



LESSONS FROM THE LONG VIEW: OBSERVATIONS AND INSIGHTS ON DEVELOPMENTS IN PRIVATE PRACTICE FROM THE 30 YEAR HISTORY OF ONE INDEPENDENT TEXTILE CONSERVATION STUDIO

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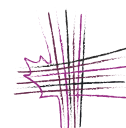
ABSTRACT

Textile Conservation Limited, an independent studio based in South West England celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2019. Founded by Frances Lennard and Fiona Hutton in 1989 and now owned by Alison Lister, the studio has completed hundreds of conservation projects for clients in the public and private sectors. Drawing upon the studio's project files the paper provides an account of how developments in the conservation field, heritage sector and business world have impacted on the studio's role, services and management. Using the unique perspective on conservation training, afforded by the authors' connections with both private practice and conservation education the paper also considers how effectively current programs are developing the physical, intellectual and emotional capabilities required for private practice to ensure independent studios like Textile Conservation Limited continue to thrive.

Lecciones de la experiencia: Percepciones y observaciones en torno al desarrollo de la práctica independiente a partir de 30 años de historia de un estudio privado de conservación de textiles

RESUMEN

El estudio independiente *Textile Conservation Limited* ubicado en el suroeste de Inglaterra, celebra su XXX aniversario en 2019. Fundado por Frances Lennard y Fiona Hutton, y ahora perteneciente a Alison Lister, la organización ha realizado miles de proyectos de conservación en todo tipo de textiles de clientes tanto del sector privado como del público.



Basándose en los datos de los archivos, esta ponencia da cuenta de cómo un estudio pequeño ha respondido a acontecimientos locales, nacionales e internacionales en el área de la conservación, en el sector del patrimonio y en el mundo de los negocios. Algunos ejemplos incluyen el recorte de servicios internos de conservación dentro de los museos, el incremento en iniciativas de acceso e involucramiento del público, novedades en tecnología y comunicaciones, licitaciones, nuevos canales de financiamiento y cambios en las leyes de contratación de personal. A través de casos de estudio a lo largo de 30 años, se analizó cómo estos cambios han impactado en el rol de la organización, su estructura, su práctica y su manejo en áreas como la contratación, la planeación de proyectos, la vinculación con los clientes, investigación y tratamientos de conservación.

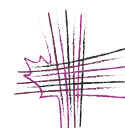
Mediante la singular perspectiva de la formación práctica y universitaria obtenida a través de los roles anteriores y actuales de las autoras, el artículo también toma en cuenta cuáles son las capacidades físicas, intelectuales y emocionales requeridas por los conservadores que trabajan de forma independiente para lograr que este tipo de organizaciones sigan prosperando.

Leçons d'une perspective à long terme : aperçus et observations sur les développements en pratique privée vus à travers les 30 ans d'histoire d'un atelier indépendant de restauration de textiles

RÉSUMÉ

Textile Conservation Limited, un atelier indépendant situé au sud-ouest de l'Angleterre, célèbre son 30^e anniversaire en 2019. Fondé par Frances Lennard et Fiona Hutton, et désormais la propriété d'Alison Lister, l'atelier a complété des milliers de projets de restauration impliquant tous les types de textiles pour des clients issus des secteurs privé et public.

À partir de données prélevées dans les dossiers des projets, cet article propose un récit de la manière dont un atelier aura su répondre aux développements à l'échelle locale, nationale et internationale dans le domaine de la restauration, du patrimoine et dans le monde des affaires au sens élargi. Les exemples incluent la diminution des services internes de restauration dans les musées, l'augmentation de l'accès et des initiatives de sensibilisation du public, les développements des technologies et communications, les systèmes compétitifs de soumissions, les nouvelles sources de financement et les changements aux réglementations d'emploi. Des études de cas tirées des 30 dernières années seront utilisées afin de passer en revue l'impact de ces changements sur le rôle de l'atelier, ses structures, ressources, pratiques et sa gestion en ce qui a trait au recrutement, à la planification de projets, la liaison avec les clients, les traitements de restauration et à la recherche.

