



Covid-19 surveys emanating from national European associations of conservator-restorers: What do they tell us about the profession?

« C'est ce que je trouve qui me dit ce que je cherche. »

"It is what I find that tells me what I am looking for."

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Context

Between March and September 2020, several national associations of conservator-restorers in Europe sent out surveys to their members, trying to assess the impact of Covid-19 on the profession they represent, as well as on the material preservation of cultural heritage. The European Confederation of Conservator-restorers' Organisations (E.C.C.O.) gathered 11 surveys from its affiliates, distributed as follows:

- 10 surveys regarding the professional activities of conservator-restorers, emanating from ACRE (Spain), ARP (Portugal), CRAC (Autonomous Region of Catalunya, Spain), DRS (Slovenia), FFCR (France – two surveys), NKF-S (Sweden), ÖRV (Austria), SCR (Switzerland) and VDR (Germany);
- one survey regarding the way in which tangible cultural heritage (CH) was cared for by conservator-restorers during the March-May 2020 lockdown in France (FFCR).

This note focuses firstly on a meta-analysis of the surveys considering the professional activity. By looking at the questions that were asked by the associations, specific characteristics of the community of conservators-restorers in Europe are inferred¹. Secondly, it attempts to draw preliminary conclusions on the impact the pandemic had on the profession, as well as on the preservation of tangible cultural heritage: FFCR's survey about CH during the lockdown was thus added to the analysed data. Lastly, suggestions are made regarding the way in which conservation-restoration as a discipline could be fostered through a better understanding and support of its practitioners in Europe.

¹ The robustness of this social sciences approach is soundly described in Comunian, R. and L. England's "Creative and cultural work without filters: Covid-19 and exposed precarity in the creative economy", *Cultural Trends*, vol. 29, 2020; 17 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2020.1770577>

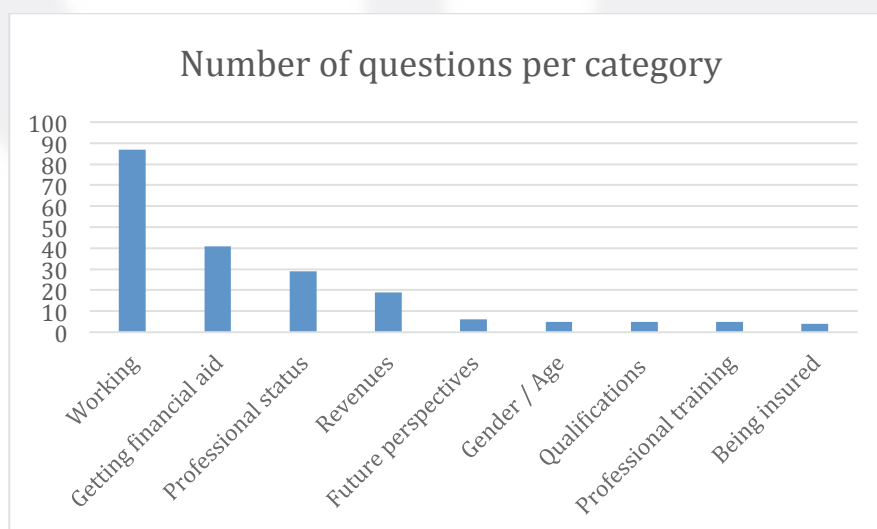
I. Questions asked

In order to better understand how the surveys were constructed, as well as their similarities and differences, either the surveys themselves (FFCR, ARP, ÖVR, etc.) or the surveys' results (ACRE, CRAC, etc.) were studied. In this latter instance, the results were used to derive the questions that had been asked. The objective of this approach was to get a sense of the associations' concerns regarding the impact of Covid-19 on their members. Once the questions had been identified, it would become possible to compare the results between countries.

