

James Bourdeau (MAC 1987), Director of Scientific Services, Canadian Conservation Institute

Interviewed by Bethany Jo Mikelait (MAC 2015)

James Bourdeau graduated in the paintings stream from the Queen's MAC program in 1987 and has been working at the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) in Ottawa since 1992. In 2006 he was appointed as Manager of Fine Arts, Furniture, Paper, and Textiles and became a key developer of the Heritage Interiors division at CCI. From 2002-2005, he worked as Senior Collections Preservation Advisor for the Parliamentary Precinct's heritage collections. Since this interview was held, James has become the Director of Scientific Services at CCI. His CV also includes conservation work at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, the Centre de conservation du Québec, the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, and the National Archives of Canada.

**Q Tell me about your career path – how did you get your current job?**

A I have moved around a fair amount in my career, and I think it's taken some unexpected turns because I have been willing try new things. I probably could have been even less settled and looked at more international opportunities but for the last few years I have been working at what one might call, the levers of power. (I don't want that to sound pretentious or more important than it is.) It started with my diving into writing policy for change management at CCI back in the 1990s during a period of severe budget cuts. This was followed by throwing myself into built heritage with the focus on heritage interiors. In 2002 I became the conservator for the Parliamentary Precinct with a collections management and stakeholder coordination role. In 2006 and 2008 I participated in a Treasury Board Policy update and in the development of moveable heritage asset conservation guidelines for federal departments. These guidelines have had a profound influence on the integration of conservation practices and conservators into the care of federal heritage collections in Canada. Building managers now know they must comply with this policy and contact a qualified conservation professional to work on anything that looks like "heritage" or "art" in their buildings.

My current job as manager of, first, Paper Textiles and Fine Arts labs, then the Furniture laboratory was a challenge I accepted in 2006. Since 2010 I have been mandated to develop a distinct Heritage Interiors section that has grown and been integrated into the Major Crown Projects in the Parliamentary Precinct. We are now part of every single construction project on Parliament Hill, thanks to a dedicated core CCI team and a lot of flexibility in hiring younger graduates, many of whom are from Queen's, to take on major planning and quality assurance work in order to protect heritage art and artifacts in this and other National Historic Sites.

**Q What do you like the most about your job?**

A I think it's the ability to make change happen despite the constraints of government. It's also all about the public good. The goals of public service dovetail very well with the altruistic aspirations of conservators to save things for posterity. What I enjoy most is that each week I could be running around reviewing many different conservation and heritage trades projects in heritage buildings and advising project leaders on the way the work is proceeding. I also love helping colleagues at CCI, many of whom are Queen's graduates, to achieve successes in their projects.

I have very much enjoyed collaborating with international colleagues, many of whom have become close friends over the years. Getting to know them and learning how they and their colleagues

deal with heritage conservation problems has been a real education for me.

**Q You are well known in the community for your work with historic interiors. Could you discuss a particular project that you are proud of that has had national or international impact?**

A I'll give you two if I may. My early research involvement was with picture varnishes, their performance characteristics and their appearance. Because of the networks of colleagues in conservation and the debates in which we engaged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I really had to rethink the decontextualization of the art object that happens in the modern museum as opposed to the historical picture gallery. Because of my family background in architecture, I saw this meant that focusing on the historic decorative interior was a way of re-situating the art object in its context. This led to our work at CCI on Symposium 2000: the Conservation of Heritage Interiors, where I was the chair of the technical committee. Nancy Binnie was the symposium chair. It was especially successful if I may say so, and tapped into the "zeitgeist" of the time in conservation whereby many international colleagues were seeing the need to bring conservation architects and built heritage planners together with art conservators to address the historic interior in its entirety, in a way that honoured how it was conceived and evolved as a unified design environment.

The second project that I have been proud of is probably the 20 years of work that my CCI colleagues and I have been doing to conserve the buildings within the Parliamentary Precinct in Ottawa. This is a massive project with a lot of twists and turns but it is like a heritage freight train picking up speed. It may be premature to say I have pride in the project at this point since it's far from over, but I and the team I work with, our collaborators, and even the Parliamentary partners, have been doggedly keeping conservation at the forefront of an exceedingly large building rehabilitation requirement.

**Q Is there an idea that you think is especially important to remember, while you are working in the field?**

A Try to enjoy being in the moment when you are buried in a project. There are many distractions along the way and they seem to grow along with your responsibilities. It's normal. Business runs on schedules and costs, but it also has to include quality and I'd have to say passion. It's also important to recognize the efforts and abilities of those you work with. I don't mean that you shouldn't be tough and set the bar high for your team, but everyone needs to feel confident that failure can be a learning opportunity. Never be afraid of a critique or of growing from those lessons learned when things seem to be going off the rails. Mentoring younger colleagues has such a big impact, you just can't imagine how important it is. I gave my first big conference presentation at the 1990 Congress of the International Institute for Conservation in Brussels on my research into UV barrier varnishes. I thought I did a terrible job and was not happy at all with my nervousness and my inexperienced delivery. A month after the conference I received a letter from Robert Feller (Emeritus Director of the Research Centre on the Materials of the Artist and Conservator at Carnegie Mellon University) complimenting me on my research and on the presentation in Brussels. I can't tell you how much that meant to me. I've never forgotten that.

