

Why Conservation-Restoration?

Espousing the principle of public participation in the Cultural heritage, Strategy 21 entrusts us all with its care and understanding. Conservation-Restoration refers to the process of care, as well as the professional field of practice concerned with material heritage and is at the heart of this emerging, cross-sectoral landscape of cultural heritage stewardship.

Conservation-Restoration professionals are authorised, through specialised education and training, to assess and intervene directly on the material fabric of the cultural heritage. They play a key role in decisions around the management of cultural heritage assets and collections, and operate within a strict code of ethics, professional standards and competences. Conservation-Restoration negotiates action on and participation in the cultural heritage so as to preserve its physical and historical integrity and cultural agency. The processes of documentation carried out during Conservation-Restoration can also enrich the narrative and enable the 'storytelling' about the heritage and its associated cultural communities. In short, the aim of Conservation-Restoration is to prolong the life of heritage assets, make them available to the public (including researchers), without compromising their authenticity and significance.

What is Conservation-Restoration?

Cultural heritage is a diverse, yet finite and irreplaceable resource. Authenticity, integrity and sustainability are core values informing the care and use of heritage today, and are the measure of how successfully it is transmitted to future generations. Together with technical diagnostics, considerations such as these inform the need, nature and extent of actions and measures to be carried out by the Conservator-Restorer, on a spectrum of Preventive Conservation, Remedial Conservation and Restoration. Each of these represents different levels of intervention, depending on the condition, form, function and intended purpose of the cultural heritage asset. Scientific methodologies employed in the analysis of materials and processes of deterioration are combined with humanistic concerns around authenticity, value and significance in the negotiation of sustainable preservation outcomes.

The detailed examination and close scrutiny undertaken by the Conservator-Restorer results in new knowledge about the materials, fabrication and histories-of-use of a heritage item. This corpus of knowledge contributes to specialised and non-specialised publications, promoting a general understanding and appreciation of the cultural significance of heritage. Such insights underpin the sustainable use of the heritage, and are key to its successful management.



Photo by Sebastian Dobrusskin 2017

Cultural agency often depends on legibility. Consequently, sensitive and skilful intervention (eg., retouching of a painting) is sometimes necessary to preserve the legibility of an artistic or architectural work. Conservator-Restorers are trained to do this. However, although it employs some of the same skills and knowledge used in the creative arts and crafts, it is not the aim of Conservation-Restoration to create new objects.

The nature of material cultural heritage, its physical and chemical properties, how it has been affected by previous and existing conditions and use, mean that expert analysis is the appropriate first step in developing a plan of conservation and after-care. If circumstances permit, and the parameters of care and intervention are clearly defined by

Conservator-Restorers, passive day-to-day care of a cultural heritage asset, which can come under the ambit of Preventive Conservation, can be shared with other heritage professionals and avocational actors.

Both the Faro Convention and Strategy 21 recognise that sustainable public use and enjoyment of the Cultural heritage relies on some level of public understanding and appreciation of its multiple values, as well as the principles of its Conservation-Restoration. It is also recognised that even basic heritage literacy amplifies the public good and well-being derived from the heritage, safeguards it into the future, and situates exchequer expenditure on heritage conservation and presentation in a broader social matrix.

What is Remedial Conservation?

Remedial conservation is a 'knowing' intervention to the fabric of the cultural heritage; it is a calculated action, governed by a strict set of parameters to achieve a specified outcome. All remedial conservation is intended primarily to stabilise or retard the deterioration of the heritage and to diminish future risk without compromising its material and historical integrity. Involving cleaning, repair and consolidation, such interventions can and often do ameliorate or reverse prejudicial changes leading to significant improvements in physical condition and visual appearance. The type of remedial conservation undertaken is determined by the nature of the heritage and the material from which it is made. Interventions require dexterity and skill in application and technique combined with knowledge of materials, their manufacture and the processes of deterioration.

What is Restoration?

As stated above, the cultural agency of the material heritage often depends on its legibility which may be undermined due to past alterations, damage and deterioration. Restoration is a complex ensemble of actions which can include the integration and replacement of non-original elements, reconstruction, retouching and infilling. It is aimed at facilitating the appreciation, understanding and utilisation of the cultural heritage.

Preventive Conservation

Is explained in a separate Factsheet.

Photo by Barbara Davidson