Each question was listed and numbered, so as to determine which questions were asked by most of, a few or even only one association. In total 201 questions, sometimes differing only slightly in their wording, were compiled from the ten surveys considered. The questions were then organized in categories:

- Gender / Age
- Qualifications / Field of specialization / Years of experience
- Professional status
- Working during the lockdown / emergency state
- Getting financial aid during the lockdown / emergency state
- Being insured during the lockdown / emergency state
- Professional training during the lockdown / emergency state
- Revenues: general data and impact of the lockdown / emergency state
- Future perspectives

Category	Number of questions
Working	87
Getting financial aid	41
Professional status	29
Revenues	19
Future perspectives	6
Gender / Age	5
Qualifications	5
Professional training	5
Being insured	4



For the associations of conservator-restorers, the main concern is clearly the way in which their members were able or were not able to keep working during the lockdown, and more generally, during the first few months of the sanitary crisis. A wide range of questions were asked such as, “*Were you impacted by the closing of institutions you work for?*” (question n° 41); “*During the lockdown, what fraction of your activity was planned in situ?*” (n° 42); “*To what extent has your business situation changed: cancellation of work by public entity?*” (n° 68); “*If you are a freelancer and were able to work from home during the confinement, what fraction of your activity did you perform?*” (n° 107); or more dramatically, “*Do you envision shutting down your enterprise?*” (n° 125). The large number of questions can be explained by the fact that depending on the variety of professional statuses available to conservator-restorers on their national ground, some associations doubled, tripled or quadrupled a similar question so that it could be answered distinctly by, for instance, public servants, company owners, conservators on time-definite contracts and freelancers.

Questions falling in the “Getting financial aid”, “Professional status” and “Revenues” categories come in second, third and fourth place. It is our belief that this distribution is not random. Rather, it signals that these three aspects are interconnected in a triangular sort of way: move one point and the shape, or professional situation, changes. Indeed, several states or local public authorities set up financial help procedures to limit the economic impact of the sanitary crisis on non-public workers. In some countries, mostly in the Latin sphere – Portugal, Spain, France, Italy – the majority of conservator-restorers work in the private sector, either as freelancers, self-employed or on the payroll of a company. For these professionals, getting government-funded financial aid proved indispensable so as not to shut down their business and/or envision a change of activity.

Obtaining public help was and still is conditioned by the national economic activity code under which a professional for the private sector is registered. In some cases, falling under a specific code proved to have major consequences. In several countries, conservator-restorers reported that they were unable to get financial aid due to their code. A classic example is when an economic activity code put conservator-restorers in the same class as professionals who could not be helped through mechanisms intended to support cultural workers, because their code affiliated them to historical buildings rather than moveable cultural objects. In other instances, conservator-restorers were affiliated with performing arts, and therefore their companies were not allowed to reopen when museums, historical buildings and archaeological sites exited the lockdown since cinemas, theatres and circuses had not yet reopened to the public. Hence, it is no accident that questions regarding the status, the ability to get public financial aid and the impact of the sanitary crisis were systematically included in the conservator-restorers’ associations surveys. It also underlines, *ipso facto*, the economic frailty of this sector within the broader spectrum of cultural and creative workers.

The other categories contain a smaller number of items: only so many questions can be asked regarding gender and age, qualifications and years of experience or insurance during the sanitary crisis. The “Professional training” category can be resumed to a single question regarding the possibility of individuals to develop new competences during the lockdown, either through internships or via professional training – depending on the status of the conservator-restorer. Lastly, “Future perspectives” were addressed through wide-ranging questions such as “*According to you, what would be the most important measures to aid conservators-restorers get through this crisis?*” (n° 196), “*What consequences do you think will be the most significant for the sector?*” (n° 198) or “*Can you suggest changes that could facilitate the functioning of the sector to make it less vulnerable?*” (n° 200): the preoccupations hinted at by these formulations highlight once more the vulnerability of conservation-restoration as a professional activity.

We shall now focus on a few issues that can be inferred from the questions in the surveys, this time looking at the frequency with which they were asked in the national surveys. No question was asked in more than five surveys, which gives a basis from which to evaluate the importance of the topics addressed in them. Age and gender come first, with five questions regarding age and four regarding gender. Again, we infer this is not by chance. Surveys are anonymous, but the age criterion enables the reader to comprehend a specific situation by balancing it against the probable experience of the conservator-restorer: one may embrace this discipline later in life but as a general rule, a professional in his fifties will have more experience than one on his thirties. Gender is also interesting, as conservation-restoration is a highly feminized profession in many European countries. Of course, the surveys' results reflect only the respondents and not the entire realm of professionals in any given country. However, 85 % of CRAC's respondents, 80 % of DRS's, 79 % of employed and 59 % of self-employed SCR's were women. This has a direct link with the fact that five questions (n° 3, 40, 46, 77 and 81, totalling eight instances in the French, German, Slovenian and Swiss surveys) were asked regarding the impact of schools and day-care facilities shutting down, not from an economic point of view (i.e., receiving allowances for childcare) but from the limitation of working time due to the necessity of looking after and/or home-schooling children. It is still a reality that in such situations, women are more impacted than men – for a variety of reasons which are not the object of this analysis.

