

Dr. Miriam Clavir (MAC 1976), Research Fellow and Conservator Emerita, University of British Columbia

Interview by Megan Doxsey-Whitfield (MAC 2015)

Dr. Miriam Clavir is a member of the first graduating class of the Queen's Master of Art Conservation program (MAC 1976). She earned her Ph.D. in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester in 1998. In 2002, she published her Ph.D. thesis as a book: *Preserving What Is Valued: Museums, Conservation and First Nations*, for which she received an Award for Excellence from the Canadian Museums Association. Miriam worked as a conservator for the University of British Columbia (UBC) Museum of Anthropology (MOA) for 24 years, and currently holds the position of Research Fellow and Conservator Emerita. Throughout her career, she has had over 20 articles published or reprinted in professional journals or in professional on-line publications. Miriam has been a Fellow of the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works; a Professional Associate of the American Institute for Conservation; and a Member of the Canadian Association of Professional Conservators, as well as a member of various museum associations. She has lectured extensively and taught university courses in Canada and the United States, sharing her knowledge with museum professionals, conservators, and students. Miriam contributes tremendously to the field of art conservation, particularly with regard to the conservation of collections from Indigenous peoples. In addition to her current work in conservation education, she is a creative writer of short stories and essays, and has published the novel *Insinuendo: Murder in the Museum*.

The interviewer's decision to pursue art conservation was in part inspired by a guest lecture given by Dr. Clavir at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology.

**Q Thank you for taking the time to answer some questions about your career! You were part of the very first class graduating from the Queen's Master of Art Conservation Program. Could you speak to how Queen's prepared you and helped shape your career?**

A Yes, well Queen's was extremely important for me. I am very grateful to Queen's for being the university to start this program; it has been such an important program for Canadian heritage. We learned an awful lot, and Queen's was certainly very supportive when I was there. Queen's should really know that they are supporting something that no other university is doing, and it is so important.

We had really excellent teaching staff, you know - Ian Hodkinson, Henry Hodges, and Jim Hanlan - but in one sense they were learning too! As a teacher, speaking from my own point of view, you are learning as well as the students because there is always new material, and new ways to reach and excite the students; you need to think 'what am I teaching and why and how?' You need examples to communicate it, and Henry and Ian had great senses of humour as well as expert knowledge.

**Q Do you have any favourite memories from your time in the program?**

A Memories like Henry singing songs in the lab? Like that? The hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful" might have been one. And at class parties, Ian was always the first person up to dance and the last person off the dance floor. We had a wonderful time.

**Q      Could you describe your career path? How did you get to your current position?**

A      I was lucky in that I grew up in Toronto in the Bloor/Spadina area so I could go to the Royal Ontario Museum almost every week. I went into Anthropology at the University of Toronto because I was very interested in archaeology and I had had the chance to work on digs with Walter Kenyon, who was the Ontario archaeologist at the time at the ROM. This opportunity first came about because, to be honest with you, somebody my parents knew happened to work with Walter's wife - so you know it was really one of those things where I was very very lucky in my early opportunities.

The month I graduated in Anthropology with a four-year honours BA from the U of T, was the month that Walter's assistant left, so I got a position at the ROM in Ontario Archaeology. Again, I am so grateful for the opportunities that were open to me. Across the hall from us was the conservation department, which was in the old museum before they had done any renovations. When Mark Burnham left to study textile conservation in Switzerland, I was able to move into his job. I had been a year and a half in Archaeology at that point. This was all in 1969 or 1970, before the Queen's program started, so I had been at the ROM for about a year and a half, when I realised I needed a break. I had gone from high school into university and then right into work. At that time, Dr. Francis Pryor, an archaeologist from the U.K., had been hired by the ROM and ran a dig near Peterborough, England. I was able to go on that dig, and then I just stayed in Europe for a year. In a sense, the career chances for me that were there at the time were so very fortunate because, when I came back happened to be when the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) and Parks Canada were just starting out in conservation. I looked at both of those, and I knew I had to take chemistry if I was going to go further in the field of conservation. Again, I was very lucky because Brian Arthur hired me at Parks Canada. At that time we were working with the National Historic Sites Service and we were all together in Ottawa with the research section, the interpretation section, and the new conservation section. So because I was in Ottawa I could take my chemistry at Carleton University that winter.