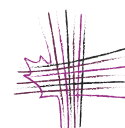


Grâce à leur expérience professionnelle, les auteures ont un regard unique sur la formation universitaire et celle en milieu de travail. C'est à travers cette lentille que cet article évalue aussi les habilités physiques, intellectuelles et émotives requises par les restaurateurs en pratique privée afin d'assurer le succès et la pérennité des ateliers indépendants

1. INTRODUCTION

Textile Conservation Limited (formerly *Textile Conservation*) is an independent conservation studio based in south west England. Established in 1989 by Frances Lennard and Fiona Hutton it was one of the first private textile conservation businesses in the UK. Now owned by Alison Lister, the studio celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2019. Hundreds of conservation projects featuring a wide range of objects, contexts and clients have been undertaken by the studio over the decades and it remains an active and viable business providing permanent employment for a small team of qualified conservators.

As can be expected over this long time frame the studio has changed in response to developments within and outside the conservation discipline. Shifts in policy and practice in the textile conservation field and wider heritage sector, changes in business regulations and the introduction of new technology have all influenced its profile and services. Taking advantage of the 'long view' this paper reflects on how and why private practice has changed and considers what implications these changes have for conservation education and training. The review has a unique perspective in that both authors have, at different times, been connected to the Master's level textile conservation program offered originally by the Textile Conservation Centre (TCC) and now by the Centre for Textile Conservation and Technical Art History, University of Glasgow (CTC).



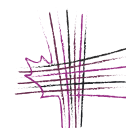
2. BACKGROUND AND PROFILE OF TEXTILE CONSERVATION (LTD)

In 1989 Frances Lennard and Fiona Hutton, both TCC graduates, set up a new textile conservation workshop in Banwell, Somerset. At the time only a few private studios existed in the UK including the TCC and the National Trust's own textile conservation studio. Early years projects included interventive conservation work for local National Trust and privately-owned historic properties, churches, schools and private clients. Projects for museums in the region were infrequent as these were mainly undertaken by the South West Area Museums Council. The studio gained a strong reputation for tapestry conservation due to Fiona's training, and undertook several projects involving painted textiles, an area of expertise for Frances. Conservation work was supplemented by talks to special interest groups and teaching and assessment of conservation students. Within three years the business was well established both in the region and the nationwide network of private studios, and projects often came from returning clients. Regular work provided opportunities to take on additional staff, often new graduates, on short term contracts.

Frances left the business in 2001 to rejoin the TCC, by then based at the University of Southampton where it had relocated from Hampton Court. At that time Alison was the Course Convenor for the MA Textile Conservation having worked within the TCC's Studies and Research Department since 1991. She left the TCC after leading the course through its first two-year cycle, and in 2003 began working on a freelance basis with Fiona who had maintained *Textile Conservation* as a sole trader. In May 2005 Fiona died suddenly from an undiagnosed heart condition. Her family chose to keep the business going and convert it to a limited company, renaming it *Textile Conservation Limited* (TCL)¹. Alison took over the ownership of the business in 2006 and in 2008 moved the studio to larger purpose-fitted premises in Bristol.



Figure 1. Fiona Hutton working on a tapestry from Houghton Hall, Norfolk. Photograph by Cristian Barnett.



The studio continues to treat a wide variety of textile types, and the contexts from which objects originate are equally diverse. It currently has three permanent members of staff with plans to expand the team, and still supports conservation education by offering opportunities for new and emerging conservators to gain work-based training and experience before, during and after qualification.



Figure 2. Alison Lister stabilizing a regimental color from the Museum of Somerset.
© Textile Conservation Limited.

3. SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE GENERAL NATURE OF PRIVATE CONSERVATION PRACTICE (IN THE UK)

Conservators in the UK, whether employed in a museum or working independently follow the same guiding principles and standards so treatment approaches and methods in the public and private sector are similar. One key difference is that an independent conservator is less likely to have specific knowledge of an object before it arrives on their work bench or responsibility for its ongoing care once it leaves. Interventive conservation is the main activity in private practice, and the ability to devise realistic and achievable quotes for projects and ensure these are maintained is critical. Treatment requirements vary greatly: textiles in private ownership, for example are often in active use, being worn, sat upon or hung on open display. It is possible to specialise but limiting one's practice to just a small range of object type or client risks running out of work. Balancing income with expenditure is an ongoing concern and increases in operating costs² can increase the conflict between achieving commercial success and maintaining professional standards. Some studios chose to maintain a team of freelancers; other employ their conservation staff. Although some studios are associated with large organisations, the majority have no source of income other than what they can generate through conservation work. To maintain cash flow work schedules must often accommodate multiple projects often running concurrently, and finding new work is a constant activity. Discipline-based knowledge and skills and the ability and disposition to expand, adapt and apply these as required in a timely and economic manner are essential for successful practice.

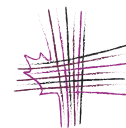


Figure 3. Stella Gardner and Maria Kinti working in-situ on a sofa on open display in a National Trust property. © Textile Conservation Limited.

4. THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF CONSERVATION PRACTICE

Changes in the way tangible heritage is interpreted, valued, managed and funded has a direct impact on what services a private studio provides, the operating systems it uses and the resources it needs. Even climate change is impacting on conservation practice with a noticeable increase in the number of objects suffering from the effects of flood and pest infestations.

Obviously, some of the changes at TCL reflect internal factors, such as staff numbers, expertise and interests, but as the studio's Register of Projects (1989 to the present) shows external factors are highly influential. Interventive treatment is still the main activity but over the years the studio has had to adopt new approaches, expand its capabilities and modify its management methods to meet new demands. The most significant changes in context that have driven these developments are as follows:



4.1 RANGE OF OBJECTS

The on-going move to a broader, more inclusive appreciation of what is considered art and culture, and therefore worthy of preservation has expanded the range of objects being conserved. This is particularly significant for textile conservation as the meaning and value (including financial) of textiles are again being recognized after decades of neglect. Historical textile art and crafts are actively being collected and displayed and new textile art is being commissioned for public spaces. Exhibitions of modern and contemporary textile art and design are very popular and the demand for fashion displays, especially haute couture, has exploded. In the last five years TCL has carried out the assessment and/or treatment of textile art by Picasso, Matisse, Sutherland, Kusama, Perry and Franko B and of costumes worn by Carmen Miranda and Andrew Logan, and its client base now includes architects, contemporary art galleries and artists. Both the nature of the objects and the expectations of clients, especially in the commercial art market, can be very different from the museum context, and the team have had to negotiate some new areas of potential conflict between ethics and economics. However, it has also been able to be an advocate for conservation as a means of adding value.

4.2 REDUCTION IN MUSEUM-BASED CONSERVATION SERVICES

Since the late 1990s there has been a significant reduction in in-house conservation departments in museums and heritage organisations, especially outside London. Resources have been reduced or removed (the South West Area Museums Council closed permanently in 1998), and the outsourcing of conservation services to the private sector is now commonplace. TCL is now the main supplier of textile conservation services to several major museums and heritage centres in the region who no longer have in-house facilities, and this has resulted in a significant amount of regular work. The nature of work for museums has also changed with fewer one-off major interventive conservation projects and more commissions for less intensive treatments for objects going on short term display.

4.3 FOCUS ON PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION

Preventive conservation has become the default approach to collections care in many UK museums and heritage organisations over the past 15-20 years. TCL is carrying out an increasing number of condition surveys and collections care advisory consultations of collections of all shapes and sizes from a few costume items to the textile furnishings of an entire historic property as part of wider preventive conservation initiatives. The studio has undertaken additional training in preventive strategies and techniques and acquired new equipment for monitoring and recording.

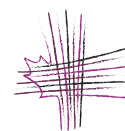
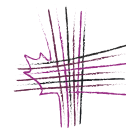


Figure 4. Constanze Zimmer condition checking a fur mask on display in MShed, Bristol. © Textile Conservation Limited.