Two other questions were asked four times: “*If you are an independent worker, what is the fiscal status of your business (freelancer, enterprise, association, cooperative, etc.)?*” (n° 23), and “*If you have a conservation-restoration enterprise, does it have employees and if so, how many?*” (n° 34). Both these questions point to status-related issues, from the standpoint of individuals or companies. Status being related to a more or less comfortable economic position in a situation of crisis, it is no surprise that such questions were frequently asked in the professional associations' surveys.

Six questions were each asked by three associations, which reinforces the preceding argument. They are:

- “*What is your professional status (civil servant, unemployed, freelance, business owner, employee, student, etc.)?*” (n° 12)
- “*If you are employed, what type of contract do you have (short term, indefinite, full or part-time, etc.)?*” (n° 19)
- “*If you are an independent worker, what is your NAF (France), CNAE (Spain), CAE (Portugal) code?*” (n° 24)
- “*If you are an independent worker and were affected by sales losses, how much are these sales losses approximately?*” (n° 86)
- “*If you are a freelancer, did you request public financial aid?*” (n° 159)
- “*Do you envision a professional reorientation in the near future due to this crisis?*” (n° 197)

Again, these questions are mostly linked to the status and the economic impact of the sanitary crisis for conservator-restorers. The last three questions are interesting, as they enable one to delve into the chain reaction that independent professionals might have lived through due to the pandemic: were sale losses notable and if so, did they request financial aid? Whether or not they were granted governmental aid, were the financial support mechanisms robust enough to keep a serene horizon, or is a professional reorientation a question to consider? We shall try to assess the answers to these interrogations in the next section.

II. General trends

From part I, we can conclude that when polling its members most national associations of conservator-restorers wanted to:

- characterize their members;
- understand what had happened to their members during the first months of the pandemic;
- know if their members had had access to State or local financial help;
- gain insight into what may happen to their members from both a professional and an economic standpoint in the near future.

In terms of results, short of an in-depth, specific analysis of the situation in each country it is difficult to accurately map the profession. At this stage however, a few general trends can be discerned from the results of the Covid-19 surveys studied here.

Trend n° 1: conservation-restoration, a non-essential service?

This trend was mainly deduced from FFCR's survey on the care of collections during the lockdown, and on a subsequent article posted on the ICOM France website². It was also inferred from the answers to the questions regarding the possibility of conservator-restorers to work – or not – on site during the recurring lockdown periods experienced in most of the countries represented in the Covid-19 surveys analysed. All lockdowns, no matter how strict, made fragile the sector of conservation-restoration on a scientific, technical and symbolic level, as it was generally not considered an “essential service”; in many museums, historic houses, archaeological sites, libraries and archives no conservators-restorers were allowed on the premises. Where they could have been on-site, few conservators were solicited to check upon the material condition of sites, buildings or collections. This situation was masked by a high visibility of the cultural heritage sector from a digital standpoint: online accessibility seemed – for a while – to be sufficient, while the cultural heritage was deemed to preserve itself.

Trend n° 2: conservation-restoration, a public service?

The surveys showed that the countries' structuring of conservation-restoration had a major influence. The professional community was generally less impacted in countries where conservators-restorers are mostly salaried personnel in the public sector (eg. Slovenia, 73% of respondents to DRS's survey). We were not made aware through the surveys whether salary cuts were imposed on public servants or on conservator-restorers employed by public cultural institutions. Conversely, conservators-restorers were strongly impacted by the sanitary crisis in countries where there is a majority of independent workers (eg. Spain, 43 % of respondents to ACRE's survey are either self-employed or run a private enterprise).

