



Philosophy and Ethics in Conservation

Working Group Report Summary

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Cultural heritage organizations have the potential to become trusted sites and agents of reconciliation, mediation, collaboration, inspiration, and learning.

Among heritage professionals and the public, there is a strong call for a more just and inclusive conservation practice that is collaborative, open, diverse, sustainable, and ethically relevant. Long-held notions of authority, expertise, representation, and ownership are increasingly questioned as collaboration with constituent communities, artists, and allied professionals becomes the dominant model of working. This philosophical shift in the way we think about cultural heritage conservation and preservation parallels social justice and climate change activism and reflects the evolving sensibilities of our time. There is a need for new structures that will enable an expansion and broadening of the entire preservation enterprise for the 21st century and beyond.

For the purposes of their work, the Held in Trust (HIT) Working Group on Philosophy and Ethics defined philosophy and ethics in cultural heritage conservation and preservation as follows: Philosophy is a broad umbrella term for a form of inquiry concerned with the fundamental principles or assumptions in a field of study. Philosophies of cultural heritage conservation are the result of meta-conservation investigations into the nature of conservation itself (e.g., the process of asking the “why” behind the “how” or “what”). Conservation ethics are the embodiment of the field’s underlying philosophy and values. Their purpose is to guide decision-making and actions. For purposes of HIT research, the Working Group investigated professional ethics regarding current models of conservation practice in the context of national and global social movements, including social justice and climate action.

Outlined below are areas of key consideration the Working Group identified for this pillar of cultural heritage preservation work.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Education on and interrogation of the philosophical systems and ethical codes of the field

Based on the Working Group’s interviews and survey results from members of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) membership, there has been growing interest in revising and broadening cultural heritage conservation philosophy and ethics in recent years. Existing literature, educational structures, and models for practice are developing; however, there is considerable work to be done to address inequities, traditional hierarchies, and sustainability in the field. Recent scholarship in conservation has challenged established methodologies based on ideals of objectivity and impartiality, instead exploring the subjective, interpretive, iterative, and epistemic nature of conservation practice.

Collaborative conservation methodologies

Collaborative practice in conservation can be defined as an approach in which cultural heritage is contextualized as fully as possible using multiple sources of information, including the deep expertise residing with artists, communities, colleagues in allied fields, and individual stakeholders;

scientific knowledge; art historical interpretations; conservation treatment methodologies; and museum and archival resources. The practice prioritizes parity between conservation professionals and collaborating partners who bring additional perspectives, knowledge systems, and expertise to the process. Sharing and negotiating authority are key to successful collaborations. At times, this results in prioritizing the needs of collaborators and intangible dimensions of collections over historically prioritized physical preservation needs. The results of such commitment to collaborative methodologies reflects the evolution of a maturing discipline. It also positions conservation as a tool for building community and for reconstructing our understanding of the past.

National cultural heritage conservation infrastructure

There is significant national infrastructure for cultural heritage conservation that addresses or should address conservation philosophy, ethics, and collaborative practice. This includes graduate programs; publications; mid-career training opportunities; and professional, non-profit, and tribal organizations. Yet the Working Group's survey of AIC members found that while a vast majority (83%) reported some exposure to the subject in college, graduate, or other training courses, many (70%) felt that the existing literature and education is inadequate.

STRATEGIC GOALS

The HIT Philosophy and Ethics Working Group has identified the following three strategic goals to guide the field's actions today and into the future to ensure a relevant and evolving model of cultural heritage conservation and preservation. Further detail on these goals and an outline of benchmarks over the short, medium, and long term can be found in the Working Group's [full report](#).

GOAL #1: Strengthen the role of conservation philosophy and incorporate humanist, diverse philosophies into conservation education, literature, and practice

Historically, conservation training, research, and practice have been dominated by materials science. There is now a strong movement to recalibrate this dominance and give equal prominence to the humanities and social sciences. This requires extensive work, starting with graduate training and continuing through mid-career education, to equip professionals with humanist, Indigenous, and non-Western philosophies and familiarize them with other methods of scholarly inquiry. It also requires funding to support multidisciplinary collaboration. Ultimately, the field should become fluid and flexible in adapting philosophy contextually and humanistically.

GOAL # 2: Reformulate conservation ethical codes to include the demands of social justice and climate change

Ethics, as taught, practiced, and embodied in our professional codes, have not deeply integrated concerns around social justice and climate crisis. It is time for a paradigm change that will require a reframing of cultural heritage conservation objectives to center the needs of artists and communities and the development of sustainable theories and practice, with a goal of social inclusion and climate activism.

GOAL #3: Incorporate inclusive and collaborative policies and practices in cultural heritage conservation

We must broaden conservation research and decision-making to include and even prioritize the voices of artists and communities with stakes in the conservation of cultural heritage. Collaborative methodologies improve the accuracy and extent of conservation and curatorial documentation, resulting in more responsible decision-making and more accurate information. By incorporating collaborative conservation methodologies into conservators' professional repertoire, the profession

has the potential for a more sustainable, inclusive, and equitable effect on contemporary society and its cultural heritage.

IN SUMMARY

We are at a moment in history in which much needed changes in cultural heritage conservation are being articulated and implemented in response to external and internal calls for social justice and more ecologically sustainable practices. At its best, cultural heritage conservation has the potential to connect people with their histories and cultures and to foster individual and community identity. Collaborative work is mutually beneficial for museums and communities and offers the opportunity for dialog, to correct and upgrade the information a museum has about its collections, and to make more informed, and therefore, more responsible conservation decisions. We join with the many other conservators and their colleagues who researched and authored other reports under the Held in Trust umbrella in hoping that this endeavour will impact future funding streams to help enact the changes that we recommend for the ongoing health and relevance of the field.

To learn further details around the findings and recommendations of the HIT Working Group on Philosophy and Ethics, please access their [full report](#).

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