

Textile conservation education in the United Kingdom

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Abstract:

The MPhil Textile Conservation programme at the University of Glasgow trains textile conservators to work in the UK and around the world. It aims to provide students with a foundation for practice in different contexts, equipping them for career entry and for a lifetime's professional development. The programme combines the development of practical skills with a foundation in theory, including chemistry, and an awareness of the cultural significance of textiles and other objects. It aims to foster the key skills of judgement and decision-making, enabling graduates to select and carry out appropriate conservation treatments for a range of textile objects, according to their role and context. The programme has close links with Glasgow Museums and other cultural heritage institutions, enhancing the development of professional understanding and skills.

The textile conservation programme is based within the Centre for Textile Conservation and Technical Art History; object-based, interdisciplinary research underpins learning and teaching.

Keywords:...

The MPhil *Textile Conservation* programme at the University of Glasgow builds on a 35-year tradition of educating textile conservators in the UK. It is the direct successor to the two-year MA *Textile Conservation* offered by the Textile Conservation Centre (TCC) at the University of Southampton between 1999 and 2009, itself founded in the TCC's three-year *Postgraduate Diploma in Textile Conservation* which began in the mid 1970s (Lennard, 2010). The Centre for Textile Conservation and Technical Art History opened at the University of Glasgow in 2010 following the closure of the TCC by the University of Southampton. It offers linked postgraduate programmes in textile conservation, dress and textile history and technical art history, the latter focusing on paintings and other artworks (<http://www.gla.ac.uk/postgraduate/>).

Conservation education in the UK tends to be rather specialised in comparison with programmes in other Western countries, with individual programmes in paintings, paper, archaeological and other material specialisms; this results in highly trained graduates to take up positions in conservation departments in museums in the UK and overseas. A two-year masters programme is now the most common training route – the UK does not follow the increasingly common 3+2 model of conservation education in mainland Europe, believing that it is a positive advantage for conservators to come from a diverse range of backgrounds. Conservation is a multi-disciplinary, dynamic and innovative profession; a group experience which draws on arts, history and sciences stimulates fresh thinking and innovation within the profession.

The MPhil Textile Conservation is based on the very successful programme run by the TCC whose graduates are employed in museums and other institutions around the world although it has been developed to reflect changes in the conservation profession as well as its new context. The programme aims to give graduates a strong foundation on which to build throughout their careers – this includes four separate elements: firstly, the development of manual skills and the practising of core techniques; secondly, an understanding of the science underpinning interventive and preventive treatments; and thirdly, an understanding of the world in which conservators operate, including the ethical basis of conservation. These come together to form the basis of the fourth element, the development of judgement and decision-making skills, the driver of all conservation activity.

The philosophy underlying the programme can be summed up in the phrase 'informed decision making' – this refers as much to working with an understanding of the textile's role and context, as to being able to select the most appropriate detergent for wet-cleaning. The rationale is that conservators do not have standard treatments for different types of objects, rather that treatment proposals should be based on an understanding of the material and techniques used and the object's condition, an understanding of the needs of its owner and any other stakeholders, and an awareness of appropriate treatments, including the ability to devise new treatments. Examination of objects sessions throughout the programme aim to develop all these skills (Figure 1), culminating in the second year 'open examination', a report written over two and a half days followed by a viva voce which assesses several key skills: the ability to observe and assess a previously unseen object in a relatively short period of time, to develop an appropriate treatment proposal, to write a clear and detailed conservation report and proposal, and to be able to justify them verbally.



Student numbers are limited to eight in each of the two years. There are four dedicated members of staff: a programme leader, a scientist and two tutors with many years of textile conservation experience who provide expert supervision of the first and second year students' practical work. The high staff-student ratio means that fees for the programme are high, but many students are fortunate in receiving bursary funding from the Centre's supporting trust, the Textile Conservation Centre Foundation. The programme is taught over three and a half days a week, with one and a half days for private study, across four semesters. In addition students carry out a two to three month work placement in a textile conservation department at the end of the first year, and write a 15,000-20,000 word dissertation at the end of the second year, so that the programme is two full calendar years in length. The programme is very structured with clear learning outcomes for each unit.

