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I hope that delegates get an opportunity to view the displays and facilities here in Collins Barracks and that your deliberations over the next few days both here and at the National Botanic Gardens will be of benefit to those of you visiting Dublin for the first time, to our natural science colleagues from sister institutions in Ireland and to our own Museum staff.

Conservation Education for Reflective Practice & Public Advocacy

Eve Graves, Principal Lecturer in Museology, Conservation Department, Camberwell College of Art

If I am asked what I do for a living I say that I work in conservation education. I have often had the response 'Oh, conservation, trees and stuff, how nice!' I used to patiently explain that I was involved in the preservation of cultural material, to begin with mostly prints, drawings and books. But the more I have become immersed in the discipline the more I have come to feel that the conservation of the natural world is continuous with that of the cultural world and that conservation of the natural environment is, in many important ways, conservation of the cultural environment. It is hardly surprising, then, that I see natural history collections, and their conservation, as a vital part of this spectrum. I would like my students to think of themselves as part of a community of professionals involved in looking after the world, in all its aspects, natural and artificial, for future generations. Conservators, of course, however enlightened and skilled, cannot do this alone. They need the co-operation of the global community. The world needs advocates for conservation. This means that we need the conservators of the future to really care and to be good communicators, to really understand the values embedded in material, natural or artificial, and to want it to endure. At a time of frightening world events and threatened resources there is a pressing need for all of us to understand our world and ourselves.

From these ideas came my research questions - How can the new generations of conservators of all types of material be educated to become reflective practitioners with a genuine desire to engage with the public? How can we help our students to be sensitive to intangible values and to understand how these values may be embedded in material things? How do we involve students in learning that is deep, flexible and lifelong?

I will briefly explain the context that gave me the opportunity to try to find answers to these questions.

Some years ago I was asked to take over the theoretical aspects of three conservation degree programmes. Previously the students on these programmes had attended art history lectures with all the other students in the college. These were seen by most of them as *add-ons*, and not, in many cases, particularly relevant to their major studies. Having the opportunity to rethink the entire approach I decided to experiment with letting the students design their own curriculum by encouraging them to reflect on the richness and contemporary relevance of the subject they were studying. In other words instead of telling them 'Here's the lecture programme - these are the issues that you need to know about' I wanted them to discover for themselves what they needed to research and discuss. As potentially the decision makers of the future they needed to understand their broader role within society, how their discipline had developed and how it was continuing to evolve. I wanted them to understand the multi-disciplinary nature of conservation and to encourage them to take a co-operative approach with other professionals and with the public. A major part of this was to encourage them to reflect on how cultural material of various kinds acquires meaning and value. For most importantly as I have suggested, I wanted them to think about values and the ways in which they are embedded in different aspects of people's lives. There is no time here to go into the detail of this but I will briefly give the outline of the procedure.

The starting point for study is the idea of the exhibited collection, loosely understood to encompass a wide range of material from art gallery or historic house to archeological site or botanical garden. Students are introduced to a range of institutions and meet professionals working in different areas (conservation, curation, education, information, administration, management, exhibition design and so on) so that they start with an idea about how professionals work together to look after, exhibit and interpret collections. They are asked to keep a Reflective Journal about the development of their understanding of their discipline. In order to provide a starting point and focus, they are asked to choose an exhibited item or small group of items and interpret the chosen material for the rest of the group by reflecting on the reasons for the collection and exhibition of the material and by examining any issues raised. They do this in their Journals and then use

their ideas to make an oral presentation, which introduces a group discussion. The issues raised may be directly related to conservation or curatorial practices and are generally linked with many other aspects of contemporary life.

Participants are specifically encouraged to scan newspapers, listen to news and arts programmes on radio and television (as well as researching the scholarly literature) so that they keep aware of media and public views. This has often led to extensive discussion and has proved an excellent way of bringing home to students how real and relevant to contemporary life their subject is.

Because so often students become aware of the challenge at the heart of museums, the twin responsibilities of access and care, many of them are prompted to look into government policies on the use of museums. Aspiring, as most of them are to work as conservators in the future they quickly become aware of funding issues, educational possibilities, management priorities and so forth. So right from the beginning they begin to appreciate some of the practical, real-life issues that impinge on their subject of study.

