

Reaching Out / Looking in: Two recent outreach initiatives at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

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Figure 1: A conservator working at a microscope



Figure 4: Conservator interviews



Figure 5: Fabricating Fake Food

As a field, conservation has a well-developed visual language that includes before and after images, magnified views of objects' surfaces and, a perennial favorite, the conservator peering through the microscope (Figure 1). These images have strong visual appeal, are widely recognized and are often used, by those outside the field, to illustrate content that may have little to do with the activities at hand. Meanwhile, conservation has struggled to develop a recognizable vocabulary linguistically, which poses problems for outreach. Recently, Colonial Williamsburg's Department of Conservation engaged in two large-scale, high profile public outreach activities: an electronic field trip entitled *Treasure Keepers* (Figure 2) and a conservation exhibit called *Conservation: Where Art and Science Meet*. (Figure 3). Both projects required intense interdepartmental collaboration; neither could have been realized without the aid of a number of individuals in departments across the foundation. However, this very fact highlighted some of the linguistic challenges facing conservators engaging in outreach.

Treasure Keepers

Colonial Williamsburg's mission is "that the future may learn from the past." The Foundation's Productions, Publications and Learning Ventures division (PPLV) aims to bring Colonial Williamsburg to new and distant audiences, to engage them and inspire them while fostering interactions with the Foundation. One of the ways they achieve this is through Electronic Field Trips (EFT). Once a month from October to April, PPLV hosts an EFT. The highest profile component of the EFT is a video production that combines pre-recorded segments with a live broadcast in which students from registered schools can call in to have their questions answered on air by a panel of experts. The broadcasts are supported by teacher lesson plans, resources for use in the classroom both before and after the broadcast and online student activities. The topics are eclectic and range from 18th century dramatizations that explore topics like Virginia's leadership in the call for independence to the relationship of slaves and masters and the impact of the Civil War, to behind-the-scenes peeks at how we learn about and present history through activities like archaeology, and curation.

Treasure Keepers offered a way to take a cross-curricular approach and encourage science participation in the EFT. Conservators were invited to contribute to the content while PPLV drafted a storyline. To keep the target audience (4th-8th graders) engaged, PPLV chose a format that combined short blasts of information, a snappy style, and youth friendly graphics and strove to inject humor where possible. Vignettes that paralleled the investigative work of conservators with a crime scene were interspersed with interviews with each of the Foundation's nine conservators. (Figure 4). Visually, the production took queues from *CSI* and *Bones*—tight camera work and numerous detailed shots communicated the closeness with which conservators examine and interact with objects.

The first airing of *Treasure Keepers* took place in February 2008 and it was rebroadcast in April 2010. Each broadcast was seen by an estimated 6 million viewers.

One of the fascinating points of discussion for the conservators involved in the planning was the diversity of interpretations that common words have within our field. We had long and sometimes heated discussions about words like "restoration". Where did restoration start and where did stabilization end? Was it the same as aesthetic reintegration or did it encompass additional activities? Did it differ from restorative conservation? Did the term really mean different things in different labs or did different branches of conservation, such as furniture conservation and archaeological conservation, represent different points on a continuum? We spent lots of time debating similar questions, until we began to become concerned that we were needlessly complicating an otherwise simple assignment and began to talk about how important it was or was not for our audience to understand these nuances. These discussions suggested that as the field has evolved and split into various subcategories which have all developed their own literature and theoretical underpinnings, the usage of terminology has drifted and the same terms have acquired slightly different meanings. If this continues, will it become difficult for conservators from one subgroup to understand conservators from another and how will this ultimately impact the public's ability to engage with us?

