a new Section, we represent the still relatively new profession of textile conservation. We are still in the process of defining common terms of reference. By considering our ethics and practice we are helping to define and create our profession.

The external influences are many and varied. The market for conservation is changing. Our working environment is changing. The UK is now part of the European Community and we face the opportunity and challenges of a common market. Valentine Walsh's talk on ECCO will introduce the professional implications of this European context.

In the UK we are facing greater economic pressures, particularly cuts in local government spending. There are more textile conservators in total and a greater proportion work freelance.

Is it coincidental that since 1990 we have been asked to submit competitive tenders for some of our work? This is an issue which Dr David Leigh will address in his lecture, and which has been the subject of recent meetings, including a very lively meeting organised by the Wall Paintings Section of UKIC and the Conservation Department of the British Museum.<sup>[1]</sup>

Other changes include the Museums Training Institute initiative which is encouraging module-based, in-service training for the museum profession. This will inevitably affect our responsibility to colleagues and trainees.

The resurgence of interest in ethics is also evident in recent publications and meetings. Much was written in the early 1980s and now, a decade later, this interest has returned. As an example, the last issue of the V & A Journal has an interesting article by Nick Umney called '*A Question of Principle*'.<sup>[2]</sup> This article was provoked by a conference held last year under the title '*Principles of Rational Restoration and Conservation Decision Making*'. Nick Umney's article advocates an urgent review of our professional ethics. I would be pleased if the forum contributed to this review.

The first question I posed was : why now?; the second was : what current principles? What are the principles textile conservators apply to everyday practice?

### **What Current Principles?**

In looking for guidance we must consult our professional associations, in our case, UKIC.

UKIC does not have a code of ethics. In fact, until recently UKIC has deliberately shied away from preparing such a code. However, UKIC does offer guidance, which is sent to every member of UKIC and is a key part of the members' handbook. (A copy of this guidance was provided for each participant at the forum.)

This guidance was prepared in 1980/81 and accepted by the membership in 1982. The guidance sets out to describe a professional standard of ethical practice. A standard to be accepted by owners or curators of objects and by conservators.

The guidance explains that the conservator's first responsibility is to posterity, then to colleagues, the public and the conservation profession.

UKIC guidance explains that the purpose of conservation is to preserve the true nature of an object. The conservators' obligations are set out. As conservators we must:

- respect the integrity of the object. What does this really mean?
- undertake only the highest standards of treatment (i.e. limit quantity, not quality). Do we do this?

- use suitable and reversible treatments. Is reversibility always achievable? Has the concept of minimum intervention superseded this?
- undertake adequate examination and documentation. Who determines what is adequate?
- not modify or conceal through restoration. But where is the line drawn between conservation and restoration? Who draws the line?
- finally, conservators must recognise their own limitations and must disclose knowledge. There should be no secrecy about any technique or materials used in conservation. Will the pressures of competitive tendering stifle such openness? Could it stifle research? Dave Howell's talk on Operation Wetclean identified some problems with this research initiative.

These are the guiding principles offered by UKIC. However, UKIC is not unique in representing the conservation profession. There are other national and international professional societies, associations and institutes. Each of these tell us something about conservation principles.

Comparing the guidance can be revealing. A comparison of the British, American and Australian guidance is very instructive. There are many similarities, but there are significant differences. Three of these differences are especially relevant for the forum. They relate to preventive conservation, contracts and responsibility.

The American guidance, formulated in 1963 and 1967, makes no reference to preventive conservation. But the Australian code, formulated in 1986, states that preventive conservation is the conservator's main aim. This obviously reflects the growing importance of preventive conservation.

In the current climate, how much interventive treatment will be considered suitable? Is washing ethical? Is it a suitable treatment? Is it reversible? These issues will be addressed by Nicola Gentle.<sup>[3]</sup>

The American guidance provides extensive legalistic advice on client relationships and contracts. However, even AIC gives no advice on competitive tendering. What are the correct ethical principles to follow when tendering?

The last point relates to responsibility. If we follow UKIC's principles we are told to be responsible to posterity. If we follow the American rules we are responsible to the object first, owner second. If we follow the Australian code our primary responsibility is to maintain a balance between the cultural needs of society and preservation of material. This issue has been addressed in Tracey Wedge's poster on Maori artifacts.<sup>[4]</sup> The issue of responsibility raises profound technical and philosophical questions.

Given the changing context and given discrepancies in principles, it is not surprising that the Executive Committee of UKIC has decided, as a matter of policy, to review the current guidance UKIC offers.

In conclusion, I urge members of the Textile Section to contribute to the discussion within UKIC and to help formulate the new guidance, which is planned for late 1993.

### NUMBERED NOTES

1. A one-day meeting held on 22.02.93 at the Museum of Mankind on '*The Implications Surrounding the Methods by which Conservators Secure Contracts and the Current Changes in the Methods*' organised jointly by the Wall Paintings Section of UKIC and the Department of Conservation of the British Museum.
2. UMNEY, N. 1993. A Question of Principle. V & A Journal, No. 6, January 1993, pp.9-10.
3. GENTLE, Nicola. 1991. Preliminary report on '*Study Tour of Swedish Textile Conservation Studios*'. Unpublished report for The Conservation Unit.
4. WEDGE, T. 1993. Consideration of Protocol when Treating Ceremonial Textiles. UKIC Textile Section, AGM Poster.

### FOR REFERENCE

- AIC. 1979. Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. AIC (American Institute for Conservation), Washington; USA.
- AICCM. 1986. Code of Ethics and Guidance for Conservation Practice for those involved in the conservation of cultural material in Australia, Canberra, Australia. AICCM (Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material Inc.), pp.1-16.
- ECCO. 1992. The Profession - Working Document. The European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations.
- ICOM.CC 1983. Working Group: Training in Conservation and Restoration. The Conservator-Restorer. A Definition of the Profession.
- IIC-CG. 1989. Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice, for those involved in the Conservation of Cultural Property in Canada. 2nd ed., Ottawa, Canada. IIC-CG (The International Institute for Conservation - Canadian Group) and CAPC (The Canadian Association of Professional Conservators).
- NJCC. Code of Procedure for Single Stage Selective Tendering. National Joint Consultative Committee for Building, in collaboration with The Joint Standing Committee of Architects, Surveyors and Building Contractors in Scotland, and The Joint Consultative Committee for Building, Northern Ireland, and in consultation with The Department of the Environment.
- NZPCG. 1985. Code of Ethics. NZPCG, 1985. The New Zealand Directory of Conservators of Cultural Property, 1991, pp. 8-13.
- UKIC. 1983. Guidance for Conservation Practice. London: UKIC.

### SUGGESTED READING

- ASHLEY-SMITH, J. 1982. The Ethics of Conservation. The Conservator 6. pp.1-7 or 1-5.
- CORFIELD, M. 1988. Towards a Conservation Profession, in Preprints for the UKIC 30th Anniversary Conference. London: UKIC. pp.4-7.
- LEIGH, D. 1993. ECCO and the Conservation Unit, in Museums Journal. Volume 93, Number 1, January 1993, p. 21.
- JEDRZEJEWSKA, H. 1980. Problems of Ethics in the Conservation of Textiles in Conservazione e Restauro del Tessili, Como, ed. Pertegato, F, pp. 99-103.

- MARSH, P.D.V. 1989. Successful Bidding and Tendering. Aldershot.
- McCREDIE, A. 1991. Relationships between Conservators' Codes of Ethics and the Conservation Policies of Institutions - Common Threads, Conflicts and Failings. New Zealand Museums Journal, Volume 21, Number 1, 1991. pp.6-9.
- PYE, E. & CRONYN, J. 1993. Standards and Training for the Heritage Profession: Current Developments with MTI. Conservation News, Number 50, March 1993. UKIC. pp 4-5.
- RICHMOND, A. 1992. Ethics for Conservators. IPC News, 63, pp. 10-11.
- SMITH, R.D. 1987. Reversibility: A Questionable Philosophy. In BROWN, A.G. (ed.) AIC Preprints 15th Anniversary Meeting, Vancouver. Washington: AIC. pp. 132-137.



