

Bruno Pouliot (MAC 1983), Objects Conservator and Associate Professor, Winterthur/University of Delaware Program

Interviewed by Sophia Zweifel (MAC 2015)

Throughout his career, Bruno Pouliot has made a meaningful impact on conservation communities across many countries and continents. After growing up in a small town in Québec, Bruno pursued a B.A. degree in Classical Archaeology at Laval University. During an excavation in Tunisia, Bruno became interested in conservation, and went on to complete the Master of Art Conservation Program at Queen's University in 1983. In his early career, Bruno completed internships at the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) in Ottawa, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, the Fowler Museum at UCLA, and at conservation research centres in France and Germany. In 1985, his passion for travel inspired him to take on a short ICCROM teaching position in West Africa.

His sense of adventure did not stop there, as he spent the next six years (from 1986 to 1991) in the Arctic, working as an Objects Conservator at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife. Bruno then moved to Montreal, and served as Objects Conservator, and later Head of Conservation, at the McCord Museum. Realizing his passion for teaching, Bruno left Montreal in 1997 to join the faculty at the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation as Objects Conservator and Assistant Professor. He now has a long legacy of students who have benefitted from his teaching, and his dedication was recognized in 2010 when he received the Sheldon & Caroline Keck Award for excellence in the education and training of conservation professionals.

Bruno continues to contribute to the conservation community both through teaching and through publications, seminars and workshops. Bruno is currently the French Editor for the Journal of the American Institute of Conservation, as well as Editor for the Art and Archaeology Abstracts Online.

Q You're well known in the conservation community for many things. But your perspectives on the ethics of conserving indigenous artifacts are of particular interest to me. This year in our organics course we read your 1998 article on the blessing of two Wampum belts from the McCord Museum in the *Journal of the Canadian Association for Conservation (JCAC)*. I was wondering if you could discuss this event, or any other events, that have shaped your way of thinking.

A Even though my background was in archaeology, my first summer work project was at the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), and I met someone there, whom you will know, Miriam Clavir. Even though I worked with archaeology, it was almost as though my heart was tugging to get to know Miriam and see what she was doing, and that's how I ended up for my second summer placement at the Glenbow museum with Ann Howatt-Krahn, and that's where my love of ethnographic conservation came from.

Also my background has had an effect. In my family we have this notion that my great great grandmother was an Abenaki, and so I had that connection to Native Americans, just because I sensed that unknown great great grandmother. And we are not Native American in any way otherwise, but it was fascinating to me, it gave a second dimension to what I was doing.

I never felt that conserving for the sake of conserving gave me full satisfaction. That came when I began to work with Native Americans, and especially the work that I did in the Arctic for six years with Native American communities. It was further reinforced when I came to the McCord Museum, where, alongside Moira McCaffrey, I worked with the Mi'kmaq community. It was an amazing experience from the start.

The wampum belt was something that reinforced the value of why we do what we do. To me, one of the most amazing things was that we were being thanked for caring for that collection within the museum. Yet, our goal to some degree was to ask the community what they thought we should do. Again, this was at the beginning of the movement when Native Americans were beginning to reassert their rights. And so it was an extraordinary experience all the way, but it came from my having so many years of interest in the subject and it was a kind of fruition. This was one of the best experiences that I ever had.

In 1996 I presented what became the *JCAC* paper in at the Canadian Association for Conservation conference in Calgary. I wanted people to get a sense of the feeling of how it was to be there. So, for my talk I had the lights turned down to almost complete blackness, and I had some people walk down the aisle with burning sweetgrass. I felt that you can't just experience something like that with your brain, you have to smell and to see and to hear. And in fact, many people told me afterwards that I had changed their minds forever about ethnographic conservation, about the value of listening to voices, other voices that are significant. We're caretakers, we're not owners, not makers, we are caretakers. It was a little bit scary to break the mould that way, but I think it paid off.

Q Is there a person in the conservation field who was inspirational for you?

A It was Miriam Clavir. And I'm still a good friend of Miriam. We hosted her two years ago as one of our guest speakers in a teaching segment we do on ethnographic conservation.

The other inspiring person is Debbie Norris, our program head. She really embraced bringing Miriam Clavir from Vancouver, she just said do it, whatever it costs. And it was an extraordinary experience for the students.

Q How did Queen's prepare you for your career?

A Well, when I was at Queen's we still had Henry Hodges there. I am the only person in a wheelchair who has gone through the conservation program. Henry Hodges admitted to me after I graduated that he had not been convinced that I would make it through the program. But by the end, he and Ian Hodgkinson said yeah, you've got what it takes. And that was a huge encouragement because I didn't know myself, honestly.

Truly it was having great mentors at Queen's. Henry was a mentor, and he - as well as mentors through the summer internships, in particular Miriam Clavir, Ann Howatt-Krahn, and Tom Stone, who sadly just passed away - to me these mentors have meant a great deal, because I think I learn more not by being told but by observing. I admired their passion for the field, I admired that they were dedicated to it, that it was a passion and not just a job but it was something that they lived. And that to me was something that I learned the best at Queen's.

On a personal level, it showed me that even in a wheelchair I could fulfill my dream. When I had the accident when I broke my back, I had in my bag, at the moment of my accident, the letter that I was going to send to Queen's the next day. I wanted to go to Queen's and then this accident put me in a wheelchair, but a year later I was able to go into the program. I had doubts, and I was a pioneer in terms of a physical handicap, but people opened doors. And that was another thing, they arranged for physical changes to the building that needed to be done to accommodate me. And it showed me that I could do it, but it also showed me that people would help to make it possible. It showed me to trust people, basically. If you are willing, if you show your passion towards something, there will be people around you who will be supportive and really make the path possible for you. So that's what Queen's represents for me.