One rewarding by-product of this approach has come from the fact that conservation at Camberwell attracts a very multi-cultural student body and this has led to wonderful opportunities for sharing experience. Students often choose to work on material from their home cultures, so that we all learn from the presentations and journal sharing. With students from China, Korea, Japan and so on, the possibilities of improving understanding are obvious. We also invariably have quite a few Greek students and recently the discussions of the Parthenon marbles have become even more pressing!

Every year sees a wide range of projects triggered by the brief to choose what they consider culturally important material. Among the postgraduates I have had: ethical issues arising from the exhibition of a Native North American War Bonnet: different approaches (Eastern & Western) to the conservation of Tibetan Thangkhas: ethical issues raised by the display of human body parts in the form of holy relics: the use of digitisation projects to disseminate information about collections, controversies caused by the decisions making process about Seahenge in Norfolk: the loss of cultural heritage occasioned by the destruction of the house & studio of Armando Reveron in the Venezuelan floods in 1999: issues arising from the categorization of material produced as part of art therapy programmes: ideas around the preservation of meaning in war damaged material and so on.

In the last few years I have increasingly found that students are inspired by various items or experiences to be found in Museums of Natural History to explore ideas of considerable cultural significance. As a result of a recent visit to London's Natural History Museum, three students, two Chinese and one Japanese, were led to reflect in interesting ways on cultural differences in the approach to presenting science to the public.

Before the visit I had asked the group (first year undergraduates – Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Swedish, French, Irish, Portuguese, English etc) to think about their prior experiences of Natural History. This resulted in some cases in lengthy reflective writing in the journals about what the term meant and even those for whom English was the first language were stimulated to think about the word 'history' in that context. As always the different perceptions of the experience of visiting the museum added to everyone's learning and reinforced ideas about the ways in which meaning is created. One detail that struck me was in an account by a Japanese student who commented that the authenticity of the Earthquake Simulation was undermined, not by the nature of the special effects but by a recreated supermarket that 'looked old fashioned' and by an upside down shop sign which she said was written in 'not exact Japanese'. It was a useful insight into the need for an eye for detail in exhibition design.

Museum text is often the focus for student comment, and this was certainly true in student writings about natural history displays of different types and eras. Several students have mused on how the manner of writing as well as the type of information conveyed, or the interpretation provided, can make the visitor feel included or excluded. There seems to be a dominant view that where a display, particularly of mounted specimens, is retained in its 19th century format for instance, there should be text that comments on the history of natural history collecting and display.

I have often myself used items that might be found in a natural history collections to encourage students to think about the ways in which things acquire meaning and the ways in which exhibition curation can be used to tell different stories. A piece of dendritic pyrolusite, for instance, with its beautiful branching fern-like markings, could feature in a geological display of the varieties of manganese and have a particular set

of meanings for a museum visitor curious about rock formations. But this item has another range of meanings. For instance to the monks of St Katherine's monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai it is testimony to Moses' vision on the summit when he was given the Tablets of the Law. According to the monastery's holy tradition the blinding light that accompanied God's appearance, in effect, photographed the foliage onto the rocks. For generations of pilgrims therefore the rock has acquired spiritual significance. It might also feature in exhibitions about the early history of medicine, as many pilgrims believed that it had healing properties. This suggests ways in which values are assigned to things. Returning briefly to the idea of the cultural value of place (as featured in the student discussion of Seahenge in Norfolk), arguments over the possibility of building a cable car to take visitors to the summit of Mount Sinai have led to a powerful clash of interests and values between the Egyptian government, local populations, the monks and those concerned with the idea of pilgrimage.



A rock from Mont Sinai - focus a discussion on meanings and values

To pursue the idea of meaning and spiritual value for a moment, botanical specimens have also led to interesting discussions. For instance in discussing Herbaria and their conservation, the idea of plant material found in unrelated books and the ethics of cleaning in such contexts emerged. This led on to a consideration of private collecting practices with a long history – in particular the collection of pressed flowers. The faded rose between the pages of a journal, the dried daisy chain in a child's scrapbook, can stir memory in powerful ways. Conservators help to look after memories.

