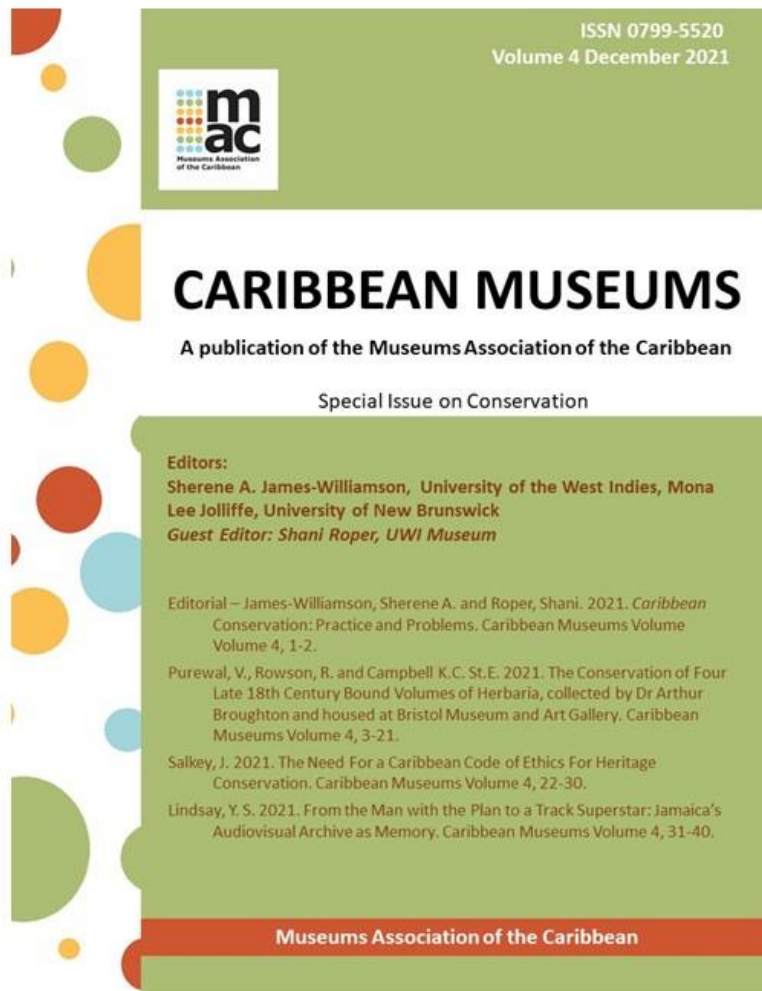


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# The Need for a Caribbean Code of Ethics for Heritage Conservation Practice

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**ABSTRACT:** The role of the conservator-restorer is to ensure the longevity of heritage objects using, where appropriate, preservation and restoration techniques. Conservation professionals are often guided by a set of rules that help them understand their responsibilities to their heritage institution, private clients and to the heritage or art object itself. Presently, many countries in the Caribbean region are facing a shortage of trained conservation professionals and anyone who practices conservation or restoration is given the title of conservator or restorer, regardless of their level of training. Untrained persons working under the guise of conservator or restorer are often unaware of the long-term damage their restorations can cause and are not familiar with ever-changing conservation practices.

Clients, Custodians and heritage institutions rely heavily on a conservator's expertise, entrusting often valuable items of tangible heritage into their care for management and repair. A code of ethics would provide a normative framework under which standards are unified as a result of a professional consensus. This code should support core values focused on responsibility, honesty, communication and the promotion of conservation awareness, while helping to establish a valid chain of accountability.

This paper aims to highlight the need for formal conservation accreditation, in an attempt to protect clients and heritage objects from untrained individuals working under the guise of conservators. It also aims to bring to the discussion, some universal codes of ethics that could one day become the foundation for a standardized Caribbean Conservation Practice.

**Keywords: Conservation, Caribbean Heritage, Ethics, Museums, Accountability**

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## 1. Introduction

Ethics, as subset of Western Philosophy, was developed as a method of systemizing concepts of right and wrong through rational thought and open discourse on universal values such as justice and morality (Andrei, Genoways 2010). Aristotle – the father of Western Philosophy, considered ethics as a continuous exercise of searching for and embodying the best presentation of good in all things; being the best version of self as a compliment to society, professional practice and personal achievement. It refers to systems that govern right and wrong, as well

as what people ought and ought not to do based on societal expectations and an established definition of a profession. In essence, a professional code of ethics provides the normative framework under which standards are unified as a result of a professional consensus.

