

# Amsterdam Hosts 7th Student and Emerging Conservator Conference "Testing the Waters"

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Image



## **'Testing the Waters' - Diving into Crucial Conservation Challenges for Emerging Professionals**

By Magdalena Ws3?

The 7th edition of the Student and Emerging Conservator Conference (S&ECC), Testing the Waters, was hosted in Amsterdam, 16-18 November 2023. The S&ECC series began in 2011 in London, and continued in Copenhagen (2013), Warsaw (2015), Bern (2017), Cologne (2019), and Lisbon (2019).

This year's conference took place in the Library Singel of the Universiteit van Amsterdam (UvA), nestled in the heart of historic Amsterdam. A committee of 11 UvA conservation students (directed by Mariana Escamilla-Martinez, and Charlotte Hoffmann), each specializing in different fields, organized the event. The three-day conference hosted 53 (in-person) students and emerging conservators from at least 17 countries, including Brazil, Cyprus, Australia, England, Poland, Germany, and more. In addition, over 200 participants registered to join the conference online via the IIC Community Platform. The conference unfolded across four sessions, each punctuated by insightful and reflective panel discussions among the panelists and participants.

The conference commenced with six guided technical visits to institutes and private studios, including UvA Studios, Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE), Amsterdam City Archives, Foto restauratie Atelier, Hoving & Klusener Meubelrestauratie, and Atelier Jurjen Creman.

Testing the Waters centered on reflecting and evaluating the initial steps in our conservation careers. The event featured four sessions with captivating talks, inspiring panel discussions, and enriching exchanges of ideas and insights during coffee breaks. Two social events aimed to foster connections among participants: the first, Skills for Tomorrow, was an online session connecting participants and IIC Fellows, focusing on equipping individuals with skills to future-proof their careers. The second in-person event, Trivia Night, was a quiz with three prizes organized by Paul Kisner, hosted by Kirby Martino, and sponsored by Schmedt.

The first session, Surface Tension: Starting a Career, moderated online by Claire Richardson, focused on initiating the first steps in our conservation careers. The discussion delved into the challenges we encounter and the diverse paths we can choose to pursue. The initial online speaker, Caitlin Southwick—founder of Ki Culture, Ki Futures and Sustainability in Conservation (SiC)—shared her journey and transition from passionate conservator to entrepreneur advocating for environmental awareness and change. She provided empowering insights on the power of networking, overcoming a scarcity mindset, acknowledging our value, openly discussing money, and shared her experiences in establishing both non-profit and for-profit ventures.

The second speaker, Lucas Mantel, initiated his conservation practice in 2022, establishing Restauratieatelier Mantel in Leiden. As a former conservation studio owner, I resonated deeply with his presentation on the pivotal role of transparency and communication among conservators addressing shared challenges. He generously shared comprehensive data about his studio, offering financial insights and addressing potential risks, making it an invaluable resource for aspiring conservation entrepreneurs in the future.

The third speaker, LaStarsha McGarity, a preventive conservator and head of conservation at Tuskegee University, and a Ph.D. student at the University of Delaware, shared insights on sustainability, accessibility, and diversity in the conservation field. Addressing current challenges faced by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) individuals, she bravely discussed her personal experiences and key moments of her career. She detailed the steps that shaped her career including acknowledging her privileges, advocating for herself, and proactively creating opportunities for internships and future job positions in conservation.

The concluding speaker for this session was Debra Hess-Norris, chair of the Department of Art Conservation and professor of photograph conservation at the University of Delaware. She imparted her extensive life experience in preserving global photographic heritage, emphasizing advocacy, promotion, and education for the future generations of conservators. She discussed the cultural significance and fundamentals of photograph conservation.

The second panel session, *Uncharted Waters: Ethics in Difficult Times*, moderated by Duygu Çamurcuoğlu (senior conservator at the British Museum), explored the ethical challenges of aligning idealistic scenarios with conservation practices during periods of conflict. Recognizing the sensitive and potentially emotional nature of the topics discussed, organizers provided two dedicated space-holders at the back of the room for conversations.

The inaugural online speaker, Sarah Stannage, IIC executive director and conservator at Lincoln University in the UK, addressed the theme of heritage at risk, emphasizing the crucial role of IIC in this domain. Commencing with her appreciation for conservators worldwide navigating hostile and challenging conditions, especially in crisis-stricken areas, she underscored the ethos of “do no harm”. Sarah delved into the IIC's support for disaster response, collaborative initiatives, and the provision of moral and practical assistance.

Rachel Tabet, preventive photographs conservator at the Arab Image Foundation, shared the challenges during her innovative work on discovering safe, sustainable, and accessible storage methods for deteriorated cellulose acetate and nitrate film supports. Providing insight into the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon and the shifting priorities of the people, she outlined the action plan for storing the photographic collection, navigating challenges and adjusting it in response to the 2020 explosion in the Port of Beirut, which significantly impacted the entire project. Nimalka Passanha and Frederick Thomson from Cultural Emergency Response (CER) provided an overview and discussed case studies on emergency support. Emphasizing creative adaptation to local realities and sustainable solutions, they shared experiences in mobilizing networks and collaborating with diverse organizations.