## ECCO : AN INTRODUCTION

*VALENTINE WALSH, UKIC Executive Committee*

Europe is very slowly, sometimes imperceptibly, moving towards social and economic unity. There is a growing awareness of its common cultural heritage and Europeans in general are increasingly committed to protecting and preserving their rich artistic and material legacy. Professional conservators' organisations in Europe, such as UKIC, have a paramount role in safeguarding this common cultural property. The creation of a European body of representative associations of conservators was initiated early in 1991 in Paris at a Round Table conference on the professional status of conservator-restorers within the Single European Market. This meeting was called by the French conservators who were being subjected to an examination in order to practice in French museums. This exam was drawn up by curators and had the backing of the French government. The conservators saw this as an imposition of standards from outside their profession and were justifiably worried. They wanted to know what status conservators in other countries had. At the meeting, after a presentation from each of the professional bodies attending, it became clear that we regarded ourselves as belonging to a profession, but that this was not generally recognised.

The need for an international body became evident. This concept was developed extensively at subsequent meetings and culminated in the formal establishment of the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations (E.C.C.O.) in Brussels on October 14, 1991. The term conservator-restorer, although cumbersome, was agreed for several reasons: the term had already been adopted by ICOM and confusingly, the French for curator is 'conservateur'.

### **Membership**

Although it is still only a very young organisation, ECCO already represents, through their professional associations, several thousand conservators throughout Europe. It was agreed that as it was to represent conservators themselves, only professional associations whose full members are active conservator-restorers could be full members of ECCO. A category of Associate Member was also established.

The founding members of ECCO were associations from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. In June 1992 associations from Denmark and Norway also became full members. There are at present applications from associations from a number of other countries.

### **Aims**

The purpose of ECCO is to develop and promote the profession of Conservator-Restorer.

To that effect, its objectives are:

- to promote and develop a high level of training, research and practice;
- to work toward legal recognition of professional standards and to affirm and obtain recognition of our professional status at both national and European levels;
- to co-ordinate and further activities and exchanges between the different members;
- to establish links with European and international organisations in order to ensure representation of the profession and the defence of its moral, cultural, scientific and material interests;
- to establish or participate in any body or service necessary or helpful in the pursuit of its objectives.

### **Activities**

ECCO has embarked on a number of tasks which are pretty massive in their concept. It is evident that there is an enormous amount of work to be done.

ECCO has written a new definition of the profession which is somewhat more elaborate than the ICOM definition, which was adopted by most conservation organisations in 1984. This was necessary, as any profession must first define itself before it can have an identity. At present ECCO is also working on the formulation of Professional Guidelines which would be the ethical basis for the profession as a whole. A code of ethics is fundamental to the respectability of a profession and its relationship with society. The ECCO code of ethics is at present being formulated, combining the codes of many countries. It should provide a method not only for gaining respect but will be the method by which the standards upon which ECCO is based can be enforced. Each member of ECCO will have a code of ethics of their own, which should align with the main points in the ECCO's code. A working party on training has been established. This, it is hoped, will eventually be able to harmonise the training of conservators and to establish equivalence of training diplomas between different European countries with the object of maintaining very high standards in conservation training.

A further working party has been established to look into professional qualifications which might, or will in the case of the French conservators who have a bill before their parliament at the moment, form the basis of a legal restriction to practice.

ECCO has been invited to participate in consultative meetings on cultural heritage matters at the European Commission and the Council of Europe.

ECCO is invaluable as an organ which can keep abreast of new developments regarding the profession across Europe and will disseminate relevant information to all its members.

## **ECCO and the UKIC**

The formation of ECCO made it evident that conservation in Britain is far better organised than in the rest of Europe. The UKIC has achieved a great many things which are the envy of other conservation organisations, and we rightly take pride in our success. Other organisations in Europe are now greatly in need of the same sort of achievements, and they do, to some degree, look to Britain for an example. Many of the advantages of ECCO will not be immediately evident but the work which is now progressing in ECCO will shape how ECCO moves forward, and as the UK has the largest number of conservators in Europe I feel that we have a duty to ensure that the UKIC represents them at this formative stage. The new generation of conservators has grown up without the antipathy towards Europe which is felt by some older conservators. They expect the UKIC to be representing them in this wider context. They will certainly be far more mobile than the present leading conservators.

We have the opportunity at the moment to take a leading role in ECCO and to shape it not only to our own ends but to use it imaginatively as a means for furthering our profession in a far wider context than we could achieve on our own. The UKIC is at the moment reviewing its aims and objectives, and involvement with other conservation organisations may well help us to see UKIC's future more clearly.

## **Lobbying**

There has been much talk in the UKIC of the need to become more of a representative body professionally, including a vague idea that we should be recognised politically and should be lobbying whenever there is any chance of legislation affecting us. This has not yet focused on specific issues or politicians in the UK, but it has begun to take shape in the EC through the work being done by ECCO. It is very exciting that ECCO has now been recognised in Brussels in quite a few areas as the representative of conservation and conservators in Europe. All the MEPs who make up the culture committee are now aware of ECCO. ECCO was mentioned in the European Parliament last month by Patricia Rawlings, who is MP for Harlow, in connection with a large report made to the parliament by the Culture Committee. It has been a success of some note that this major policy-forming report on culture in the European Community was made aware of conservation issues by ECCO and has thus taken conservation into account at the planning stage. This would not have occurred were it not for the involvement of ECCO with the European Commission and were ECCO not a very strong representative body. A number of directorates general are also now aware of ECCO's existence and wish to support its work. This would not have been the case if the various conservation organisations had not joined together in this way.

## **Accreditation and NVQs**

The EC is, whether we like it or not, having quite a bit of influence on the shape of things such as the accreditation of conservators. There are two directives on mutual recognition of professions which govern the mobility both of legally restricted professionals, and those which do not have a legal basis. The laws are complicated, but they are essentially aimed at ensuring that there is

free movement between European countries. It would be a very difficult problem for British conservators if there were lower standards of practise in other European countries once we too have a legally restricted profession. Sadly it may be some time before we have a legal basis to the title conservator in this country. The system for achieving this here is complicated. We must have had accreditation in place and operating for some time. National vocational qualifications, which will very likely be the basis for our accreditation, are now beginning to be noticed in the rest of Europe. We may, through ECCO, be able eventually to persuade the other conservation organisations that our skills-based accreditation should be universally accepted, as opposed to their present thinking that accreditation should be based on the acquisition of a university degree in conservation. It is quite amazing that even within our profession Britain is often out on a limb arguing for a different way of thinking, as it does in other areas of the EC.

### **Finance**

There is also a large pool of finance available for certain projects from the EC. These projects are only open to multi-national groups comprising three or more countries. The officers of ECCO have been led to believe that should we put together a project to survey post-qualification training in Europe, this would be very likely to receive funding. It would be an extremely important survey given the shape which NVQs are taking and the idea that the accreditation status of a conservator might need to be reviewed every few years to ensure that he keeps abreast of new developments. Until now there has just not been that sort of funding available to the UKIC and it is through the auspices of ECCO that this would be possible.

It seems to me to be sheer insanity to be working on these major developments in isolation. There is of course no reason why we should not talk individually to the other conservation organisations but joint consultation between all the European organisations is a far more sensible method of working together. We are a relatively small profession. Given the number of conservators practising in Britain and the fact that Britain is recognised by our European colleagues as being better organised, it would make sense that we should be playing a leading role. It appears to be a reflection of the general attitude which the UK has toward the EC that we are not taking the lead in ECCO and using it as much to our own ends as to the common good of the profession.

I welcome any comments on ECCO. Please see the attached sheet for the ECCO working document.



E.C.C.O.

European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations

WORKING DOCUMENT  
This text is a document of provisional work, subject to possible changes.

8TH NOVEMBER 1992

## THE PROFESSION

The Professional definition promoted by the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations

### Preamble

The objects to which society attributes a particular artistic, historic, documentary, aesthetic, scientific, spiritual or religious value are commonly designated "cultural property"; they constitute a material and cultural heritage to be passed on to forthcoming generations. Since these are entrusted to the care of the Conservator-Restorer by society, he has a responsibility not only to the objects but to the owner or legal guardian, the originator or creator, the public and posterity. These conditions serve to safeguard all cultural property, regardless of its owner, age, state of completeness or economic value.

### 1. Role of the Conservator-Restorer

The fundamental role of the conservator-restorer is the preservation of cultural objects for the benefit of present and future generations. The conservator-restorer contributes to the understanding of the aesthetic, historic and physical integrity of these objects.

The conservator-restorer undertakes responsibility for and carries out the diagnostic examination, conservation and restoration treatments of the cultural object and the documentation of all procedures.

#### Diagnostic Examination is:

the determination of the composition and condition of a cultural object, the evaluation of the causes of deterioration of its original materials, the identification of alterations and assessment of how such alterations occurred and the establishment of the need for treatment. It includes the study of relevant documentation.

