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# NEWS IN CONSERVATION

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## TEACHING CONSERVATION IN A NEW WORLD

By Adriaan Botha and Dr Christian Dreyer

*Anyone teaching today is teaching in an altered world. That part is clear.*

What is less clear is precisely how student bodies, and the pursuit of learning more generally, will ultimately reconstitute itself when the world recovers from the swirling wake of 2020-22. Currently, students of higher education still perceive a precarious world and act with reserve. Less tentative are the cultural shifts, which continue to drive the "work-from-anywhere" trend. This groundswell is rapidly re-shaping a generation's relation to place and geography. While the corporate world in particular has been quick to appropriate it, we should recognize that the same aspirations which animate the working generation are just as keenly embraced by the student cohort coming up on the heels of today's newly and innovatively employed.

The implication is that studying at a particular locale—or from a particular locale—is becoming increasingly anachronistic. Are postgraduate conservation programmes responding to this?

But first, a bit more about our institution and its postgraduate training programme. You can find The South African Institute for Heritage Science and Conservation in the countryside town of Twee Riviere (Two Rivers) in the Southern Cape region of South Africa—a mountainous, fruit-growing region known as the Langkloof (Long Valley). The Institute was founded in 1994 and, during its nationwide short course dispensation, gained a reputation for high technical attainment at the conservation bench. When the Institute entered into the postgraduate education domain during the most recent decade, a distinctive focus on technical skills and critical assessment remained prominent hallmarks of its one-year resident postgraduate diploma programme. No less than 1,400 hours of laboratory-based contact learning continued to form the programme's backbone in delivering the requisite hand-skills and discernment. Teachers and students of comparable laboratory-based conservation programmes, similarly based in the physical sciences, will recognize this as an extraordinary number. Accordingly, over the years, a great many conservation students and interns (largely from Europe and North-America) found their way to this remote South African town, seeking to avail themselves of this exceptional opportunity for hands-on, in-depth conservation bench training.

Let us take the wider view for a moment. As an essentially inter-disciplinary vocation, conservation practice finds its application at that rich, liminal intersection of the physical sciences and the humanities. Because of this essentially hybrid character, conservation training programmes can differ markedly in their respective emphases. Sponsored programmes in particular will often bear the imprint or priorities of their patron entity. As a consequence, many conservation training programmes have come to variously assume a museum flavour, or an archaeological flavour, even a liberal arts character or perhaps something of a research/academia flavour—all with different impetuses and to differing results. But if conservation practice should be left to establish value quite directly, on its own terms and in an environment constituted by itself, what would that environment be like? In other words, what happens if conservation practice successfully fends off the reflexive, and even opportunistic, attempts to compel it towards ends and purposes and institutional habitats conceived for it by parallel disciplines and domains, and chooses a



Top: The Langkloof valley - Twee Riviere's setting (SAIHSC).



Left: Conservation student gilding a Japanese lacquered candle stick (SAIHSC).

direction by and for itself? Outside of these, what would the conservation profession legitimately and authentically encompass or begin to constitute?

Setting aside all hackneyed presumptions, one might very reasonably propose that conservation practice is a vocation that, in simplest terms—most often by leveraging exquisite critical assessment and technical skill—reinstates value where it had been lost. And if this is so, the present times compel us to ask anew: what, if anything, compels this profession to be constituted of anything more than a practitioner, a client and an object? Perhaps drawing, in part, on its own character as a self-funded enterprise, the Institute favours the view that there is fundamental merit to the simplicity of this equation. But does merit require active defence?

It is not difficult to grow high-minded about conservation, and this soon yields to forced abstractions and self-defeating positions—these often developed and imposed from outside of the conservation domain itself. Conservation is vulnerable to being besieged in this way when otherwise distinct domains become conflated with it, obscuring fundamental distinctions. The Institute takes the view that a cleanly diffracted sighting, taken through the prism of heritage science, reinstates proper calibration (this term, as advanced by UK Parliament's House of Lords in their 2006 report). Peering through the spectacles of heritage science, our institution finds both clarity and utility in distinguishing three primary vocational lanes: conservation, interpretation and management. The latter two arise from the humanities, while conservation stands founded in the physical sciences. Therein lies the fundamental distinction between conservation and professions which primarily concern themselves with values and significance, culture, arts, social history, governance, funding, policy development etc. Of course, none of this diminishes the lively collaboration which exists between conservators and curators or private custodians.