4.4 INCREASING ACCESS

In contrast to the decline in in-house conservation services there has been a significant increase in the amount of time heritage sites and collections are open to the public. Evening and even all-night openings of museums and historic buildings are common and buildings are open regularly for musical performances, weddings, conferences, fairs, and film productions. The inevitable wear and tear and exposure to previously infrequent risks results in more rapid deterioration and repeated damage that may not be addressed adequately using methods and materials developed for a museum setting. The studio's annual work schedule is less predictable than in the past with shorter notice periods and treatment time frames, and it has had to develop new protocols to respond to these demands.

Longer opening hours may be one explanation for the increase in the number of temporary museum exhibitions. Where a single major exhibition a year was the norm it is now more usual for exhibitions to last 3-6 months with several running concurrently. To meet this demand museums are sourcing exhibits in private ownership but can be reluctant to fund their full conservation treatment. Assessing and preparing items for display, including sourcing and/or creating bespoke mounts, liaising with exhibition designers, interpreting exhibition layouts, consulting with suppliers of cases and framers, condition checking items on display, and installing and de-installing exhibits forms a far greater element of TCL's work program now than previously.



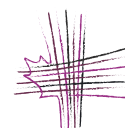
4.6 WORKING IN FRONT OF THE PUBLIC

The visibility of conservation as a museum activity has also increased. Conservation used to be a 'backroom' activity carried out in the studio or when an historic property was closed but is now often scheduled as a special event aimed at drawing in more visitors. Conservators are also invited more frequently to speak about their work to special interest groups and on all forms of media.

The requirement to include unqualified personnel in some element of the project is also becoming more common, especially in the case of publicly funded projects. While increasing awareness of conservation is overwhelmingly positive for the profession, creating a more diverse and informed market for our services, it has perhaps also led to wider expectations of what conservation can achieve. Conservation treatments carried out in a room setting or gallery cannot usually be done as efficiently as in the studio and the rate of work is often slower especially if the public can talk directly to the conservator. TCL undertakes conservation work in front of the public several times per year and has systems for preparing new staff for this role and for calculating the effect (financial and non-financial) on aspects such as time, schedule of work and resources required, as well as the added pressure and stress.



Figure 5. The team from Textile Conservation Limited removing tapestry linings in situ. © Textile Conservation Limited.



4.7 DEVELOPMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY

While there has been little change in the technology of most textile conservation treatments in the past 30 years, modern (especially digital) technology has had a big impact on communication and recording processes. Clients can access conservation expertise more easily than even ten years ago and have much higher expectations than formerly regarding quality, precision, accessibility and reproducibility of condition assessments, treatment reports and images. Digital and internet based systems for data storage, project planning and time management are all readily available, and social media has great potential for private practice as a marketing, networking and recruitment tool. Acquiring the skills necessary to use the technology has become essential for commercial success even for a micro-business like TCL.

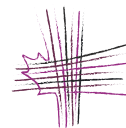
4.8 BUSINESS PRACTICE

As small businesses independent conservation studios must also respond to new regulations in areas such as governance, employment, data protection, accounting, redundancy and taxes. As an employer TCL must meet its statutory obligations on issues such as pay, leave, pensions, and safety at work. It also chooses to follow the Institute of Conservation's guidance on salary scales. Working for clients such as council-run museums and the National Trust also involves increased regulation covering areas such as insurance and security, professional accreditation, references, risk assessments, certification for using scaffolding and portable appliance testing. These additional costs cannot easily be made explicit to clients.

Some business systems are not new but have become more formal over the decades. Procurement is one example. The National Trust has routinely used competitive tendering to procure conservation services for projects over a certain value for at least 25 years. The system is much more formal and structured requiring evidence of relevant experience, a sustainable business model, confidentiality, insurance, contingency plans and professional references in addition to the estimated cost of the work. This is more time consuming, and thus expensive, than the previous low key process and TCL staff have had to become familiar with new terminology and procedures.

4.9 A CHANGING VIEW OF WORK?

Although the context of private practice has changed significantly, the number of independent studios like TCL in the UK has remained fairly constant in the last two decades. The reason why new independent textile conservation studios are not being established is unclear but may be due to the precarious nature of commercial practice within an under-resourced sector. It may also reflect changes in how work is viewed by the current generation for whom a single lifelong career may be less attractive. Both factors preclude the long-term employment of staff



and mitigate against expansion and succession planning. This lack of growth is a key concern for institutions such as the National Trust which commissions a great deal of freelance work much of it focussed on large-scale objects such as sets of tapestries, curtains and upholstered furniture.

