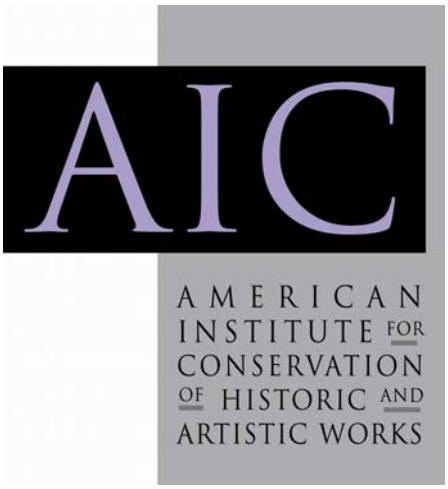

Defining the Conservator: Essential Competencies

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) is pleased to present *Defining the Conservator: Essential Competencies*. The purpose of this document, ratified by the AIC Board on May 20, 2003, is to define the essential competencies of a conservator at present. It is recognized that the specifics contained within this document are subject to change over time, reflecting the continual evolution of the conservation profession. Providing an outline of the basic competencies that define a conservator today however, assists in advancing the profession and in making it more comprehensible to other professional groups and the public at large.

The Board of Directors of AIC is grateful to not only the members of the Qualifications Task Force, who coordinated and authored the text of this document, but to all members of AIC whose thoughts, opinions, and experiences are embodied here and without whose support this document could not have been realized.

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) is a non-profit national membership organization dedicated to preserving the art and historical artifacts of our cultural heritage for future generations. AIC advances the practice and promotes the importance of the preservation of cultural property by establishing and upholding professional standards, and coordinating the exchange of knowledge, research and publications. AIC was founded in 1972 and currently has a national and international membership of over 3500 conservation professionals.

American Institute for Conservation
of Historic & Artistic Works

Defining the Conservator:
Essential Competencies

Defining the Conservator:
Essential Competencies

I. Purpose and Scope

The Board of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) formed the Qualifications Task Force in August 2000. Its members were charged to define the essential areas of knowledge and skills that characterize the conservator. (For background and context on definitions in the field of conservation, see Appendix 1.) The task force was asked to use, as a mental construct, an individual at the very inception of his or her professional career; that is, the point at which a conservator crosses the line into the professional world, the point at which one declares that he or she is a conservator – not a student, not an intern, not a trainee, but a conservator. Therefore, this document identifies the competencies that, taken as a whole, can be regarded as fundamental to the definition of the conservator. It is understood that these fundamental competencies are held in common by conservators of all specialties.

As a profession, conservation represents the embodiment of a canon of knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience. This document will contribute to the continuing process of articulating the extent to which we must be qualified as conservators to conform to the standards of our profession. Conservation is not only an important humanistic discipline but also an essential means of ensuring that cultural heritage will be better preserved for and enjoyed by future generations. (For a discussion of the concept of cultural heritage, see Appendix 2.)

II. Essential Competencies of the Conservator

According to the AIC Definitions of Conservation Terminology, a conservator is:

> A professional whose primary occupation is the practice of conservation and who, through specialized education, knowledge, training, and experience, formulates and implements all the activities of conservation in accordance with an ethical code such as the AIC *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice*.[1]

In practical terms, this definition requires that the conservator possess the expertise to preserve cultural heritage in a way that retains the integrity of the object, building or site, including its historical significance, context, and aesthetic or visual aspects.

For the purpose of this document, the word “competencies” has been used to designate the knowledge, skills, and abilities that constitute the expertise required of the conservator. The intent is to identify general competencies necessary for all specialties. The degree of proficiency required in any specific competency may vary according to the conservation specialty and the

given task. It should be emphasized that possessing each separate competency is not in itself sufficient, but rather that to be a qualified conservator one must utilize these competencies synergistically to maintain the standards of practice required by the profession.

Today it is increasingly assumed that the conservator must have an undergraduate university degree. This basic level of formal education is generally regarded as helpful in attaining proficiency in critical thinking, communication, and resource organization and management. All of these skills are important in every profession and field of endeavor involving reasoning. Beyond undergraduate education, it is assumed that the conservator will have had extensive theoretical and practical education and training relating to the field of conservation and to one or more specific areas of specialization. Furthermore, because cultural heritage speaks to us through our senses, and because the physical integrity and intangible qualities of cultural heritage are so important, it should be self-evident that to carry out an examination and treatment, the conservator must possess intrinsic sensitivity to the materials of which cultural heritage is made. The conservator should aspire to develop and enhance these sensitivities throughout his or her career.

