

Ian Hodkinson, Professor Emeritus of Paintings Conservation, and founder of the Art Conservation Program, Queen's University

Interviewed by Laura Hashimoto (MAC 2015)

Queen's University Professor Emeritus Ian Hodkinson began his illustrious conservation career in 1958 by graduating with an M.A. in Fine Art from Edinburgh University in conjunction with the Edinburgh College of Art. Following this, he completed post-graduate studies in 1959 at the Central Institute for Restoration in Rome, Italy. On his return to the U.K. he treated 16-17th-century mural and ceiling paintings at the National Trust for Scotland. Ian established the Stenhouse Conservation Centre in Edinburgh and became Chief Restorer in 1965. In 1969, He brought his conservation expertise across the Atlantic and in 1974 founded the Queen's University Master of Art Conservation Program, which offered interdisciplinary and research-based conservation training. From 1977, Ian was the Head of the Restoration and Conservation Laboratory at the National Gallery of Canada until, in 1979, he returned to Queen's University as Professor of Fine Art Conservation and Program Director. Despite his official retirement in 1995, he remains active in conservation projects in Canada and internationally. The Queen's Master of Art Conservation Program celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2015, truly an occasion to celebrate the formidable feat of the program's founder. Ian delivered the keynote speech, which can be found beginning on page 4 here:

http://queensu.ca/art/sites/webpublish.queensu.ca.artwww/files/files/ArtCon_Newsletter_2015_Interactive_May24.pdf.

Q How did you first get involved with art conservation?

A I studied at Edinburgh University for my MA in Fine Art, which was a combination of a four-year Bachelor's in Art History and a diploma in drawing and painting at the art college. While I was at the university, I had an essay to complete on one of the paintings at the National Gallery of Scotland. I chose a small oil painting by Bernardino Butinone, *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* (Figure 1).



There was lots of symbolism in it, Christ was sitting on top of a spiral platform with the doctors all around him and there was a doorway in the background that looked out onto a landscape. During my research I discovered an old photograph where there was a tree in the middle of the doorway that wasn't there anymore. As I continued to research I found that a restorer had removed it because it was found to be a later addition. It struck me that the symbolism of this tree rising out of the background was incredibly important, so in my essay I argued that it should not have been removed. In a way wrongly, because it had been removed after being proved it was much later paint, but I still think that there was a tree there originally. This is what got me interested in restoration, as it was called in Britain at the time.

Figure 1: [National Galleries of Scotland](#)

Q Where did you continue on and do your formal training?

A It went from that initial interest in my studies to discussing with my professor, David Talbot Rice, a mentor really, who took me aside and said if I was interested he could arrange either for me to go to the Central Institute of Restoration in Rome to do post-graduate studies or go and assist in the restoration of the church of Hagia Sophia in Trebizond, Turkey. I was already married and had a little one so we decided to move to Rome for the year, which I'm glad we did. I went there supposedly as an audiore, a listener, but I was very lucky. Just at that time in the Restauo they were preparing for a huge exhibition, bringing in massive paintings from all over Italy, and so we were able to get a lot of experience working with these paintings. In the Restauo we worked from 3 in the morning until 1 o'clock. Then I was able to go off and work with private conservators who were doing work on mural paintings in churches and chapels throughout the city. It was a really wonderful experience. Then, when I got back to Scotland I was offered a job with the National Trust for Scotland, which looked after historic houses and castles. It was at that point that I had realized I was being prepared for this job at the National Trust because there were a lot of paintings and murals in the houses that had been poorly treated in the past. I received a scholarship to do a study tour of Scandinavia where there were many similar murals and ceiling paintings that had been treated by conservators in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. This study tour was really also part of my training as well. I came back to Scotland and worked for ten years with the National Trust and established a conservation centre in Edinburgh, working on not only murals but easel paintings as well.

Q You are clearly well known in the community both nationally and internationally for mural conservation, and for being the founder of the Queen's Master of Art Conservation program. Could you discuss a particular project in your conservation career that you are proud of and that has had an impact on you and others in the community?

A If I had to single one out it would be a project that we did in the field in 1993. It was the Church of Our Lady of Good Hope at Fort Good Hope in the Northwest Territories (Figure 2).

The church is quite amazing, with sophisticated decoration inside. It was established by Oblate



missionaries in the 19th Century who went to that area to convert the native communities. The church was beloved by the native community, despite the religious history. One of the people we worked with who looked after the church said she had actually been in one of the residential schools. The great thing about the project was that we were

Figure 2: Canada's Historic Places

able to work with the community and learned so many things from their customs and lives there. It was really a wonderful experience. Not only that but I was able to take five students with me for about four months to work in the field there. Cleaning, removing discoloured varnish, mending tears and the like. There were three paintings students and two artifacts students from the Queen's program so we had a lot of input and discussion. Another thing I want to note is that this was one of the best-organized projects that I had ever worked on. The curator of the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Tom Andrews, did a wonderful job, first of all bringing all the parties together that were going to be working on this. Builders, electricians, carpenters, and conservators all exchanged what we were going to be doing and made sure we were all on the same page. All the students got a tremendous amount of experience from it and it was great life experience. So, if I had to pick one experience it would be that one. The discussion aspect was key for us, because we wanted to know what the community remembered about what the church was like. From their descriptions we found that the ceilings had been completely changed and it was originally an ultramarine blue with yellow-painted stars made of old food tins. We had old photographs of it and using computer software we were able to find out what the original composition of the stars looked like. When we actually got up on the scaffold and plotted where they had been we found all the original holes from the stars and in the end we were able to put them back where they once were. And then, fortunately, we found a box of the original stars in the basement of the mission that had been put away for storage. There had also been stained glass windows and because the artifacts students were there we were able to replace the windows. Everything worked out really quite superbly, and it really was a tremendous experience.