Conservation: Where Art and Science Meet

This exhibit, which opened in June 2010, focuses on the process of conservation from the creation of an object to its treatment. It starts with a section called the Material World, which spotlights the manufacturing process and examines how choices made during construction may affect the life of an object. Moving into the next segment, *Foiling the Agents of Decay*, visitors are introduced the effects of light, pollutants, temperature and relative humidity, pests and handling as well as methods of counteracting them, such as the creation and use of fake food in historic homes (Figure 5). The third segment, *Preserving the Past*, examines larger scale preventive conservation actions such as the engineering necessary to create a safe case or the work of the technicians and custodians who comprise Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area Collections Care team, and spend the early hours of most mornings monitoring conditions in the historic area and cleaning the period buildings. The next segment, *the Detective Story*, highlights the various methods that conservators at Colonial Williamsburg use to analyze and understand objects. The final section, entitled *Case Studies*, introduces selected philosophical and ethical issues in conservation including cleaning and the use of replicas. It concludes with a segment called *The Object as Document*, which features a 1790s grand piano that has definitely seen better days (Figure 6). The sound board is warped, ivories are missing, and a mouse has built a nest inside it to list just a few of the indignities this instrument has suffered. Elements of the piano are highlighted. Photos and text identify the evidence contained in the element and what would result if restoration were to occur. The visitor is then encouraged to vote as to whether the piano should be restored or left as it is. A narrated PowerPoint tells them what decision Colonial Williamsburg has made and puts it in the context of other instrument treatments.

In selecting a look for the exhibit the designer focused on the industrial qualities of a science lab with resulting in a style that is clean and crisp. (Figure 7). Mounts and other fittings are very obvious and are not painted out. In one case the control box for the fiber optic lights is very clearly visible. This helps to convey a sense of going behind the scenes and helps capture the intimacy often felt in the labs. Objects are shown in various states of undress—partially disassembled or at angles that visitors are unused to—heightening the perception of being an insider. Within this exhibit setting, the objects provide much of the color and have a jewel-like quality. Conservation staff largely felt comfortable with this design scheme, but several expressed concern that the setting appeared sterile and did not adequately reflect the world of color and texture within which they worked.

While the visual aspect of the exhibit was largely uncontroversial, an interesting point of conflict emerged with respect to the narrative. The non-conservator elements of the exhibit team pushed for a minimal approach to text and were uncomfortable with the use of "jargon". Conservators on the team felt strongly that they wanted to avoid reducing the field to "before and after" moments and that as such it was important to place actions in context and use the terminology that the field employs in order to introduce our activities. This proved more difficult than we thought. A particular challenge came with regard to the exhibit's title. Visitor surveys prior to the exhibit suggested that the word conservation did not resonate strongly with our audience, even those who are already relatively informed about the field. At best, visitors were ambivalent about the term. When visitors spoke about the topic they used terms like "preserving", "restoring", "saving", "caring for", and "keeping". For many of our visitors there was a deep sense of nostalgia for the past; the words that they used to talk about our activities reflect these positive emotions. We were concerned; if the term did not resonate, would people be drawn to see the exhibit? We considered other titles, including some suggested by our marketing department, but ultimately felt that since our goal was to educate the viewer about *conservation*, we would be doing the visitor and the topic a disservice by concealing that fact. However, conservators leading public programming connected with the exhibit report that visitors continue to struggle with the term.