The areas of competency are as follows:

1. Conservation Terminology
2. Conservation History, Ethics, and Philosophy
3. Values and Significance
4. History of Technology of Cultural Heritage
5. Access and Use of Cultural Heritage
6. Health and Safety Policies and Regulations
7. Scientific Principles and Methods
8. Processes of Deterioration and Change
9. Preventive Care
10. Examination Methods
11. Documentation
12. Treatment Methods

1. Conservation Terminology

The nomenclature or language of technical terms used in conservation.

All disciplines use a specialized language that represents concepts and facilitates communication. Each of these languages has its own history and each changes and evolves over time. The conservator must have a working knowledge of the vocabulary of conservation and scientific methodology in order to effectively examine an object, assess its state, understand its history, and articulate its needs. This vocabulary includes both general terms that are used widely within every conservation specialty and terms that are used primarily within one or two fields of specialization.[2]

2. Conservation History, Ethics, and Philosophy

The historical development of concepts motivating conservation activity, objectives of conservation practice, and ethics and standards governing professional conduct.

The judgment and actions of the conservator must be guided by a familiarity with how and why current practices have evolved and what conservation treatment methods were used in the past. In formulating a treatment the conservator must also have a firm grasp of the philosophical precepts expressed in the AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice. The conservator must understand, for example, that it is important to respect the integrity of the object, that intervention in the life of an object is a solemn responsibility, and that his or her actions should not jeopardize the long-term preservation of the object.[3]

3. Values and Significance

The values and significance of cultural heritage, and the role of research and conservation practice in preservation of these attributes.

An understanding and appreciation of the aesthetic, cultural, economic, historical, political, religious, scientific, and social values of objects, buildings, and sites are critically important when devising preservation and conservation plans, strategies, and treatments. When caring for and treating cultural heritage, the conservator must be aware of and consider knowledge relating to these values, on the basis of which society establishes the significance of cultural heritage. Although conservation and preservation decisions may be viewed as technical in nature, the conservator must be aware that these decisions are themselves profoundly influenced by past, present, and future societal attitudes and values.[4]

4. History of Technology of Cultural Heritage

The qualities, attributes, and distinctive features of materials that constitute cultural heritage and the history and technology of their use, as well as those materials that are used in connection with care and treatment.

Knowing how materials constituting cultural heritage were acquired, modified, processed, or manufactured, and how craft or manufacturing techniques and processes have evolved through time is essential to understanding objects before undertaking their care and treatment. The conservator must also possess knowledge of the chemical and physical properties and long-term behavior of a wide range of materials, whether these materials were used in the original fabrication of an object or in its subsequent treatment and preservation. [5]

5. Access and Use of Cultural Heritage

The methods and strategies for promoting preservation of cultural heritage within a context of appropriate access and use.

The conservator must be cognizant of issues arising from the ways that culturally significant materials will be accessed or used by society. Among the customary means by which objects are made available to constituents include museum exhibition and display; libraries and archives; archaeological and ethnographic sites, landscapes, and built structures. All these and the many others, require protection and interpretation. The conservator must have knowledge of the context in which cultural heritage is used, as context may be critically important to understanding its condition, formulating appropriate treatment, and recommending future care. Diverse responsibilities may be associated with this competency, including, for example, replicating originals; reformatting; evaluating environmental factors and security; designing and building mounts, cases, and transit containers; and establishing guidelines and procedures for publicity needs and access for those with disabilities.[6]

6. Health and Safety Policies and Regulations

Health and safety policies, procedures, and regulations, especially as they pertain to the practice of conservation.

The conservator must be knowledgeable about safety in the workplace and must carry out his or her practice in compliance with federal, state, and local regulations. The conservator must also be familiar with safety issues such as control measures for certain hazardous materials, use of safety equipment and standard operating procedures, and training of staff in safe practices. The ultimate purpose is to minimize or avoid risks and hazards to humans, the environment, and cultural heritage.[7]

7. Scientific Principles and Methods

The fundamental principles of science, methods governing scientific research, and their application to conservation.