Codes of ethics rely on the principles of self-regulation, setting boundaries that, once crossed, opens the individual to some form of accountability. In the absence of written legislation, the notions of accountability and self-regulation bring some sense of control that can be exercised over members to conform to a certain standard. That being

said, codes of ethics do not automatically translate into laws, just as legal instruction can be deemed unethical. A key example of this is slavery, which was once considered a legal enterprise but is now deemed highly unethical in terms of human rights.

In essence then, codes and guidelines are expected to provide guidance for professionals in their relationships with their clients, colleagues, co-workers, and the public at large as well as the objects they are charged to protect. These codes and guidelines also help conservation professionals understand what their responsibilities are and what is their position in the workforce. In addition to this, codes of ethics can provide a benchmark that professionals can use to measure integrity, market a professional standard and mitigate risk. This can in turn be used to encourage compliance in the profession and prevent illegal or unethical acts; which once committed elicits a punishing response.

## **2. The Role of the Conservation Code of Ethics**

In conservation, a code of ethics acts as a guideline of ethical obligations under which professionals commit to operate. These obligations are important as conservation professionals are the first line of defense against deterioration for many of our artistic and historical treasures and what conservators do can have serious long-term consequences. The act of conservation and restoration can be recognised as the minimal intervention by a professional with the intent of stabilizing deterioration and enhancing the value of an object. The conservation professional or conservator, in this case, is to comprehend the material aspects of objects of historic and artistic significance in order to prevent their decay and enhance our understanding and appreciation of them.

(The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession. ICOM-CC)

Objects, whether of artistic or historic nature hold a wealth of information about their fabrication and purpose. They are generally recognised as “Original Documents,” meaning that they tend to represent a visual documentation of a specific time, place, religious beliefs, culture, or aesthetic that was popular around its creation. This information is important for understanding our progress and advancement throughout history and relies heavily on the “Original Document’s” authenticity. It is the responsibility of the conservator to ensure that all aspects of an object’s integrity are preserved and to recognise the sensitive nature of the data preserved within it. Therefore, all proposed preservation treatments must conform to reliable conservation practices and must be executed by a trained or experienced professional.

## **3. Conservation Practice**

Conservation practice involves all methods and actions aimed at minimising damage or deterioration of an object. These practices include preventive conservation, remedial conservation and restoration each utilizing different approaches to object care and management. As defined by the ICOM-CC (International Council of Museums - Committee for Conservation) in its Terminology to Characterize the Conservation of Tangible Cultural Heritage (ICOM-CC), preventive conservation deals with the indirect protective measures concerning an object or its environment. For example, security, registration, handling and environmental management, fall under preventive conservation. Remedial conservation focuses on all measures directly applied to an object aimed at stabilizing it and thereby retarding the rate

of deterioration. This type of conservation would involve consolidation procedures, the de-infestation of textiles and books, as well as the dehydration of wet paper or canvas (ICOM-CC). Like remedial conservation, restoration works directly with an object and is aimed at increasing the object's appreciation or helping to understand the object's use (ICOM-CC). Unlike remedial conservation, restoration is only applied to a stable object and under no circumstance should it add on or modify the object's original appearance, thereby altering the "Original Document". It is the ethical responsibility of the conservator to find an appropriate method of conservation practice that satisfies the need of the museum, curator, private client and more importantly the object, to ensure its longevity. The method of conservation chosen should also respect the need for retreatment /reversibility if necessary. This ensures the conservator, in an effort to preserve, does not cause additional or permanent damage to the original document and conservation treatments can be updated according to changing methodologies.

#### **4. Responsibility to Changing Methodologies**

Presently, many countries in the region have a lack of trained conservation professionals and anyone who practices conservation or restoration is given the title of conservator or restorer, regardless of their level of training. I have personally encountered situations where individuals have been practising restoration for years without any formalized training or knowledge of contemporary conservation practices.