Queen's started their program the very next September and they needed one more student since they only had 11. I hadn't been at Parks Canada for long, but Brian let me go, which was so generous of him, on a civil service kind of program, where, if I remember correctly, they paid my tuition for two years if I promised to work for them for four years. So I was in the position of having a guaranteed job when I graduated. I think it was good for them to be supporting this new university program, and I would go on to work in one of the regional centres after graduation. They said 'you can't come back to the Ottawa mothership', so to speak, so I said I would go to the regional lab in Quebec City, which had been, in fact, a dream of mine.

For my two internships during the Queen's program, one was in Victoria at the museum, which was then the BC Provincial Museum, and the other was in Hawaii at the Bishop Museum; both were fabulous. Again, the MAC program was new and they really wanted the Queen's program to succeed, so there was a lot of help and we just had really great opportunities. Internships still offer excellent opportunities for learning conservation in more detail and different contexts.

After graduating, I was at Parks Canada for another four years. And then the job at the UBC Museum of Anthropology came up. I applied, and at first they chose somebody else but in the end I understand he decided he couldn't uproot his family. I remember it was in May, on the first good, warm, sunny day after winter, that I got a call from MOA asking if I was still interested. I then went out for an interview and got the job.

**Q So at that time did MOA have a conservation department or were you the first?**

A I was the first, MOA did not. But the Canadian government was really focused at that time on preserving heritage following the centennial celebration in 1967. There were now more grants that museums could apply for to improve professional standards; essentially, the professional standards of conservation had become formally recognised. Museums were really trying to look professional and institute preventive conservation measures and, if they could afford it, to have a conservator on staff.

**Q Would you say it was a real turning point for museums in Canada regarding conservation just when you were getting into the field?**

A Yes I would say that. Definitely. And again that was my experience as a young person - whether someone who had already been working in a museum for 20 years would say that, I don't know. However, CCI and Parks Canada, in setting up their labs, had had to go to Europe and Great Britain to find conservators as there was no formal training program in Canada before the one at Queen's.

**Q You are well known voice in the conservation community for exploring and emphasizing the relationship between museums and Indigenous peoples, and for considering an object's value beyond the physical and aesthetic properties it may have. I understand that your publication *Preserving What Is Valued* came out of your thesis for your doctoral studies and I am curious about how you come to the decision to pursue that direction?**

A Well thank you. I think a lot of it came from the context in which I was working, that is, the Museum of Anthropology and especially from the director Dr. Michael Ames. Michael was an anthropologist, and also a bit of a devil's advocate; he kept asking us questions and making us justify what we were doing. The whole way that the museum was organized contributed to an atmosphere that allowed questioning while maintaining collegiality and collaboration. First of all, we were a medium-sized museum, where there were 26 people on the permanent staff. We had weekly staff meetings where we all could comment. I could ask questions of public programming, for example. I could really go outside conservation, and ask a curatorial person why are you doing this, and vice versa. That was Michael's doing, and it was just excellent. The other thing is that Michael was an academic and the museum was at a university. There was a whole atmosphere supporting how good and important research and publishing were. Even though we were staff, not faculty, we were expected to just work very hard in researching, teaching, and publishing, as well as in our daily work at MOA.

The new museum building was built in 1976, but the museum itself had started collecting in the 1920s. Dr. Hawthorne, in the Anthropology department, became the first director but it was really his wife, Audrey Hawthorne, who had taken some of the collection,

then exhibited it in the basement of the UBC main library, and then to Expo '67 to show it at the BC pavilion. I believe she became friendly with Trudeau, as did the MOA architect Arthur Erickson, and so awareness was raised, leading to contributions of money to build the museum, which opened in 1976.