Q Tell me about your career path – how did you find yourself at its various stages?

A I felt it was time for a change and that I had accomplished what I had set out to do at the National Trust and with the conservation centre. It was quite by chance that I saw an advertisement by Queen's University looking for someone to join a new Art History program teaching historical techniques to students in the Art History program as well as the Fine Arts program, which was just beginning. I got in touch because it was intriguing and I went for an interview in London. I very much liked what they had to say and I said I was interested in doing it provided I was able to start up a conservation lab so that I could teach the practical aspect and not only the theoretical side of things. They agreed, so in 1969 my whole family and I decided to burn our boats and come to Canada.

Q How did the Queen's Art Conservation program come about?

A As soon as I got here I realized that Queen's would be an ideal place for a conservation training program – an integrated program – which didn't exist in Britain much at all. I could see the value in having paintings, artifacts, paper conservators, and scientists all working together. In Britain, we had the Courtauld Institute and the Institute of Archaeology, which had been separate. It was a very hierarchical structure, where paintings restorers were the elite and artifacts conservators at the British Museum for instance were called "artifacts technicians" and paid about half the amount. I knew they were every bit as clever as the paintings restorers and this all was quite ridiculous. There had been an unsuccessful movement to bring the Courtauld and Institute of Archaeology together. And so I realized that Queen's would be a perfect place to start this kind of program because they didn't have this hierarchical and historical baggage to keep this integration from happening. So, I drew up a proposal and brought it to the Head of the Art Department, Gerald Finley, who was very excited about it. At this point, there was a lot of interest but no money available, as well as an embargo established by the provincial government of Ontario on the start of any new graduate programs. Fortunately, in late 1971-1972 the federal government of Canada established a new National Museums Corporation complete

with a new National Museums Policy under the Trudeau government, which was quite visionary and so, as a part of that, the development of the National Museums Assistance Program and the Canadian Conservation Institute came about. It became quite clear that there was an opportunity so we resurrected the proposal and went to the Dean; everyone agreed and so we began to apply for federal government funding. I made a presentation to the principal at Queen's and he asked very pertinent questions and at the end he said it is not often that good ideas come up, this is a good idea and we're going to do it. It became a real chicken and egg situation after that though, because we couldn't get a federal government grant until we got approval from the province, but we couldn't get the approval unless we could prove that we had the resources to do it, which we couldn't get without the grant. I made my presentation 28 separate times between 1970 and 1972 to various groups. I had to prove it was an applied science to get the maximum amount of funding for labs and so on. Gradually, it all came to pass and in December of 1972 we got approval from the senate to start the program, then it was a rush to get everything in place. Just at that time, I got very fortunate: Henry Hodges at the Institute of Archaeology in London applied for the position of Artifacts Professor, and Jim Hanlan, senior scientist at the Canadian Conservation Institute applied for the Conservation Science position. They called us the "Three H's" and we came together and got the program started.

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

A Respect. That's the thing I think is most important. Respect for the object and respect for the client or the custodian of the object. We are all just custodians of the objects after all. Also keeping in mind ethical practice while dealing with the object, in terms of invasive treatment or prevention. That means knowing the original significance of the object, what the artist's intent was, and what the acquired significances were, and all the questions that pertain to the object. Down to the nitty gritty of the treatment, reversibility wherever possible is key. Conservation for me means three things: investigation, preservation, and restoration. All these things come together in conservation as far as I'm concerned.

Q Is there a person in the conservation field that was particularly inspirational to you both early on and later in your career?

A The chief restorer at the National Gallery of Scotland, Harry Wolford, was a great mentor and help while I was in Scotland. I didn't actually work with him, but we met often and discussed problems and he offered me a lot of good advice. When I was in Rome, Paolo and Laura Mora were conservators of mural paintings and extremely active at that time. I really looked up to them and tried to emulate their approach to things. Later on, I came to very much appreciate the work of Marion Mecklenburg and Gerry Hedley. They brought a completely new perspective to the behaviour of materials and I learned a lot from their work.

Q What are your favourite memories of Queen's?

A I think my favourite memories involve the interaction with the students. In fact, I learned a lot from the students who all come from different academic backgrounds; everyone is an expert in their individual fields so that kept everyone on their feet. If you didn't know something and wanted to know, you just had to suggest that someone research it for a seminar and then you had all of this tremendous research for everyone. The interaction between the students and me, as well as between student and student was wonderful and I'm sure it still exists.

Q What do you like the most about being a conservator?

A Oh boy. Not only communicating with the past but with the future as well, as I said because we are the custodians of cultural heritage. Being able to satisfy curiosity about objects, and problem solving are also aspects that I continue to love, because every job presents something new.

Q What are some changes you've seen in the art conservation field throughout the years?

A One that I've seen that is rather sad is less funding, but as far as the approach to the discipline, the main change I have seen is an emphasis on prevention as opposed to treatment. I think that this is a good development in the field, and the importance of scientific research informing preventive methods is at the forefront. This greater recognition of research in art historical and scientific research is tremendously valuable for the field.

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

A Definitely follow your dream, that's essential. Seize every opportunity you can to advance, whether it be conferences, seminars, workshops, or volunteering when there's experience to be had but no money to support it. And finally, be very strong about your convictions, but humble as well. Be prepared to listen and reconsider, but more than anything else be totally committed.