**Conservation:**

a) **Preventive Conservation:** consists of indirect action to retard deterioration and prevent damage by creating optimum conditions for the preservation of the cultural object as far as is compatible with its social use. Preventive conservation embodies correct handling, transport, storage and display.

b) **Remedial Conservation:** consists of direct action carried out on the cultural object with the aim of retarding further deterioration.

-**Restoration:** consists of direct action carried out on a damaged or deteriorated cultural object, the aim of which is to facilitate its understanding and its cultural meaning or significance, while respecting as far as possible its aesthetic, historic and physical integrity

In addition, it is within the conservator-restorers competence to:

- draw up conservation-restoration programmes or surveys
- provide advice and technical assistance for conservation and restoration of cultural object
- prepare technical reports on cultural objects excluding any judgment of their market value
- carry out research relating to conservation-restoration
- develop educational programmes and teach conservation restoration
- disseminate information gained from examination, treatment or research
- promote a deeper understanding of conservation-restoration.

**III. Distinction from Related Fields**

The conservator-restorer is neither an artist nor a craftsperson. Whereas the artist and craftsperson is engaged in creating new objects and in maintaining or repairing objects in a functional sense, the conservator-restorer is concerned with the preservation of objects of cultural significance.

**III. Educational Training**

To maintain the standards of the profession, the conservator-restorer's professional training shall be at the level of a university degree or equivalent.

## SSCR & ECCO

*CLARE MEREDITH, Chair, SSCR*

ECCO, the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations, was formally established in Brussels on 14 October 1991. I was SSCR's observer at the meeting, funded by the Scottish Conservation Bureau and SSCR. The founder members concentrated on drafting statutes and electing their first committee and, by the end of the day, there was a collective sense of achievement that the jumbo jet-like ECCO had finally left the runway and was airborne.

UKIC was a founder member and their representative, Valentine Walsh, has been SSCR's main source of ECCO information. SSCR, in turn, keeps members informed through our quarterly magazine, the SSCR Journal. A prosaic question-and-answer feature appeared in the August 1991 edition:

*Is there a European organisation that represents the professional interests of conservators and restorers?*

*Who was at the meeting to represent Britain?*

*Who was there to represent Scotland?*

*What's ECCO doing and why?*

*What's ECCO going to do that's different?*

*What does all this cost and who pays?*

and so on. Regular up-dates on ECCO's progress, and SSCR's position, appear in the SSCR Journal.

Right from the start there was one particularly sticky issue. It was proposed that organisations with Full Membership status must consist '*exclusively of conservator-restorers of cultural property*'. This was subsequently thought too rigid and amended to include '*any person who is recognised as having trained as a conservator-restorer and whose principal career remains within the field of conservation-restoration of cultural heritage*'.

To better understand the reasons for this requirement, look at ECCO's objectives: they include, unsurprisingly, the promotion of the conservation-restoration of works of art; the development of training and research; the co-ordination of activities and exchanges between members. Another, however, is that ECCO will '*work toward legal recognition of professional standards and affirm and obtain recognition of the professional status of conservator-restorer at national and European level*'. A significant and highly desirable development, if it is achieved, for conservation as a profession and the protection of standards.

SSCR circulated a questionnaire in May 1992 to gauge opinion before our June 1992 AGM. Only individual members living in EC and EFTA countries were asked to reply and we reckon about 50% did so. IPC and ABPR have since become Associate members, but, at the time and along with UKIC, they were Full, founder members of ECCO. We asked if our members with separate UKIC / IPC / ABPR membership wished for SSCR representation. With one exception they did. We asked if members without UKIC / IPC / ABPR membership wished for SSCR representation. Without exception they did. We received several comments about the need for a distinct, Scottish voice in ECCO. None thought the Confederation is another example of EC bureaucracy. We asked if members thought they conformed to the amended description of a 'conservator-restorer'. Several did not. At the June 1992 AGM these issues, together with criticisms of ECCO's administration and costs, were raised but the mood of the meeting was positive and, I think it was with two abstentions, the motion was passed that we apply for Full membership.

This has constitutional implications and we are dealing with these now. Together with many conservation organisations, SSCR has developed over the years from a broad base, embracing not only practising conservators and professional colleagues, but also individuals supportive of the Society's aims and activities. At this year's June AGM we will propose amendments to our Constitution to introduce a two-tier structure for Full (or professional) and Associate (supporting) SSCR members. We may then apply for Full membership of ECCO with an identifiable professional SSCR membership category.

It is hard to arouse an appetite for the ECCO menu; the main courses, packed with conservation's equivalent of vitamins and fibre, are not readily digestible and there are no eye-catching hors-d'oeuvres to lure diners to the Euro-table in the first place. ECCO's strength is in the medium and long-term; short-term Pan-European professional and financial benefits are not on offer. In addition, ECCO's administration is perceived as unwieldy and expensive. But, despite geographical and linguistic difficulties, as well as cultural difficulties, progress has been made and ECCO is working. Statutes, a budget and draft Rules of Procedure are in place; EC Directorates and cultural programmes, the Council of Europe and European MPs are being lobbied. An impressive third wave of Membership applications is in the pipeline, and SSCR's is amongst them.

\* \* \* \* \*

SSCR welcomes comment about ECCO or any of our other activities. Our office is now staffed Monday and Thursdays, 9.00 a.m. - 5.00 p.m.

*SSCR  
The Glasite Meeting House  
33 Barony Street  
EDINBURGH EH3 6NX  
Telephone: 031 556 8417  
Fax: 031 557 0049*

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF COMPETITIVE TENDERING FOR CONSERVATORS

*DAVID LEIGH, Head of The Conservation Unit, Museums & Galleries Commission*

The Citizens' Charter of 1991 sets the tone for the competitive culture which is causing increased concern to conservators: *"We are convinced that the widest possible application of competition will benefit the local taxpayer and consumer of services alike"*.

These ringing words merely serve to encapsulate a shift in approach which we have all experienced as citizens over the last fourteen years, but from the practical results of which conservators have managed to remain largely immune until recently. Competition among private conservators has not been an issue, or at best only referred to in fairly agreeable tones. The world of conservation is so small, the family so tight knit (we all know each other so well, having trained in the same institutions, or worked together at some stage) that it has seemed personally unacceptable - too divisive - to take aggressive competitive measures against each other or even to appear to mind too much if someone else gets a job. Although the UKIC Code of Practice does not yet specify it, other conservators' codes countenance against overtly competitive measures such as advertising. Clients, too, have tended to operate in a civilised way, whether as museums or as private owners, and have exercised their choice of conservator discreetly, as befits the humanistic approach normally associated with cultural heritage material, its ownership and its study, even if art and antiques are often traded for their monetary value.

Even the Conservation Register, run by The Conservation Unit, offers to potential clients details of five studios from which the client is invited to choose that conservator most appropriate to their needs. In our leaflet *'How to Choose a Conservator or Restorer'* price is only one of the criteria to be taken into account. There is no sense in which the Register could be seen as primarily an instrument to stimulate competition. Its primary aim is to raise standards.

Times are changing, and the tentacles of competition have reached the cultural heritage. What is more, a recessionary environment is making clients think more stringently about how they spend their money, and forcing conservators to be hungrier for work and more competitive in their marketing. This shift has come late to conservation compared to other more overtly commercial industries in which competition has been the norm for very many years. Indeed in many fields the way in which competition is enacted has become formalised so as to ensure an element of fairness. One accepted approach is competitive tendering, whereby several providers of services or products bid on the basis of price alone to be given work carefully specified by the client.

In coming to grips with these changes, conservators are faced with a number of problems. Firstly, they are unfamiliar with the cut and thrust of the marketplace and so cannot operate effectively within it. They often find its values unsympathetic, at odds with the values and interest of their work. Rightly or wrongly, they see the mores of the marketplaces as a threat to the

quality of their work and to the artworks and historic objects in need of conservation, about which they care at least as much as about their own livelihood. They are wholly unfamiliar with the process of competitive tendering or, worse still, their clients are unfamiliar with this process and conduct it wrongly.

The task facing conservators now is to ensure that the conflicts arising, whether real, imagined or feared, are resolved without harm to the professionals and their businesses and without prejudicing the high standards of conservation work currently on offer in this country.

