

Training of Restorers at Tartu University

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Abstract

Nowadays the problems related to the preservation of the historical and cultural heritage have become highly topical in the whole world, especially in Estonia against the background of great changes taking place in the society here. The preservation, maintenance, conservation and restoration of cultural heritage requires a close cooperation between a large number of specialists, among whom chemists-restorers occupy an essential position. A considerable number of graduates of the Department of Chemistry of Tartu University have set to work as restorers at museums, archives, and libraries since the 1960s. Using individual study programmes the training of chemist-restorers began in the late 1980s and continued at the present Institute of Organic and Bioorganic Chemistry up to 2003. As a joint project the Faculty of Physics and Chemistry and the Faculty of Philosophy launched Master level programmes for restorers of a natural scientific and historical bios in 2003.

Introduction

There are a large number of historical and cultural monuments and immovable antiquities in Estonia. Nowadays the problems related to the preservation of the historical and cultural heritage have become highly topical in the whole world, especially in Estonia against the background of great changes taking place in the society here. Increasing pollution of the environment, menacing propaganda of the ideas of economic profiteering, lack of education, vandalism, deterioration of the cultural situation and social ethics or their low level are some of the disturbing factors. In Estonia these factors are, to a greater or smaller extent, especially discernible, not to speak about economic difficulties in the sphere of culture.

Preservation of cultural heritage

The definition of "cultural heritage" itself is varied, and recent decades have seen the concept of heritage - much like that of culture - undergoing a profound change. Culture is a matrix of infinite values. Heritage gives values. The past is a shared heritage that is valued by different people for different reasons--including scientific, aesthetic, spiritual, social and political, commercial and economic, consumptive and non-consumptive, and intrinsic reasons. Heritage is a vital component of identity and participation in society. Cultural heritage should include not only buildings, landscapes and museum objects, but also element such as language, oral traditions, myths, rituals, music, dance, traditional medicine and pharmacopoeia. The role of cultural heritage in societies is expanding. There is the need to redefine the heritage philosophy. This is partly because the communications environment, which is the contemporary cultural field, is itself redefining the relationship of information to artifact. The distinction between data and material has become metaphysical or symbolic, rather than categorical. When an artifact

can be so readily reconfigured as data, its materiality begins to be a stage, rather than a state, of existence.

Guaranteeing of memory requires efforts on the level of each individual but even more on the level of the whole society. Preservation is an inseparable component of any information transmission process, be it connected either to oral tradition, printed media, audio-video or digital information. As such, preservation forms an integral part of all activities of the society.

The most general developmental tendencies of preservation within the last decades have been the following.

Firstly, preservation problems are universal. Today the amount of damaged objects is growing steadily and faster in every country all over the world. Increasing prices and tense budgets of cultural institutions make preservation more complicated.

Secondly, proceeding from the above-said, a shift of attention from preservation of single objects to the preservation of collections is taking place. In the 1970s to the 1980s much more attention than before was paid to preservation activities which embrace an entire institution. Until that time the main priority was conservation and restoration of single objects. Today we speak about preservation of cultural heritage of regions, states, cultures and the whole of humankind.

Thirdly, in the 1970s the concept of preventive preservation began to place an emphasis on solving the problems in advance instead of clearing up consequences. Commencing of preventive preservation is directly connected with the shift of attention to preservation of collections. Preventive preservation also means that preservation activities embrace objects in all stages of their life cycle, beginning at the moment of its production. This tendency will grow even stronger with the constantly wider distribution of digital objects. Fourthly, the formation of preservation management as an independent speciality in the 1980s logically proceeds from the above-mentioned developments. Integrating preservation as a complex subject into everyday work of information institutions has required new managerial and planning methods.

The fifth and maybe the most important development is the vast spread of digital information which already has significantly changed economy, entertainment, education and culture. Distribution of digital information in the society influences traditional preservation in two ways. Digital objects need to be preserved like all traditional objects but their preservation is more complex due to the variety of circumstances. On the other hand, digital technologies can be used both for managing preservation (different databases, documenting systems, etc.) and reformatting.

Briefly, we can say that preservation management is becoming more and more important due to the increase in the number of objects needing preservation and still more complex technologies. Precise knowledge of the situation, optimal allocation of resources and right strategic decisions are the only methods that ensure the preservation of cultural heritage for future generations.