The conservator must have a working knowledge of scientific principles as they apply to conservation, including how to access and use scientific literature and how to assess the validity of published research in conservation and allied fields. Such knowledge is essential for independent research. The conservator must have a working knowledge of scientific and analytical techniques for identifying materials and/or determining changes in these materials. The conservator must be able to use this knowledge appropriately in conjunction with the preservation of cultural heritage and must also be aware of analytical techniques and treatments that may compromise future research on the cultural heritage. Depending upon specialty, the conservator may need to collaborate with or consult chemists, biologists, engineers, geologists, oceanographers, physicists, and others.[8]

8. Processes of Deterioration and Change

Factors and mechanisms that may chemically and physically change, damage, or destroy cultural heritage over time, and the means to arrest, counteract, or impede destructive processes in order to promote the long-term preservation of cultural heritage.

The conservator must be able to recognize and understand the changes that occur in cultural heritage over time and to distinguish the cause of the changes, whether from natural chemical, physical, or biological processes, or from human influences such as deliberate change or alteration by a hand other than that of the maker. Knowledge of the mechanisms of change helps the conservator formulate actions and select materials to preserve cultural heritage.[9]

9. Preventive Care

The mitigation of deterioration and damage to cultural heritage through the formulation and implementation of policies and procedures for appropriate environmental conditions; handling and maintenance procedures for storage, exhibition, packing, transport, and use; integrated pest management; emergency preparedness and response; and reformatting/duplication.

The conservator must be versed in the many ways in which light, relative humidity, temperature, and pollutants can influence the long-term preservation of cultural heritage and must be familiar with techniques, equipment, and resources that can assist in managing these important environmental factors. The conservator must know how to identify threats to cultural heritage such as harmful materials in their immediate surroundings or the potential for accidents stemming from inadequate physical protection or housing. The conservator must be able to play a key role in recommending methods and taking action to protect cultural heritage from the adverse effects of injurious substances in the vicinity as well as in developing programs and methods for upgrading the quality of this physical environment. The conservator should be familiar with current practices of dealing with harmful pests by using integrated methods that reduce risks to collections. The conservator should also have at least a basic knowledge of the fundamentals of emergency preparedness and be familiar with some of the techniques, materials, and resources that would aid in processes of response and recovery.[10]

10. Examination Methods

The systematic procedures required to investigate the structure, materials, and physical state of cultural heritage, including the identification of the extent and causes of change and deterioration.

The conservator must be able to conduct a safe, thorough examination of cultural materials in order to gather relevant information about their condition and to formulate an appropriate plan for preservation and treatment. The conservator must know which tools and techniques are

appropriate, how extensive the examination should be, and how or whether to perform external, intrusive, and occasionally destructive sampling. Furthermore, the conservator must be able to recognize when it is necessary to seek support from others with additional expertise in various methods of analysis, given that many analytical tools available today require considerable knowledge and experience for proper operation and the interpretation of results. Such tools must, however, be regarded as supplements, not substitutes, for the perceptions, knowledge, skill, critical thinking, and experience of the conservator.[11]

11. Documentation

The procedures, practices, and rationale for recording in a permanent format the information derived from examination, research, analysis, and treatment of cultural heritage.

The conservator must understand the purposes of documentation and must be knowledgeable and proficient in appropriate methods of written and pictorial documentation as well as in the maintenance and preservation of the body of information produced during examination and treatment. In assessing the condition of an object, building, or site, the conservator should be adept in the use of all resources relevant to thoughtful decisions on treatment and care. Research and data collection will aid in the establishment of the various contexts of cultural heritage, such as artistic, historical, social, cultural and scientific. Information concerning prior treatment and housing can be useful to the conservator, and records generated during subsequent treatment can be important in determining future care or treatment.[12]

12. Treatment Methods

The body of tools, equipment, materials, practices, procedures, and methods used to deliberately alter the chemical and/or physical characteristics of cultural heritage in order to achieve appropriate goals, such as prolonging the expected life of objects and helping to promote better understanding of their intrinsic properties and meaning.

