

# Sharing Conservation Decisions – UK

HELEN HUGHES

## ABSTRACT

This paper outlines how one delegate of the Sharing Conservation Decisions Course (SCD 2006) attempted to use the ICCROM toolkit to raise the awareness of conservation theory in the UK by designing a short version of the course. To date the three-day SCD-UK course has been delivered twice, once at West Dean College (December 2010) and once at the Sir John Soane Museum (December 2011). Both courses received very positive feedback from participants, “The course encourages conservators [...] to take part in the discussion of challenging issues”, which perhaps highlights deficiencies in current UK conservation training provisions. The success of the course was due to the massive support and goodwill of participating institutions and tutors. However, the future of the course and the delivery of its message are now under threat due to lack of funding.

*One’s destination is never a place, but rather a new way of looking at things.*

— Henry Miller, 1957

## Introduction

Conservation is a way of exploring our cultural heritage – but this new way of seeing is often ignored or even denied by more dominant disciplines within the sector. Conservation is beset with confrontations and challenges, and conservators are less likely to participate in the decision-making process than other sector partners. But are conservators themselves responsible for this situation? Do they contribute to the maintenance of their lowly status by concentrating on the mechanics of their work – without consideration of contexts?

We conservators are invariably focused on **how** and not **why** we are doing this ... we stand uncertain and mute as decisions are made [...] (Caple, 2009, p. 25).

My attendance at ICCROM’s Sharing Conservation Decisions Course (SCD 2006) offered me a period of reflection away from my work as a conservator-restorer for English Heritage and my part-time PhD. My PhD research question considered why the interdisciplinary mindset of conservator-restorers was not celebrated, and examined disciplinary boundaries. Removed from the UK, I became more aware of my Anglo-oriented view of conservation history.<sup>1</sup> Like most UK conservators, I had little understanding of the work of Brandi (Hughes, 2008). “Who’s afraid of Cesare Brandi?” I would nervously joke with my SCD 2006 fellow participants. This joke was to become the title of my review of the SCD 2006 course, which was published in the magazine of the Institute of Conservation (ICON) in March 2007 (Hughes, 2007). “To attempt to sidestep Brandi, especially when attending a month long course, in Italy [...] would be as unthinkable as discussing the history of conservation in the UK and omitting Ruskin” (Hughes, 2007, p. 40). In my review I asked whether the training provided for conservation students in the UK was still rooted in the values of the 1970s and 80s, and, by failing to engage students with evolving conservation theory, was not equipping them to engage in the conservation decision-making process. In the UK the inculcated belief system of the conservation community is subliminally steeped in the legacy of John Ruskin. But the unquestioned acceptance of Ruskin’s philosophy as a norm is, I suggest, responsible for the professional paranoia which is his legacy to the average British conservator. Ruskin’s often quoted retort, “Do not let us talk then of Restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end!” (Ruskin, 1849), has meant that ‘restoration’ is a tainted term.