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TEACHING PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION AND TEXTILE TREATMENTS IN ASIA AND AFRICA

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Introduction

The training of fledgling museum staffs in the basics of preventive conservation and textile treatments is a new ongoing effort in the field and an important part of our expanding international role. Teaching collections care to non-conservators gives us, the conservators, the chance to positively influence the stewards of cultural heritage for years to come. Throughout the world, from capital cities to villages, there are treasured collections which have received little or no conservation. Professional staff, village leaders, monks or caretakers, charged as the responsible stewards of their cultural patrimony, are keen for practical guidance. While the cultures, climates, languages, material artefacts and institutions vary, the goals and needs are the same – to train a first generation of conservators or conservation technicians in the basics of preventive care practices, build staff infrastructure and sustainability and improve the methods and conditions for protecting cultural heritage.

This case study covers an approach for teaching preventive conservation theories and practices in countries for the first time. It outlines the training methods and topics, and how they are implemented in developing cultural institutions. It broadly covers preventive conservation and focuses more specifically on the treatment and care of textiles. The experience is guided by field-based workshops conducted in Bhutan, Thailand, Cambodia and Algeria. The case study chronicles the difficulties and rewards inherent in teaching in the field. Included are the challenges of local religious and cultural mores, coordination with local ministries, patrons and funders, the adaptation of local products to solve conservation problems, the implementation of upgraded storage and display methods using local materials, as well as the successes of sustained training to support a first generation of professional conservators.

Philosophical approach

How does an outside teacher influence the political, cultural or religious authorities for the goal of conservation, while respecting centuries-old traditions and deep-rooted power structures? In short,

slowly, through discussions and listening to the prescribed rules of use and channels of authority. The key to success is collaborating to find a middle ground of action.

The first step to ensure success in training and treatment is to accept that as teachers, we are visitors and strangers. The views expressed in the American Institute for Conservation or International Institute for Conservation Codes of Ethics are all subject to philosophical debate and compromise. A guiding principle is NOT to mandate western views of conservation. Conservation in other countries is often about people and living beliefs. Religious and indigenous art is not art 'for art's sake', but objects that are alive, even when housed in museums. Many are imbued with powers of protection and blessings. So, the conservation of these sacred textiles and objects is not about conservation of material culture as we know it, but rather, it becomes people-based conservation, centred around the maintenance of the religion, culture, uses, and how conservation can fit into its philosophy (Brennan, 2008a; Figure 7.6.1).

Experience informs that as guest teachers we can inspire and advise, but that the ultimate say and decision lie with the cultural owner. It is important to provide people with the tools and responsibility to care for their cultural patrimony. This is the core of sustainable training, as it empowers the shareholders from top to bottom. It is essential to work in an environment of seeking the agreement and decisions of colleagues, from royal and religious patrons, to the Minister of Culture and the local caretakers. The resulting work and treatments are a compromise between east and west. The dialogue that ensues is what drives the course of the project. Small changes should be heralded as triumphs, such as not removing the old brocade mounts on the thangkas, but instead



Figure 7.6.1 Rolling a large devotional scroll in a monastery in Bhutan. Author's image, National Textile Museum, Thimphu, Bhutan.

stabilizing them, the washing of hands or wearing of gloves, installing curtains to block sunlight or saving a historic column for placement in a tourist hotel. These are the manifestations of basic conservation theories.

Preparation

Thoroughly prepare before the project starts. Correspond with hosts and funders to determine the scope of work and their requests. Obtain feedback on the working space, collections, staff and goals of the institution or representative. Honouring the work requests of the hosts provides mutual respect and helps ensure a successful project. Electronic communications have expedited correspondence and are vital tools for advanced communications. Photos of objects that are a priority for conservation can be exchanged and assist with the preselection of needed materials. Photos of storage rooms and galleries, staff and workrooms will help inform plans and purchases. Consider the frame (often short) and achievable goals (always huge) and prepare to be flexible in the scope of work, goals, tasks and staffing.

Evaluate if the budget affords large shipments, and the transport time, costs and duties. Work with your local conservation supply companies on discount shipments, pro bono services and promotional incentives. Many 'western' conservation supplies are not available in the Global South. Consider the climate and select the appropriate materials. For example, acid-free boxes will not survive or serve their purpose in a non climate-controlled tropical environment. On a more modest scale, secure a budget for basic supplies which will facilitate immediate implementation of the scope of work. Bring the basics for conservation treatments and climate and pest monitoring. Compile printed teaching materials and glossaries of terms, tailoring the syllabus to the specific project. Take conservation supply catalogues, as they serve as valuable visual teaching tools and help to identify future needs of the institution. They become favourite and dog-eared tomes.

Consider the local dress code and pack appropriately. Take small presents for the staff and hosts of the project. These are greatly appreciated, and often the culture dictates the return of farewell presents. Take a dossier of printed photos of your family, home, garden, urban infrastructure, studio, pets, lab, museum, exhibits and treatment work. Everyone loves seeing the teacher's heartland.

