



**Conservation of Cultural Heritage:
Key Principles and Approaches**



Hanna M. Szczepanowska

CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Conservation of Cultural Heritage covers the methods and practices needed for future museum professionals who will be working in various capacities with museum collections and artifacts. It also assists current professionals in understanding the complex decision-making processes that face conservators on a daily basis. The uniqueness of this book lies in correlating the aspects of material science and the behavior of artifacts in a museum environment. It will be of special benefit to museum professionals not trained in conservation.

Covering a broad range of topics that are key to sound conservation in the museum, *Conservation of Cultural Heritage* is an important tool for students and professionals alike in ensuring that best practice is followed in the preservation of important collections.

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PREFACE

In 2000 Carolyn Rose, late chairman of the Anthropology Department at the National Museum of Natural History, asked me to teach a course, Introduction to Museum Conservation, for graduate students of the Art History, Museum Studies and Anthropology departments at George Washington University. Carolyn had established the basis of that course nearly twenty years earlier to bridge the gap in the existing conservation offerings, which were focused on art collections and archaeology but omitted conservation of anthropological objects. That branch of conservation did not exist until then.

Carolyn was an admired teacher, loved by her students. Her invitation to join her class, first as a guest speaker and later, when her health failed, as a course instructor, was an honor for me.

Designing the course posed an enormous challenge; it was an overview of all branches of conservation for which there is no comprehensive handbook. In addition, Carolyn's original intention was to focus the teaching on anthropological artifacts, which brought to the fore sensitizing the students to seemingly opposing values of Western concepts of preserving material objects versus the spiritual, intangible heritage of aboriginal people. The urgency of preserving vanishing intangible heritage became the center of international debates only a few years ago.

The course was intended for museum professionals who envisioned their work as collections custodians, curators and registrars and who, without a doubt, at one point or another would interact with conservators. As a member of the conservation community and working closely with non-conservator museum professionals, I am aware that decisions which conservators make are not always self-explanatory to others. Thus, presenting a conservator's point of view on dealing with museum artifacts is the core of this book. It is also hoped that it will fill the gap between museology- and conservation-focused literature.

Preservation and conservation are enormous subjects, impossible to address in one book. Therefore the selected topics are meant to serve as an overview and a springboard for further explorations of a problem posed by a real situation or the need of a specific artifact; the reader is expected to take each subject as far as the problem calls for.

This book consists of two main parts; the first introduces common museum practices which are of concern to conservators and the second elaborates on material-specific problems. The technical information has been limited and introduced only when explanation of materials' behavior or deterioration processes requires more details. Interrelations between the type of material and the degradation process or between the institutional governing of collections and preservation initiatives are complex. Schematic charts in the text are intended to point out the most essential components and their co-dependence; I call the charts "visual abstracts."

In the early stages of the writing my students had an opportunity to evaluate the charts; their comments contributed to the charts' clarity. Six years of teaching and interacting with the students was the best barometer indicating relevance of the teaching material to the students' professional interests. The enthusiastic and honest commentaries of the students shaped the chapters of this book; it was written for them. It is my hope that the enthusiasm for learning about museums, artifacts and preservation will be imparted to the reader.

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During the six years of teaching at George Washington University in Washington, DC, my students in the Art History, Museum Studies and Anthropology departments responded to my questionnaires, which helped me focus on their particular needs. My special thanks go to the students of the 2004 class who commented on the charts. Erin McKeen-Johnson, class of 2002 and Cynthia Love, class of 2003, reviewed parts of the book long after the class sessions ended. Their comments were very helpful.

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FOREWORD

Collections are intertwined with all museum activities including education, research, marketing, sales, digitization, communication and management. Properly caring for collections requires highly skilled professionals who preserve and advocate for collections for future generations.

Conservators who conduct examination of objects and conserve and preserve them need to consider temperature, relative humidity, pollutants, biological organisms, reactivity of materials, light, vibration and other factors which speed up the natural degradation of objects. Vast knowledge and depth of understanding are necessary to deal with more than one material such as stone, cloth, paint, plastics, wood and metal. Conservators also face challenges that cut across many disciplines including chemistry, art, geology, optics, history, physics, statistics, meteorology and information technology. To produce successful outcomes, curiosity, imagination, vision, commitment, judgment and intuition also come into play.

The author's breadth of experience, creative use of concepts, frameworks, tools and methods and cultural layering have resulted in the conservation of many valuable artifacts in global settings including Poland, Egypt, Malta, the Republic of Georgia, New York, and Washington, DC. In this book, she links work on specific projects to an overall portfolio that involves a wide range of materials and techniques. Consistent excellence on the conservation of diverse artifacts time after time, use of interdisciplinary knowledge and skills when day-to-day work may be very function specific, sharing knowledge with others, and paying relentless attention to a mindset that taps vast intellectual resources have produced an important book that fills a gap, and contributes to new perspectives on conservation.

The scope of this book is intentionally broad. It rests on the premise to provide relevance to students, practitioners and academics. Hopefully, this book will spur