american institute for conservation
Preserving Cultural Heritage

American Institute for Conservation (AIC)
Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice

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This document, the *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), sets forth the guiding principles and values for **cultural heritage conservation practitioners**. The *Guidelines for Practice* are an essential part of the *Code of Ethics*, and the two must be considered together as a unified framework. **Conservation practitioners** assume certain obligations to **cultural heritage**, its custodians, each other, society, and our planet. A livable planet is integral to the preservation of **cultural heritage** and linked to the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of the field. As conservation practitioners, we embrace the overarching principle that the preservation of **cultural heritage** is a collaborative endeavor. We acknowledge that all conservation choices affect **cultural heritage** and that the conservation practice is subjective in nature. These underlying principles represent an evolution from a strictly material-focused methodology to a more holistic approach in hope of enacting positive contributions to the field and society at large. (Note: **Bolded** phrases and terms are defined in the Glossary.)

Code of Ethics

The conservation practitioner shall:

I. demonstrate integrity in all aspects of their work.

II. consider the holistic character of **cultural heritage**, including but not limited to the cultural, historical, spiritual, symbolic, intangible, environmental, economic, and aesthetic significance.

III. apply a collaborative and people-centered approach considering the following: the intentions of the creator(s), the informed consent of **stakeholders**, as well as collaborators' specialized knowledge, contributions, and values.

IV. integrate preventive conservation into practice, as it is the foundation for a holistic and sustainable approach to the care of cultural heritage.

V. select preventive and/or interventive methods and materials that support future examination, scientific investigation, treatment, function, access, and physical integrity, acknowledging that all conservation actions are part of a continuum of care.

VI. consider that physical change is possible as a result of access and/or use and proceed with the understanding that change may be acceptable. Decision-making around access and change shall be determined through a collaborative process whenever possible.

VII. document all decisions and actions/inaction, including but not limited to rationale, collaborative processes, research, examination, scientific investigation, conservation treatment, and preventive methods. Documentation in records and reports shall be comprehensive and as permanent as possible. Documentation shall also be accessible to appropriate stakeholders.

VIII. work within the limits of their own personal competence, education, resources, and available facilities. They shall recommend other competent practitioners, **specialists**, resources, and/or facilities as the scope of work requires.

IX. contribute to upfront and transparent expectations of compensation, work to be performed, and deliverables for all conservation practitioners including those in training.

X. properly assign credit to contributors and authors on collaborative research publications and presentations.

XI. remain up to date about the latest developments in the field, including new materials and technologies that may inform practice, and carefully consider the ethics surrounding their use. Shall also acknowledge that the field of cultural heritage conservation is ever-evolving and shall adapt to changes in approach.

XII. contribute to the development of the conservation field and the broader cultural heritage community, acknowledging that a diverse range of experiences add value to the field.

XIII. strive to have the least negative environmental impact and consider the climate crisis as one of the key risks to cultural heritage. This includes a responsibility to anticipate and minimize harm to the environment and **cultural heritage**.

XIV. create, foster, and maintain a healthy, safe, and supportive professional culture that centralizes mental and physical well-being and minimizes risks and hazards to people.

The conservation practitioner shall use the following *Guidelines for Practice* together with the AIC *Code of Ethics* in the pursuit of ethical practice. The governing body of the American Institute for Conservation is responsible for promoting and enforcing this code of ethics. All members are expected to adhere to and promote understanding of the *Code of Ethics* as a part of their affiliation and as required by AIC Bylaws.

Allegations of misconduct follow the process provided by the AIC Board of Directors, as outlined in the Bylaws. All correspondence regarding alleged ethical misconduct will be held in the strictest confidence.

Guidelines for Practice

Conduct

The **conservation practitioner** should be guided by the intent of this document while recognizing that specific circumstances may legitimately and ethically affect professional decision-making.

The **conservation practitioner** shall treat every person with respect, fairness, good faith, and dignity to ensure an inclusive environment as well as advocate for the rights and welfare of all colleagues and collaborators. They should work to advance equity and dismantle individual and systemic biases in the cultural heritage field.

The **conservation practitioner** shall avoid situations in which there is a potential for a conflict of interest that may affect the quality of work, lead to the dissemination of false information, or give the appearance of impropriety. The **conservation practitioner** has the right to refuse involvement if they feel the actions compromise their personal ethics and/or the AIC Code of Ethics.