Theory and hand skills go hand in hand with tools

The most effective and practical approach to teaching preventive conservation is object based. Museums, monasteries and villages are packed with artefacts in need of basic remedial care and improved storage, as well as intensive treatment. Utilizing these collections as teaching tools will empower the trainees and benefit the objects. Lectures and review of theories should tie directly to the tasks. Demonstrate through theory and practice the importance of preventive conservation and collections care, and how it ultimately saves artefacts. It is important to impart this to all staff and shareholders, so that everyone is empowered to take individual responsibility. Generally, advance surveys and assessments cannot precede treatment and intervention. Fieldwork including triage, techniques of care and rescue are taught on the actual artefacts, alongside the staff.

Try to divide collections into workable categories, so that within the given time there is measurable success. Identify a group of objects that can be treated, a group of objects that can be rehoused and a group of objects to mount for display. Use the collections to teach documentation and condition report writing. Teaching this topic is particularly important for the security and long-term

maintenance of national collections. Proper labelling is another important preventive care measure and can be coordinated with documentation. Use the collection to address complex subjects such as cleaning. Demonstrate simple cleaning techniques, both wet, surface cleaning and vacuuming, with warnings about the pitfalls and irreversibility. Build a common understanding about the effects of treatment and cleaning, so that trainees can make informed decisions in the future. Use current storerooms and display areas to critique and teach about the environmental conditions, humidity, light and pest management. Address these agents of deterioration on site, building a consensus of how to improve or augment conditions (Figure 7.6.2).

Long-term training tools can include textile conservation kits and conservation-stitching samplers. For textile work, provide each participant with a sturdy tool pouch containing scissors, tape measure, gloves, magnifying glass, scalpels, spatulas, tweezers, needles, pins, threads, humidity-indicating cards and sticky traps. For basic training, have each participant stitch a sampler chronicling the 12 essential stitches used in conservation. Name the stitches in English and the local language and write on the samplers. In addition, provide each trainee with a large file book for condition and treatment reports, before and after photographs, checklists for cleaning, storage, terminology, and lists of suppliers and emergency contacts. All these documents should be translated as templates into the local language for future use. Assign conservation topics, such as integrated pest management, climate monitoring, methods of storage and display, care and handling of artefacts, and assign groups to research and give short presentations. Continually review basic preventive conservation theories and administer quizzes to gauge the trainees' comprehension. Finally, award



Figure 7.6.2 A traditional scroll storage box is buffered with Marvel Seal, Bhutan. Author's image, National Textile Museum, Thimphu, Bhutan.

the participants graduation certificates containing the signatures and official insignia of museum directors, funders, Minister of Culture or other appropriate government officials. In most countries, proof of participation in a training workshop is critical for continued study and advancement.

Teaching conservation topics

The actual tasks and scope of work adjust with each project. When conducting the first conservation training workshop in a location, focus on preventive conservation and collections care (Gillies & Putt, 1999). This broad approach covering fundamental principles will have greater long-term impact than focusing specifically on treatments. For repeat workshops, augment the level of conservation theory, skills and treatments, advancing the most suitable candidates. Employ previously trained staff to co-teach and facilitate the workshop.

The following is a general list of topics and tasks covered in a first-time preventive conservation training workshop, with a focus on textile collections:

Environmental evaluations and monitoring – Cover the standards for acceptable humidity and temperature levels, teach how to use hygrothermographs, dataloggers, monitoring apps from smart phones and humidity indicator cards, and keep written records. Utilize locally available products such as fans or dehumidifiers to modify conditions. Address issues of airborne pollutants and methods for blocking them. Discuss the pitfalls of food and plants within collection spaces.

Lighting – Cover the basic principles of safe lighting, the use of smart phone apps to take readings in the galleries, storage and work spaces, and advise on methods to adjust and reduce harmful light.

Pest management – Use sticky traps and maintenance charts to train in the identification and monitoring of insect and rodent infestations. Create an illustrated local insect chart. Advise on mitigation of infestations. Isolate or move vulnerable objects to metal cabinets to prevent rodent destruction.

Care and handling – This is one of the most important topics and needs to be repeatedly reinforced. Supply gloves, practise moving objects and stress the importance of teamwork.

Documentation and labelling – This is another important preventive conservation measure. Repeatedly teach how to write clear descriptions and condition reports in order to establish a baseline for the collections. Stress the importance of careful observation, simple language and accuracy. Teach methods of labelling objects.

Cyclic maintenance and routine cleaning – Establish simple routines to ensure the stability of the collections and mitigate the need for extensive treatments. Address the advantages and disadvantages of cleaning, and train in safe methods of cleaning artefacts on display. Train in safe methods of vacuuming textiles, using a protective screen and working in pairs.