I possess a little book bought in a junk shop that has within its pages a tiny envelope containing pressed flower specimens. A note handwritten in the book states that these were collected on a visit to the Holy Land in the 1940s. They had meaning perhaps as botanical specimens but also I suspect as holy souvenirs. Reflecting on the multiple meanings of such items has inspired students to return to displays of specimens and to think about collecting practices, past and present. It has also led on to discussions of medieval herbals and from there to the ideas of types of natural history representation, voyages of discovery, art and science, natural history photography and so on. One undergraduate student at least has now decided that she wants to specialize in the conservation of botanical drawings.

Giving students a free reign in their choice of museum collections to explore for their projects has been particularly productive for some. An MA student, Zoë for instance, chose to focus on the Natural History Museum in London where she became intrigued by the vast collections of wet specimens, particularly those items collected in earlier centuries. She went on a tour of the Darwin Centre, to see the Spirit Collection, and her excitement at the Darwin material led her to pursue a research project about notions of value in relation to such items, how these have changed over time and where their cultural value now lies. As a paper conservator she appreciated the issues arising with labels of great historical as well as scientific value. Zoë also started working in the Natural History Museum and has recently participated in the continuing project to assess, database and conserve Sir Hans Sloane's collection of Vegetables and Vegetable Substances* (Miller 2004). She is currently working on part of an Apothecary's Herbarium for her major conservation project for the Masters degree. Zoë is an embodiment of the conference theme.

I have had many examples in the last few years of students who have been drawn to issues around museum possession of human remains. I will only briefly mention a few of these. A South African student, Erica, chose to focus on the debate around repatriation requests for the remains of Saartjie Baartman in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Just after the conclusion of her project the remains were finally returned. Soon after this the *Bodyworlds* exhibition raised huge interest and controversy among the students and led several of them to explore ideas around the use of human remains for scientific study and education. Students are encouraged to follow and if they wish participate in public debates in the media as part of the process of reinforcing a view of their discipline as a central part of contemporary life. Lindow man in the British Museum usually generates at least one project a year, as do various exhibited Egyptian mummies. The shrunken head that was part of the British Museum's *Medicine Man* exhibition also excited a great deal of interest, particularly as it was used to introduce ideas about different perceptions of such things and some of the ethical issues that displays of such material raise. The publication of the Human Remains Report late last year has become a major talking point and has led several students to return to elaborate on earlier comments in their journals.

I now want to describe the ways in which two postgraduate conservation students (neither of whom are cur-

rently specialising in natural history conservation) have been inspired by their experiences with natural history collections to explore in various directions in search of meaning. Some of the paths taken have been surprising and may result in different careers to those intended. As a result of the discoveries they have made in response to natural history items they have gained a richer understanding of the role of collections for cultural understanding and of the importance of their own discipline for keeping these possibilities alive.

These two students took as their starting point mounted specimens in public collections. Harry, was mesmerized by a Victorian case of Hummingbirds at the Natural History Museum in London, and what, having read the museum text, he interpreted as embarrassment on the part of the museum at its possession of such material. What he did next very much endorses the title of this conference 'Natural History is Cultural History'. He set out to discover the source of this perceived embarrassment by investigating the earlier cultural context of the mounted birds.

Harry examined the evolution of natural history displays in relation to developments in taxonomy in the late 18th/early 19th centuries. He looked into the social context of popular amateur interest in 'Natural Theology', and he went on to consider ethical and political issues raised by contemporary display of such material. Along the way he looked into the technical aspects of preservation of specimens (which may have health and safety implications for hands-on conservators and curators).

Harry's investigation also happened to coincide with the auction of Mr. Walter Potter's Museum of Curiosities. Discussing some of these tableaux led to mixed reactions from humour to horror. This prompted further discussion of changing approaches to natural, or in this case, unnatural, history. Anthropomorphism and its role in art and literatures were also touched on.

Harry, currently studying paper conservation, is keeping an open mind about his area of specialism and this has been motivated at least in part by the rich cultural/historical context of natural history collecting.

Thinking about issues arising from looking after natural history collections, the sheer scale of the amounts of material collected, students have been led to reflect on the nature of conservation in this area – ideas about preserving whole collections rather than generally a hands-on approach to individual items.