The **conservation practitioner** shall provide recommendations and referrals based on personal knowledge or peer review of the ability of the recommended practitioner to accomplish the task successfully and shall convey the limitations of their own knowledge and expertise. When the owner, custodian, or authorized agent seeks a second opinion, the conservation practitioner shall cooperate with all reasonable requests. These may include providing referral information or supplying the documented results of examination and analysis for which the conservation practitioner has been compensated.

Collaboration

Collaboration is integral and essential to the ethical, sustainable, holistic, and equitable care of cultural material. **Collaborative care** sets humanity at the center of practice and shows value in multiple sources and systems of knowledge, including communities of origin, artists and makers, individual and community **stakeholders**, colleagues in allied fields, those with legal or moral claims to ownership, and those with a stake in the outcomes of preservation decisions. **Conservation practitioners** should recognize collaboration as a cornerstone of their work.

The extent of collaborative practice may be limited by factors such as the availability of resources, institutional power structures, and/or the nature of the client-practitioner relationship. The practitioner shall seek out information and to understand **stakeholders'** perspectives to incorporate both into a decision-making process as much as circumstances allow.

Decision-Making

Decision-making goes hand-in-hand with collaboration, investigation, and documentation. Communication between the **conservation practitioner** and the **stakeholder(s)** of the **cultural heritage** is essential to formulate a plan that reflects shared decisions and realistic expectations. In their working relationships, the **conservation practitioner** shall be informed by the factors outlined in “Collaboration,” strive for transparency, and share complete and accurate information.

The rationale and goals for the proposed work plan shall be clearly defined. The aims of the proposed intervention or non-intervention shall consider **stakeholders**, ethical and legal considerations, the demands placed on the cultural heritage, physical and mental health and safety, and the material preservation of the heritage. All recommendations shall be made clear to the **stakeholders**, including an assessment of consequences, risks, and benefits.

The **conservation practitioner** should act with the informed consent of the appropriate **stakeholders**. The **stakeholder(s)** should be informed of any significant discoveries and/or circumstances that necessitate significant deviations from an agreed-upon plan. In circumstances, such as an accident or a disaster, in which it is not feasible to obtain prior formal consent, the conservation practitioner may act without consent only to reduce the risk of further damage to the cultural property. The conservation practitioner must submit a written report to the responsible party for ex post facto consent as soon as possible.

Preventive Conservation

The **conservation practitioner** shall institute **preventive conservation** as the most effective and sustainable means of promoting long-term holistic preservation and seek to balance preservation, access, and environmental impact with an understanding that each situation requires a tailored approach. Preventive conservation policies and practices provide important avenues for collaboration and decision-making with allied stakeholders in the mitigation of

threats to **cultural heritage**. Preventive conservation is an ongoing process that continues throughout the life of cultural heritage.

Whenever appropriate, the **conservation practitioner** shall provide specific guidance for disaster prevention and recovery, climate resiliency, environmental conditions, maintenance, and other possible risks. Stewardship activities involving continuing use and care, access, handling, storage, and display should be considered collaboratively with stakeholders when necessary and shall acknowledge the resource limitations of the cultural heritage **steward**.

Documentation

Documentation contributes to the understanding of the condition, significance, values, and contextual information of cultural heritage, and minimizes the risk of the dissociation of information. Documentation includes, but is not limited to, written and visual records that detail description, condition, and actions involved in the preservation of **cultural heritage**. Documentation may describe preventive, interventive, non-interventive, sampling, non-destructive and micro-destructive analysis, investigation, replication or reproduction, exhibition, surveys, and maintenance and management plans. Documentation records should identify the heritage, the names of the examiner(s) and primary **stakeholder(s),** the date(s) of actions, and a rationale for any action or intentional inaction involving **cultural heritage** as well as include before and after pictorial and/or auditory records, **contextual research**, techniques and procedures involved, materials used, and extent and location of alterations.

If other conservation practitioners, specialists, and stakeholders are involved, documentation of the collaborative process is encouraged. This includes participants, decision-making, challenges, and possible gaps in knowledge. Some shared information can be culturally sensitive knowledge. The conservation practitioner shall discuss and document how information is disseminated and how the information will be managed and implemented over time.

Conservation practitioners shall produce documentation that is timely, comprehensive, accessible, and intelligible using relevant methods and formats, including appropriate written, visual, digital, and/or auditory technologies. If artificial intelligence (AI) is used in the production or interpretation of documentation it should be disclosed. Documentation shall be maintained in standard archival formats for an adequate period for its purpose in such a way that is locatable,

accessible, and in accordance with relevant contracts, local laws and regulations. Copies of examination and treatment reports should be given to the appropriate **stakeholders**, who shall be advised of the importance of maintaining these materials with the **cultural heritage**.