Practical work, together with the underpinning science and professional practice, occupies 50% of each week. In the first year students learn and develop key skills: documentation and photography, surface and wet cleaning, humidification, dyeing, stitching and mounting. In the second year further skills are added to the portfolio: cleaning with solvents, bleaches and enzymes, adhesive treatments, working with non-textile materials and analytical techniques. As skills are added to the set, they are practised and reinforced by applying them to 'real' historic objects belonging to museums and private clients. In the final semester students put all their skills into practice by working on two objects with often complex problems; they act as professional conservators, developing and implementing an appropriate treatment following discussion with the client, writing a substantiated conservation report and evaluating the treatment carried out (Figure 2).



This portfolio of skills has not changed greatly over the years, although there have been subtle revisions over time. As academic members of staff, the programme team also undertakes research which informs conservation practice; this feeds into the programme and new developments inform the curriculum, whether in solvent activation of adhesives or strain monitoring of tapestries. Some techniques, such as bleaching and even wet cleaning, are used less now than in former years, but students still need experience of how and why they are used to be able to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of employing them, and also to understand the condition of objects in the collections they care for. Textile conservators working in busy, exhibition-led museum departments may find they employ major treatments only rarely, but to be able to make appropriate treatment choices where treatments must necessarily be limited, it is just as important to have a good understanding of what can be achieved, what is necessary and what can safely be left undone, a process of risk assessment.

Organic and textile science form a vital backbone to the practical elements of the programme; a scientist is a key member of staff. Students learn about the chemical structure of fibres and dyes and how they are affected by environmental changes (Figure 3). This underpins both interventive treatment and an understanding of preventive conservation practices. In conjunction with textile science, a knowledge of textile technology contributes to an understanding of how textiles break down and how they can best be conserved, as well as informing documentation. Lectures, case-studies and demonstrations of individual treatments, such as wet cleaning, solvent cleaning or the use of adhesive supports, are reinforced by sessions explaining the underlying chemistry. This gives students the ability to make an informed choice of detergent depending on the fibre and soil type, for example, or to select an adhesive with appropriate

properties for the textile and the conditions in which it will be kept. Conservation science is increasingly including assessment of the physical properties of objects as well as an understanding of their chemistry; one new development in Glasgow is a session for students hosted by the School of Engineering, where textiles are strained on a mechanically-operated rig; students are able to see the effect of loading on the stress-strain curves of different textiles - this is important in understanding the behaviour of large and heavy textiles hanging on display. Conservators gain a huge amount from working closely with scientists in the workplace, but the information gained is often targeted at finding out more about the object, to inform dating for example. It is important to be able to ask the right questions, in order to gain information which will also



inform the choice of conservation treatment.

However conservation science can be thought of in broader terms to include the social sciences as well as physical sciences. Conservation practice has developed over recent decades to be far more responsive to the needs of individual clients. For example, the seminal work of Miriam Clavir (Clavir, 2002) has led to a much more inclusive ethos when conservators work with objects from first nation communities, embodied in the working practices at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian. Here and in other museums around the world representatives of aboriginal communities are routinely consulted when making decisions about appropriate methods of care and conservation; collaboration underpins all activities. In the same way, the treatment of modern artworks depends on consultation so that the artist's intent for the piece can inform the method of intervention. Conservation students need to develop an understanding of the roles of stakeholders in making conservation decisions. The *Material Cultures* unit of the MPhil *Textile Conservation* aims to help students think about why objects are conserved, what is significant about them, and who should make the decisions about treatment, as well as introducing some material culture theory

such as the concept of the object biography, a useful tool for understanding museum collections.

Students are also given an understanding of the wider professional context with activities which help them to understand how conservators work in the real world. Students share some teaching with those on the MLitt *Dress and Textile Histories* and MLitt *Making and Meaning: Technical Art History* programmes, enabling them to gain an early understanding of the different perspectives of conservators and curators, and to begin to forge professional relationships. One assignment aims to give textile conservation students a broader view of collections than the single objects they typically work on; the students write a report from the point of view of a consultant asked to give recommendations for improving preservation and widening access to the textile collections of the University's Hunterian Museum (Figure 4). It is hugely beneficial for the students to have access to the university's own world class collections, both on display and in store.