² <https://www.icom-musees.fr/actualites/suivre-letat-materiel-des-collections-patrimoniales-pendant-le-confinement>

This shows that where conservation-restoration is considered a public service, the care for tangible cultural heritage is less at risk of being overlooked or of suffering a temporary hiatus. This has far-reaching effects: when considering which discipline to study, young people in countries where jobs in the public sector are scarce are less likely to project themselves as conservator-restorers. In some countries, this can be measured in the drop of students wishing to embark in a Master's Degree in conservation-restoration of cultural heritage³. It may be recalled here that conservator-restorers are highly qualified, being trained in strictly defined and largely encompassing competences⁴.

Trend n° 3: the invisibility of conservator-restorers as a profession

The disparity of legal and fiscal statuses under which conservators-restorers work is pan-European. It has been studied for nearly a decade by public bodies and E.C.C.O.⁵ During the pandemic, this made it difficult for governmental bodies to identify conservation-restoration as an economic sector, hence impeding an equitable distribution of public aid. In several surveys, but even more in the daily dealings of the national associations of conservator-restorers, members complained that they fell in a gap that prevented them from being granted financial help. This situation widened the economic divide between the practitioners of a single profession because of differences in their statuses and/or national economic activity code, these being atomized (see ARP's survey to freelancers, which lists at least 18 possible codes). On a more symbolic level, it also sometimes fostered or revived unnecessary feuds regarding, for instance, the implications of being either self-employed or having created a "proper" business, thus dividing further a profession already invisible to the governing bodies. It may be noted that in a report commissioned by the Council of Europe in November 2020 regarding the impact of the pandemic on the Cultural and Creative Sector, there is not a single mention of conservation-restoration of the cultural heritage⁶. On an even broader spectrum, ICOM's worldwide survey about museums facing the pandemic assesses the conservation of collections strictly from the standpoint of security (structural integrity of buildings and systems) and environmental conditions⁷. One may argue that although these parameters are undisputedly essential for the preservation of collections, conservation-restoration reaches far beyond these primary objectives.

³ A drop in candidacies to Master's Degree Programs has been observed in France and Germany over the past few years, but not in Italy. A thorough comparison of the situation in European countries would be useful regarding this specific parameter.

⁴ E.C.C.O., *Competences for Access to the Conservation-Restoration Profession*, 2011; 27 pages.

⁵ For background and specific recommendations see E. Marçal, S. Corr, D. Aguilera Cueco, J. Hutchings, C. Newman. "On the Classification of the Cultural Heritage Sector within NACE", *International Journal of Cultural Heritage*, vol. 5, 2020; p. 23-31.

⁶ KEA, *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Cultural and Creative Sector*, Report for the Council of Europe, November 2020 (updated from initial June 2020 version); 29 pages. https://keanet.eu/wp-content/uploads/Impact-of-COVID-19-pandemic-on-CCS_COE-KEA_26062020.pdf.pdf

⁷ ICOM, *Follow-up report: Museums, Museum professionals and COVID-19*, November 23rd, 2020. <https://icom.museum/en/news/follow-up-report-museums-covid-19/>

Trend n° 4: the economic frailty of conservator-restorers

The results of many Covid-19 surveys underline the economic frailty of the conservation-restoration of cultural heritage sector. For instance, in FFCR's April survey 55% of the 208 respondents informed the association that they had less than three months of available cashflow; only 10% had a financial viability of over six months. It could be argued that this analysis is not sufficient, as mismanagement may be attributed to individuals rather than to clients, be they public or private.

However, two facts may be added to the preceding argument:

- the conservation-restoration sector is comprised mostly of very small entities such as self-employed professionals or one-person enterprises⁸;
- conservation-restoration Europe-wide is structurally underfunded, both by public bodies and private partners⁹.

As to the invisibility of the sector, this intrinsic weakness has potential implications which would prove catastrophic for the tangible cultural heritage. As a consequence of the sanitary crisis, or more casually due to growing economic difficulties, should the number of practitioners in conservation-restoration plummet there would rapidly be a shortage of trained professionals for the preservation of the cultural heritage.

⁸ Europa Nostra, *COVID-19 et son impact sur le monde du patrimoine culturel*, Press Release, April 1st 2020.