It is in this, perhaps the most crucial of all competencies, that the full gamut of manual skills, knowledge, and experience of the conservator must combine to ensure the ongoing significance and long-term well being of an object of cultural importance. The conservator must have an awareness of various treatment methods available as well as their effects on different types of cultural heritage, based on an understanding of condition, natural use, cultural, historic, and scientific significance, and, if applicable, the artist's or maker's intent. Lack of competency in this area cannot be offset by knowledge and skills in other areas. It is in the decision to treat, or equally the decision not to treat, cultural heritage that a conservator may have a profound, long-lasting effect on it. Practical abilities necessary for the conservator, depending on specialty, may include but are not limited to drawing, painting, color matching, sewing, weaving, carving, casting, and other artistic or craft skills.[13]

Notes

[1] American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, AIC Definitions of Conservation Terminology, in AIC Directory, 2003, p. AIC-22. Also available at http://www.conservation-us.org

[2] The AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice contain 13 ethical precepts and 29 guidelines that provide fundamental guidance for the practice of conservation. Sections of the Code of Ethics and the Guidelines for Practice that are relevant to some degree are referenced in footnotes following the description of each competency, although in general both the Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice underlie all the competencies described in this document. For example, for the competency Conservation Terminology refer to Code of Ethics I, VII, VIII, XI, and Guidelines for Practice 2, 5, 9, 20, 24, 25, 26, 27. The Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice are in AIC Directory, 2003, pp. 22-29.

[3] Code of Ethics, entire document; Guidelines for Practice, entire document and Commentaries, AIC, pp. 29-64.

[4] Code of Ethics, I, II, VI, VIII; Guidelines for Practice, 3, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28.

[5] Code of Ethics, II, III, VI, VIII; Guidelines for Practice, 3, 4b, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27.

[6] Code of Ethics, II, III, VII, VIII; Guidelines for Practice, 3, 4b, 20, 21, 22, 29.

[7] Code of Ethics, XII; Guidelines for Practice, 3, 4a, 8, 22, 29.

[8] Code of Ethics, II, VI, VII, VIII, XII; Guidelines for Practice, 2, 4a, 16, 17, 18, 19, 22, 24, 27.

[9] Code of Ethics, II, III, VI, VII, VIII; Guidelines for Practice, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28.

[10] Code of Ethics, I, II, III, VI, VII, VIII; Guidelines for Practice, 3, 4b, 8, 16, 20, 24, 25, 28, 29.

[11] Code of Ethics, I, II, VI, VII; Guidelines for Practice, 16, 17, 18, 19, 24.

[12] Code of Ethics, I, VII; Guidelines for Practice, 5, 6, 7, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28.

[13] Code of Ethics, I, II, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII; Guidelines for Practice, 3, 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d, 4e, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26.

Appendix 1: Background and Context

Since at least 1930, there has been an ongoing effort to understand and define the field of conservation. In 2000 the International Institute for Conservation (IIC) published an overview of its own history[1] and cited the Rome Conference, October 13-17, 1930, as an important early effort to document changing ideas and attitudes toward conservation and conservators. George Stout noted that the Rome Conference seemed "to have come at or near the end of an indefinitely long period of complacency with respect to the conservation of works of art."[2] Stout remarked elsewhere that prior to this conference, restoration "was a trade, a craft in which the craftsman could lay claim to diverse and irregular funds of knowledge and ability. By 1930 there was vocal disquiet; many art historians and a few curators and collectors complained and asked for more rigid standards of qualification for those who would practice as restorers."[3] The IIC was founded in 1950, and within the next decade the American Group of the IIC had been established.[4]

In 1963, the IIC-AG (subsequently AIC) was the first group of art conservators to adopt a written set of standards of practice and professional relations, initially titled The Report of the Murray Pease Committee: IIC American Group Standards of Practice and Professional Relations for Conservators. In 1967, the first formulation of a code of ethics was also adopted. Both these landmark documents (now called the *AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice*) have been revised in subsequent years, but they stand as important efforts to codify professional conduct by conservators.[5] Recently, these guidelines have been further amplified through the addition of a set of Commentaries to the Guidelines for Practice.[6] The Commentaries Task Force wrote the Commentaries from 1995 to 2000 after extensive consultations with the membership of AIC. In 1979, the Australian International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) adopted the Burra Charter, which sets forth "a standard of practice for those who provide advice, make decisions about, or undertake works to places of cultural significance."[7] In 1986, the Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property published its *Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice*, which is now in its third edition.[8]

The Collections Care Task Force (CCTF) of AIC, formed in 1994, was charged with developing guidelines for training of conservation technicians. This task force identified the need to define the knowledge and skills associated with conservators, in contrast with those of conservation technicians.

