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The papers  
from **Ulrich Schiessl**  
**PhD Colloquium** hosted  
by the University of Pardubice  
in the Czech Republic from  
23-24 March 2017  
in Litomyšl

EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR CONSERVATION RESTORATION EDUCATION

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"Shell sculpture" in Johanna Runkel, *Preservation and  
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The papers from  
**Ulrich Schiessl PhD Colloquium**  
hosted by the **University of Pardubice**  
in the **Czech Republic**  
from **23-24 March 2017**  
in **Litomysl**

**T**eaching and learning conservation-restoration as a discipline is more than just accumulating knowledge or facts. Rather, conservation is a process that is supported by the hard facts, which may indeed be acquired and accumulated, but concerning which decisions must constantly be made. Each decision needs individual judgement, depending on a multitude of physical, historical, and aesthetic parameters as well as on societal values. So, when teaching the discipline of conservation-restoration, only approaches can be taught, in order that we may reach informed and well-based decisions.

On the other hand, acquiring knowledge in terms of facts but also in terms of possible approaches has become a challenge. Since the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been an enormous increase in knowledge production taking place, and it has become more and more difficult to follow all the relevant strands of knowledge even within a distinct specialisation, let alone getting an overview of the whole field. It has become clear already for a few decades that specialisation is a must, that it has become impossible to be a 'general' conservator-restorer.

To a major extent, knowledge production takes place in universities, as proven by a study undertaken by ICCROM. Knowledge production takes place mainly towards the end of the master's degree phase, but sometimes even earlier, and PhD studies. Unfortunately, the results of these ample research activities are difficult to access. This is somewhat easier for the results of PhD studies, as there are not yet many PhD theses in the field of conservation. Yet, even making this knowledge accessible poses a challenge. There have been several attempts to create a database for research results in conservation-restoration in terms of bachelor's, master's, and PhD-level contributions to the field. Sadly, until now, there have only been isolated solutions, even for just listing titles and abstracts, let alone full text accessibility.

Given the huge challenges inherent in the conservation-restoration of cultural heritage research, the need to support research in this field is more pressing than ever.

The goal of ENCoRE is to promote research and education in the field of the conservation-restoration of cultural heritage. The classic approach of universities is research-based teaching, and while advancing in the levels of qualifications from bachelor's studies to PhD level, the balance within research-based teaching is increasingly moving towards the research part.

Therefore, ENCoRE supports not only the teaching side, but also research. The first PhD colloquium organised by ENCoRE took place in 2008, on initiative of Ulrich Schiessl. This so-called Oranienbaum Meeting was a huge success and was therefore repeated in 2010. After the tragic death of Ulrich in 2011, René Larsen and myself proposed to continue this initiative, changing its name to the Ulrich Schiessl PhD Colloquium.

The first Ulrich Schiessl PhD Colloquium took place in 2014 in Dresden, the home and university town of its namesake. The second Ulrich Schiessl PhD Colloquium was then hosted by the University of Pardubice in the Czech Republic from 23-24 March 2017 in Litomyšl.

Great thanks must go to Karol Bayer, then head of studies in the conservation-restoration curriculum in Litomyšl, representing the host. Of course, thanks are also attributed to the 13 PhD presenters as well as their tutors, who presented and discussed their research activities and results, following the idea of the Ulrich Schiessl PhD Colloquium, as designed by its original founder.

The following papers give a good overview of the broadness that is covered by research in conservation-restoration, and it is hoped that they will spread and inspire further research activities.

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*Chairman of the Board of ENCoRE*

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**Manon D'haenens**  
École Supérieure des Arts  
Saint-Luc of Liège (Belgium)  
[dhaenens.manon@saint-luc.be](mailto:dhaenens.manon@saint-luc.be)  
[m.dhaenens@uliege.be](mailto:m.dhaenens@uliege.be)

PROMOTORS:  
**Muriel Verbeeck**  
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École Supérieure des Arts  
Saint-Luc of Liège (Belgium)

# The Role of Conservators: An International Survey on Conservation Within Contemporary Art Collections

## ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the role of conservators within contemporary art collections. Based on an upstream, integrated, and global approach to collection management, it analyses the activities, positions within collections, and contributions of conservators concerning the conservation of contemporary artworks produced, displayed, and/or preserved there. The first step was to study the way in which collections function: How do these collections manage conservation issues? Who are the stakeholders involved in each step? What is the conservator's role? An international survey conducted by the author in 2015 provides unprecedented insight on the current status quo of conservation management within contemporary art collections.