Before proceeding further, I must make brief reference to something called Compulsory Competitive Tendering. There remains a possibility that local authorities in this country might be forced to extend competitive tendering to the museum service. As regulations stand at present, this is not the case. Competitive tendering is obligatory for some local authority services which are used by museums, such as cleaning and some catering services, and the voluntary contracting out of services is on the increase, but as things stand the official line is *"that while there is clearly some scope for commercial approaches in museum management, the activity as a whole is not a ready candidate for competitive tendering at this stage"* (DoE consultation paper, 1992 Competing for Quality). We need to watch the phrase *"at this stage"* and be ready for the day which may well arrive when museum services are brought into the net.

To summarise the present situation: The legal and commercial relationship between client and conservator has for a long time been casual, but is increasingly moving towards a contractual one, expressed in writing. Contracting or contracting out of conservation by public or private organisations has been normal practice for years (eg. museums funded by Area Museum Councils and historic house owners, respectively) but is on the increase. Competitive tendering is not compulsory, but there is a growing use of this practice, particularly by some large institutions subject to strong financial or governmental pressures, or where large or architectural projects bring conservation into contact with different practices. In due course it may become compulsory for a significant proportion of our public-sector clients.

I will now consider some of the issues for conservation which arise from the practice of competitive tendering. Let us be clear, however, that some of these derive not so much from the practice itself, if properly conducted, as from its improper conduct, from its misuse or abuse by clients unfamiliar with the practice or unfamiliar with dealing with conservators, or from conservators' own unfamiliarity with the practice.

Consider first the situation of the client who does not understand conservation. This situation has frequently been reported when the client is an architect or building contractor of some kind. Individual architects are normally familiar with the practice of CT (because they themselves have to tender for work), but frequently do not apply it according to the rule book when choosing conservators. Their demands on conservators may sometimes be quite unreasonable and match their unreal expectations of what conservators do, how they operate, to what standards they work and how time-consuming conservation can be. The problem partly arises here (and in other situations) from the lowly status of conservators compared with other professionals such as engineers and architects. Conservators may be treated more as artisans whose

practical skills can be bought by the hour, and clients are taken aback when we start using the language of recognised professionals.

Where the work is managed as part of a larger building repair project, the practice of competitive tendering, though being technically correct when applied to the supply of timber or concrete or the supply of replica doors, may sometimes be operated in a way largely unsympathetic to the professional practice and high standards of conservation.

Secondly there is the situation of the client who does understand conservation, but does not understand how competitive tendering works. This situation has caused aggravation for a number of years. Here neither the client nor the conservator may think of the process as competitive tendering. There may be a grant-giving body for instance. It is trying to spend its limited funds wisely. It therefore seeks costed proposals from several conservators. It may or may not tell the conservators that it is doing this, that others are in the field. Sometimes secrecy and confidentiality which properly applies in competitive tendering is in these circumstances mis-used as an excuse to play one conservator off against another.

I hesitate to speculate on the nightmare scenario of the client who knows neither about competitive tendering nor about conservation!

Either of the two main groups of clients, but especially the latter, may give only the skimpiest of instructions to the conservator and expect not just a price, but a detailed inspection and report, possibly involving one or more visits and considerable preparation time for reports. When the reports are compared, they may be written to answer different unspecified briefs, reflecting the conservators' personal judgments about what needs to be done and his or her chosen method and materials. Such reports are not comparable, and the client may be more or (often) less good at interpreting the resulting differences. Even those clients who understand something of conservation may have insufficient specialist insight to appreciate the finer points. Their judgement of price in relation to what is offered by each conservator is almost impossible, yet has to be done.

In such circumstances, all the conservators are being treated unfairly, even more so if they are not aware of what is going on in the client's office. Meanwhile, the client is at risk of making a judgement which is not in the best interests of the art object. The ethical calumny is multiplied when the reports and estimates are collected not all at once, but one after another. The client may consciously or unconsciously adapt the brief to the next conservator down the line, now informed by the findings of the first conservator; worse still, the actual written report from the first conservator may be shown to the second conservator as a kind of freely-gained specification. Needless to say, payment for the preparation of such reports is by no means the norm, and only sometimes are their travel expenses covered.

When these kinds of situation arise, as they increasingly do, then I believe it can only be an improvement to introduce rules which ensure greater fairness to all concerned. Fortunately such rules already exist in the form of various codes of practice for competitive tendering from other fields. All that remains to be done is to adapt those codes to the particular circumstances of conservation. My assumption is that this can be done, and that there is nothing inimical to

ethical conservation practice in the competitive tendering process, provided this is carried out to the letter. As I have said, this is presently not the case.

Perhaps it is relevant to point out that one of the purposes of these rules or codes is to ensure that as far as possible the tenders are so comparable that all that the client finally has to consider is the price, and it is ultimately price alone which determines who gets the job. Put baldly, this at first sounds horrifying, consider the nature of the rules.

The literature in this area is quite considerable, and I have not personally inspected it, but some of the rules of play for competitive tendering which would seem most helpful to conservation are:

1. The intention to hold a tender competition should be open, and made widely known to all those conservators likely to be interested.
2. A single specification should be made available to all potential contractors, so that each is bidding for the same piece of work.
3. The specification should include performance criteria and evaluation processes by which the success of the work will be judged.
4. A shortlist of tenderers who meet the requirements of the client should be drawn up. This will involve making preliminary enquiries, or a questionnaire, or requesting method statements, or interviewing the conservator. No-one should be included on that list whom the client would not wish to employ, so that the selection can be solely on price. Only those conservators are invited to tender.
5. All tender documents are kept sealed until the allotted day, and opened together.
6. The successful and all the unsuccessful tenderers are notified of who has won at what price, and who the other tenderers were.

Additional rules which we might wish to see adopted for conservation are:

7. The person managing the tender process must either him or herself be a professional conservator able to form professional judgments on the work specified OR he or she must be advised by an independent conservation consultant, for whose services the client must expect to pay. It is simply not acceptable for the process to be managed by accountants, building contractors, leisure service managers, or even well-meaning but inexpert grant-giving bodies without expert assistance.
8. Similarly, the specification itself must be drawn up by a professional conservator or by a conservation consultant.
9. Furthermore, the process of assessment of the work during and at the end of it must be undertaken by someone appropriately qualified.

The normal expectation is that reports are provided at the cost of the business which is tendering. This practice may not be sustainable at the current scales of conservation income. In other service industries the tenderer is expected to cover the costs of failed or successful bids by the margins earned on successful bids. It may be appropriate, at least for an interim period, to offer some nominal fee to a limited number of conservators wishing to tender. At the least, their expenses should be paid. But clearly this all depends on circumstances, on distances travelled, and on the complexity and range of the job to be tendered for.

Bear in mind that the tendering process is expensive for the client, and may not bring sufficient financial benefits for smaller jobs. The National Trust does not specify a limit but in practice will not use competitive tendering for work much below £7,000. For many traditional conservation jobs, competitive tendering should not therefore be relevant. However, this may not stop some clients attempting a pseudo competitive tendering process, and it is up to the conservator to insist that the nature of the process actually being used is clearly understood by all parties.

For some projects, it has been suggested that it would be better, and perhaps more cost-effective for the client, not to issue a detailed specification, but a more general brief, on which the conservators tender. The chosen conservator then draws up a detailed specification of the planned work, as an initial part of the job.

In conservation, where practice varies considerably, it should be open for the tenderer to suggest variations on the specification which will not materially alter the price charged; or even perhaps variations that will alter the price. But this would undermine the intention of price-comparability.

It should be possible for the conservator to inspect the work, as well as read the specification, in conditions which ensure that a fair and thorough assessment is made of the work, and in the company, where appropriate, of the client or his/her conservation consultant, either of whom should be prepared to discuss the work in some detail.

Since the course of a conservation treatment is often unpredictable, it should be accepted practice for conservators to depart from the specification and the original price, by notification and agreement, during the course of the treatment, confirmed in writing.

In choosing who should be invited to tender, conservation principles and standards must be taken fully into account. Hence, preliminary investigations should identify the qualifications, experience, and approach of the conservator. Fellowship of a recognised professional body might be one criterion. Another might be membership of the Conservation Register, which entails a whole range of other criteria. In due course, any professional accreditation produced by UKIC or IPC would be another.

Some broader implications arise from these points. We need as a profession to establish and make known standards for the work we do, including the materials and processes we use, so that greater confidence can be felt by clients in the quality of work of a larger number of conservators. The standards being drawn up as part of the exercise towards NVQs will undoubtedly help in this, as will professional accreditation as soon as it comes about.

We must also lead clients to expect to pay for an appropriate level of documentation; and for the costs of any analyses or examinations that are required, whether by the specifier, or by the conservator during the course of the work; and for adequate time to be allowed for this.