Preservation of cultural heritage is now recognized as resting within the general field of environmental and cultural development. Sustainable management strategies for change which respects cultural heritage requires the integration of conservation attitudes with contemporary economic and social goals. Cultural heritage preservation

is not an isolated issue, but must be considered as integrated in social and cultural development policies and strategies.

Historical background

The training of conservation specialists at Tartu University is closely connected to the Chemical Department. Since the 1960s chemists at Tartu University have been consulted for assistance in problems pertaining to the conservation and restoration of historical and cultural monuments. The Department of Chemistry, particularly the present Institute of Organic Chemistry (former Chair of Organic Chemistry) have on their own part shown obligingness and offered their aid in the solution of practical problems as well as in the training of chemists-restorers with a required speciality.

A considerable number of graduates of the Department of Chemistry of Tartu University have set to work as restorers at museums, archives, and libraries since the 1960s. Having received thorough education in the field of chemistry, they have been able to act successfully as restorers after a necessary specialisation. Up to 1990 special conservation education was not delivered at the Department of Chemistry. Since in most cases future institutions of employment were known to a student, the topic of the graduation thesis was decided upon considering the needs of the institution. The graduation thesis dealt with the chemical study of some particular problem. Usually, it was preceded by a course paper written on the same topic, and a pregraduation practice. That enabled the student to get familiarized with the selected range of problems. The course of study lasted five years while students started work at their selected topic in the third year. Using individual study programmes the training of chemist-restorers began in the late 1980s and continued at the present Institute of Organic and Bioorganic Chemistry up to 2003.

The individual or special study programme means that besides compulsory subjects included in the syllabus for all students of the department, exams and preliminaries for specialization, fixed by the department, had to be passed during the scheduled number of lessons, and a graduation thesis on a respective topic be defended. Each student had an individual syllabus; the subjects of research in a narrower field (wood, paper, leather) were different. The programmes were drawn up depending on the profile of institutions wishing to employ conservation specialists. Archives, libraries and museums were provided with conservators of paper, leather or wood. The specialists trained at university have received the necessary education in general chemistry and are able to work elsewhere in the field of chemistry. It is natural that the graduates of the university who start their work as chemists-conservators are expected, depending on their employment, to improve their skills considerably, especially as regards practical conservation. A three-year course is certainly not sufficient for students to acquire manual skills comparable to that of an experienced conservator.

During the years around 2000, six Masters dissertations have been defended in the field of restoration, namely four on the basis of chemistry, one of physics and one of biology. In 1998 – 1999 over 40 restorers from all over Estonia attended the first 2-year refresher course for restorers at the Open University of TU. The Department of History of the University gave the qualification of paper and bookbinding restorers on the basis of

individual programmes in 1970 – 1980s. As a joint project the Faculty of Physics and Chemistry and the Faculty of Philosophy launched Master level programmes for restorers of a natural scientific and historical bios in 2003.

Master Programme "Preservation of Cultural Heritage"

Conceptual background

Every action in human world are based on formal or informal theoretical model. What artifacts and how we must preserve? This question is part of the ethical, social and economic context of preservation. What heritage do we want and why? How should they be chosen and by whom? What methods to achieve these ends are acceptable? Discussions about which objects to treat when, involve a comparison of different views.

At the operational level conservation was very practical, yet its justification relied on conceptually complex matters. Preservation specialists must be aware of the way a society evaluates its cultural environment (i.e. its value systems), and they must ensure that the society is well informed on the expert products of cultural heritage preservation research. There also needs to be a convincing case for the economic need for preservation. Preservation projects are expensive and their value is not always evident in conventional economic terms. Thus preservation should be viewed as less of a luxury and more as an essential part of the functioning of the human society.

The problems associated with conservation are complex, unstructured and commonly poorly defined. The person (or team) conducting the preservation of cultural heritage is always an intrusive participant in that process, not a disinterested, objective specialist and preservation documentation should reflect this. The personalized preservation model encourages the preservation specialist to focus on the task of interpretation, not explanation based on pre-established norms and guidelines.