**Q Is there a person in the conservation field that was particularly inspirational?**

A That is a tough question. There are many colleagues in this profession who have inspired me over the years. It's almost impossible to answer. I've very much looked up to Kate Frame, head

of conservation at Historic Royal Palaces in the London who built an entire collections conservation infrastructure from the ground up. And I've very much enjoyed the times I have been lucky enough to collaborate with Sarah Staniforth who was for years a driving force for integrating conservation with community engagement and bigger issues of environmental and site sustainability at the National Trust UK. Not on to back down from a challenge, she has now, in "retirement", been elected president of the International Institute for Conservation in London.

**Q How has Queen's prepared you for your career?**

A Queen's has a reputation for quality of teaching and research within a human-scaled campus that attracted me. I'd have to say that throughout my years there, I felt pretty free to grow intellectually both in Art History studies and later in the Art Conservation Program. Some of my profs were perhaps not considered the greatest researchers but often they made up for it in their ability to communicate ideas and question dogma. My year in the Art Conservation Program was the first to specialize in one field, which was paintings conservation. Before that, the fine arts stream studied one year of paintings conservation and one of paper conservation. The innovation was a big improvement and gave me a good set of skills and experience upon graduation. A lot of credit has to go to Professor Ian Hodkinson for the pragmatic approach to conservation intervention he passed down to us in those years. I also remained working in the lab in the department for six months after graduation on a contract to conserve paintings from the Bader Collection of European art. This meant that when I finally left Queen's, including my summer internships, I had completed approximately 30 projects including about 10 major conservation treatments. This prepared me very well for the following years I spent at the Centre de conservation du Québec and the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, where I carried out one major treatment after another on easel paintings from all periods, major altarpieces, and several mural paintings. I have to give the Art History program much credit also for preparing me for the roles I seem to have grown into later in my career. This made me very sensitive not only to technical problems and solutions, but to the realization that identity, meaning and context and origin are critical. I was pushing history and identity within my varnish research and in my readings on authenticity and appearance even before I was in the position to pull a lot of my experience together in my later work on historic interiors. I easily could have gone on to graduate and post-graduate work in Art History but I'm happy I made the choices I did.

**Q What are your favourite memories of Queen's?**

A Winning the Departmental Medal in Art History in 1985 stands out for me. As an undergrad in Art History I was placed on the Dean's list several times. In 1981 there was a large reception to honour students from all departments for their achievements. As part of the event there was a lecture by one of the professors in the chemistry department. I think the students were both honoured and a bit apprehensive at the same time asking themselves, you know, "Do I measure up?" I was taking second-year organic chemistry at the time and really enjoying it. Coincidentally the lecture was on a chemistry topic concerning reaction mechanisms if I recall. When he was finished the lecturer asked for questions from the student body. I remember asking a rather complex question about stereochemistry and isomers in relation to specificity of chemical reaction mechanisms. The lecturer answered it with a lot of complexity. Great. Then he asked me what was my department. When I answered 'Art History' the whole room burst out laughing. That was in my mind the best about a Queen's education, the ability to cross the lines and become a more wholly educated thinker. I think I was fortunate to have been at Queen's at time when many of my professors, who were older, encouraged this.

Later on, in the Art Conservation Program, my best memories in my year (1985-1987) were of the

hard work tempered by the wonderful atmosphere of play and debate that pushed everyone to question and think. Convenience in any discipline seeks a level of comfort in recipes that Queen's and other conservation training programs try to overcome by empiricism and scepticism. This is a very important period in the formation of a conservator that you hope will carry a student through a career when habit takes over.

**Q        What advice would you give to students or new graduates?**

A        I'm not sure they need to hear my shopworn advice, but I find that those graduates who understand that an education is not the same as technical training are those who will be the most change-ready in their careers. If I am any example, I have changed what I do fairly significantly about every seven to ten years and I have had to pick up new skills along the way. Now, it's not about the bench as much as it's about contract management, teams and projects, reporting results and accounting. Yet you also have to maintain a sense of your professional self, maybe your inner professional vision, even as you seem not to be doing what you expected. What the Department of Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC) needs from the conservators at CCI is their core materials knowledge, and their conservation vision that can help to guide the heritage outcomes of a huge project like the rehabilitation of the Centre Block on Parliament Hill. Our colleagues at PWGSC are very clear that they need the very things with which I was equipped by my time at Queen's. Not just knowledge of materials but also knowledge of historical context and historical identity.

I don't think young people need much advice on being creative in terms of crowd sourcing or social media to make things happen, but I have found by experience that you actually can go right to the top in the corporate world to make a business case for funding and succeed. There are chronic complaints about funding in conservation, but there is a lot of room to improve this by thinking creatively. Most museums know this and conservators have to achieve this without compromising their ethics.