Becoming a profession: conservation in the United Kingdom

Stan Lester, Stan Lester Developments, Taunton, UK

Abstract

The idea of 'profession' carries with it various connotations about occupational characteristics, function in society, engagement with the market and with other occupations, and power, status and reward. Over the latter half of the twentieth century, conservation has gradually taken on some of the characteristics of, and engaged in activities associated with, professional occupations. The conservation community is now reaching a critical stage in this professionalisation process where it needs to step back and consider the kind of profession it is appropriate to become.

Conservation in the UK

'Conservation' as used in the field of material heritage and the arts refers to conserving objects of cultural, artistic or historical value, for instance through stabilising, strengthening or removing accretions and agents of deterioration, or taking preventive action through protective measures and environmental management. Conservation forms a reasonably recognisable occupation both in the United Kingdom and internationally, although there are grey areas where conservation blurs into restoration and to an extent into craft occupations, building professions and curatorial functions.

Over recent years the term 'conservation-restoration' has appeared in the UK to describe the profession, following the lead of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations (ECCO). However, this is not unproblematic in that 'restoration' generally refers to "remak(ing) the spoiled parts of an object or those which are missing due to ageing or other circumstances"[i], i.e. to bring an object to a condition resembling its original state, or to a point where it can be used as originally intended. The conservator-restorer might undertake restoration work in this sense, but would be expected to follow a conservation ethic in doing so. To avoid confusion, the term 'conservation' is used in this paper to refer to the profession as encompassed by the ICOM and ECCO definitions and guidelines.

Professional associations of conservators and restorers date from the late 1940s onwards, and codes of practice and ethics emerged during the 1960s with the Charter of Venice in 1964 and the International Institute for Conservation American Group code of ethics in 1967. An influential definition of the profession was produced by ICOM in 1984[ii], and ECCO published its Professional Guidelines and code of ethics in 1993-4[iii]. More recently there has been a trend for closer collaboration and dialogue between the various professional associations both within countries and internationally, as well as moves towards increasing professionalisation in terms of education routes, qualifications and in some countries aspirations towards legal definition and status.

In the UK, conservation and restoration form the occupation of an estimated three and a half thousand people, of whom just over half work in private practices[iv]. There are eleven organisations represented in the UK that act fully or partly as professional bodies, accounting for an estimated 2000 practitioners; these comprise the UK Institute for Conservation (UKIC) which encompasses most

conservation disciplines other than paper, books and archives; the Society of Archivists, which includes a section for archive conservators; six specialist bodies; and one Scottish and two pan-Irish organisations.[*] An umbrella body called the Conservation Forum was formed in 1993 and reconstituted with extended responsibilities in 1999 as the National Council for Conservation-Restoration (NCCR).

Professions and professionalisation

During the 20th century there has been an increasing trend for occupations to identify themselves as 'professions,' and to aspire to characteristics and behaviours that they regard as 'professional.' However, the notion of a 'profession' as distinct from a 'non-professional' occupation is far from clear, and there are several ways in which the phenomena of professions and professionalisation can be understood.[v]

Occupations claiming what they regard as professional status frequently focus on the attributes seen to define a profession as opposed to a non-professional occupation.   One of the attractions of this static or trait approach to professions is that it offers a relatively simple means of deciding how much an occupation has progressed towards becoming a profession, at least in the terms of the model being used. However, this approach tends to draw on ideal types, often medicine, law and other well-established professions, and fails to recognise the breadth and variation of characteristics exhibited by different professions, particularly where they have evolved at different times and to fulfil different functions.[vi] It can also fail to take account of both the changing conditions in which professions operate, and changes in the way that professions are conceptualised.[vii]

Nevertheless, there are some characteristics of professions or professional activity that have had reasonably wide currency. Drawing on Hoyle & John these could be summarised as the possession and use of expert or specialist knowledge, the exercise of autonomous thought and judgement, and responsibility to clients and wider society through "voluntaristic commitment to a set of principles".[viii] For both private practice and employed professionals there is also a sense, if often an imperfect one, of acting as a principal rather than as an agent of the client or employing organisation (i.e. retaining autonomy of judgement and a sense of responsibility that extends beyond the employment or client context). As will be discussed later there are tensions affecting these characteristics, and new conceptions of professionalism may need to emerge as the current century progresses.