We also need conservators to cost their work more realistically than they have in the past and to include in their charges all the overheads associated with their work, including the costs of estimating and tendering. A more level playing field would be created if conservators adopted a more uniform charging regime, when their charging rates would probably come within a closer band than they do at present. Most conservators do not charge nearly enough either to properly cover such overheads, or properly to reflect their true level of training and expertise.

Much of this assumes a more or less drastic change of practice for many conservators. For instance it means that those who are asked to draw up a specification may not be the ones who finally carry out the work specified (though in the small world of conservation this may well not be the case). It means that conservators must become better at estimating and at presenting themselves to potential clients in such a way as to ensure that they are invited to tender. It means that they have to carry out the job strictly according to specification, and within the time and therefore the cost for which they have estimated. If they are to remain solvent, they cannot afford to over-run for there will be no more money to pay for the extra time.

In general it means a degree of professionalism and good business practice which conservators have only in recent years begun to see the need for.

### **Conclusions**

This talk has taken the line that competitive tendering is here to stay, that we have to find a way of living with it, and that it may do conservation no harm. Indeed if it leads to a greater degree of professionalism among conservators it may indeed do us some good.

However, I recognise that there is a down side to all this. For a start, this practice is designed to ensure value for money for the client, and will almost inevitably tend to push prices down. Conservators already work on too fine margins, so cannot afford to have them cut further. Their defence must be to charge realistically and to ensure as far as possible that clients are educated to expect to pay properly for high quality work. This should have happened a long time ago. The need is now that much more urgent. UK conservators cannot afford to have their work undermined by slipshod conservators, and you will certainly not be happy about overseas workers beating you on tenders.

Linked to this fear is the risk that the quality of conservation work will suffer, that somehow conservators will cut corners to achieve low prices. I do not believe this follows, and it is up to you as conservators to make sure that it doesn't, by a combination of the measures I have already described.

If there is a code for conservation we should ensure that it is adhered to as much by those placing contracts as by those tendering for work. When we have such a code, we shall be in a position to demand compliance by clients, provided we

as a profession are prepared to stand together and ensure that all our colleagues of repute operate similarly. UK textile conservators can surely co-operate to that extent, as today's meeting demonstrates!

Is there an ethical conflict between competitive tendering and conservation? I think not. The conservator must be guided in the first place by his or her professional ethical code. If the work specified to be tendered for conflicts with that code, then the conservator is not obliged to tender for it. I realise this is an idealised approach. However, if we simultaneously work towards regularisation of the tendering process according to our own code, then it will be less likely that clients will seek tenders from unethical conservators.

Textile conservators are not alone in their recent worries on this score. Last week the wall paintings conservators of UKIC devoted a whole day to the topic. I gather that archive conservators are equally worried. Archaeological conservators not long ago considered the intricacies of estimating, presumably in response to competitive tendering which has been normal practice in archaeology for the last few years.

What I have presented is a partial analysis of the problems, and some suggestions as to how they should be tackled. My proposal, already hinted at by others, is that UKIC and the other professional bodies should pool resources and effort, possibly with the support of The Conservation Unit, and that within the next year should aim to produce a code of practice for competitive tendering in conservation, possibly containing within it sub-sections specific to the different specialisms, and that workshops should be run to train conservators in this process. Your response to this suggestion would be welcome.

### **Acknowledgements**

My thanks to those speakers at the conference on this topic held by the UKIC Wall Paintings Section, whose ideas I shamelessly translated into parts of this paper; and to several individual conservators who shared with me their concerns about unfortunate experiences of competitive tendering over the last year.

### **References**

Local Authority Museums and the Contracting Out Culture, Museums & Galleries Commission, 1992.

Contracting Out: Basic Principles, NCVO, 1989.

Code of Practice for Competitive Tendering, CIPFA.

Project Management, Dennis Lock, Gower Publications, 4th edition, 1988.

Various NJCC publications available from RIBA publications, including several Codes, such as the Code of Procedure for Single Stage Selective Tendering, 1989.

Successful Bidding and Tendering, P V D Marsh, Gower Publishing.



## THE CHOICE OF CLEANING

*NICOLA GENTLE, Senior Conservator, Victoria & Albert Museum*

In 1991 I spent some time in Sweden studying methods of textile conservation. The overriding impression gained through talking not only to conservators, but to curators of collections, museum staff generally and to the people of Sweden is that everyone can be considered as a custodian of their heritage. This heritage is both cultural and environmental - in Sweden 'the Nature' is important and so is the inheritance of culture.

The conservator is the custodian of all aspects of the object in his or her care, and conservation methods - practical treatment, display, storage - are chosen according to the state of the object.

I have been asked here to talk about the choice of cleaning.

In the past - in Sweden and no doubt elsewhere - many historic textile objects were taken apart as a matter of course and cleaned by washing. This inevitably led to loss of information about the provenance, history and construction of the object and to change in the dimension and possibly the colour of the textiles. The true change in the condition of the fibres was often an unknown factor not necessarily always beneficial.

More recently it has been seen that the benefit and loss accomplished by cleaning have to be brought into balance and, as with all conservation methods, an acceptable compromise has to be found. The conservator is now more aware of the questions of choice, if perhaps not sure of all the answers.

In tests carried out on a 17th century Turkish tent at the Armemuseum, Stockholm, vacuum-cleaning was found to be the least damaging method to give the most efficient results (Meddelelser om Konservering, Marts 1983). Vacuum-cleaning is now regarded as the primary choice of cleaning, either as a treatment alone or prior to wet-cleaning.

In wet-cleaning, the choice can be made between water alone (a choice of tap, softened, distilled, deionised), water plus a detergent (but which detergent?), water plus a washing solution (it is questioned whether a suspending agent such as CMC is always necessary or beneficial).

Within the wet-cleaning process the cleaning agents can be formulated as thought necessary.

The main criteria are that the choice of cleaning method be made to suit the condition, the fibre, the soiling. I refer you to my full report on textile conservation methods in Sweden for all the details and 'arguments' for choice.

Ironically one of the main factors in this widening of thought has been a restriction in availability. Swedish legislation on imports which could cause harm to the environment is strict, and a tighter control is being continually made on the industry within the country itself.

Synperonic N has long been considered to be non-biodegradable because of its phenol content. Judith Hofenk de Graaf in 1982 stated that the oxyethylate of alkyl phenol is not much used any more because of its poor biodegradable properties (Science and Technology in the Service of Conservation, preprints to the Washing Congress, pp.93-95, IIC 1982). However Synperonic N was continued as the nonionic detergent commonly used by conservators in Sweden, Britain and elsewhere. But now its import into Sweden has been banned and an alternative choice has to be found.

My attempts to follow up the alternative detergents seen being used in Sweden 18 months ago have been thwarted by the continuing narrowing of the market there due to environmental concern. At present it seems that conservators are using either a mixture of anionic and nonionic detergents of the types alkyl aryl sulphionate and fatty alcohol ethoxilate, or an anionic alone, sodium alkyl aryl sulphionate.

However my contact with the industry tells me that even these could eventually be phased out and that the way forward is with amphoteric systems.

Meanwhile in Britain it seems that textile conservators continue, rightly or wrongly, to use Synperonic N. This is so at the V&A Museum. But we also have the choice whether or not to wash and there is undoubtedly a more cautious thoughtful approach to finding the balance between the benefit and loss that either wet or dry-cleaning can achieve. And most recently the validity of vacuum-cleaning as a viable, valuable alternative choice has been realised.

Sometimes the compromise can be a difficult one to make.

The silk damask 'choux' from a 17th century State Bed show the improvement not only in appearance but in condition and handle that wet-cleaning can make.

The Melville Bed is a most complex, composite and a most important object. It is an object which will go back on display at the Victoria & Albert Museum as the centrepiece within a suite of new primary galleries. The conflict for the conservator and indeed the curator is to present such an object in its full visual glory while at the same time preserving its full integral value with art historical and social historical information intact.

To dismantle every one of its hangings in order to give the full 'benefit' of washing to each textile would be to destroy the integrity of the whole object, its making up, its unique construction. To attempt to wet or dry-clean most of its composite hangings whole would create dimensional changes causing damaging tensions, dye loss and bleeding, and transfer degradation products of one fibre type to another.

Overall vacuuming and sometimes more concentrated local treatment have to be accepted as the extent of cleaning afforded to most of the pieces.

Fuller use of solvent cleaning is being considered for some of the most soiled pieces where run of excess dye is less critical, red on red.