There was a history of interest in Northwest Coast objects and collections and everything about them, which meant that MOA had a profile that other museums maybe didn't have. Finally the activism of Indigenous communities was really getting stronger and stronger. I think it was in 1982 when the constitution was being repatriated, that a large group of First Nations marched in Vancouver up to UBC, and Michael opened the doors and invited everybody in. He had food brought in and told everybody they could stay as long as they wanted. We had these wonderful museum clowns, Koko and Garbanzo, so he got them to come in to entertain the kids. And people slept overnight and so we all stayed overnight too. The next morning, there really weren't all that many people who had stayed overnight, but they brought the staff together in the Great Hall and they sang us an honour song and that was really, you know, so very moving... Michael, as an anthropologist and a human being, was really open and wanted to see where new ideas would lead.

**Q That certainly sounds like a very powerful experience.**

A Yes it really was. And then you know things continued because people would come to the museum to tell us whether we had something sacred on display in MOA's 'Visible Storage' and ask to hide it, or to ask about repatriation. There is a whole context for my career in a sense because the place that I worked had a very great influence on it. And then the curator, Carol Mayer, who is still at the museum, who curates European, African and Oceanic collections, decided she wanted to go back to England and get a doctorate. In England, you could get a research doctorate where you didn't need to take coursework, but kept in close touch with your supervisor. I thought well this is terrific because I can't leave my job for the two years it would take to pursue courses. The other thing that made a real difference was that as research students, where we went to the university only one week a year, we paid the same fees at the time as a British student; that is, not the much higher foreign student fees. For me, my whole focus became not conservation treatment, but conservation within a museum context, specifically where Indigenous people were involved.

**Q Did you find leading up to your doctorate that the attitudes of the museum conflicted with your learned conservation goals and conservation values?**

A Yes, and it wasn't just the museum. Of course different people in the museum had different opinions. Michael, around 1983, was urging me to sign some loan forms for an older piece from MOA's permanent collection to which Gloria Cranmer Webster's family had the cultural lineage right and wanted to borrow for a potlatch. Gloria had a long history with the museum too, as well as being the first Director of the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay. Staff had respect for requests like Gloria's already; these things had been debated, including the pros and cons of loaning objects for use. This whole question of a museum's relationship with the originators of a collection is what being a part of the museum was about. Michael was always questioning, what are we doing and why are we doing it this way.

**Q** That is certainly something we are trying to be conscious of as students. Something we are taught to think about is ‘why are we treating this object, and what are we trying to accomplish?’

A Oh good! That is really very important. And it is important intellectually to think about what you are doing, not just doing it.

**Q** Would you have any specific advice for new graduates?

A First, be curious and interested in everything. Second, just hang in there! I know that good job opportunities today are hard to come by, certainly more difficult than they were for us; but I think if you are passionate about the field then you should keep trying to make it work for you! And of course I say that from a distance while you are the ones experiencing it right now, but I’m hoping the challenging experience can be valuable, too.

**Q** Tell me more about *Insinundo*! I’m putting that on my summer reading list. How did you break into writing mystery novels?

A Well, I read mystery novels often as bedtime reading, and in 2004, I stopped my day job at the museum because we ended up with a cottage north of Kingston, ON, so I spend part of my time there, and part of my time in Vancouver. Whenever I went to the cottage, I thought: “I enjoy writing and I would like to try writing a mystery novel”. *Insinundo* is a mystery based at MOA. When you think about a museum and conservation there are so many mysteries, and quite frankly a lot of ways to kill people quite dead! There are a lot of behind-the-scenes views that a reader doesn’t always get. I had to fictionalize things because MOA was very generous with letting me set things in the museum, but you have to be careful about making sure those associations are not made with real people. I have also written a second book set in Quebec City on an archaeological dig, and have had several stories published in literary magazines.

**Thank you so much for taking the time to share stories about your education at Queen’s, your career, and your life!**