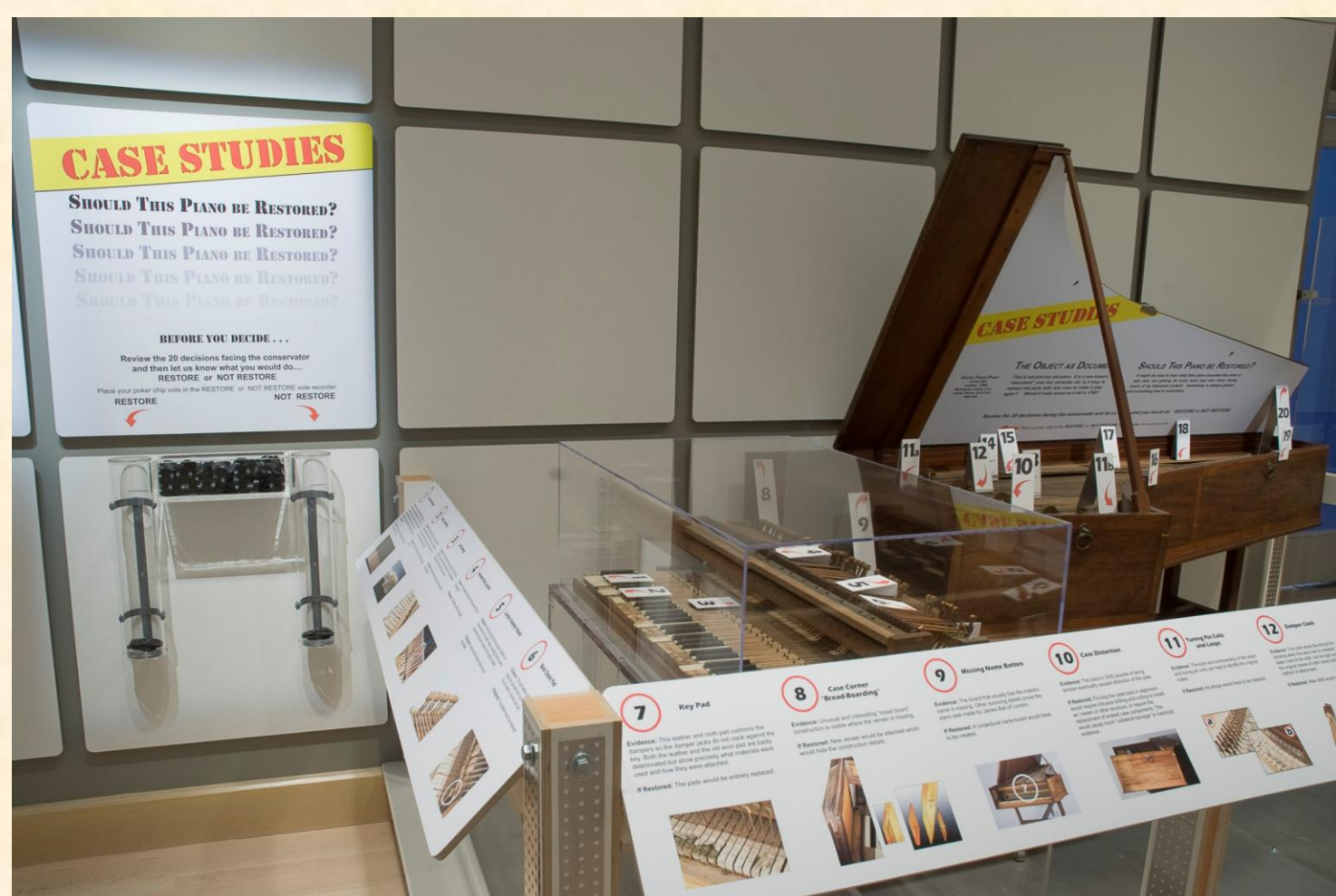


Figure 6: Piano display with voting station



Figure 7: Overview of the exhibit

Conclusion

Our focus on language and terminology caused us to make conscious choices about which phrases were most likely to appeal to our audiences and, at times, to adopt different approaches for each program. In *Treasure Keepers*, the phrase "Agents of Destruction" was employed. It was felt that this phrase would help create a link to the worlds of super-heroes and computer games that are familiar for many in our target age group. In the exhibit, the somewhat more genteel phrase "Agents of Decay" was used, with its connotations of moldering mansions and bygone eras. We found usages of each in the literature; a comforting fact as we had no desire to add to language confusion. Language has a tendency to evolve and shift and we need to be aware of this and pay attention to it in our field. We must also look at our audience and attempt to meet them where they are in order to ensure that our attempts to engage the public are ultimately successful.

