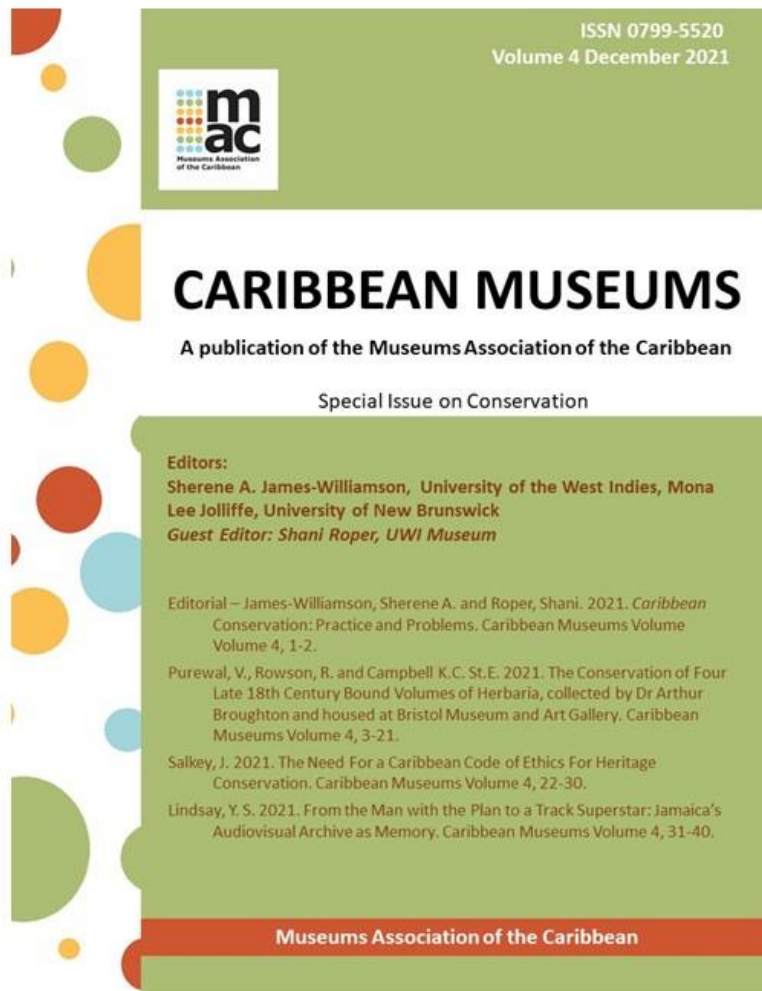


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Conservation in Caribbean Museums

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EDITORIAL.

Conservation plays an important role in the creation of a sustainable heritage sector. It includes the preservation of material culture and facilitates the exhibition and interpretation of both tangible and intangible heritage. The practice of conservation, however, is shaped by the context in which practitioners operate, such as the specialization of the institution, access to funding, equipment and other integral resources.

Many of the guidelines governing the practice of conservation are developed in the temperate zone, which in turn are adopted and adapted in the Global South. Consequently, those interested in the field of conservation get their training in the global north and then return to regions like the Caribbean to practice their trade. However, issues such as limited resources in the capacity of funding and infrastructure, and climate, shape the practice of conservation in the Caribbean.

As Small Island Developing States (SIDS), countries within the Caribbean share a common heritage, climate, policy framework and infrastructural issues and face the same natural disasters – all of which impact how conservation in museums is managed. Caribbean conservation entails similar challenges as institutions in the global north, however, within the Caribbean this is also shaped by the diverse

demands to preserve and conserve museum artifacts, sites and monuments, where each require a different set of specifications for their care and protection. The field of conservation has grown significantly over the last number of years particularly because Caribbean heritage and museum professionals have encountered significant challenges. Regionally, the resources available for most conservation work is very meagre. In fact, each museum, due to budgetary constraints, each museum they have, may only be able to tackle one particular issue at a time through external funding, cooperation and collaborative agreements with practitioners, conservation centres or other museums with established facilities or programmes.

The Institute of Jamaica, and similar organizations, rely on conservators as well as technologies of conservation to preserve and expand our understanding of material culture. In November 2016, the IOJ Researchers and Curators Committee hosted its annual IOJ Research Symposium under the theme “Towards Sustainable Heritage Development: Conservation in the Heritage Sector.” This symposium included presentations from the divisions within the IOJ as well as the National Library of Jamaica, Jamaica National Heritage Trust and Geology Museum at The University of the West Indies (Mona). The main goal of the symposium was to highlight the

interdisciplinary nature of conservation science as revealed by the diverse conservation practices found within the IOJ. Through this engagement, we have further broadened our understanding of conservation practices in the Heritage Sector.

Some of the issues associated with Museum conservation in the tropics and, by extension Museum conservation on a wider scale, includes protection and conservation of paper or fabric and other similar material/media. Additionally, consideration must be given for protection from natural disasters, such as hurricanes, volcanoes, earthquakes and similar hazards which frequently affect the region. The primary issues associated with conservation in Caribbean museums are related to climate control. As much as there are climate control standards for museums, these largely do not fit into the Caribbean scenario. These standards do not fit for two reasons. Firstly, the expense associated with implementing such climate control systems is particularly high, due to the various climate control standards for display spaces, collection stores and work areas. Secondly, the paucity of standards relating to occupational health and safety requirements for persons and specimens co-existing together in the same space.

Inadequate or inappropriate climate control mechanisms give rise to pests that can cause significant damage to artifacts, labels and infrastructure. An integrated Pest Management strategy within our museums is absolutely necessary and critical to the protection of almost every item in the museum. Internal spaces are not the only places that need protection, since there are artifacts that are exposed to the elements, for example. Historic buildings also require conservation and documentation of repairs and materials. The bricks, stone, metal works such as gates, wooden parts for windows, doors and staircases and other decorative and structural elements require preventive maintenance and monitoring.

Within the tropics the hot, wet and humid climate, create a hostile environment for outdoor exhibits, monuments buildings and sites. What is required at this point is a center of excellence that would have several persons trained in the different areas, possibly governed by CARICOM, in the same way we have a disaster agency and alternative energy and climate change agencies that are an appendage to CARICOM. Such an entity would have experts operating in a virtual capacity and could be deployed to various institutions where their expertise is required. This entity would also create opportunities for fund generation through our governments as well as international agencies and multilateral bodies. It is to be understood that some of our museums are historic buildings, which themselves require conservation, before any other conservation measures can be put in place. A holistic approach needs to be developed for one to ascertain all that is required. A prioritized list of areas requiring conservation, budget for or seek the relevant funding and identify the respective professionals required to aid in the resolution of each issue of group of issues.

To underscore all of this is the need for policy at the regional level that govern among other things:

- An ethical framework governing the practice of conservation in the region
- The benefits of partnerships with better resourced environments
- A clearing-house of resources and best practices according to Caribbean conditions and issues
- A centre for excellence for conservation in the Caribbean
- Integrated curricula within regional training bodies with Museum and Museology programmes to provide training resources and content for regional professions and students.