Professor Jane Henderson, professor of conservation at Cardiff University and secretary-general of the IIC, delivered an insightful talk on the impact of emotions in conservation practice. Exploring our emotional responses to projects and their influence on our work, she emphasized the value of understanding and harnessing emotions. Professor Henderson highlighted the importance of self-reflection, acknowledging privileges, and recognizing the value of conserved objects. She shared significance assessment toolkits for conservation projects, offered tips for effective collaboration and consultation management, concluding with a thoughtful exploration of decision-making criteria.

The third session, *One Droplet After Another: Building Community*, was moderated by Marteen van Bommel and delves into fostering connections and community with the public, institutions, colleagues, and related fields, highlighting the significance of collaboration between conservators and diverse disciplines.

Cristina Duran Casablanças, a book and paper conservator at Amsterdam City Archives, emphasized the crucial role of conservators in collaborative projects. Sharing her experiences and challenges working with a diverse team of conservators, engineering students, and a

digitalization company, she discussed how they successfully collaborated to produce a final product acceptable to all parties. She underscored the importance of considering others' perspectives during dialogue.

Professor Robert G. Erdmann, associated with the Rijksmuseum and UvA, presented a multidisciplinary project on utilizing artificial intelligence for identifying silver hallmarks. Collaborating with co-authors Ellen van Bork and Tamar Davidovitz, the presentation explored the innovative application of technology in this context.

The third speaker, Thea B. van Oosten, a conservation scientist specializing in plastics, discussed the evolution of research, conservation methods, and education in her field. She outlined how she expanded her community, eventually building her own scientific network. Using the case study of Zuccaia by Piero Gilardi, she highlighted the collaborative efforts of numerous professionals involved in the project, discussing both successes and challenges.

In the final keynote address, Adam Klups shared his engagement in the care of churches in England, providing reflections and tips on cultivating a supportive community. Stressing the importance of making connections, effective communication, and interdisciplinary collaboration, he shared valuable insights for advancing in conservation careers.

The conference's final day started with in-person demonstrations and presentations by Turtle presenting the most innovative, safe and sustainable crates for art works in the world, and Michelle Vergeer, Vice President of Restauratoren Nederlands. After an inspiring presentation by the organization, I made the decision to sign up as a member and eagerly anticipate participating in their future activities. The final session, Still Waters Run Deep moderated by Sharra Grow, delved into diverse approaches for communicating conservation practices. Christel van Hees, head of conservation, and Paulien t'Hoen, art historian, showcased Boijmans Van Beuningen's Depot building, the world's first publicly accessible art storage facility. Employing various communication strategies, it offers a unique behind-the-scenes experience. They also discussed conservators' transparency and collaboration within an interdisciplinary network involving conservators, artists, curators, and others. Their collaborative discussions resulted in the conference and publication *Modern Art, Who Cares?*

The second speaker, Mariana di Giacomo, natural history conservator at the Yale Peabody Museum and chair of the Shared Conservation Laboratory at Yale's Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage, discussed the significance of communicating conservation through social media. She shared her experience in managing social media and promoting natural history conservation, offering valuable tips for conservators navigating social media in institutional settings. As a conservator trying to manage my own personal social media, Mariana's presentation deeply resonated with me, inspiring new ways to balance my social media presence while working at another conservation studio.

Bart Devolder, chief conservator at Princeton University Museum of Art, discussed his role as on-site coordinator and full-time conservator during the Ghent Altarpiece Project. He shared insights into their interactions with the public, presenting a simple communication model. Devolder highlighted challenges faced by restorers during public visits and the adjustments they made to enhance the visitor experience.

Beatriz Haspo, executive director of ApoyOnline, provided a brief introduction to the organization's mission and activities. Her presentation emphasized fostering connections between people. Participating in an IIC-SECC conference provided an excellent opportunity for networking, professional growth, and fostering valuable connections. The experience allowed me to share insights, build new friendships, and potentially pave the way for future collaborations and projects. It significantly contributed to a deeper understanding of the conservation profession and highlighted the importance of open, honest conversations among emerging conservators.

## **Author Bio**

Magdalena Wsół, a 2019 MA graduate in conservation from Cracow's Academy of Fine Arts, founded Pracownia w Ramach, her Polish conservation studio (2021-2023). She has been a co-organizer of workshops for Polish conservators at Eukon Conservation since 2021 and is currently a fellow at Studio Redivivus in The Hague, the Netherlands. Her expertise and collaborative spirit reflect a deep commitment to preserving cultural heritage through her multifaceted contributions to the field.

*(Read the review and see all the images in the February-March 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 100, p. 68-73)*