In 1999 the Certification Task Force convened at a retreat with representatives from several AIC committees and the AIC Board to discuss the feasibility and process for certifying conservators. One of the major elements identified was the need to define the minimum knowledge expected of the conservator. This need, also identified by the CCTF, led to the decision by the AIC Board to form the Qualifications Task Force (QTF) to define minimum qualifications for a conservator in the United States. The work of the CCTF, as well as review of related documents from other sources, has been indispensable in preparing the present document.

This document was developed not only by a series of meetings of the QTF members but also by soliciting suggestions and feedback from several groups so that the final document would

represent as broadly as possible the ideas of many people within the conservation community. This series of meetings included an AIC Board retreat in Boston in March 2001, at which a number of heads of AIC committees provided useful guidance. Following this meeting, a draft report in narrative format was prepared and presented to a meeting of the AIC Internal Advisory Group (IAG) in February 2002, which permitted feedback from a larger number of key representatives within AIC. Opinions of the faculty of the graduate conservation training programs were also solicited. The comments and suggestions from these groups were highly significant in shaping the direction of the work of the QTF, and to a great extent they helped shaped this document. A subsequent draft was advertised through the AIC Announce (an electronic membership message distribution list), making it available to the entire membership of AIC both by request from the AIC office and by posting it on the Internet. This draft was also presented and discussed at the Issues Session of the AIC Annual Meeting in Miami, June 2002, and a request was again made for comment from the entire membership through the AIC *News*. In the January and March, 2003 issues of the AIC *News*, as well as by posting on the AIC Announce, the membership was again solicited for comments and suggestions. In addition, the Chairs of the Specialty Groups volunteered to collect comments from their constituents, which were then forwarded for consideration by the QTF. This final document represents the work of many more individuals than the QTF itself, and the members of the task force join the AIC Board of Directors in expressing deep gratitude to the many people who took time to offer such excellent suggestions.

Notes to Appendix 1

[1] Hero Boothroyd Brooks, A Short History of IIC: Foundation and Development (London: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 2000).

[2] Quoted in ibid. p. 3.

[3] George L. Stout, "Thirty Years of Conservation in the Arts: A Summary of Remarks to the I.I.C. American Group in New York, June 1963," *Studies in Conservation*, 9 (1964): 126.

[4] The IIC was incorporated on April 27, 1950; the organization was then called The International Institute for Conservation of Museum Objects. By the time of its incorporation, a decision was made to recognize two categories of members, one for Fellows, and another for those "who were not conservation professionals." Brooks, "Short History," p. 15. The American Group of the IIC was founded by vote of the IIC Council in June 1958. AIC was incorporated as a separate organization in 1972.

[5] Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, printed in AIC Directory, 2003, pp. AIC 22-29, also available at http://www.conservation-us.org.

[6] Commentaries to the Guidelines for Practice of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, AIC Directory, 2003, pp. AIC 29-60, also available at http://www.conservation-us.org.

[7] Australia International Council on Monuments and Sites, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance, rev. 1999, unpaginated. Available at http://www.icomos.org/australia.

[8] Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property, *Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice of the Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property and of the Canadian Association of Professional Conservators*, 3rd ed., 2000, available at http://www.cac-accr.ca/ecodeth1.html.

Appendix 2: The Concept of Cultural Heritage

The term "cultural heritage" reflects a shift in emphasis that has taken place during the past few decades toward recognizing that material culture embodies both tangible and intangible qualities. Intangible qualities include the range of values and significance that accrue to objects over time — starting at the moment of their creation until their designation as heritage.

Conservation now requires an awareness of the many cultural, historical, material, political, religious, and other values that add meaning to the material manifestations of heritage, whether they are objects, buildings, or sites. This awareness has, in turn, influenced the ways in which conservators must approach their work and carry out their responsibilities.

An important precursor of this usage is found in the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted in November 1972 by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Article 1 of this convention defines "cultural heritage" as follows:

- Monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science
- Groups of buildings: groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science
- Sites: works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.

In this present document, the task force has expanded the phrase "cultural heritage" to encompass those kinds of material manifestations of culture ordinarily subsumed under the phrase "objects with artistic and/or historical significance."[1]

Notes to Appendix 2

[1] United Nations Educations, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972, available at http://whc.unesco.org/world_he.htm.

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