Beyond this, there are a number of sociologically based perspectives that seek to put professions more firmly in the context of the societies in which they operate. Structuralist or functionalist approaches study the functions that professions perform in relation to society, so that for instance they can be seen as means of making expertise available to the public good, and professional ethics as offering safeguards against external pressures such as those of bureaucracy and the market;[ix] a summary of the functionalist argument is provided by Hoyle.[x]   Neo-Weberian approaches, such as the work of Larson[xi], focus on professionalisation as a market 'project' and its effect in creating market

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[*] The specialist bodies are the Association of British Picture Restorers; the British Antique Furniture Restorers' Association; the British Society of Master Glass Painters; the Institute of Paper Conservation; the Natural Sciences Conservation Group; and the Photographic Materials Conservation Group. The national bodies are the Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works in Ireland; the Irish Professional Conservators' and Restorers' Association; and the Scottish Society for Conservation and Restoration.

or employment rewards for those who achieve professional status. Marxist approaches focus more on professions in relation to power and class relationships within society[xii], while interactionist approaches, typified by the Chicago school, are concerned with the interactions that occur within practice situations and the meanings that these have in terms of wider occupational or societal relationships[xiii].

Finally, it needs to be noted that the concept of 'profession' in the sense discussed above is largely a product of the English-speaking world. In much of continental Europe the free-market notion of a professional defined by expertise, autonomy and ethics is less pronounced. In France for instance there is little tradition of autonomous professional associations, these having been viewed in the past with some suspicion as being anti-egalitarian, and being a professional is largely associated with officially-sanctioned legitimacy based on educational qualifications[xiv]. In Germany, despite a tradition of well-defined training routes and career paths, there is no concept equivalent to the English 'professional': in different circumstances the concepts of *freie Berufe* (liberal or self-employed occupations), *akademische Berufe* (academic occupations), or *Bürgertum* (burghers, with its connotation of middle-class citizens) have some parallels with the idea of profession.[xv]

Professionalising conservation

The development of conservation over the last fifty years, and particularly over the last decade, is strongly suggestive of a process of professionalisation. In the UK there has been a strengthening of the professional associations, an upgrading of conservation courses often to first or postgraduate degree standard, introduction of a professional accreditation (qualification) scheme and continuing professional development requirements[xvi], and the adoption of a common (European) code of ethics[xvii]. At a European level there has been more emphasis on common definition of the profession and attention to university-level entry routes, with an aspiration to greater uniformity in entry requirements ideally at master's level; this has also extended in some countries to lobbying for legally protected status. While the latter is an unrealistic aim in the UK, there is an agenda to encourage agencies responsible for cultural heritage to use professionally accredited conservators for works that they fund or are responsible for: for instance the NCCR anticipates that "accredited status will increasingly be a requirement in grant-aided projects and tendered work as well as for senior employed posts"[xviii].

Part of the driving force behind this professionalisation, and its main public justification, is the functional consideration that a more qualified, ethical, and higher-profile (and therefore professional) conservation workforce will result in greater attention being given to the care of cultural heritage, and to higher standards of conservation work. This public-minded agenda appears to be a genuine motivation for professionalisation in a field where there is a high level of vocation and personal commitment. The other widely-voiced but less publicised agenda is a market-oriented one, to raise status and therefore level of reward in what is sometimes regarded as a craft or technician occupation, with (in the employed sector at least) low starting salaries and insecure tenure, and limited opportunities for progression. In this respect there is less a sense of creating a niche with monopolistic rewards[xix], and more one of expanding the market for conservation services (an objective which is closely intertwined with improving the standard of care) and achieving a fair economic rent for them.

One aspect of this dual agenda is being played out in the interaction between conservation and other occupations involved in the care of art and heritage. Occupations such as curators, architects and archivists have traditionally occupied the role of the more senior or influential profession, a factor which appears to be reflected both in reward structures and in decision-making about the balance between conservation and other demands such as display and functionality. The situation is not as marked as it is for instance in healthcare, but it is suggestive of a mild form of professional dominance[xx]. Part of conservation's professionalisation agenda therefore concerns gaining equal status with the other occupations concerned with cultural heritage and artistic works, both giving its voice greater parity in decisions about its care, and redressing imbalances in remuneration.

