



SAVING YOUR Treasures

A Website about what you can do to protect and preserve the things of importance in your life



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WHAT IS A CONSERVATOR?

A conservator is an individual who, through formal training and practical experience, cares for historic and artistic works. The American Institute for Conservation of Artistic and Historic Works defines a conservator as follows.

“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*.”

(<http://aic.stanford.edu/about/coredocs/index.html>)

This practice of conservation encompasses a number of different aspects of preservation. Conservators provide direction and advice on the preventive care of collections including display, environmental control, storage, handling, packing, and shipping. They are specialists in the identification of materials and techniques that are used to make objects and works of art. A conservator can assess the physical integrity of an object to answer questions of structural stability. They assess visible and/or invisible damage.

The conservator will try to identify the source of damages and deterioration so that steps can be taken to remove or lessen the causes. “If damage is present, is it creating further risk or damage?” Examination, along with historic and scientific considerations, may show that treatment is necessary for the structural and aesthetic needs for the work. A conservator is equipped with the knowledge, experience, and skills, both physical and mental, to carry out the conservation treatment. In addition to conservation topics, conservators study chemistry, physics, art history, studio arts, and the area of their specialization such as anthropology or geology.

What is the difference between restoration and conservation?

Restoration is a term common to most people. The aim in restoration is to make an object look and work like it did in its original state. This often involves reconstruction and adding and disguising new elements; occasionally this will obscure and require the removal of parts of the original. A restore might remove and replace a broken chair leg or refinish a piece of furniture. A restorer might repaint an object to freshen up its appearance.

What is a Conservator?

In contrast to restoration, conservation takes a different approach to the treatment and care of historic and artistic works. Conservators aim first to preserve all aspects of the original materials and appearance of the object. Only after all of the original materials are stabilized will a conservator consider cosmetic or restoration aspects of an object. Great lengths are used to ensure that no original materials are removed or obscured. Elements of restoration, such as loss compensation (replacing missing parts) and in painting (replacing missing paint), are often part of a conservation treatment, but are never the sole focus. The aim in conservation is not to trick or fool the viewer however, rather to help the viewer interpret the work and appreciate it in its entirety as an authentic original object. In the United States, the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) is the national organization of conservators that spells out guidelines for its members in its *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* with high standards of work ethics and professionalism. The AIC website link is <http://aic.stanford.edu/>.

What do conservators work on? How does one become a conservator? Where do conservators work?

In the US, conservators work in broad specialties such as objects, paintings, paper, furniture, and textiles. Within these categories, some conservators specialize further within these broad categories. There are also conservators who focus primarily on scientific research, architecture, preventive care, and other areas. Conservators go through extensive training. A foundation in art history, science, and practical hand skills is expected from conservators working in any area of specialization. Theoretical knowledge and specialized treatment skills supplement that foundation, and practical experience provides a conservator with the ability to carry out examination, research, and treatment. Some conservators will put their skills to use at a museum or historical society, others at libraries or archives, and others in private practice or in another institution where conservation is needed.

There are several graduate level programs that train conservators in the United States.

- The AIC has prepared a brochure on becoming a conservator. Please visit this link <http://aic.stanford.edu/education/becoming> to learn more about conservation training.
- The AIC also has a referral service to help you find the right conservator for your needs. Visit <http://aic.stanford.edu/public/index.html> to see the *Guide to Conservation Services* and a brochure on *Selecting a Conservator*.

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