Display – Review existing methods of display and use this as a teaching tool for alternative and safer methods of display. Cover the different textile display techniques and underlying principles, such as free hanging with Velcro® or fabric sleeve, full support stitch mounts, roller mounts, three-dimensional supports and mannequins, case and flat display (Figure 7.6.3). Use pieces in the collection to make examples of these methods. Review safe methods for display and protection while objects are in use, such as on an altar or in a public location.

Storage – Critique existing storage environments and devise a plan to improve current methods. Stress the importance of safe long-term storage and regular monitoring. Teach how to roll textiles, construct padded hangers and make support mats and padded supports for three-dimensional objects. Source local materials such as cabinetry, neutral pH mulberry paper, muslin, PVC pipes and polyethylene boxes for storage purposes.



Figure 7.6.3 Introducing the method of hanging carpets using Velcro® at the Bardo National Museum, Algeria. Author's image, Musée National du Bardo, Algiers.

Treatment – Stress the importance of long-term preventive care of collections to mitigate the need for treatments. It is important to address the complex subject of treatment, its fundamental principles and applications. Identify a group of objects that can be treated in the workshop time frame, and demonstrate methods of cleaning, stabilization and repair. Teach trainees how to write treatment reports and document specific damages. Discuss reversibility, documentation and exacting practices. Implement treatments that can be utilized in future work independently by trainees. Involve museum directors and high-level shareholders in the oversight process.

Successes and compromises

Are these conservation projects executed with 'lower standards' than in the US? Are different treatment principles and the use of imperfect materials compromising conservation standards? Should conservation guidelines be adjusted to suit the particular culture and artefact? Yes, to all of these. Most conservation work conducted in the Global South is done within the limits of locally available materials and with respect for the people who use and care for it. Often people are being trained for the first time in strange, radically new ideas of conservation. To change centuries-old habits and traditions takes years, and moreover, some traditional practices have applicability. The best approach is collaborative compromise, respecting the needs of both hosts and outside teachers. Success will be evident in the sustainability of the practices, the continued application of what has been taught and the desire to learn more and protect more (Figure 7.6.4).



Figure 7.6.4 Training in methods of examination, terminology, and creating detailed descriptions and condition records, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Cambodia. Author's image, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Cambodia.

The conservation of living ‘relics’ poses multiple challenges with regard to the selection of appropriate conservation treatments for the continued use of the objects. Treatment has to be in accord with the theological guidelines which dictate use, as well as the political and educational chain of command. Gaining people’s confidence is the most important foundation, and truly the reason why conservators are invited back to continue to train and have access to extremely revered and protected objects. When working on relics and living objects, securing permission from the highest level of stakeholders is vital. Part of the challenge is to convince and assure the authorities that conservation will enhance and extend the life of the artefact. In turn, it is wise to gracefully accept the limits imposed by culture, such as the purification of the conservator and workspace, the blessing of insects in a Buddhist monastery before extermination, the saving of washing water from a relic to water living plants, and restrictions on entering certain spaces or touching certain artefacts. Measurable successes from training are evident in small ways and should be commended. These can include the continued practice of hand washing, placing protective muslin over exposed textiles, limiting the number of butter lamps on each altar, placing curtains over frescoes and wall paintings, and the removal of food materials from storage rooms. Over time these practices become second nature, and trained stewards teach others.

Sometimes a landmark innovation is introduced and embraced by the shareholders. The implementation of anoxic microenvironment for long-term textile storage in Bhutan is such a case. It is a highly sophisticated, yet low-tech, solution for the storage of protein-based textiles, protecting

them from insects, mould and airborne pollutants in a location where climate control is impossible to achieve. Ten trainees were coached over the course of several years in the methods of executing the system. Over two decades, more than 300,000 textiles have been safely stored. Important national treasures and relics residing in rural repositories have been placed in anoxic environments for long-term safety. Small museums in other countries have observed this system and are adapting it for their own collections. This storage innovation has not only protected many artefacts for the long term but also boosted Bhutan's international conservation profile and forged collaborations between Bhutan and other neighbouring countries (Brennan, 2008b).

The future

As more countries take an active role in protecting their cultural property, the resulting protection and promotion of culture is a source of national pride and builds alliances with international organizations such as the International Council of Museums and visiting tourists. Repeated trainings have fostered a first generation of conservators in countries where preservation protocols were little known previously. Increased professionalism and confidence of the trainees can be attributed to their personal commitment to support the preservation of cultural heritage. They continue to work on collections, treatment and preventive work with a focused dedication, utilizing their skills and knowledge. Some have established themselves as recognized specialists and divisions within the museums and ministries, training others and setting up satellite projects. Their successful conservation contributions are recognized throughout the cultural community.

These are small steps towards national policies of cultural preservation. Conservation labs need to be established, and advanced training in various disciplines and materials needs to be coupled with continued education, internships and exchanges. Textile conservators can serve as ambassadors in the field, to impart basic fundamental principles of conservation and forge alliances with colleagues around the world.

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