Investigation

Examination of **cultural heritage**, including **contextual research** and scientific analysis, is used to gather **empirical evidence** and information pertaining to its condition, use, history, materials, method(s) of manufacture, provenance, care and treatment history, and/or risk assessment. Before undertaking any examination or scientific analysis, the **conservation practitioner** shall establish and document the rationale for such procedures. Examination is the first step in the conservation decision-making process and is ongoing throughout.

It is the responsibility of the **conservation practitioner** to report and interpret observations with clarity while acknowledging that observations are inherently subjective. All findings from examination shall be communicated to appropriate **stakeholders** accessibly and transparently, acknowledging the degree of uncertainty and possible alternative conclusions as well as their level of expertise in the examination methodology.

Contextual research is conducted to ascertain knowledge about heritage objects from different sources, including **stakeholders**, institutions, creator(s), and historical primary and secondary sources. **Contextual research** aids in the understanding of the conditions of creation and use, as well as the past, present, and future significance to stakeholders and society. Research utilized to inform future conservation action should be free of manipulation that biases its interpretation.

Scientific analysis and research of **cultural heritage** is complementary to examination and may contribute to the technical study by gathering information, verifying empirical observations of examination, and/or documenting the materiality of **cultural heritage** through systematic and measurable means. Any experimentation conducted should follow the **scientific method**, except where it conflicts with the traditional cultural values of stakeholders.

It is the responsibility of all conservation practitioners and specialists to uphold scientific integrity in the collection, processing, interpretation, documentation, and dissemination of results.

Scientific integrity also demands that inductive and deductive interpretations of empirical information are independent of government or institutional policy and private ownership preferences. Practitioners should recognize their own knowledge and interpretive limitations. To ensure appropriate expertise in investigations that draw inferences and conclusions from empirical data, collaboration with stakeholders may be necessary. Similarly, while software-based interpretations may be useful, it is still the responsibility of the interpreter to confirm and caveat all conclusions appropriately.

Scientific analysis may involve **non-invasive** or **minimally-invasive** methods. If invasive methods are required, the **conservation practitioner** shall establish the necessity and risk for alteration and obtain prior consent from the stakeholder(s). Samples should only be taken when the analytical technique may provide an answer to the specific question being addressed. The amount of sample material required, and the expected value of the information gained, must be weighed against the effect of removal of the sample upon the cultural material. Documenting the method of removal and sample location(s) is required, as is retention of the sample if possible.

Intervention

The **conservation practitioner** must prepare a proposal following examination and before the commencement of intervention. The proposal must include the justification for and the goals of intervention, process, and potential risks. This plan should be submitted to the **steward** for final approval.

Intervention may be considered when it is agreed that such action is necessary to preserve the integrity, accessibility, appreciation, or use of a **cultural heritage** item. Any action that intervenes on or alters a **cultural heritage** item must be undertaken with an awareness and respect for how the item is and may be used or displayed; its design and environmental context; artist or maker intent; previous and future conservation actions; scientific analysis; and the interests of **stakeholders**. Actions shall only be considered when there is reasonable evidence to support the efficacy of the methods proposed for achieving them. Any change to the item must not knowingly obscure or falsify provenance, authorship, attribution, or cultural significance of an item.

Changes made to an item should, when possible, be identifiable by others through non-invasive examination methods to inform future actions, investigation of significance, or use of the item. Documentation may supplement or complement detectability.

When a **cultural heritage** item is inherently unstable or when its use is incompatible with its preservation, the **conservation practitioner** may recommend a reproduction or substitute as appropriate to the situation. A reproduction or substitute should communicate appropriate significances and result in the least alteration to the original and should be clearly identified as such.

Decisions made with **stakeholder** collaboration can override the use of standard interventive practices if necessary to uphold the significance and integrity of **cultural heritage.**

Dissemination

Dissemination of investigations into **cultural heritage** and conservation methods must maintain honesty, transparency, reproducibility, and accessibility. Findings pertaining to conservation methodology and **cultural heritage** may be shared in professional forums, including peer-reviewed publications, when possible. It is the responsibility of **conservation practitioners** to critically evaluate the quality of disseminated research.

In reporting and publication, all intellectual contributions, including the design, methodological development, and interpretation of data, may warrant co-authorship. Credit must be given to any persons who contributed intellectually or technically. Authorship and co-authorship necessitates an intellectual contribution.