New advancements in technology and science have enabled conservation professionals to find safer, more effective ways of preserving objects of value; for example, the use of controlled lasers instead

of acids to clean the surface of stone, as acids could potentially harm the composition of the material. Some common restoration methods that were once accepted in the professional community, such as the relining of canvas paintings with wax to protect the painted image on the front and stabilize the canvas support, are now being phased out due to their harmful long-term effects to the artwork. The wax-resin treatment was popularized in the 1800's with the intention of protecting the painted image on the front of the canvas from moisture damage, as well as adding an extra layer of canvas for support. This conservation methodology remained popular until the late 1970's when experts realized that the process had in fact been doing more harm than good. Oily residue from the wax and added treatments over time, had the tendency to "bleed" through to the front of the canvas, potentially distorting the painted images. Another issue arose with the advancement of conservation technology and specialized heating tables, which allowed the relining process to be effectively executed at faster speeds than traditional treatments. This led to an abuse of the treatment, where paintings that were not in need of treatment were relined simply because the resources were available. The treatment was also deemed irreversible, as once the wax seeped in between the fibres of the canvas it was impossible to remove without employing potentially dangerous methods.

The use of some common consolidants such as Pattex, a high strength epoxy adhesive, and silicone, are banned in conservation, as once applied they are impossible to remove without damaging the object they were used on. Though their properties such as heat resistance and strong bonding may seem appealing for contact adhesion, the conservator should keep in mind the ethical

issue of treatment reversibility. Reliance on outdated techniques and methodologies can potentially be viewed as irresponsible. Information on products that can be used in conservation is constantly being reviewed and revised to assess their usefulness in the conservation practice.

And while it is difficult to fault conservators for practising long-standing conservation techniques and beliefs, it should be their responsibility to keep abreast of new developments in the practice and to test their feasibility within the context of their own collections. Contemporary conservation publications and resource material are readily available online, or through a subscription service. However, in my opinion, most untrained restorers prefer to stick with what they know will get the job done and what they are familiar with. Often, functionality and aesthetics take the place of longevity, and unethical conduct is left unchecked.

## 5. General Principles

The first formalized publication of a Conservation Code of Ethics and standardized practice was created in 1961, by a committee working under the direction of Murray Pease, Conservator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (AIC). The goal of the publication was to

*“...provide accepted criteria against which a specific procedure or operation can be measured when a question to its adequacy has been raised.”*

Since then, publications such as the *Standards of Practice and Professional Relationships for Conservators* adopted 1963 and *The Code of Ethics for Art Conservators*, adopted 1967 have served as the foundation of contemporary conservation ethics and have helped to

globally standardise ethical principles in the profession. In response, contemporary conservation has developed the following principles as the foundation for global ethical practice:

- the obligation to perform research and documentation; that is, to record physical, archival, and other evidence before and after any intervention to generate and safeguard knowledge embodied as process or product;
- the obligation to respect cumulative age-value; that is, to acknowledge the site or work as a cumulative physical record of human activity embodying cultural beliefs, values, materials, and techniques, and displaying the passage of time;
- the obligation to safeguard authenticity—a culturally relative condition associated with the fabric or fabrication of a thing or place as a way of ensuring authorship or witness of a time and place;
- the obligation to do no harm, performing minimal intervention that will reestablish structural and aesthetic legibility and meaning with the least physical interference—or that will allow other options and further treatment in the future.)” (Mateo. F, GCI)

Some professional organisations have created specialised committees in order to support the enforcement of their codes, particularly in the museum world (ICOM). ICOM (International Council of Museums) has its own permanent Ethics Committee, as well as a comprehensive database of global committees ranging from specialities in the arts to zoology, ethnography and taxidermy.

## 6. The AIC Code of Ethics

The American Institute of Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works formed in 1972,

operates under 13 codes of conduct, which were revised in 1994. These codes are as follows:

*I. The conservation professional shall strive to attain the highest possible standards in all aspects of conservation, including, but not limited to, preventive conservation, examination, documentation, treatment, research, and education.*

*II. All actions of the conservation professional must be governed by an informed respect for the cultural property, its unique character and significance, and the people or person who created it.*

*III. While recognizing the right of society to make appropriate and respectful use of cultural property, the conservation professional shall serve as an advocate for the preservation of cultural property.*

*IV. The conservation professional shall practice within the limits of personal competence and education as well as within the limits of the available facilities.*

*V. While circumstances may limit the resources allocated to a particular situation, the quality of work that the conservation professional performs shall not be compromised.*

*VI. The conservation professional must strive to select methods and materials that, to the best of current knowledge, do not adversely affect cultural property or its future examination, scientific investigation, treatment, or function.*

*VII. The conservation professional shall document examination, scientific investigation, and treatment by creating permanent records and reports.*

