

The 2024 Forbes Prize: Interview with Luiz Souza FIIC

Submitted by sharragrow on 25 Apr 2024

Image



At every IIC Congress, a distinguished member of the conservation profession is invited to give the Forbes Prize lecture. The prize is named after Edward Waldo Forbes (1873-1969) who was Director of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University from 1909 to 1944 and the first Honorary Fellow of IIC in 1958. The Forbes Prize lecture was established in 1958 by IIC's Council to acknowledge an individual's success and conspicuous service to conservation and provides an opportunity to address the assembled Congress.

*It is our pleasure to announce that [IIC's 2024 Forbes Prize](#) lecture at the forthcoming 30th biennial Congress, *Sustainable Solution in Conservation: New Strategies for New Times*, 23-27 September 2024, hosted in Lima, Peru will be delivered by Prof. Dr Luiz A. C. Souza FIIC, Full Professor of Conservation Science at CECOR—Center for Conservation of Cultural Heritage at the School of Fine Arts, Federal University of Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, on the opening day of the Congress.*

Seizing the opportunity to get to know Luiz a bit more, we present here a Q&A with him, the first half to be in this issue and the second half to be in the next (June-July) issue:

Q: Luiz, congratulations on being awarded the Forbes Prize for this year's IIC Congress in Lima. Can you give us any hints as to what you will be speaking on for your Forbes Prize lecture?

A : First of all, I am indeed very honored by the award, because it recognizes all the work regarding conservation of cultural heritage in Brazil and South America that I have developed over the last 30 years (41 years, if I count from when I started my internship at CECOR – Center for Conservation of Cultural Heritage, at the School of Fine Arts of the Federal University of Minas Gerais, in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil) within the field of cultural heritage preservation, involving a wide range of topics such as training and education, scientific research, professional association, recognition of conservation-restoration within the scenario of emerging research fields, networking and cross-cultural and scientific promotion of the field, and its importance to society as a whole.

The opportunity I have as the Forbes Prize Lecturer at the opening of the IIC Lima Congress 2024 in September is a unique one given the importance of the event and the high quality of the conference audience which, besides in-person delegates, will also include online attendees from all over the world, crossing all time-zones including Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, South America, Australia, and Antarctica.

In regard to the contents of my lecture, I'm pleased to advance that the talk will be based on the following provisional title and contents:

Preliminary title: "Promoting Social Diversity and Inclusion in Cultural Heritage Preservation: Advancing a Global Community Committed to Conservation." This preliminary title for the lecture entails not only respecting—and learning more about—the cultural heritage of minorities, but also delving into the intricate technicalities concerning the climate, material composition, and overall vulnerability of cultural heritage sites, collections, and immaterial heritage on a global scale and with a very close regard and sensitivity to local issues and cultures.

Q : You have been involved in leading and shaping conservation education in Brazil for decades now. Has serving on the ICOM Working Group on Sustainability changed your approach to teaching conservation?

A : My experience in dealing with conservation education in Brazil comes from the very beginning of my career when I was a chemical engineering undergraduate student at the beginning of the 1980's. I have good memories of those initial years at the University, when I had to decide which professional paths to follow, with all the implications in terms of contextualization as forged by my future career activities. At that time, my decision to change my undergraduate training from chemical engineering to chemistry—and also the decision to join the then very young and recently inaugurated CECOR (Center for Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage) at the School of Fine Arts of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (initially as a volunteer, and soon after as a grantee of the Brazilian National Research Council Scientific Initiation program)—was already pointing to several questions and issues that I would much later discussed within the ICOM Working Group on Sustainability. Forty years later, after my initial days as a young undergraduate, these fundamental questions are effectively the basis for Sustainability according to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015.