While we acknowledge the early ground broken for conservation from within museums—particularly in the age of Rathgen, Forbes and Plenderleith—we cannot help but wonder what remains the possible justification today for conceptualizing conservation departments as built-in extensions of a museum (apart from logistical concerns and prestige). And why do so many conservation programmes still produce students habituated to the idea that museums, galleries and archives are conservation's naturally given and self-evident habitat? The mere fact that so many conservators are still prevalently embedded into curatorial institutions of the humanities does not help us to evaluate the desirability or practicality of this unequal and counter-intuitive arrangement. A clear-eyed re-assessment is needed. Certainly, these respective vocations are not birds of a feather, and conservation, without question, becomes pinned in the arrangement, being managed and steered from without, made subject to exigencies and objectives foreign to its own discipline and practice. Even if the match is considered successful from an institutional perspective,





conservation must inevitably grow moribund under the cradle-to-grave patronage of the humanities. Incessant scholarships, funded chairs, funded research and twinning with such institutions inevitably produce conservators in the image of the humanities. In those halls, conservation is not only denied affirmation of its own distinct discipline, but also its crucial and innate capacity for generating its own resources, being prevented from directly earning its keep. The reality is that private custodians (as well as public and corporate entities) very readily recognize, engage and remunerate skilled conservation services. There exists, therefore, no benevolent cause for museums (or similar) to take conservators into cloistered occupation nor justification for training programmes to deferentially accustom budding conservators to such a narrowed expectation.

No doubt there are admirable conservation training programmes that cannot be fairly characterized in this way, and whose students—upon graduation—possess sufficient certainty of their vocational identity and the fundamental nature of their academic discipline to cast their vision also well beyond employment in museums, galleries and other curatorial-minded expressions of the humanities. Stating such a preference is not uncharitable, at least no more than conceding that it would be an equally glum scene if all students of architecture (let's say) should meekly transform themselves into in-house functionaries of property development corporations. A profession should be permitted to breathe the air of its own discipline if it is to flourish.

Returning to the broader theme, how might a practically minded form of conservation be taught in a rapidly changing world?

We had started by saying that anyone teaching today finds themselves teaching in an altered world—a world of shifting societal expectations and the call of new technological possibilities. Held as we are in the wake of complex currents, what adaptations do the cultural shifts of work-from-anywhere, study-from-anywhere demand from conservation study programmes? And how will the intense demands of technically oriented, hand-skill-focused education be accomplished and integrated with such a world?

Over the course of the last three years, the Institute had developed a multi-year, blended learning mode of presentation, combining distance learning with intensely technical, on-campus block sessions: find the [2022/23 academic calendar here](#). To arrive at this result, the curriculum development team drew on 25 years of full-time, contact teaching experience to establish a blended learning programme focused on express technical attainment, critical assessment and the capacity for private practice deployment. The cumulative hours of application are no less than before, though these are now distributed (along with tuition fees) over a minimum of two years as opposed to a single academic year. Students undertake 59 weeks of tech-supported distance learning, interspersed with a minimum of three on-campus block sessions, cumulatively adding an additional 11 weeks of resident contact

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**Left:** Entrance to the campus grounds—autumn scene (SAIHSC)

**Center:** Stone & mortar practical field work in built environment. The image is of conservators deployed by the Institute on a historic sandstone building known as Centre for the Book, located in Cape Town's city bowl. (SAIHSC)

**Right:** Postgraduate programme Graduation Ceremony—Programme Director congratulates (SAIHSC).

learning. For programme students, completion of these 70 weeks ring in the dissertation phase, while occasional part-time (non-programme) students are permitted a more elective route from the outset. Purposeful and strategic integration of the virtual elements—driving proficiency in the uptake of the technical components prior to the contact sessions—lies at the heart of this exciting new format.

The programme declines to merely prepare conservation practitioners for salaried, stipend-based or internship positions without also simultaneously vesting them with the sensibilities required for commerce-ready, high street practitionership—whether private or salaried. If indeed it ever was, it is certainly no longer defensible or reasonable for conservation programmes to equip conservation candidates with manifest skill while leaving them unprepared to deploy their expertise in the marketplace. Instead, the conservator's appreciation of her/his/their vocational authority and role, within both the broader and the more immediate world, increasingly seems a self-evident requirement today. Certainly, this is more in keeping with expectations of equitability in the world of work and with the defensible hopes of a new generation.

The Institute believes that the advantages of a highly technical, materials-based approach to conservation training needs no defence. We are similarly persuaded that the prospects of private commercial practice should be embedded into vocationally oriented conservation training programmes. It is therefore our intent that this programme—in its innovative new format—will retain both of those distinctive characteristics, even as the mode of presentation swivels into alignment with a quick-paced, ever-changing world.

Wish us well!



**Adriaan Botha** is chairman of the executive board and institutional co-founder. Over the course of the last 28 years, Adriaan has directed a life-long affection for academic environments, future reflection and value creation, into synergy with personal passions for landscaping, architecture and tree collecting. From this fertile combination grew a campus habitat optimized both for productive learning and high attainment in deployment.



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