

John McElhone (MAC 1985), Chief Conservator, National Gallery of Canada

Interviewed by Kaslyne O'Connor (MAC 2015)

John McElhone is well known in the field of photograph conservation. He has worked in the conservation department at the National Gallery of Canada for 30 years and has published extensively on the effects of display, travel, mounting, and light exposure on photographic media. He is particularly fascinated by daguerreotypes. Conservation was not his first career choice, however. Raised in Ottawa, John had intended to become a biochemist until he found work as an installation technician at Montreal's McCord Museum and discovered conservation. After the completion of a fine arts degree in photography, he was admitted into the country's only Master of Art Conservation program at Queen's University in Kingston, graduating from the program in 1985. He was then granted a one-year fellowship, under Jeffrey Moreau, at what was at the time called the Public Archives of Canada. In 1986, in order to prepare the daguerreotype collection for display, he was offered the first-ever position of photograph conservator at the National Gallery. Continuing his diligent work and care of the collection, John was promoted to Chief Conservator in 2011.

Q Tell me about your career path; how did you get your current job at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC)?

A Well those are two different questions. The career path was pretty long and complicated. But my current job here is Chief Conservator. I have worked at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) since 1986, as photographs conservator for most of that time. While doing photograph conservation over some 25 years, I picked up quite a lot about how the institution works and an appreciation of conservation issues outside my own specialty. So in 2011 when Stephen Gritt, who was Chief Conservator at the time, was promoted to a senior management position - he became Director of Conservation and Technical Research - he approached me to see if I would be willing to change jobs - giving up being a photographs conservator and becoming the manager of the department. I had to think about it for a while; then I said yes.

Q Do you still do much photographs conservation or is it mainly curatorial/managerial tasks?

A I do very little hands-on conservation. I do a lot of conservation on the telephone and in meetings. I do a lot of "talking conservation". There is a role for that kind of conservation, especially in a big institution like the NGC and that's the kind of conservation I do now, in addition to managing the department.

Q Is it something you would like to get back into, working more hands on with the materials?

A If the opportunity arose. If there was an opportunity for me to go back into a more hands-on position (and gracefully leave the one I am in now), I would probably think very seriously about doing that. And I don't do absolutely no hands-on work; I have a couple of small projects, usually daguerreotypes, that I keep on the go. I might not touch them from one week to the next.

Q What did you like the most about being a hands-on photograph conservator, as opposed to your present role?

A I am really interested in art, and among the various art media, I have a special fascination for photographs. For a conservator working in the context of an art museum, that is what is on offer. Absolutely the best thing is that you get to spend your working days surrounded by art objects. I would say that that was my favourite thing about being a photograph conservator. That is an ideal situation for someone who is interested, stimulated, engaged by art; and if you're going to be a conservator in an art museum, that is definitely what you have to be.

Q Would you be able to discuss a particular project of which you're very proud and that has had a national or international impact?

A I guess that would be the early work I did on the exhibition of photographs . . . What are the effects of exhibition, travel, mounting, handling, and, most importantly, light exposure on photographs? What I observed about exhibiting photographs over a period of three or four years was relatively reassuring to the art museum and photograph-collecting community. Contrary to some earlier suggestions, exhibition in art museum conditions does not often deteriorate photographs. In fact, very rarely does that happen. It was reassuring to look at a range of objective measurements. I was using densitometry as a colour measurement tool; it was a pretty coarse kind of analytical tool for this question, but that was what was available to me at the time. And everything that I've seen since, using more sophisticated, more highly sensitive, and more informative instrumentation, seems to have confirmed those early observations. We do still hear about instances where exhibition is said to have damaged a photograph, and occasionally that seems to have been the case. But sometimes those reports stem from a confused set of circumstances that are difficult to interpret.

Q On that note, would there be an idea you think particularly important for conservators to remember while working in the field or performing general lab work?

A I don't know that I have a very specific issue that all young conservators should be paying attention to, other than to keep their eyes wide open. When you're in a conservation lab, you're in the nexus of a whole bunch of different processes that are going on, including (in the context of the NGC), exhibitions, loans out, new acquisitions coming in, research by conservators, curators, and researchers coming in to study our collections. It's really wise to keep your eye on all of those processes happening around you and see where the interesting questions are and how you can insert yourself into responding to those questions by moving in to fill an emerging void and becoming something of a specialist expert yourself. It's really good to have an area of special expertise; one where you have devoted enough time to the study and observation of a particular issue, problem, medium, or type of material; where, after a few years, you emerge as one of a handful of world experts. That field may be very narrow. It probably will be - it's hard to become a world expert on a widely defined issue. Find a subject that stimulates you enough to spend the required time getting a solid background in whatever disciplines are necessary to understand the problem. For example, you may have a background in art history, but your chosen problem may require that you to learn something about structural engineering. You shouldn't hesitate to do so, and you certainly shouldn't say to yourself, "Oh well, that's not my thing because I'm an art historian and a conservator, not a structural engineer." The best conservators always have surprising and exotic areas of knowledge.

Q Being so specific would make you pretty qualified to be within such a handful of world-renowned specialists....

A Yes, but I don't mean to say that's going to make your career. To get a job you need a range of abilities. I think when people look at your accomplishments, when they're thinking about hiring you, they pay attention to that kind of thing: your demonstrated ability to concentrate and go deep into a problem and come out the other side with authoritative knowledge and the ability to teach other people about it and express your own opinions. That's a very valuable accomplishment to be able to show to potential employers because they will recognize that, having achieved that once, you can do it again - that you have that capacity.

Q Is there any advice you would give to current students or upcoming graduates?