5. RESPONDING TO THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF PRACTICE

5.1 HOW TO RESPOND AS EDUCATORS?

Textile conservation education has also changed significantly, in relation to the sectoral changes discussed above. 30 years ago training tended to focus primarily on the development of interventive treatment and documentation skills, then at the heart of professional conservation activity, but it has become much more wide-ranging over past decades. CTC students now work on a wide range of objects, interacting directly with owners and curators, and taking part in external, on-site projects, whereas the authors' own training was entirely studio-based and did not involve discussion with clients. Formal 'examination of objects' sessions were used to develop observation and report writing skills; today the focus is as likely to be on verbal assessment, role playing, time estimating and surveying a number of objects in a short time as on extended written documentation - all valuable skills for the workplace, and particularly in the range of situations experienced in private practice.

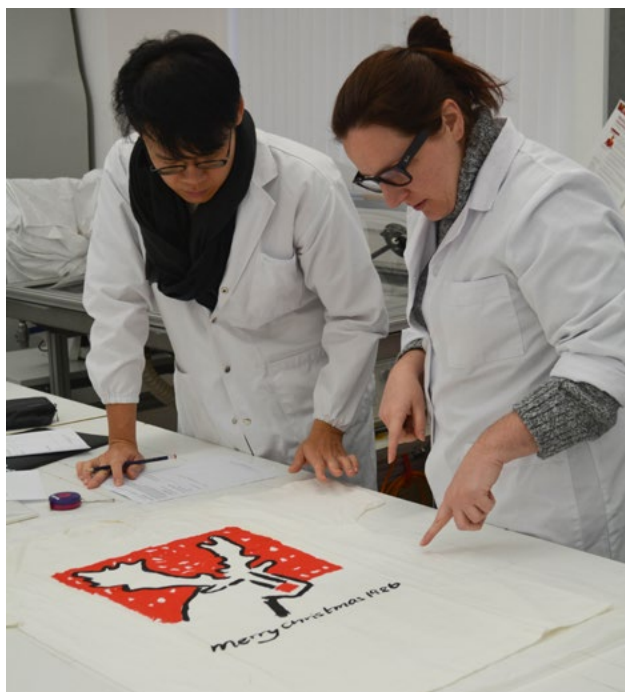
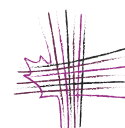


Figure 6. CTC students surveying a collection of artist's t-shirts from Glasgow School of Art. © University of Glasgow, by kind permission of The Glasgow School of Art and Fraser Taylor.

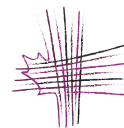


The program has greatly expanded in scope and currently exposes students to, for example, risk assessment, fund-raising, the tender process, working with loans, practical sessions on costume mounting, the treatment of textile art and exposure to a wider range of museum staff through close working relationships with local museums. It also contains an integral and compulsory work placement element. Project management, time management, team working and professional skills are all emphasized. Communication skills have always been central, but opportunities to practise speaking to visitors, to talk to wider groups within the University and to give public talks to schools and community groups have become increasingly important. Students undertaking work placements in museums and historic houses in 2018 all reported some element of speaking to visitors about their work, demonstrating that public engagement is now a core professional activity.



Figure 7. Frances Lennard with CTC student Eva-Maria Catic with a group of school pupils. Image by Elaine Vallance, by permission of Eastwood High School.

While this requirement is common to most textile conservation posts, it is clear that working in private practice requires a particular range of skills. One especially challenging aspect is the development of business and professional skills and in particular the type of soft skills needed for dealing appropriately with clients. This is different from working in the museum field where our colleagues are fellow professionals. Freelance conservators need to learn how to develop the ability to build relationships with clients, responding to their needs effectively and delivering appropriate solutions for both their and the objects' needs, but this can be challenging for students and recent graduates. Students at the CTC gain real-life experience of working with clients, helping them consider the owner's point of view and move beyond the purely physical needs of the object when developing treatment proposals. The overall emphasis of teaching is on developing judgement and decision-making skills rather than primarily on practical skills as in the past, and all discussions and assignments on developing treatment proposals start with a client brief. Core teaching on significance and value also helps in thinking more broadly. It is often challenging for students to manage and present different options for treatment and to find an appropriate tone in reports. As a result these skills are an ongoing focus of learning throughout the program.