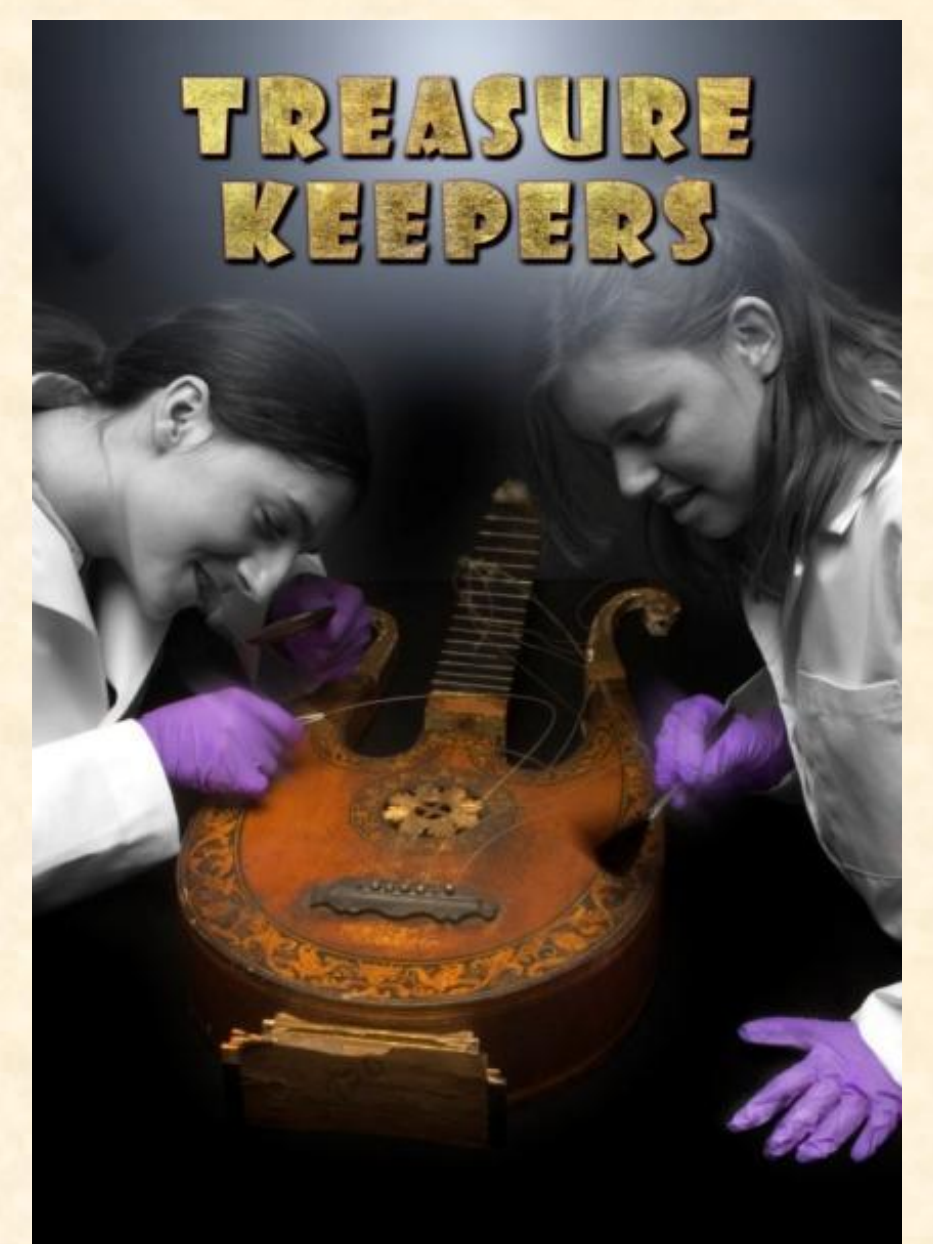


Figure 2: Promotional Poster for *Treasure Keepers*



Figure 3: Entry to *Conservation: Where Art and Science Meet*