A From the perspective of a manager of an art conservation unit who is involved in all kinds of staffing procedures, I would say it's important to grab every opportunity you can to deepen your experience, because the market is quite competitive. For many years there has been a shrinking job market for art conservators, as governments everywhere have pulled back. Art conservation in Canada used to be driven by government budgets but government cultural budgets have now either reached a point of stasis or they've actually shrunk, or in some cases even disappeared. And so government-funded conservation positions in Canada are fewer than when I graduated. On the other hand, the private conservation sector has grown somewhat and solidified in many ways and become a better option to think about. But of course you can't go straight into private practice out of Queen's. So to come back to the advice: I would encourage students and recent graduates to aggressively look for, develop, and chase opportunities to acquire experience doing any kind of conservation. If that doesn't mean hands-on conservation treatments, do it anyway. Of course it's good to get more experience doing hands-on work; that's important but it's not the only thing. And of course, as administrators like me know, many institutional conservators only spend a small amount of time doing conservation treatments. The skills that we are looking for when hiring new conservators, are only partly hand skills.

Q Like environmental and preservation...

A Preservation systems, preservation policies, preservation community development, preventive preservation projects, engaging the public with conservation by making conservation more interesting to them, getting conservation activities publicized. Doing conservation surveys is an incredibly good learning opportunity and it is one of the fundamental tools of conservation. Learn about risk management principles because, if I had to give one sentence definition of what we do in the Gallery's conservation department, it's managing risk.

Q Is there a particular person in the conservation field who has been inspirational for you on your path?

A Well there are a number of people I could mention, but I think the one on the top of the list is Geoffrey Morrow. Geoff was the Senior Conservator of Prints and Drawings at the Public Archives of Canada when I first met him. I went to the Archives for my first year summer internship in photograph

conservation - that was when the Archives' conservation labs were in the 395 Wellington Street building. At the end of my second year I got a fellowship to do a year's further study. I asked Geoff if I could spend the year in his paper conservation studio and he graciously permitted me to do so. I worked some with him and a lot with the conservators in his unit. In the course of that year, Geoff left the PAC and became Senior Conservator of Prints and Drawings at the National Gallery. Soon after that a job opened up for a photographs conservator at the Gallery - it was the first time the NGC had ever employed a photographs conservator. I wasn't the first choice, because there were people with more experience in the field than me, but I ended up getting the job. Geoff became my boss and I worked in the same room with him for 25 years. Strangely enough, in the last year before he retired, I became his boss. But it didn't matter who was "boss", because we had a really good professional relationship. I learned from him a tremendous amount about looking at works of art, and how to look critically at the evidence in front of one's eyes if one has the discipline to see. And he is a really great guy; we worked together in the same room for more than 25 years and there was never a frustrated or angry moment. We got along really well.

Q I will switch over now to talk a little bit about Queen's. How do you think the program in the Art Conservation Program has prepared you for the career you have now? That is also a large question. Are there particular skills that you learned at Queen's that have been very beneficial?

A I think the first level answer to that has to be . . . it gave me the graduate degree that was necessary to go on in my career. And I don't mean that to be dismissive - I got a good grounding in materials science and conservation treatment theory and practice when I was there. I didn't get much in the way of training for the specialty that I ended up working in - I put that together more on my own. This was the early 1980s at Queen's; it was a different time and there was a different ethos about what conservators needed to know.

Q The program was still a baby at that time...

A The program was about 10 years old at that time. It was a bit eccentric, I must say, the training that I got at Queen's. What I did have, which was very beneficial, was the opportunity to work collaboratively with my fellow students. There was something about our class, or with the program, or perhaps the attitudes of the class ahead of us, that encouraged collaborative work. I had two bachelor degrees at that point but I had never had the experience of working collaboratively with my fellow students. Graduate school, or at least that graduate school, seemed to be different and that was a good experience and an excellent model for the working styles and relationships that I would develop in my career. It also gave me a network of other conservators who were entering the profession at the same moment I was.

Q I agree. Do you have any favourite memories from the program? And do you remember where your desk was?

A I do! I remember vividly where my desk was - although I think that the geography of the rooms have changed quite a lot since then. I was in the objects stream, directed by Henry Hodges, and we had that huge room on the west side of the building. It did have a half wall in it but it was a very big room with very large desks beside the north facing windows. I was looking west and opposite me was Monica

Smith, a year ahead of me. She's now at the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) and we've remained fond of one another and in occasional communication over the last 30 years, as she became the head of conservation at the VAG and I eventually became head of conservation at the NGC. Our interests have coincided in different subject areas over the years.

Q It's always nice that, even if you don't stay in contact all the time with your year (or your two years), you can just send an email to them at any time and it would be just the same as old times.

A Absolutely! Those relationships are really important to invest in.

Q Do you have any other fond memories from the program? Other than the people of course.

A I must say I found spending two years in Kingston rather difficult.

Q Were you from a smaller town?

A I was from Montreal and I spent a lot of weekends back in Montreal. My life was largely back there, which was perhaps a mistake. And I didn't like the winter weather in Kingston, even though it was warmer than Montreal, and with less snow; I found it wet and unpleasant. I lived in the student district, had noisy neighbours, and I worked a lot. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that, when you're in school, and when you're in graduate school especially, the work never ends. You can never reach a point where you say to yourself, "Well now I've finished, I've done enough." There's always something that remains to be done. So it was a pretty challenging time for me personally. And I survived it by putting my head down and working.

Q I don't think your year had snack club then?

A I've never heard of snack club. It sounds very nice.

Q Every Thursday afternoon break, everybody takes turns to bring a snack in and relax.

A That's a very good idea!

Thank you for answering all my questions! You have given me lots to think about!