**KEYWORDS:** *collection management, contemporary art, conservation, role, survey*

## RÉSUMÉ

*La recherche porte sur le rôle du conservateur-restaurateur dans les collections d'art contemporain. Basée sur une approche anticipée, intégrée et globale de la gestion de collection, elle analyse les activités, positions et contributions du conservateur-restaurateur pour la conservation des œuvres qui y sont produites, présentées et/ou conservées. Nous avons commencé par étudier leurs fonctionnements : Comment ces collections gèrent-elles les difficultés de conservation ? Quelles sont les parties-prenantes impliquées à chaque étape ? Quel est le rôle du conservateur-restaurateur ? Notre sondage international conduit en 2015 fournit un aperçu de la situation actuelle de la gestion de la conservation dans les collections d'art contemporain.*

**MOTS-CLÉS:** *gestion de collection, art contemporain, conservation-restauration, rôle, sondage*

## INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

This Ph.D research focuses on the role of conservators within contemporary art collections. Considering the conservation challenges to contemporary artworks produced, displayed, and/or preserved there, we can observe that their tasks have drastically increased. Treating material damage to artworks is just one part of the work of a conservator, besides for study, mediation, exhibition, loans, (re)productions, etc. While the role of the contemporary art conservators is often addressed in literature or conferences,<sup>1</sup> their involvement in collections with an approach that links their activities, positions within the organisations, and contributions has never been considered in the literature. We base this research on the principle of transmission to future generations while ensuring its current use<sup>2</sup> with a global approach to collection management.

Firstly, to explore these observations as conservator, we gathered documentation; testimonies; case studies; and discussions with colleagues, heads of collections, artists, interns, freelance conservators, and

other stakeholders in the contemporary art field. We start with three main hypotheses:

1. Contemporary art collections have difficulties with the conservation management of their artworks.
2. An upstream, integrated, and global collaboration between conservators and collections helps to optimise the conservation of artworks produced, displayed, and/or preserved there.
3. The activities, positions, and contributions of the conservators within collections are interrelated.

The research is then carried out in two parts: Firstly, data is collected in order to establish the current situation of conservation management within contemporary art collections. Then, the analysis of this information as well as the practical verification by means of case studies address the hypotheses. We began to gather data based on existing literature and by interviewing the heads of 20 collections in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and England (figure 1).

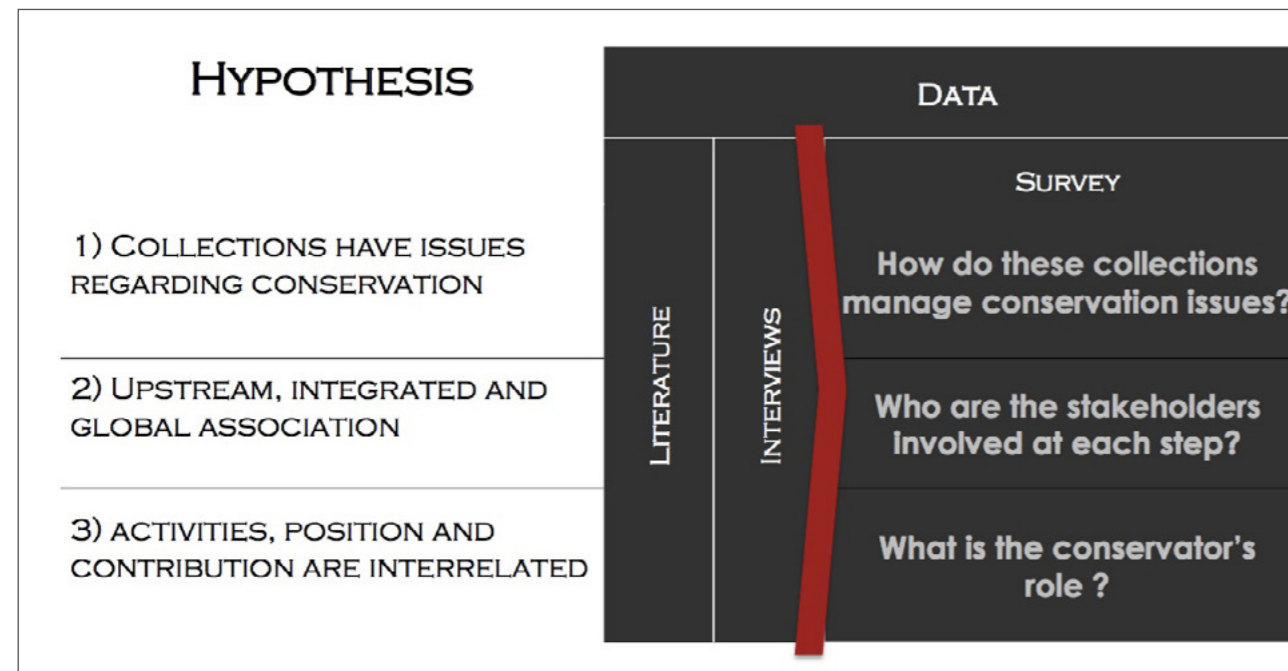


FIGURE 1  
First step of the research: Hypothesis and data collection from literature, interviews, and surveys