Returning to a trait perspective, conservation appears to have achieved at least one of Hoyle & John's three characteristics, that of responsibility: commitment to a set of principles, in the form of codes of ethics and recognition of responsibility to cultural and artistic works, to clients and to wider society, is relatively well-developed in the culture and literature of the profession.   That conservators have, develop and use expert knowledge and understanding is also clear, although discussion about the natures of conservation knowledge is relatively immature, and tensions can be discerned between the development of practical know-how and expertise, the goal of a more developed scientific, historical and artistic understanding, and the less constructive pursuit of a codified knowledge-base as part of the professionalisation agenda. The presence of autonomy is less clear and may be bound up with the issue of professional dominance; while the exercise of autonomous judgement is present in what might be considered more professional settings and in mature client-practitioner relationships, sufficient instances are reported where conservators are placed under pressure to act against their better judgement or are limited in the scope of their actions.

Future directions

Professions and professionals at the beginning of the 21st century are operating in an environment that is subject to several sometimes contradictory tensions. The number of occupational groups claiming professional status and putting in place the traditional artefacts of professions, or variations on them, is continually increasing. On the other hand, conditions of professional work appear to be changing and more practitioners (even in the long-established professions) are working in managed environments or to specified and monitored contracts[xxi].   In particular, the notion of the professional as all-powerful expert is increasingly being challenged, and the trust relationship between professional and client or professional and wider society can no longer be taken for granted. To an extent this is leading to bureaucratic and market attempts to deconstruct professional work as a producer-consumer relationship, and make it subject it to external regulations, standards and controls that treat it in the same way as any other employment or trade interaction[xxii]. A different reconstruction of the professional relationship is also emerging in which rather than being seen as a deliverer of services, with the balance of power weighted either towards the practitioner (traditional) or client or employer (market-bureaucratic), the professional works in partnership or dialogue with others - colleagues and clients - to create appropriate ways forward.[xxiii]

These trends and tensions create uncertainty around the idea of profession and make for a potentially ambiguous operating environment for the professional. It is clear however that professional models appropriate for the 19th or 20th centuries are not going to fit entirely well with the demands of the 21st, and the traits of 21st-century professions cannot be expected to conform to earlier ideals.

Several factors, such as the growth of the knowledge economy, acceptance that 'professional' problems are frequently interconnected and highly complex, and the rate at which new knowledge and ideas emerge, are strongly suggestive of a reconstructed professionalism rather than of deprofessionalisation. In this conception, professionals might typically:

- be engaged in problem-setting or identification[xxiv] and 'managing messes'[xxv], as well as problem-solving and developing creative ways forward

- demonstrate autonomy of thought and decision-making within the context of working with other professionals, clients or employers as partners in an agreed endeavour

- be able to transcend the boundaries of their discipline or specialism, and work with issues holistically while contributing their particular expertise and skills

- engage in continual learning and development at a number of levels, from basic updating to re-evaluation of their overall practice and envelope of capability

- going beyond uncritical acceptance of a professional code, to a deep-rooted commitment to personal ethical standards and professional practice principles.

Beyond this, there is also a sense that professionalism is less about membership of a professional association or defined occupation, and more concerned with individual practitioners engaging in clusters of reflective and knowledgeable activities in a way that embodies a professional ethos. In this scenario the role of the professional association is both increased and diminished: increased as practitioners look for communities of practice around which to associate, and diminished as the idea of profession as institutionalised specialism loses some of its currency. In parallel, there is a greater onus on the individual practitioner to take personal responsibility for practice, ethics, autonomy and ongoing development, as well as for his or her career and market position. The decline of the traditional corporate or bureaucratic career towards the end of the 20th century is likely to see a parallel in the professions, and while professional membership or accreditation may be a necessary condition for practice in some areas, it will be far from sufficient to guarantee of a career; according to one commentator on the future of work, "quality, originality, cleverness and occasionally, speed" will be critical.[xxvi]

Issues for conservation

Until recently the professionalisation of conservation has trodden a relatively uncontentious path, subject to the proviso that the wide range of disciplines and specialisms represented under its umbrella have different traditions and outlooks, and over the years given rise to varying combinations of association and dissociation. Recent moves towards accreditation, higher education entry routes and international identities and codes of ethics are likely to exert greater control over things such as who enters the profession, their enculturation into it and the kind of knowledge they acquire, and exercise at least limited influence over who is able to practise. Consequently, caution is needed if this latter stage of development is to be successful for the profession and in a wider functional sense.

Generally, it is important that conservators and their associations place the idea of 'being professional' in the changing contexts both of professions in society and the market, and of the particular context of conservation practice, rather than embarking on an agenda linked to inappropriate or out-of-date

notions of what professions are and how they operate. Conservation in the UK will have a number of critical questions to face over the next few years, particularly in relation to the kind of profession it is appropriate to evolve into and how this can be facilitated by the various initiatives - such as accreditation, entry routes, codes of practice, continuing professional development, and practitioner research - that are being pursued. Equally, the potential for negative effects - such as reducing the diversity of people coming into conservation and undermining the position and continued supply of practitioners with craft skills and craft knowledge - need to be given careful consideration.