Here too a choice of cleaning must be made. Tests were carried out on two tassels of mainly floss silk ingrained with black fossil fuel soiling. Industrial methylated spirits proved by far the best cleanser, while Genklene (1.1.1.Trichloroethane) was seen to inhibit removal of this type of dirt.

For one tassel, two baths of IMS provided a good combination of water-based and oil removing properties to solve the soiling present leaving little for the third bath of Genklene to affect.

On the other tassel, two baths of Genklene removed only the oily base leaving a non-lubricated 'dry' soiling or small particles too strongly bonded for the subsequent bath of IMS to remove.

To some extent the textiles of the Melville Bed have to be sacrificed to the integrity of the object as a whole. However it was decided, by agreement between conservator and curator, that some of the silk damask be conserved to its best possible condition at this time using wet-cleaning.

The linings of the two narrow head curtains were chosen as the examples most easily and least destructively isolated for washing and the least visibly contrasting when again replaced - clean against unclean.

Wet-cleaning proved a positive benefit to appearance, condition and handle while loss occurred through dimensional change, the destruction of original stitching and hence the overall construction.

Even within the wet-cleaning of these two linings, reconsideration of the appropriate method occurred over the time between treatments. The first was washed with a composition of Synperonic N and carboxymethyl cellulose. For the second the addition of a buffer (ammonium hydrogen carbonate) was employed in the initial bath and it was noticeable that degradation products and soiling were removed both more rapidly and more effectively.

The linings of the two larger foot curtains will retain most of their original stitching and their true dimensions. They will also retain the soiling which makes them brittle and acidic and which will continue to help their further deterioration.

When ethics allow, the process of wet-cleaning can undoubtedly be of positive benefit to textile objects. But more still needs to be known about the methods and results of wet-cleaning and indeed dry-cleaning before the conservator can make the decisive choice of cleaning.

In 1988 the Textile Conservation Research Committee was set up to investigate the process of wet-cleaning historic textiles through the project Operation Wetclean! The Committee's Chairman, David Howell, will now review the results of the project so far.



## PROGRESS ON OPERATION WETCLEAN

*DAVID HOWELL, Chair, Textile Research Committee*

While apparent interest in Operation Wetclean has always seemed to be very active, the actual response in terms of filled-in forms has been very disappointing. Over the several years that the project has been running, only about 80 forms have been received.

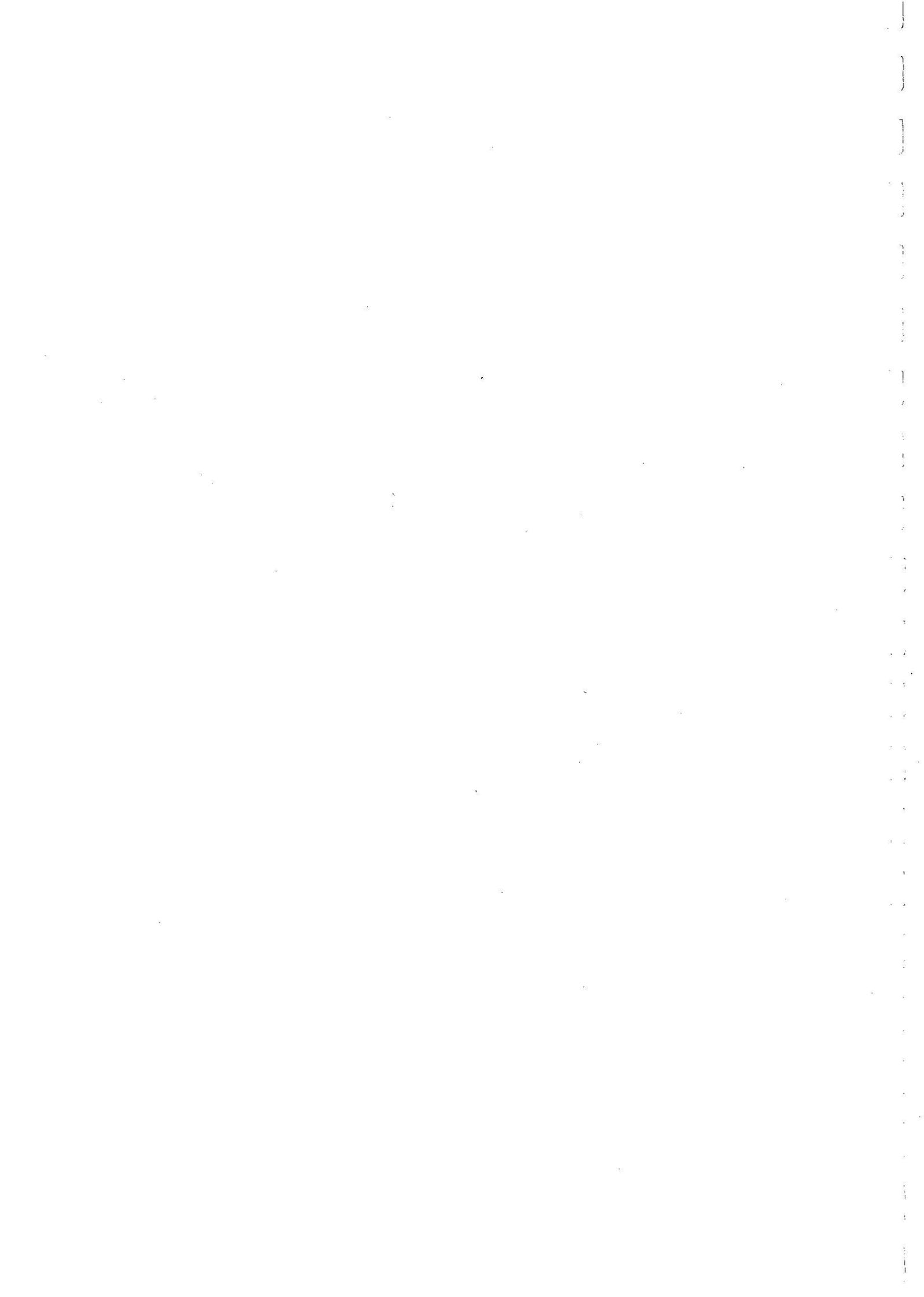
The purpose of Operation Wetclean is to collate as much information on washing methods as carried out in practice, and to evaluate these methods in terms of their effect on degraded textiles. The object was never to ascertain detergency or efficiency of cleaning; it was to try to come to conclusions about whether certain methods were more or less damaging to the textiles.

The condition of textiles, and any change in condition, is of course very subjective. In order for variations in the way objects are evaluated to become less significant it is necessary for a very large number of records to be compared. These could then be analysed by using a statistics programme on a computer which should show up various trends which could then lead on to further research / conclusions.

In order to collect the necessary information a small committee was formed who set about designing an easy to fill in form which would record all the potentially relevant information. After some time, and considerable effort, a form was produced which was thought to be appropriate. While this form has been seen to be complicated and time consuming to fill in, it was considered by the committee to be wrong to remove any of the sections in it as we may then miss out on one of the most important criteria.

On several occasions we have tried to engender more interest in the project, with a newsletter, a poster display, and by word of mouth, but in each case the response has been rather disappointing.

At the moment, those records which have been received are being analysed, and from this statistical analysis we should be able to decide whether we wish to continue with the project. Whatever the eventual outcome of Operation Wetclean is, the information and experience we now have must be looked at and learnt from if any other large project like this is to be attempted again.



## POSTERS

### TEXTS OF POSTERS DISPLAYED AT THE FORUM

#### Asian Buddhist Textiles: Western Conservation Concepts and Ethics

*ANNE AMOS, Senior Conservator, Victoria & Albert Museum*

Most Buddhist cultures have no concept of conservation; should we therefore impose our Western ideals on their textiles?

- Should an object, once it enters a museum's collection, stop being a religious textile?
- If we see them solely as 'textiles', should we be made more aware of their religious significance and treat them with the reverence they deserve?
- Should we then take in-progress photographs, when many Buddhist temples request 'No Photography' on their premises?
- Do we ever consider that we may be causing irreversible defilement?

Poster illustrated by:

- Tibetan 'Black Hat' dancer
- 'Black Hat' dancer's apron (*pang khebs*)

The apron, as all of the costume, would be blessed before being used.  
499b-1905 ch.00342 ch.i.0022 V&A

- Chinese hanging temple banners

Symbolising the human body, this would also be blessed and the blessings emanate from the banner by wafting in the breeze.  
Stein Loan ch.00342, ch.i.0022 V&A

Suffragette Banner 'The Office', Early 20th Century

*MAY BERKOUWER, Private Conservator, Museum of London*

The main conservation problem - and the only point discussed here - was the treatment of the disintegrating silk twill ground fabric.