Data and/or images shall only be used with citation or permission of the appropriate holder of intellectual content. The level of confidence in interpretation of any data or empirical observations shall be transparent and justified. All sources of error and margins of error in data shall be acknowledged and communicated in reporting and dissemination. Fabrication, falsification, or suppression of results for any reason constitutes misconduct and unethical behavior. For this reason, all data and methodology being reported shall be retained and accessible.

Information derived from investigation and/or treatment of cultural items and sites should not be published or otherwise made public without permission from the appropriate **stakeholder(s).** In an instance where permission is not obtained, anonymized and generalized information can be shared.

Education and Supervision

Conscientious education through mentoring, instructing, and/or supervising **conservation practitioners** at any level fosters growth and innovation of the individual and the field. Training, internships, and fellowships all provide value and necessary labor to the field that shall be fairly compensated, preferably monetarily. Educational and professional development opportunities are most successful when they provide thoughtful, clear, and mutually agreed upon learning objectives, identify cross-training opportunities through collaboration with allied practitioners, and facilitate connections and opportunities with peers and colleagues for advancement opportunities.

Mentoring shall strive to create positive outcomes and be equitable. Mentors shall carefully consider whether their skills, knowledge, and resources are a good fit for the education the trainee desires. Supervisors have the responsibility to educate supervisees on the *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* and may share ethical responsibility for any violation.

Conscientious education and supervision also require transparency and appropriate training on health and safety issues, including physical and mental safety, potentially sensitive content, ethical and cultural protocol guidance, and environmental impacts of materials and methods.

Conservation practitioners in leadership positions shall strive to encourage equitable access to professional opportunities and embrace opportunities to guide and support interns, fellows, and **conservation practitioners**. They should also advocate for fair and equitable compensation, taking into consideration local cost of living, scope of project, and other relevant factors.

Environmental Sustainability

The **conservation practitioner** shall recognize their obligation to humanity and the global environment as integral to the preservation of cultural heritage and adapt practices as new information becomes available.

The **conservation practitioner** shall consider the climate crisis in both short- and long-term planning.

The **conservation practitioner** shall seek to educate themselves about the scope of the climate crisis and its direct impacts on communities and world heritage as an integral element of their training and ongoing professional development, and then appropriately adapt their work practices, particularly as new information and innovative solutions emerge. The conservation practitioner shall actively seek to reduce or mitigate energy-intensive environmental standards, waste, use of hazardous materials, and impacts from shipping and transit.

Health and Safety

As both a personal and community responsibility, conservation practitioners shall create, foster, and maintain a physically and mentally healthy, safe, and supportive work environment. Conservation practitioners' health and wellbeing is of paramount importance and faces challenges that can be inherent in the work. The **conservation practitioner** shall be aware of and up to date on issues concerning the health risks and safe use of materials and procedures, including complying with all workplace safety requirements, relevant federal, state, and local health and safety standards and regulations. Known hazards stemming from conservation practices, materials, or the **cultural heritage** itself shall be clearly identified and communicated to colleagues, clients, and the public where appropriate.

Emergency Situations

In emergency or disaster situations, the **conservation practitioner** shall prioritize the health and safety of all people involved over saving **cultural heritage**. Emergencies can pose a serious threat to **cultural heritage** and result in damage or loss that may warrant immediate intervention on the part of the **conservation practitioner**.

The **conservation practitioner** shall strive to be an active participant in the creation, training, and execution of emergency preparedness and response plans and incorporate preventive conservation protocols, emergency planning, region-specific training and sustainability, and disaster preparedness into their practice.

In an emergency that threatens **cultural heritage**, the **conservation practitioner** shall take all reasonable action to preserve the **cultural heritage** while recognizing that strict adherence to the *Guidelines for Practice* may not be possible.

Laws and Regulations

The **conservation practitioner** shall be aware of and comply with international, national, state, local, and community laws, regulations, guidelines, charters, and other recognized documents that have a bearing on professional activities. This especially pertains to those laws, regulations, and guidelines that apply to ancestral remains and sacred cultural materials, labor, health and safety, environmental regulations, the rights of artists, endangered species, and looted materials. Conservation ethical standards can exceed legal minimums.

The **conservation practitioner** may enter into contractual agreements with individuals, institutions, businesses, or government agencies, provided that such agreements align with the principles of the *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice*. Where applicable, the primary contractor should be transparent to stakeholders regarding fees and fair compensation for consultants, collaborators, and other contributors.