Not unrelated to this, the rather sensitive question needs to be answered about whether all involved in conservation can be encompassed by the professionalisation agenda, or whether the aspiration of creating an occupation with high academic and professional status will mean that some kinds of practitioner will be consciously excluded. Particularly in specialisms such as books, stone, metalwork, stained glass, paintings, furniture and gilding, there are strong traditions of restoration and people - and firms - that practise as restorers rather than conservators; the boundaries between conservation (or conservation-restoration) and restoration need at least to be made clear and accessible. There is also an issue as to whether a technician or associate professional role is needed in conservation, as exists for instance in architecture and accountancy. If a case for such a role can be established, there will be a need for clarity about its relationship with both professional conservation, and restoration and craft work.

While it is inappropriate to suggest an ideal direction for conservation's agenda of professionalisation, its specific and more general professional contexts do point to some general factors. In terms of professional knowledge and understanding, it will be critical to consider more carefully and inductively the kinds of knowing, understanding and enquiry that enable practitioners to become competent and capable. Rather than becoming bogged down in pursuit of a body of technical-rational knowledge, this needs to evolve into an informed dialogue about the varied sources of knowledge and understanding that inform conservation practice.[xxvii] Without undermining the expertise and skills of practical conservation, there will also be a need to embrace the emerging professional ethos through things such as the ability to work in multidisciplinary communities of practice, capability in problem-setting and solving and project leadership, the development of personal commitments to principles, and the ability to critically and creatively manage dilemmas and value-conflicts that go beyond basic codes of ethics. Similarly, the ongoing development of practitioners will need to move beyond technical updating and traditional notions of continuing professional development to an ethos of strategic learning[xxviii] and enhancement of professional capability and extended professionalism.[xxix]

At the level of the various conservation and restoration bodies, while the current diversity of associations is not untenable greater clarity of roles is likely to be needed in the future. Public-facing initiatives such as professional accreditation and the register of practices are already the product of collaborative effort, and these will need to remain consistent across the profession to retain credibility. Other areas of professionalisation such as influencing entry routes are also likely to need joint effort, and overall a picture is emerging of the need, in the absence of a single leading professional body, of authority being delegated to the NCCR in a way that has some parallels with the Engineering Council. Part of the clarity that needs to emerge is likely to involve particularly the smaller bodies and those with partial interests in conservation working with the larger conservation-specific organisations to reduce duplication of function and effort.

Finally, the limits of collective professionalisation need to be recognised, as do those of the professionalisation agenda more broadly. Given the reluctance of UK governments to create protected occupations other than where there are clear public interest issues at stake, it is unlikely that conservation can achieve anything approaching legal status; a more productive agenda is to promote the engagement of qualified conservators for major contracts, grant-aided work and professional posts. Individual practitioners and local communities of practice also need to recognise the criticality of their own roles in gaining acceptance as professionals, rather than assuming that the collective action of the professional associations will automatically give them enhanced status and rewards and a stronger voice.

Conclusion

While significant milestones have been achieved in UK conservation community's professionalisation project, the challenges that remain should not be underestimated. In particular, now that key elements have been put in place it is important that the profession steps back and considers - in a spirit of open dialogue and enquiry - how it needs to develop over the critical next few years as well as into the longer term. Importantly, the profession needs to evolve in a way that is appropriate to its particular context and operating environment; while inevitable constraints are imposed by social constructions of the idea of profession and by the need to move forward within the international conservation community, the direction of this evolution needs to avoid being dictated by 19th- and 20th-century assumptions about professionality. In particular, great care is needed to ensure that the conservation community retains a diversity requisite to the needs of cultural heritage and artistic works.

Author

Stan Lester is sole principal of Stan Lester Developments, an independent consultancy and research firm based in Taunton, UK, and a visiting academic at Middlesex University. His work focuses principally on professional and work-related development and its accreditation, and he has been involved since 1998 with the development and implementation of NCCR's Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers.

Tel 01823 333091, [initial.lastname]@devmts.co.uk

Acronyms

ECCO   European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations
ICOM   International Council of Museums Committee for Conservation
NCCR   National Council for Conservation-Restoration
UKIC   United Kingdom Institute for Conservation

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