Most of the issues we have discussed within the ICOM WG on Sustainability, with a focus on museums, professionals, and community, have brought to mind the issues that I have lived with and learned in my student life, my personal life, and my career. These include the importance of respecting and promoting the diversity of opinions, color, and cultures; respect for and protection of the environment; gender equality; reduction of inequalities; and partnerships in reaching goals. The museum community still has a long way to go in terms of adopting and effectively practicing several of the 17 UN Development Goals. Last year the success of discussions and work performed by the WG on Sustainability led to the creation of ICOM SUSTAIN – The International Committee on Museums and Sustainable Development. Parallel to the creation of ICOM SUSTAIN, is the creation of the SOMUS – International Committee for Social Museology, and not coincidentally, the very first SOMUS General Assembly occurred last week in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Just as a reminder, it was also in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992 at the UN Earth Summit in Brazil, that more than 178 countries adopted Agenda 21, a comprehensive plan of action to build a global partnership for sustainable development to improve human lives and protect the environment.

Returning to the question on how serving on the ICOM Working Group on Sustainability has changed my approach to teaching conservation, I am glad to look back at my teaching history and approach and conclude that my trajectory runs parallel with the construction of the SDGs within the agenda of the UN countries, as well as within the museum community. Brazil and Latin America both have represented a key and leading role in all of this, and I am happy to be an active part of this new, more open, and inclusive horizon. Speaking of combatting inequalities, in particular through my teaching, I am glad to reinforce to our conservation students the need, within the museum community in general, to recognize conservation-restoration professionals as fundamental components of the museum world, together with the other members of this community. In my opinion, we all must work to combat inequalities, both within our museum community and within society in general; inequalities exist not only within society in general, but also within the museum and cultural heritage community. It's a matter of mutual respect towards our own diversity!

Q : Compared to 30 years ago, how have you seen sustainability change and grow in South America in general and within the conservation profession?

A : Looking back 30 years ago to 1994 in South America, my impression is that we had a stronger and well-connected community of conservation professionals compared to the situation today. It seems strange, because back in 1994 the internet was just a baby, and there was no Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn, making it much more difficult to be in touch instantaneously, as we are today with WhatsApp and other social media platforms. I remember very well that we had strong and regular communication and connections between the conservation professionals in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Bolivia, Uruguay, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Back in 1994, the ABRACOR – Brazilian Association of Conservator-Restorers, then recently created in Rio de Janeiro, was an important reference for the conservation professional community, and our biennial congresses used to have 300 to 400 participants, with representatives from several of the countries mentioned above.

In terms of sustainability, if we look back at the ABRACOR conference preprints, we can see that the contents of the papers were more directed towards scientific aspects of conservation interventions such as the materiality of cultural heritage including questions related to solubility and cleaning techniques, among others. Conceptual questions were also discussed, but the focus was more on what we would call “traditional” cultural heritage, still very linked and rooted in our colonial heritage.

As I have already mentioned above, Brazil and some South American countries have played important roles in the progress of sustainability, and the inclusion of these efforts within the South American conservation profession has made our community distinct within the global conservation profession. Back in 1994 we were already researching and publishing in the field of preventive conservation, expanding professional knowledge on the role of local climate on the behavior and conservation of wooden polychrome sculptures, for example, and questioning the then-popular restriction of temperature and relative humidity fluctuations for museum collections and cultural heritage holding institutions.

In the years since 2000, there have been political changes in several countries in South America, and some of the training courses have disappeared in the region while new programs have been created. Within the region’s governments, the shift between right and left political parties has interfered with cultural heritage policies, directly impacting investments in the training, research, and societal reach of conservation. Despite these ups and downs, my impression is that the conservation community in South America is progressing, and we have all the necessary components to engage as strong members of the international conservation profession, making use of social media as well as local, regional, national, and international events to promote our knowledge and our academic and professional interactions, with the inclusion of minorities in mutual respect and a deeper understanding of our cultural diversity—important elements and the basis of society for several countries in the region.

(Read the interview in the April-May 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 101, p. 28-30)