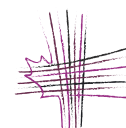


Despite these positive developments it remains challenging to fully prepare students for work in the private sector. A careful balance of different aspects of the syllabus can mitigate against obtaining the type of experience that would be especially valuable. While freelance conservators often focus on the preparation of objects for short-term exhibition, student interventive treatments have to focus on the development of core cleaning, support and mounting skills, which are necessary to be able to assess risks and judge how to safely carry out more minimal treatments. There isn't sufficient time for the students to get fully involved in, for example, liaison with mount makers and mannequin suppliers. Equally, objects for student treatments tend to be supplied by museums or private clients and there are fewer opportunities to work with a range of different clients such as artists or architects. However the gap between the experiences students are exposed to on the program and the needs of the private sector have closed in recent years. And on a positive note, students today start out with advanced skills in technology and social media!

The short duration of conservation programs remains a limiting factor. While students gain a great deal from a structured academic experience where they are introduced to a range of situations and begin to master key skills, they will inevitably benefit from developing their experience in the real world, through internships or posts. This puts the onus on small businesses in the private sector to carry out further specialized training.

5.2 HOW TO RESPOND AS EMPLOYERS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR?

Private practice has a lot to offer emerging conservators as its diversity and fast turnover can expose new graduates to a wide range of exciting and challenging experiences, in which they can test their developing knowledge and skills in a short time. However, the costs (usually in the form of time) incurred in providing work-based training can be unsustainable for some private studios without additional financial support. Some funding streams for post-graduation internships are available but not all are open to 'for profit' businesses. Freelance conservators contribute to the program as visiting lecturers, and case studies illustrating complex real-world situations can introduce students to all the issues associated with working in a commercial setting. TCL's experience has shown that 'problem setting', i.e. the deliberate naming and framing of the aspects of a professional situation that define the nature of the problem to be addressed, is a skill graduates can lack. Without this skill the ability to engage fully and positively with each new situation, to identify and evaluate all the relevant options and (most importantly) to select the most suitable with confidence and conviction is slow to develop. The development of this skill is perhaps where private sector practitioners can be of most value to conservation education.



6. CONCLUSIONS

Reviewing the work of one independent textile conservation studio over 30 years clearly demonstrates that conservation practice in the private sector has changed significantly since 1989. While we can only try to anticipate future changes in funding, collecting policy and work practice, one thing is certain – it will continue to change in the future. It is important that future freelance conservators are equipped to deal with the particular and varied challenges of work in the private sector. It is in the interests of all parties for conservation education to keep abreast of changes in practice in all areas of the field, and for independent studios like TCL to play their part in developing the next generation of practitioners. The preparation of this paper has already led the authors to consider future collaborations. As the past three decades has shown private conservation practice has much to offer and much to gain from close ties with conservation education.

ENDNOTES

¹ In the UK a business partnership is a group of two or more individuals who personally share responsibility for a business. Partners share the business's profits and are both responsible for the costs associated with the business and any losses the business makes. Each partner pays income tax on their share. A sole trader is an individual who runs their own business as an individual. They are self-employed so keep all the business's profits after paying tax and is personally responsible for any losses the business makes. A private limited company (abbreviated to Ltd) is a company that is legally separate from the people who run it, has separate finances from the business owners and is allowed to keep any profits it makes after paying tax.

² The fixed operating costs for TCL include salaries, pension and national insurance contributions, rent, rates, building maintenance and insurance, electricity, water, sewerage, telephone, internet and email services, professional insurance, security and fire alarm monitoring and maintenance, bank charges, business registration charges, bookkeeping and accountancy, professional membership and accreditation fees, music license, stationary and printing, advertising, cleaning and staff welfare costs.

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