The professional context is also enhanced by a close working relationship with Glasgow Museums and other cultural heritage bodies in Scotland and further afield in the UK. Glasgow Museums has 450 staff across all sectors of the museum profession; students are able to interact with curators, the learning and access team, the education department and exhibition designers as well as with the conservators. They make visits to the conservation studios but the displays, stores and short-term exhibitions are also used as the raw material for teaching sessions and assignments, ranging from preventive conservation to project management. Students also benefit hugely from being able to work on objects from the collections of the Hunterian Museum and

Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow Museums and other collections further afield. Although the Centre has its own teaching collection of textiles for initial experimentation as well as for study, it is invaluable for the students to work on textiles belonging to a variety of owners with different conservation needs.

The development of professional skills such as estimating and project management is also ongoing throughout the programme. Students continue to develop these skills, as well as gaining further practical experience, through undertaking a work placement in a museum or other collection at the end of the first year. This gives them the opportunity to practise skills learnt in the first year, to gain a taste of working in a museum environment with the opportunity to work with curators and attend departmental meetings for example, and to begin to build professional networks. The students always return for their second year of study full of enthusiasm and increased confidence. An important part of the placement experience is the formal sharing of information designed to help the students understand how the work undertaken varied from one conservation lab to another, depending on the institution's particular mission.

A new development within the programme aims to underline the growing importance of public engagement for the conservation profession within the UK and elsewhere (Hess Norris, 2008). It is increasingly common for conservators to become more visible, undertaking conservation treatment in public, or showcasing their work in conservation exhibitions. It has been shown that this adds greatly to the interest of visitors to museums and historic houses. This year for the first time the second year students have prepared and delivered talks on textile conservation to members of the public, speaking to an over-55s art class, a sewing group and a community-based group holding an afternoon of activities based on an environmental theme (Figure 5). The venues were chosen with input from Glasgow Life, the local government body responsible for culture, art and sport within the city. The students gained a huge amount from interacting directly with members of the public, all of whom found the talks very interesting and informative.



Textile conservation is a multi-disciplinary profession involving science, art, history and technical skill. Pye and Sully's excellent paper (2007) underlines the range of skills, knowledge and understanding needed for a career in conservation. Students learning to be textile conservators have to develop a huge range of skills, from photography and dyeing to advising on how to increase access to a collection and engaging with members of the public. These disparate elements need to fit together to create the environment within which the skilled conservator operates almost instinctively when making conservation decisions. A conservator needs a wide range of skills, from manual dexterity to the ability to write clear and well-reasoned conservation reports, from verbal skills to time management, from team working to problem solving. They also need a good understanding of materials and technology, and of the history and use of the objects they treat. The programme aims to develop all of these and to fit them together into a cohesive whole. A wide variety of types of assessment is used to engage with each area of skill and understanding. Professionally useful skills, such as the ability to create a research poster, write a journal paper or compose a funding application, are also included in the range of assignments. A final dissertation provides the opportunity for students to carry out an individual research project and to begin to follow a specialist area of interest; this work is often of relevance to the wider textile conservation profession and may be published.

The programme aims to lay the foundation for a career working in the field of textile conservation, although graduates have also gone on to work as curators or to PhD study, for example. The programme provides students with a set of tools and instils a way of thinking which provides the foundation for further skill

development throughout their careers. A one-year internship is the ideal next step to consolidate skills, and some students are fortunate to be able to undertake post-training internships, usually in the UK or the USA. Other graduates go into junior posts in museums and with freelance conservators. Reflective practice is central to conservation education – it is a key skill for a conservator who needs to actively reflect on the success of treatments as they are developed and carried out and to evaluate practice over the long term. A sound understanding of the principles underpinning textile conservation and a good underlying knowledge of the key theory and practice allows students to put theory into practice in the most appropriate way, whether in a different country – students from the programme return or move to work all over the world – or in a different type of institution. The programme includes training in conservation techniques, but it is primarily a conservation education aiming to equip graduates with the tools needed for a career of lifelong learning.

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Captions

- ⤴ Second year students engaged in a documentation and estimating exercise.
- ⤴ A second year student working on an academic hood, part of the University of Glasgow Hunterian Museum's collection of historic academic dress.
- ⤴ A natural dyeing exercise designed to give a greater understanding of historic materials and techniques.
- ⤴ Students gathering information about the stored collections of the Hunterian Museum in order to write a consultant's report.
- ⤴ Students giving a talk on textile conservation to members of the public.