The considerations in choosing the most suitable treatment were both ethical and technical.

*Ethical:* Should the missing areas of the ground fabric be 'filled in' with a matching support fabric?

If so, then should this be applied throughout? Or in the lower sections only?

*Technical:* Could/should the fabric be supported, and/or did it require a protective cover?

Would sewing or adhesive treatment be preferable, or indeed a combination of the two?

The following alternatives for treatment were proposed, and most tested:

*Inserted support fabric, stitching method*

- using - silk habutai fabric
- matching silk twill thread
  
- couching with - silk filament
- Stabiltex pulled thread
  
- lines placed - vertically
- diagonally, in line with the twill direction.

*Inserted support fabric, adhesive method*

using silk crepeline

*Protective cover*

- using - silk crepeline
- nylon net

- secured by
- adhesive treatment
  - sewing around edges
  - sewing throughout (around edges, between slits, etc.)
  - a combination of above.

### **Conclusion and Decision on Treatment Method**

After the experiments, it was decided to apply an adhered protective cover of silk crepeline (dyed to match), without inserted support fabric.

Main advantages:

- the adhered cover holds the shredding silk in place and prevents further loss of silk fibres;
- there is no damage caused by inserting fabrics or by stitching;
- the choice between silk crepeline and nylon net was easy, the former being the more sympathetic by far.

The inserted support fabric was no longer required with this treatment method. To introduce it would have been purely cosmetic, and would only make a serious difference to the lower sections.

The total cover of silk crepeline, dyed to match, seems to stop the eye from picking up too much on the missing sections of silk twill.

The least interventive treatment method was therefore chosen.

## Too Fragile to Conserve?

*FIONA HUTTON & FRANCES LENNARD, Textile Conservation, Avon*

We recently worked on an eighteenth century embroidery. It was worked in coloured silk yarns on plain-weave, cream-coloured silk fabric and through a layer of plain-weave linen fabric underneath.

The embroidery was tacked onto a wooden stretcher frame.

### **Condition**

The silk fabric was extremely weak, with several small areas of loss. It did not lie flat and sagged in the centre where it was unsupported. This was causing the silk to crack around the edges of the stretcher frame.

### **The Dilemma**

When the embroidery on its stretcher frame was removed from the frame and its true condition was revealed, we were in two minds whether to treat it.

The silk fabric was so fragile that even the least amount of disturbance involved in removing the embroidery from the stretcher frame and supporting it seemed likely to cause some further damage and loss.

On the other hand, if we did not treat it, its condition would continue to deteriorate.

### **Treatment**

The embroidery was removed from the stretcher frame and surface cleaned with low-powered suction to remove the surface soiling.

As the silk was too weak to stitch through, the damaged areas were supported onto a fine silk crepe-line which had been coated with an adhesive. Dyed silk patches were placed underneath the crepe-line.

Finally the embroidery was stitched to a fabric-covered, acid-free board to ensure that it was evenly supported.

## All or Nothing - or Something

### A Flexible Approach to Tapestry Conservation

*KSYNIA MARKO, Manager / Conservator, Textile Conservation Workshop, Blickling Hall*

The cost of conservation continues to rise and in a climate of recession conservators are faced with the dilemma of offering a degree of treatment commensurate to their client's purse and not necessarily that which would be considered 'ideal' in purist conservation terms.

Whereas the 1980s saw a rise in the profession and a virtual elimination of volunteer labour on practical conservation projects, the 1990s will doubtless again see volunteers as a force to be utilised to best advantage. This is even encouraged by the present government where unemployed persons are offered extra benefit if they work as a volunteer for a charity.

Within this climate, conservation becomes an expensive luxury and the conservator must be inventive and flexible when it comes to the choice of treatments.

**Tapestry Conservation** has always been expensive. Labour costs are high because of the many hours involved. It is this area in particular where alternatives to the traditional lengthy couching treatments are required in order to prevent clients resorting to unskilled (cheaper) labour which can result, as has been seen in the past, in permanent damage.

The conservator cannot afford to ignore the real fact of financial constraints if the client has a set of six tapestries and each requires £40,000 plus of treatment.

In many cases full conservation is the only option and if this cannot be afforded then these tapestries are best left alone.

However there are others which can receive modified treatments, either carried out by the conservator or by paid or unpaid skilled needle women under guidance from the conservator.

This concept is not new. Workrooms and volunteers have come and gone. The Textile Workrooms at Hatfield House have now been operating for many years with Joan Kendal's guidance and the treatment of the Sheldon Tapestries there is now nearing completion.

Likewise the relatively new workrooms at Waddesdon Manor, although not engaged on tapestries, are nevertheless undertaking a large curtain project under the direction of Sheila Landi - work which would be extremely expensive if carried out by an all professional team.

Workrooms such as these have had a mixed reception from the profession, but their obvious advantages in the marketplace can outweigh the ethical argument for the client. Such argument in itself, although necessary in providing restraint, can also be misleading and it would be wrong to accuse the 'conservation enlightened volunteer' of non-ethical work.

A joint project has been undertaken by the conservators at Blickling and the Chatsworth Voluntary Textile Conservation Group under the direction of the House Seamstress, Christine Thompson.

The Blickling Studio has undertaken the removal of adhesive, the preparation for and wet-cleaning of a 17th century Brussels tapestry (5.5m x 4.5m). In addition, a full support of fine linen scrim was prepared and attached to the reverse. The scrim was pre-shrunk and marked with tacking lines from top to bottom every 8½" across the width. The tapestry was framed up and the scrim attached section by section in the normal way, allowing 8½" of scrim for every 8" of tapestry. The tapestry was thus supported with the scrim being evenly distributed across the whole of the reverse side, each section marked with tacking holes.

Three of the six member team from Chatsworth spent two days at the Studio, working at the frame, under supervision. Their task was to sew the sections of scrim permanently in position as they worked through the tapestry. In addition they were to undertake support stitching, in the form of laid couching, across all weak areas. Polyester thread (100/3) was chosen in a limited range of colours for the purpose of the laid couching and a polyester (50/3) was used to sew up slits.

To provide overall support, a grid of laid couching lines was to be worked, three lines from top to bottom within each 8" section. More detailed laid couching would then be worked where necessary. This was the alternative support stitching chosen to the more accepted 'darning' technique where details of the design are re-introduced.

The team had to practice these techniques and familiarise themselves with the even distribution of the scrim within each section.

The tapestry was then removed from the frame and transported to Chatsworth where this treatment is now being undertaken.

A full conservation by a professional would have amounted to some £60,000. By offering an alternative solution and thereby ensuring at least some professional involvement, the cost has been reduced by approximately two-thirds.

The Blickling Studio does not offer such advice across the board. This poster merely cites an example of an approach which has caused much ethical discussion, firstly amongst ourselves. We are aware that it is open to both criticism and abuse.

But finally it has enabled a fine 17th century tapestry to be saved from the abuses of former adhesive treatments, rendering it properly clean and safe for display. The present method can be reversed or further stitching can be added at any time in the future.

## The Thangka - Functional Religious Art

*GILL OWENS, Conservator, Victoria & Albert Museum*

Perhaps the multi-media nature of a thangka in its mountings: wood, metal, leather, and textiles as diverse as fine silk and coarse cotton, is one reason why large numbers of thangkas have been cut from their mountings and displayed framed behind glass.

*'As for display, a number of our thangkas from the 1920s were cut from their original mountings and framed'*  
[part of a reply from a Chicago museum to a query about the storage of thangkas]

This comment could have come from many other museums with thangka collection.

Historically, thangkas are part of a long tradition starting with the Indian pata or banner painting, and Chinese hanging scrolls, which spread with Buddhism across the Middle and Far East from the 3rd century AD. Buddhism was established in Tibet by the 7th century.

The purpose of a thangka was to provide a focus for prayer and meditations, and to heighten consciousness. It was only displayed with veils parted for short periods. It was carried, rolled, by travelling monks, to be used as an aid for religious instruction. Very large thangkas were displayed for a day or two at major religious festivals and then rolled or stored. Individuals might commission the painting of a thangka to be displayed at a funeral. The ability to be rolled was an essential part of the thangka's function.

Tibetan thangka mounts are constructed according to strict iconographical precepts, and the non-iconographical elements also play an important part in their religious function. For example the veil, or picture cover, keeps off dirt and protects the painting from the uninitiated eye.