Today, the academic world is witnessing strong tendencies toward fragmentation and specialisation. It is no longer enough to be a specialist in preservation. One must become, for instance, efficient in digital 3D modelling of Nasca pottery or Raman spectroscopy of medieval manuscript inks. This is a natural inclination, and may be necessary in many ways. Yet, for those faced by policy-making, planning and management of cultural heritage, the situation is the opposite. Given real-world problem-solving and policy-making situations, interdisciplinary learning and comprehension are sufficient for reaching overall views and visions about highly fragmented, scientific knowledge, and for integrating the views of various stakeholders in a constructive and balanced way. Along with the recognition of the problems, integrative philosophies and approaches that minimize the boundaries between scientists, policy-makers, and stakeholders, have been discussed for years, but development in this field of cultural heritage management is far below the needs.

Scope of the course The strategy of the course will focus on the development of a fully interdisciplinary Masters of Science course in the broad area of preservation of cultural heritage. Its likely emphasis will be the conservation of movable heritage and preventive conservation.

While this course will cover the area of conservation, it is not intended to train participants as conservators. It will develop scientific and technical knowledge,

alongside information management and communication skills and will give strong emphasis to issues relating to preventive conservation.

This course will uniquely mix professionals from different disciplines, and will utilize a range of innovative pedagogies. It is intended to engage the skills and expertise of a range of professionals, including chemists, conservators, preservation managers, biologists, physicists, art specialists both as teachers and participants.

A modular structure will make it possible for the course to meet different learning needs of participants and the time they have available to study.

The varying complexity of the content, the use of different pedagogies and the modular structure of the course will enable the course to fulfill the aim of being fully interdisciplinary. This can be achieved as follows:

- The most complex interdisciplinary modules will be obligatory for all participants and will be taught in the classroom or in the field to enable face-to-face discussion.
- A range of other optional modules more appropriate for self-directed learning will also be available.
- The course can be slanted towards individual needs through selection of optional modules as long as the obligatory core modules are taken.
- The core modules will be developed specifically for this course.

One of the most fundamental defining characteristics of effective conservation education is that it must lead to actions which result in better cultural outcomes, not simply the accumulation of inert knowledge or impractical skills. Effective conservation education must also encourage the pursuit of cultural goals in harmony with other powerful and legitimate social and economic goals – it should not be taught in a vacuum, or simply equip people to pursue an agenda on the margins of society. Conservation education needs to incorporate this reality by providing people with the knowledge, understanding and capacity to influence mainstream society in a way which progresses cultural objectives along with other legitimate social and economic objectives.

The course curriculum

The course curriculum compiled in 2003, was drawn up by a working group of conservators and scientific staff of the Tartu University.

The education is a two-year course consisting of three main blocks:

- theoretical and practical studies (65 %)
- internship in conservation studios (10 %)
- final master project (25 %)

Though the main part of the theoretical and practical courses are conducted at the Tartu University, some of them have been carried out in cooperation with other institutions.

The components of theoretical and practical studies are general course of study, Electives, optional subjects and master seminars.

General course of study account for 46 % of the whole course of block of theoretical and practical studies. General course of study include courses in natural sciences, material science, chemistry, preservation of cultural heritage, theory of conservation, legislation of preservation, information technology. Most of these courses are taught during the first study year.

Electives account for 38 % of the whole course of block of theoretical and practical studies. Electives include courses in cultural history, art, chemistry, physics, preservation science and methodology of science.

The internship period is planned for each student in co-operation with the host institutions.

The subject for the master thesis is chosen by the student in cooperation with teaching staff. The work consists mostly of a theoretical discussion of preservation problems.

Tartu university concept of curriculum involves optional courses. In the preservation curriculum these make up 4 credits. The student can choose the courses according to his or her personal interests.

University diploma has been required of persons applying for entry in to the curricula of preservation of cultural heritage. This means that most of the applicants are adults who have studies from four to five years in different universities and are trained professionals in a suitable field. Therefore, the students have a well enough good conservation skills. Their previous study must be contained humanitarian and science prerequisites.

When estimating the present situation the demand for conservation specialists in Estonia has not decreased in comparison with earlier years but , on the contrary, increased. On the other hand, the employment of these specialists may be difficult due to purely economic reasons. Considering future perspectives, the education of conservators at Tartu University should be intensified, updated and diversified.

ICOM-CC Workin Group in Education Meeting held 01.- 03. of October 2004 at the EVTEK Institute of Art and Design/Department of Conservation Studies in Vantaa, Finland

Available at: <http://www.evtek.fi/design/current/icom-cc/konsailomets.pdf>