*VIII. The conservation professional shall recognize a responsibility for preventive conservation by endeavouring to limit damage or deterioration to cultural property, providing guidelines for continuing use and care, recommending appropriate environmental conditions for storage and exhibition, and encouraging proper procedures for handling, packing, and transport.*

*IX. The conservation professional shall act with honesty and respect in all professional relationships, seek to ensure the rights and opportunities of all individuals in the*

*profession, and recognize the specialized knowledge of others.*

*X. The conservation professional shall contribute to the evolution and growth of the profession, a field of study that encompasses the liberal arts and the natural sciences. This contribution may be made by such means as continuing development of personal skills and knowledge, sharing of information and experience with colleagues, adding to the profession's written body of knowledge, and providing and promoting educational opportunities in the field.*

*XI. The conservation professional shall promote an awareness and understanding of conservation through open communication with allied professionals and the public.*

*XII. The conservation professional shall practice in a manner that minimizes personal risks and hazards to co-workers, the public, and the environment.*

*XIII. Each conservation professional has an obligation to promote understanding of and adherence to this Code of Ethics. (AIC)*

## 7. IIC/CG Code of Ethics

In 1985, the IIC/CG released their version of a Canadian code of ethics consisting of 6 principles outlining the responsibilities of those working in the conservation field. They stipulate that:

*I. It is the responsibility of the conservator, acting alone or with others, to constantly strive to maintain a balance between the cultural needs of society and the preservation of cultural property.*

*II. In the conservation of cultural property, all actions of the conservator must be governed by an unswerving respect for the physical, historic and aesthetic integrity of the property.*

*III. The conservator shall strive to attain the highest standards in all aspects of conservation, including examination, treatment, research, documentation and training.*

*IV. The conservator shall recognize his or her limitations and the special skills of others.*

*V. The conservator has the responsibility of contributing to the evolution and growth of the profession by continuing to develop knowledge and skills and by sharing this information and experience with colleagues.*

*VI. The conservator shall respect the integrity of fellow conservators and the conservation profession as a whole. (IIC/CG, 1985)*

## **8. Global Principles of Ethics**

The United Kingdom Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works formulated and published their code of ethics in 1996, consisting of 9 principles (UKIC). ECCO, the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers Organization adopted their current professional Code of Ethics in 2003 consisting of 28 principles sectioned according to General principles, Obligations to Cultural Heritage, Obligations to Owner or Legal Custodian and Obligations to Colleagues and the Profession (ECCO). Many of these codes have been extensively referenced by other conservation organizations and have been modified to reflect the organization's individual intention. Yet, despite being designed in different countries, they all support the same core values focused on responsibility, honesty, communication and the promotion of conservation awareness.

## **9. Accountability and Training**

There is a great need within the region to bring awareness to the issues and concerns of the preservation of tangible heritage within the various cultural organizations. The Caribbean depends heavily on cultural tourism. Cultural institutions such as museums and heritage sites play a significant role in safeguarding and promoting objects of our cultural heritage. This aspect of tourism allows visitors to view objects that reflect historical and

national pride in a permanent location, that can be referenced time and again. Due to our complex histories, many of our Caribbean heritage objects are endemic to the region, and thereby should be protected to maintain their regional value. Museum professionals are thus held accountable to their governments and institutions for the preservation of tangible culture and should have a standard framework of operations for managing and safeguarding Caribbean collections. Ministries of Culture oversee and promote the preservation of cultural assets while offering support to various cultural entities that protect national heritage. Many countries lack government support and supervision for national heritage conservation, which exacerbates unchecked unethical practices.

Cuba has a long-established conservation program, supported by the cultural arm of the government, and the country has often sent teams of conservators to assist with projects throughout the English-speaking Caribbean. Cuban restorers are often invited to Jamaica to provide restoration work for private collectors. This is not uncommon, as many other islands rely on overseas professionals to slow or repair damage to their collections. Canada, The United States of America and Mexico have also offered aid and conservation expertise. In August 1999, a team from Escuela Nacional de Conservacion, Restauracion y Museografia “Manuel de Castillo Negrete” restored 10 works of art at the National Gallery of Jamaica. The Dominican Republic’s Centro Leon boasts a state-of-the-art conservation program and facilities. But despite all this, opportunities for training and advancement in the profession are limited in the English speaking Caribbean.