Q Your career has spanned many cities, environments, continents. How did you get to your current job and what motivated you to travel to all of these places?

A Travelling has always been a dream of mine since I was a kid. Honestly I was young and my dream was to live in Africa. So I had done a little bit of travelling before I went to Queen's. But then I saw the opportunities for travel in conservation. And my wife, that is how we came together, because our love for travel was just at the top. I wanted to blend both what I did with my love of travel and experiencing other cultures, and somehow things worked out, really much more than I anticipated.

Even though I'm from a tiny little French-Canadian town, way out in the boonies, and I didn't speak English really until I was about nineteen, to me I'm French-Canadian but I don't feel that I need to live there to be French-Canadian. I left there when I was nineteen, really, and then we travelled throughout the world. I wanted to experience cultures and I figured out opportunities to be able to do so. When I was out west - to Calgary and then later to UCLA. I got an NEH grant to study at UCLA for six months, and then I got a European grant to study for six months in France. Then that led to the teaching position for ICCROM in Africa. When I came back, that's when I went to the Arctic for six years, and then I came back and went to the McCord for six years.

What led me to teach was that everyone had always told me I was a natural teacher and I had no idea what they meant, because I never saw it in myself. But then I realized that every year I was taking some Queen's students and I was taking some Fleming students, and I even took a Winterthur student one year. Kathleen Kiefer was her name, she came as a textile conservator, and realized when she was there that she was interested in working with ethnographic materials. So I spoke to the textile conservator and she said I could certainly supervise some of her work on leather, on porcupine quills, on horn, on ivory. And Kathleen is the one who said to Winterthur: "Oh you know I had this wonderful supervisor up in Canada". And they were looking for a conservator, and they contacted me and they said well, would you like to come? And since I had taught a course at ICCROM and done all this training of interns, I realized well, maybe I am good at teaching. And then I met Debbie Norris, and I was like wow. By then I was forty, and I felt that if I were to come here, to Winterthur, I had a contribution to make. And I felt strongly that my contribution at that moment was to bring ethnographic conservation knowledge to this program, which it didn't really have at that time. And Debbie Norris said that's what we want, and she convinced me to come, so I came here.

Q In 2010 you were awarded the AIC award for excellence in teaching, have there been any moments throughout your career in teaching that have been particularly memorable?

A Well the ICCROM course of course, I was just fresh out of school, and I realized all these things that we shouldn't be doing, and I had brought these notes - you know 50-page handouts - nobody had handouts. I had the experience and I really enjoyed it, and I had feedback from amazing students who told me I was doing a great job. I still didn't have self-confidence about it, but I had so many students that said it was great! Students were coming to me and saying, you know no one else gives us notes - and the other teachers were all saying 'what is it with all these notes?', and I had worked quite hard on these notes at CCI - and the students were saying it was fantastic to have them! And so I thought, well I am on the right track!

I've always loved teaching, even as a kid, I don't remember it specifically about myself but apparently it was something that I was doing even when I was young. I'm from a big family, I'm the eleventh child, and my older brothers say "yeah he's been teaching us ever since he was a baby". So anyway, I didn't know what I was doing but apparently that's what I was doing.

I did follow my instincts, but it was sometimes tough. Not every year was easy because I had to change the mentality a little bit in this program, but I had the support of the director. And now it has been eighteen years - it will be eighteen years next week and you know, I'm in a good place, that's all I can say.

Q What advice would you give to students or to new graduates entering the field?

A Give your best. Actually, I set very high standards for my students, but I try to do it in the way that is supportive. Find a passion for something, and then follow your passion. Of my students who graduated in 2014, I had five students of five different disciplines - from musical instruments, to arms and armor, to the natural sciences, to antiquities, and to ethnographic conservation - and I had to teach them all at once. So the only way to do this was to be sure that things were clear and the students understood what they were doing. What we were doing was to give them the foundation, and it was their role to take it to the next level.

It's a challenging field, you'll be challenged.. But my gosh, the reward! Still, after 30 years of experience, I have never felt boredom about what I do. The days are always too short, they are never ever too long. Your passion will carry you through, because you will be able to find from within it strength to make it through. And not only will your passion give you strength, but with it you will find the right way to make it through.

Q What do you love most about your current job at Winterthur?

A I love most that it keeps me interested every day. And my new passion is for modern and contemporary materials. There is just such a strong connection between how one considers the input of native communities, and the input of an artist or of an artist's vision. I find a strong parallel, and to me now both are mixed in terms of my way of thinking, and I can integrate both into the way I teach. And hopefully I will continue to do so.

Q Have you ever encountered indigenous contemporary art in your career?

A Totally. Actually, on Tuesday next week that's what we're doing as a part of our ethics seminar. We used to only teach ethnographic ethics, and it was typically done through a day-long visit to the National Museum of the American Indian, where we talked to their repatriation officers, the curators, and everybody else who works in conservation. But this year we are going to see sculptures on display on the Mall in Washington DC by the artist Nora Noranjo-Morse. The sculptures are sort of a soft earthenware of baked clay, and are meant to return to nature - but in a certain way. It's been our most recent thing to work with modern Native American artists, and maybe that's where my blend of the two comes together. It's a great combination, it's fun, and I think that's why I like it because I continue to learn every day. There's always something new to learn, and it's great. Maybe it's simple to say that, but it's fulfilling. I'm happy with the learning that I must still do and with the teaching that I must still do, and that keeps me going.