A framed or mounted thangka denies access to the sacred syllables painted on the back of the painting without which it is meaningless.

Sister Wendy Becket suggests that 'inner beauty is closed' to those from a different cultural background viewing a thangka. By displaying it hanging in its mountings we are attempting to acknowledge that:

*'Art as much as wildlife is better understood, appreciated and cared for when it is left in its own cultural or ecological setting'*  
[Paul Wills]

*'The Buddhas need someone to worship them and offer them biscuits and butter-lamps'*  
[His Holiness the Dalai Llama]

## Problems in the Conservation of a Set of I.S.T.C. Banners

### *CONSERVATION SERVICES, General Department, Textile Conservation Centre*

Four out of six very similar banners from the Iron & Steel Trades Confederation have been conserved at the Textile Conservation Centre

They consist of two layers of painted cream silk on either side of a thick brushed cotton interlining, with braid around all sides.

Due to the original construction, the borders were all too tight; this had resulted in severe bagging and creasing of the central fabrics.

After surface cleaning, contact humidification was given to the first banner and stitched support patches were inserted where necessary.

This banner was not disassembled, in order to preserve the original stitching. However, after treatment, the bagging of the fabric was still noticeable.

The second banner was therefore disassembled before receiving similar treatment and the excess fabrics were turned under before the braid was reapplied. This ensured that the banner hung smoothly and could be stored without creases forming.

The third and fourth banners were treated in a similar way.

An additional problem arose due to large areas of loss in the scenery and especially in the lettering of the third banner. Even when specially dyed support fabric was inserted, these were still felt to be visually disturbing. A decision was therefore made to infill these areas.

Following several trials the method chosen was to insert patches of silk coloured with Hilizarin printing pigment between the fabric support and the silk of the banner. In the case of the lettering, only the outlines were painted in, as this was felt to be all that was necessary to recreate the wording.

Because of the extensive damage to the bottom section, it was given a protective overlay of dyed fine net. Stitching was worked through the net, the infills and the support fabric, around the perimeter of the damaged areas.

Both treatments outlined above posed ethical problems in terms of conservation. However, both were considered justifiable. Disassembling the banner was considered essential to ensure its long-term preservation, and infilling helped to re-establish its original pictorial significance.

## Conservation of an Early 16th Century Flemish Tapestry

*CONSERVATION SERVICES, Tapestry Department, Textile Conservation Centre*

The tapestry is Flemish and dates from 1500-1525. It is uncertain as to what the scene depicts. One of the main problems associated with this piece was the patches of tapestry that had been painted to continue the design. These patches were visually disfiguring and some of the joins between the patches and the main tapestry were weak.

The decision was made to remove the patch from the male figure in the background and then to rewarped and couch the missing area.

However, it was decided to retain the two patches in the female figures in the foreground and to strengthen the joins where they were weak.

These decisions were made because the joins of the patch on the male figure were weak and broken in places. Also the design painted onto the patch was the shoulder of the figure, not a complicated, intricate area such as a face.

The female figures are in the foreground and are more prominent in the design of the tapestry. One of the patches has the face of one of the female figures painted onto it; the other patch has drapery of dress painted on it. Also these patches were more securely stitched to the tapestry. Therefore, because they were in more prominent areas of the design of the tapestry and because they were more securely attached to the tapestry, the decision was made to retain them but to strengthen the joins where they were weak.

## Consideration of Protocol when Treating Ceremonial Textiles

*TRACEY WEDGE, Second Year Student, The Textile Conservation Centre*

The treatment of ceremonial textiles from all cultures should be undertaken with an awareness of the significance of each object within its cultural context and an understanding of the correct protocol to be followed when dealing with the object. It is becoming more common that ceremonial textiles/objects held in museums are being made accessible to the people of the culture from whence they originated. These textiles could well be used again in ceremonies and therefore any conservation treatment must take this into account.

Taonga (Maori treasures) in Aotearoa (New Zealand) are being made available to the Maori people. This alters the amount of control which museum staff have over the Taonga, eg. control over the environment is lost. A compromise must be made between a conservator's professional responsibility to stabilise an object as effectively as possible and the cultural 'role', as defined by the users.

Each culture has its own set of beliefs and traditions which dictate that certain protocol must be observed when dealing with sacred objects. The Maori believe that customs, traditions, history, music, oratory, legends, and the needs of the iwi (tribe), hapu (subtribe) and whanau (family) are all reflected by the weaver as she creates a cloak, not for herself alone but for the mana (prestige) of the people (Doig, ed. 1989). Each time a cloak is worn its manu is increased, the most important cloaks being given names and valued as highly as any other treasure. It is important to realise that objects, particularly the Taonga, are subject to the restrictions of tapu (religious restrictions) and therefore treatments and behaviour when dealing with these objects must observe these restrictions. Even though the cloaks may be housed in the museum, the Maori people have access to them for ceremonies and to ensure they still play a pivotal role in Maori culture. Any treatment should not interfere with the future use of the object in ceremonies but should endeavour to preserve the object.

The conservator's experience should be offered with the willingness to learn and observe protocol in consultation with people representing the cultures concerned - when possible. Both have aims for the object and both know the limitations of the object - for the conservator they are the materials involved; for the cultural representatives they are the correct practices towards the object and its significance. This knowledge should be shared for the benefit of both parties and the object.

As stated in the NZPCG Code of Ethics:

*'The opinions, wishes and views of the owner, custodian or other responsible person must be fully acknowledged and considered when discussing a proposal for conservation.'*

The code also states that the true nature of an object must be preserved:

*'The true nature of an object includes evidence of its origins, its original construction and materials, information as to the technology used in its manufacture, and the cultural significance of the object.'*

*'Even with the best codes and policies there is still need for high levels of dialogue. With conservators and curators / owners / custodians better informed of each other's perspectives not only can the objects themselves benefit, but greater access by users can ensue'*  
(McCredie, 1991).

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks to Dinah Eastop for proof-reading and suggestions, Valerie Carson and Rangi Te Kanawa for guidance.

### **REFERENCES**

- Doig, F. (ed). 1998. Taonga Maori Treasures of the New Zealand Maori People. Sydney: Australian Museum.
- McCredie, A. 1991. Relationships between Conservators' Codes of Ethics and the Conservation Policies of Institutions - Common threads, Conflicts and Failings. In New Zealand Museums Journal, Volume 21, Number 1. Journal of the Art Galleries and Museums Association of New Zealand. pp.6-9.
- New Zealand Professional Conservators' Group, 1991. New Zealand Director of Conservators of Cultural Property. Auckland: NZPCG.



## FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

*FRANCES LENNARD, Textile Conservation, Avon*

Many of the topics which were discussed at the forum are of equal interest to conservators in other specialisms. It is encouraging that further work is being undertaken on many of the issues which were raised.

UKIC intends to revise the 'Guidance for Conservation Practice' in the members' handbook this year. One of the sections of the working party which is being set up to implement the proposed changes to UKIC will be looking at this issue.

At the recent AGM of ECCO, UKIC renewed its membership as an associate, rather than as a full, member. While this means that UKIC cannot vote on major decisions, it is still represented on ECCO's working parties and will be involved in forming policy in that way. The UKIC executive committee feels that it is important to show its commitment to ECCO, although this must be dependent on ECCO fulfilling its promises about producing reports and budgets, but that Europe must be a lower priority this year than the internal restructuring of UKIC. At the 1993 AGM of UKIC held in May, this issue was debated by the members, many of whom felt that it was vital for UKIC to take a leading role in shaping the new organisation.

Competitive tendering is an issue which is now of great interest to all conservators. The Professional Practices sub-committee of UKIC has decided to look specifically at competitive tendering and is setting up an across-the-board working party with representation from all the UKIC Specialist Sections, with the aim of producing a code of practice for conservators and for bodies awarding contracts. Sherry Doyal and Liz Flintoff have offered to represent the Textile Section on the working party; between them they have valuable experience of the tendering process as both conservator and client.

There was some debate at the forum about the future of Operation Wet Clean. The statistics gathered so far are currently being evaluated, and a meeting of the Textile Research Committee will be held to determine whether or not Operation Wet Clean can continue. Many textile conservators have expressed a hope that a way will be found to overcome the problems which have come close to halting the valuable work of this project.

One aspect of the forum, and of the Textile Section's programme of events as a whole, which was very evident, was the willingness of textile conservators to discuss the issues which confront them, whether these are directly to do with the treatment of objects or with matters of wider professional practice. It is hoped that this debate will continue as it can only enhance the overall position of textile conservation.

\* \* \* \* \*