In the Anglophone region, museums, libraries and archives have been in recent

years offering training to those hoping to enter the profession. It is difficult to get an exact number of the practising conservators in the English speaking Caribbean as there is no organised network of professionals at this time, however there are a few organizations with a functional conservation departments or with a conservation officer monitoring collections. Trinidad and Tobago's National Library and Information System Authority's Preservation and Conservation laboratory offers a wide range of services including conservation treatments, collection repair/bindery, disaster recovery and training. The National Museums Jamaica, as a part of the refurbishing of their conservation laboratory, offered a 13 week-long conservation workshop; at the end of which participants were offered technician level certification from the HEART TRUST NTA. This certification is regionally recognised and allows the recipient to apply for technician level conservation positions. The Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts offers an introductory course in conservation theory. The course was created in 2013 and has raised awareness of the conservation profession among young artists.

This brings into focus the need for formal conservation accreditation in the Caribbean. In the absence of formalized degrees, a temporary system can be implemented to train those interested in the profession or certifications granted, as with of the NMJ's conservation workshop. Workshops and short-term training, as well as museum experience exchanges, can be organized throughout the region to aid professional experience and familiarize professionals with issues specific to our region. In other professions, organisations charged with accrediting professionals, such as the Medical Council of Jamaica, offer conferences and seminars. Doctors must

collect a standard number of hours of participation to retain their licenses. Of those hours, a specific number of hours are dedicated to Ethics alone.

A conservation code of ethics would greatly assist those with minimal training from workshops and short term training to keep within the ethical boundaries of the profession.

## **10. Principles of a Caribbean Code of Ethics**

The purpose of a Caribbean Conservator's Code of Ethics would be to standardize conservation practice in the region as well as to guide conservation professionals in their relationships with clients, curators, museum and heritage professionals. It would assist in understanding the role and responsibilities of the Caribbean Conservator, as well as to establish a valid chain of accountability. In a museum environment, conservators work with curators to determine whether or not an object or artwork is exhibition worthy. If there is conservation or restoration work to be done it is usually executed under a directive from a curator or from the Director of the museum. In a private conservation, the directive is usually given by the client, once they have a full understanding of the conservation procedures to be undertaken. It is the conservator's right to refuse to execute a directive if he or she feels the request conflicts with his or her professional ethics. Some examples of general ethical principles that can be adapted from existing codes to form a Caribbean standard can address:

- An obligation to respect the "Original Document" as it relates to age, evidence provided with the object, value (value in this case may refer to aesthetic, historical, sentimental, material, monetary or along those lines).
- provenance as well as maintaining the cultural and religious traditions



associated to the object (where possible).

- An obligation to research and gather accurate information for documentation purposes. This would include a commitment to keep up to date physical records not limited to before and after treatments.
- An obligation to do no harm, which would include consultation with experts as well as performing the minimal interventions where necessary.
- An obligation to educate communities on the value or significance of objects in a collection. It should be the responsibility of the conservator to not only practice but promote the conservation field.
- An obligation to maintain transparency and safeguard authenticity meanwhile upholding accountability.

These examples can be expanded upon or edited to suit the needs of a governing body; however, it should serve as a solid foundation for ethical practice in conservation. Governing bodies and organizations concerned with the preservation of heritage would ensure the codes be followed or penalize non-compliant conservators, affecting accreditation and clientele. This penalty could result in published notifications, which would alert the public, museums and private collectors, who rely on such services, and thus keep their collections safe. The code could be a point of reference for clients to use to weigh the appropriateness of proposed treatments. A Caribbean Code of Ethics for Conservation practice would benefit not only conservation professionals and the artefacts they protect, but serve to unify and advance conservation practice in the region.

A formal role call needs to be conducted throughout the entire Caribbean to indicate

just how many working professionals and untrained restorers exist.

## 11. Conclusion

The formulation of a Caribbean Code of Ethics for Conservation practice would require a consensus from trained conservation practitioners in the region. These conservation practitioners would be responsible for setting the boundaries of practice, and once violated would open the individual to some form of accountability. It would oblige those practising conservation without a proper understanding of their responsibilities to conform to a certain standard as well as keep up to date with changing methodologies. The code of ethics could be used to promote awareness of the conservation profession while allowing those outside of the profession to tailor their expectations of conservation according to an ethical framework. A greater understanding of our ethical obligations as protectors of tangible heritage and culture can only lead to a greater understanding of ourselves as Caribbean people and would have a greater global impact on Conservation Practice.

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