

# The Key to Sustaining Conservation: Student Leadership and Community Outreach

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# UCL

## I. Introduction

The authors participated in a pilot conservation project for the University College London (UCL) Institute of Archaeology's MSc in Conservation for Archaeology and Museums during the 2012-2013 academic year. The project involved the repair of four previously damaged glass radiography tubes and valves from UCL's Medical Physics collection. Rather than proceeding with the project as another opportunity for remedial experience, the collection's curator, the University's head conservator, the program coordinators and the authors decided that the situation offered a new opportunity. The conservation process, rather than the result, would serve as the focus of the project, allowing the institution, the students and the public to engage with the issues raised by object treatments. Furthermore, engagement occurred in real time, by blogging updates and discussion points throughout the process rather than upon completion. This methodology was seen as a crucial way to sustain conservation in terms of public engagement, enhancing understanding of conservation as a profession, and training the next generation of conservators.

## II. Approach of Student Leadership

The UCL program trains students in values-based conservation, emphasizing the role of significance and an object's unique biography in determining appropriate treatment methodologies. As such, students also learn to confront the role that conservation decision making has on the material itself. Conservators, through both action and inaction, impart new values and create new levels of significance. While this process is often implicit, a group decision was made to make the story of conservation explicit in the reconstruction of the glass radiography objects.

The four objects were identified by the curator as being at risk of loss and/or further damage if not conserved. However, as each object was industrially manufactured rather than handmade, similar and even duplicate objects already existed within the collection in complete form. Thus, the conservation of those in poor condition was less of a priority than other collection needs. The ideal solution was to involve the UCL

Comparing the treatment options and decisions between the objects highlighted the complexity of the conservation decision making process even within a group of seemingly similar objects.

The benefit of public outreach lies in increasing awareness of conservation and informing the public about the inherent individuality of treating objects. This strengthens the position of conservators and conservation educators within the public eye, while solidifying the importance of conservation as a profession. This relationship between conservators and the public is mutually beneficial, both encouraging public support of heritage issues while also enhancing the public's experience of museums, allowing them better insight into the conservation and preservation issues that often seem unreachable, and "behind the scenes". The conservation profession is sustained by these interactions and the opportunities they create.

## IV. The Conservation Process

The four objects presented here followed similar treatment plans, with variations in execution based on the requirements of the individual object. From the outset, the understanding that treatment would result in distinct stages of reconstruction was embraced. This provides a future opportunity to design a display which communicates the conservation decision-making process to the community and individuals outside of the conservation profession.

Following thorough documentation and research, the treatment plan included cleaning to remove dirt, dust and other non-use material.



Fig. 2: All four authors working on their radiography tubes.



conservation students in the treatment. In partnering with a conservation training program, learning opportunities were created and the condition of the collection was improved without significant monetary cost. A relationship and a methodology for future interactions was also forged, harnessing a valuable resource for the University, and its students.

While students had previously conserved objects in the UCL collections, there had never been an emphasis on the use of the objects once bench work was complete. This was the foundation for a collaboration between the UCL collections and conservation students which uses four permanently altered objects to tell the story of use, damage, and conservation on both a physical and digital platform.

The next and most prolonged step was reconstruction, which began with fragment association, dry reconstructions and adhesive testing. Once the form was recreated to the best and safest extent and an adhesive was selected, phased reconstruction began. Hxtal NYL-1 was used for both the reconstruction and fills for all four objects, as its refractive index and aging properties were more desirable to those with shorter cure times. A reversible adhesive was considered; however, reversibility was considered lower priority than aesthetics and strength. As seen in the pictures, only three objects were fully reconstructed. One valve was left in two pieces for structural concerns.

Each object also required a custom storage container and mount design. This needed to take into account their individual physical characteristics, as well as how they would have originally been orientated during use.

## III. Outreach & the Benefits of Blogging

The unique opportunity offered by peers treating a similar group of objects allowed us to share the experience with the general public through a blog, thereby showcasing conservation methodology and techniques. Because each object was different in terms of manufacture and damage, treatment had to vary between each so that they could be reconstructed in a manner most appropriate based on level of completeness, scale and weight. Throughout treatment, from initial observations through mounting, the authors

shared the process with other UCL students and the general public. In writing the blog posts, the students themselves were able to verbalize the process of prioritization and the interplay of values in an informative manner that illuminated the conservation decision making process for themselves and the public.

## V. Coming Together: Sustaining Conservation

Conservation as a profession requires collaboration amongst heritage professionals and members of the public. A university setting provides a unique context for this interaction. The combination of students, professors, university collections and strong communities allows for sustainable collaborations and beneficial outreach experiences. When conservation derives from a place of mutual advancement, the outcome is not only material preservation, but the beginning of a relationship which will help to guarantee the sustainability of the collection and the conservation profession. This relationship has so far allowed for outreach opportunities including public open days, workshops on the theories of making, and participation in national archaeology festivals.

As a result of this collaboration, the student conservators produced stabilized and legible objects, advanced their education, and engaged a wider London community. Maximizing the number of shareholders involved in conservation projects ensures not only the professions' sustainability but also the sustainability of the conservation action itself. The project provides a model for future collaborations which extends beyond the sphere of university training programs.

The following links refer to the blog posts written as a part of this project:

- <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/museums/2013/02/05/conservate-it-getting-started/> ;
- <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/museums/2013/02/27/conservate-it-part-ii-research-and-investigation/> ;
- <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/museums/2013/05/24/conservate-it-part-iii-reconstruction/> ;
- <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/museums/2013/07/05/conservate-it-part-iv-filling-and-finishing-touches/>

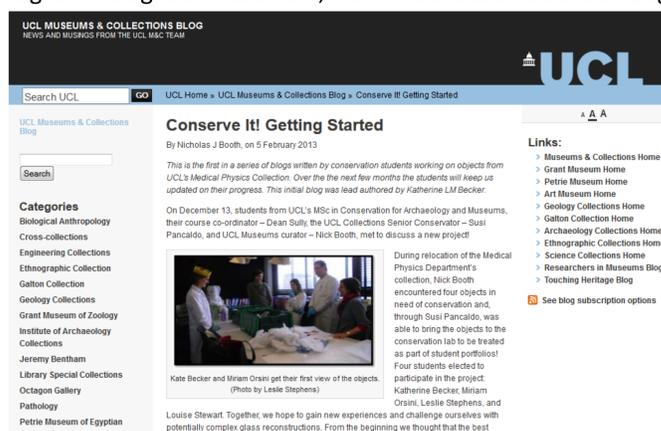


Fig. 1: Screenshot from the first blog post in the series completed by the authors.