⁹ This assertion is a consequence of the fact that the EU countries with some of the vastest cultural heritage, from a quantitative point of view, have the lowest budgets in percentage of GDP for the cultural sector, including cultural heritage. <https://www.touteleurope.eu/societe/les-moyens-alloues-a-la-culture-en-europe/>

III. Lessons for the future

Surely there are lessons to be learnt for this past “pandemic year”. In October 2020, E.C.C.O. drafted several recommendations which were included in a broader-scope document published by Europa Nostra¹⁰. We feel it is interesting to highlight E.C.C.O.’s contribution by citing its specific proposals, as they refer specifically to conservation-restoration and conservator-restorers.

Recommendations to support personnel and security of jobs

For heritage operators

- Acknowledge in European recommendations that heritage activities such as conservation-restoration are mainly performed behind the scenes of the public presentation, so in line with national legislation and contingency plans, professionals should be allowed to continue their activity.

For policy makers

- Ensure that in employment policies, eligibility criteria and procedures, heritage activities such as conservation-restoration are recognised as an economic activity and eligible for support either as companies or freelancers.
- Develop mechanisms to update the assessment and recognition of heritage professions and professionals ensuring it comprehends its diversity and continuously evolving nature.

Recommendations to ensure the security of heritage sites, contents and visitors

For heritage operators

- Ensure in European recommendations that conservators-restorers activity should be included in the continuity plans of all cultural heritage institutions, and that the specificity of their competences be recognized as essential to the preservation of sites, buildings and collections in times of prevention and disaster response developed in national strategies.

Recommendations to tackle the social implications of the crisis

For heritage operators

- Acknowledge in management policies that cultural heritage is not dependently subordinated to the tourism industry and that its sustainability should derive from its intrinsic economic and social value to society.

For policy makers

- Support the development of an economically and environmentally sound strategy for the cultural heritage sector, recognizing its fundamental and indisputable role in a sustainable society.

¹⁰ Europa Nostra, *COVID-19 and Beyond: Challenges and Opportunities for Cultural Heritage*, October 2020; 30 pages. https://www.europanostra.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/20201014_COVID19_Consultation-Paper_EN.pdf

Recommendations to ensuring proper communication and keeping networks alive

For decision makers

- Ensure that the voice of NGO's and the diverse network of stakeholders from civil society is heard at European level and its knowledge informs drafting of recommendations and policies, fostering a solid and sustainable bottom-up strategy for the future of cultural heritage care and management.

Reflections

One year onwards, the Covid-19 sanitary crisis is far from over. However, many enterprises still have work, as tenders that were commissioned in 2019 or early 2020 are being performed. Many of E.C.C.O.'s associations thus have planned to send their members another survey, in order to assess the long-term effects as well as the more immediate ones. It might be inferred from that proactive attitude that the mechanisms set up to understand and better protect conservator-restorers from dire circumstances are, one might say, bottom-up. Professionals on the ground and representants of these practitioners are working together to find solutions. Of utmost importance in this process is the mapping of the profession, in order to lift the invisibility veil and enable stakeholders to identify conservator-restorers in the general ecosystem of cultural heritage preservation. It is indeed the scope of CHARTER¹¹, a four-year European project about the cultural heritage sector initiated in January 2021 in which E.C.C.O. is a full partner and a work package leader¹². The EU Commission's communication on COVID-19 and *the safe resumption of activities in the cultural and creative sectors*" states that the "*Member States are encouraged to monitor the developments and findings of the CHARTER project*"¹³.

We thus have a horizon toward which to focus our hopes.

¹¹ Cultural Heritage Actions to Refine Training, Education and Roles, is an ERASMUS+ funded Blueprint project on the Cultural Heritage sector <https://charter-alliance.eu/>

¹² See <http://www.ecco-eu.org/bbp-charter/> and <https://www.facebook.com/177205748999066/posts/the-charter-project-will-develop-a-matrix-mapping-heritage-practice-in-terms-of-/3613459545373652/>

¹³ EU Commission, Communication from the Commission, *EU guidelines for the safe resumption of activities in the cultural and creative sectors – COVID 19*, Brussels, 29.6.2021, page 11.

<https://ec.europa.eu/culture/document/communication-eu-guidelines-safe-resumption-activities-cultural-and-creative-sectors-covid-19>