Postgraduate students at Camberwell discussing a prepared tiger skin

Another postgraduate, Kate, wanted to explore the significance of her paternal grandfather's Game Diary, which was kept while he was serving in the British army in India in the 1930s. In this book were photographs of animals he had shot. She linked this with her interest in the Powell-Cotton Museum in Kent where the idea of the exhibited natural history specimen as trophy cannot be avoided. When discussing these possibilities she revealed that her family also still possessed a tiger skin though it had spent the last fifteen years rolled up in an attic. Both of these items had value for her as part of personal family history. This provided her with a starting point for exploring the link between the book and the skin and what value such things might still have in a public context. In the public rooms of Quex House, the home of the Powell-Cotton family there is a tiger skin, presented in a similar manner to Kate's family heirloom.

As part of their research into cultural/natural objects of all sorts students are encouraged to examine a variety of different types of text that link in some way to their 'object', and to consider what lies behind the different approaches.

How do you begin to read about a privately owned tiger skin? The starting point was found in the other family heirloom, the Game Diary. So Kate began with her childhood memories of a scary skin spread-eagled on the wall in the hallway of her grandparents' home, and of her grandfather's tales of heroically ridding terrified villages of a man-eating tiger. The Game Book soon cast another light on all this by revealing another narrative and another set of attitudes and assumptions. These led her in several directions. One was an exploration of colonial history and attitudes. In researching the historical context she consulted writing on folklore, histories of colonial India, books on the natural history of wildlife, the significance of the tiger hunt and technical works on skinning and taxidermy.

Having taken advice on possible Health and Safety implications she brought the skin into the college for discussion. Incidentally, health and safety issues, clearly of great importance in themselves, have also led

to several wide-ranging discussions. Earlier treatments for insect infestation and so on have rendered many items problematic to handle. Discussion of past museum methods for preserving such material has led on to consideration of health and safety issues arising from requests for the repatriation of ethnographic materials.

This tiger skin excited a great deal of interest, not just from conservation students. The reactions were very mixed and this time included disgust and acute distress. However the discussions that ensued highlighted the value of the exhibition of controversial material for raising awareness and stimulating debate. Apart from all the political issues that were raised there was considerable discussion of the psychology of competitive trophy collecting, the emergence of concern over the survival of wildlife leading to the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972 and continuing problems caused by poaching in some areas of the world.

A final link established the rich possibilities of this type of multidisciplinary study. As a paper conservator Kate was at the time working on some mid 19th century prints. Several of these were by Cruikshank and featured the Great Exhibition (Hyde Park 1851). One of these showed the Indian pavilion and another the *Dispersion of the Works of All Nations after the Great Exhibition of 1851*. Suddenly these prints, previously unrelated items worked on for improving the conservation decision-making process and hand skills, took on real cultural significance. In finding out about the ideas and values associated with the tiger skin, Kate had also enriched her cultural understanding of the works on paper. The detail of the tiger flying off at the top left edge of the print perhaps refers to the fashion for taxidermy at the time. Another print was found to link with Harry's project on mounted specimens and the Victorian fashion for anthropomorphic scenes.



Tiger detail from a print by Cruikshank
- *Dispersion of the Works of All Nations after the Great Exhibition of 1851*

Before concluding I should also just mention another enormous value of publicly exhibited mounted specimens. These have a long history of being inspirational models for artists. Working as I do in an art college and having many connections with practicing artists I am constantly reminded of the importance of natural history collections for creative inspiration. During the tour of the Darwin centre at NHM our guide told my new first year students how all manner of creative people had been inspired by material in the collection.

An elderly painter friend of mine laments the possibility that virtual displays may eventually completely replace the magnificent mounted specimens that he has spent a lifetime drawing in one collection or another. For my part I am delighted to see that some institutions still lend items to schools and colleges for artistic study. I recently saw a Hippopotamus skull safely back on display that a few weeks earlier had taken centre stage in a drawing studio. (My own house also has skeletons in the cupboard) Most of us have had the experience of trying to avoid tripping over children with their clipboards and coloured pencils drawing dinosaurs or tigers. Currently the Powell-Cotton Museum is exhibiting, among their permanent collections, the results of an art project with a local school. Huge papier-mâché apes and tigers inhabit the museum, colourful testimony to just one of the many possibilities for inspiration and learning provided by natural history displays.

With this account I have sought to give some flavour of the ways in which I am seeking to generate in my students a deep and lifelong involvement with conservation and a desire to share its values with a wider public. I hope I have also given sufficient examples from the rich range of ideas generated specifically by natural history collections to suggest their value not just for science but also for inspiring real involvement with ideas of cultural meaning and value.