Advertising and other representations by the **conservation practitioner** shall present an accurate description of credentials and services. Limitations concerning the use of the AIC name or membership status shall be followed as stated in the AIC Bylaws.

Amendments

Amendments to the *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* may be proposed by one of two methods. (1) The AIC Board of Directors shall review the document at least once every ten years to determine whether to activate a select committee to propose changes. (2) Proposed amendments may be initiated by petition to the AIC Board of Directors from at least 1% of AIC membership.

Notice of any proposed changes must be furnished in writing (which may include an electronic transmission) to AIC individual members not less than thirty (30) days prior to a vote. Acceptance of amendments or changes must be affirmed by at least two-thirds of all AIC individual members voting. The vote quorum shall be at least 10% of AIC membership.

Glossary

These terms are defined below as they pertain to the American Institute for Conservation *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice.*

Climate resiliency

The ability to anticipate, prepare for, adapt to, and recover from climate impacts. This involves an understanding that climate change will create new risks and alter current risks.

Collaborative care

A style of work that is rooted in respectful partnership, shared decision-making, and mutual trust between parties both within and outside of the conservation and cultural heritage profession. It involves building and maintaining relationships and respects and supports the diverse approaches to care that derive from people's varied cultural, societal, spiritual, political, and geographical perspectives.

Conservation

All measures and actions aimed at safeguarding cultural heritage while ensuring its accessibility to present and future generations. All measures and actions should respect the significance, physical properties, and intangible aspects of the cultural heritage. Conservation activities include examination, documentation, treatment, and preventive care, supported by collaboration, research, and education.

Conservation practitioner

Any person who has the knowledge, education, ability, and experience to formulate and carry out conservation activities in accordance with the AIC *Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice*. The term, therefore, includes conservation professionals in an institution or private practice, as well as heritage scientists, technicians, educators, managers, and consultants who work in conservation.

Contextual research

Background and historical research that is essential to examination and analysis of cultural heritage including but not limited to provenance, authorship, attribution, use, or cultural significance of the cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage

Materials such as objects, collections, specimens, structures, buildings, or sites, tangible and/or intangible, which people identify and value as a reflection and expression of their evolving knowledge, beliefs, and traditions, and of their understanding of the knowledge, beliefs, and traditions of others.

Empirical evidence

That which is observed through the human senses and/or through experimentation.

Minimally-invasive analysis

A type of analysis that affects the physical and/or chemical state of cultural heritage, including but not limited to: the removal of material, chemical spot testing, solubility testing, surface pH testing, microfading, micro-ablation, and in-situ extractions. Minimally-invasive analysis is undertaken to gain additional information about cultural heritage materials for the purpose of determining the viability of a conservation action or the technical study of the materials.

Non-invasive analysis

A type of analysis that does not involve removal or alteration of cultural heritage, including but not limited to that which is visual, photographic, or sensory in nature. Non-invasive analysis should be conducted, as possible, according to the availability of resources and qualified professionals before commencing with any invasive analyses.

Preventive Care/Preventive Conservation

An active, ongoing process to support heritage preservation and access. This process involves an adaptable approach to mitigating risks to slow down the inevitable rate of deterioration and damage from both discrete and continuous processes;

Discrete processes are events which occur in a rare, distinct, sporadic, or unplanned frequency that may result in damage to collections;

Continuous processes are when damage is a result of ongoing, inherent, and or uncontrolled conditions surrounding collections.

Scientific method

The process of making hypotheses, deriving predictions from the hypotheses as logical potential outcomes, and then carrying out experiments or empirical observations based on those predictions. Hypotheses can then be modified based on experimental outcomes and re-tested until they are satisfactorily explored. The process requires thorough documentation of experimentation for experiments to be replicable.

Specialist

Non-conservation practitioner knowledgeable in areas related to a conservation project. When specialists are involved in the conservation of cultural heritage, conservation practitioners should inform the specialist(s) of the conservation practitioner's adherence to the *AIC Code of Ethics* and *Guidelines for Practice*.

Steward

A steward is a person or group who participates in the care of cultural heritage and collaborates with cultural groups, institutions, and conservation practitioners related to that heritage. This person, or persons, gives approval for conservation treatment.

Stakeholder

A person, group, or organization with a vested interest in or who are likely to be impacted by decisions made about cultural heritage. Stakeholders may include artists, creators, owners, institutional staff, and source communities. The term "stakeholder" is acknowledged to be problematic based on its roots in colonialism, but is used here for lack of a better term to succinctly denote inclusivity of all agents involved in and responsible for the care of cultural heritage.