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## LITERATURE REVIEW AND INTERVIEWS

The relevant literature is replete with examples of challenges to conservation and attempts at solutions.<sup>3</sup> The interviews conducted in this study allow us to identify the difficulties in the conservation of contemporary art within collections and to classify them into four main categories:

1. The materiality of artworks as they became variable, combined, sensible, ephemeral, reproducible, or even 'immaterial';
2. The status of artworks that change with artists' collaboration, heritage recognition, a new approach to authenticity, and the variability of production or iteration;
3. The structure of collections, which may vary depending on resources, circumstances, available locations, staff, staff competencies, financial circumstances, objectives, and recognition; and
4. Handling of artworks, which is more and more frequent due to an increase in travelling temporary exhibitions and loan policies of collections.

The association between conservation, contemporary art, and collection is mostly linked to museum management and their stakeholders.<sup>4</sup> At the intersection of these three axes, we have identified three areas of potential research concerning the role of the conservator:

1. Specialisation of conservation for contemporary art as new artworks force the profession to adapt itself;
2. Institutionalisation of contemporary art entering collections addressing new questions about presentation, production, reiteration, documentation, and legal protection;
3. Management of collections integrating conservation needs in their activity, with different approaches and stakeholders.

Finally, the conservators' role is addressed at first through his competencies and activities defined in professional frameworks and guidelines.<sup>5</sup> On first glance, discussions and interviews give us the impression that collections would prefer to manage conservation issues with an in-house conservator.

Their contribution would depend on their position within the collections.

Having explored this first approach by performing interviews within private, corporate, and public collections, the next step is to study the current situation within the collections: How do these collections manage conservation issues? Who are the stakeholders involved in each step? What is the conservator's role? These questions are addressed by means of an international survey.

## SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this survey is to gain a global understanding of the current actual management of conservation within contemporary art collection. Two themes are addressed in two surveys: one intended for collection managers (concerning conservation practices) and one intended for professionals working in collections (concerning stakeholder's tasks).

The survey was developed at the University of Liège (Belgium) using Qualtrics<sup>®</sup> with the help of Système méthodologique d'aide à la réalisation de tests (SMART) and Centre d'étude de l'Opinion (Institut CLEO). To gather the highest possible number of answers, the survey was confidential and anonymous, allowing for the communication of sensible information. It was transmitted on the internet in English and in French and was mainly based on qualitative questions (mid-open: closed questions with an option of 'other') to limit bias. However, since there are no neutral questions, the results were limited by the framework of the analysis, the context, and the theoretical canvas.<sup>6</sup>

The questions and the target audience were very specific, and we used a professional vocabulary that was intended to be as international as possible. We considered that people who answered had sufficient competency to do so. It is also assumed that answers came from collections who already had an interest in these questions. The questions were been pre-tested and corrected where necessary with the collaboration of professionals in the field in order to limit any risk of misunderstanding.

Each survey yielded results within 95% of trust and a margin of error of 11-17%.<sup>7</sup> However, statistically speaking, the results are not representative of all collections. We did not aimed to achieve a representative sample considering the stature of population<sup>8</sup> and the variability of their characteristics. The aim of the survey was therefore to determine

the general trends for our research and not to generalise the results. In this case, it is not the representation rate that matters but the sample repartition.<sup>9</sup> We took this point into account in the analysis of the results by determining the categories and their representativeness.

The survey was diffused by email to 310 collections of contemporary art of diverse categories and origins and by using professional and social networks (IIC, ICOM, ICCROM, ICON, FFCR, Twitter, and LinkedIn). The data was gathered using the Qualtrics® platform, analysed using a binary system in a table, and sorted according to the main factors (survey, function, localisation, collection categories, conservators position). A control for the statistics, correlation, and variables was realised using the Statistica® software. Some variables were re-categorised, and the data was sorted in a frequency table or by cross-tabulation.<sup>10</sup>

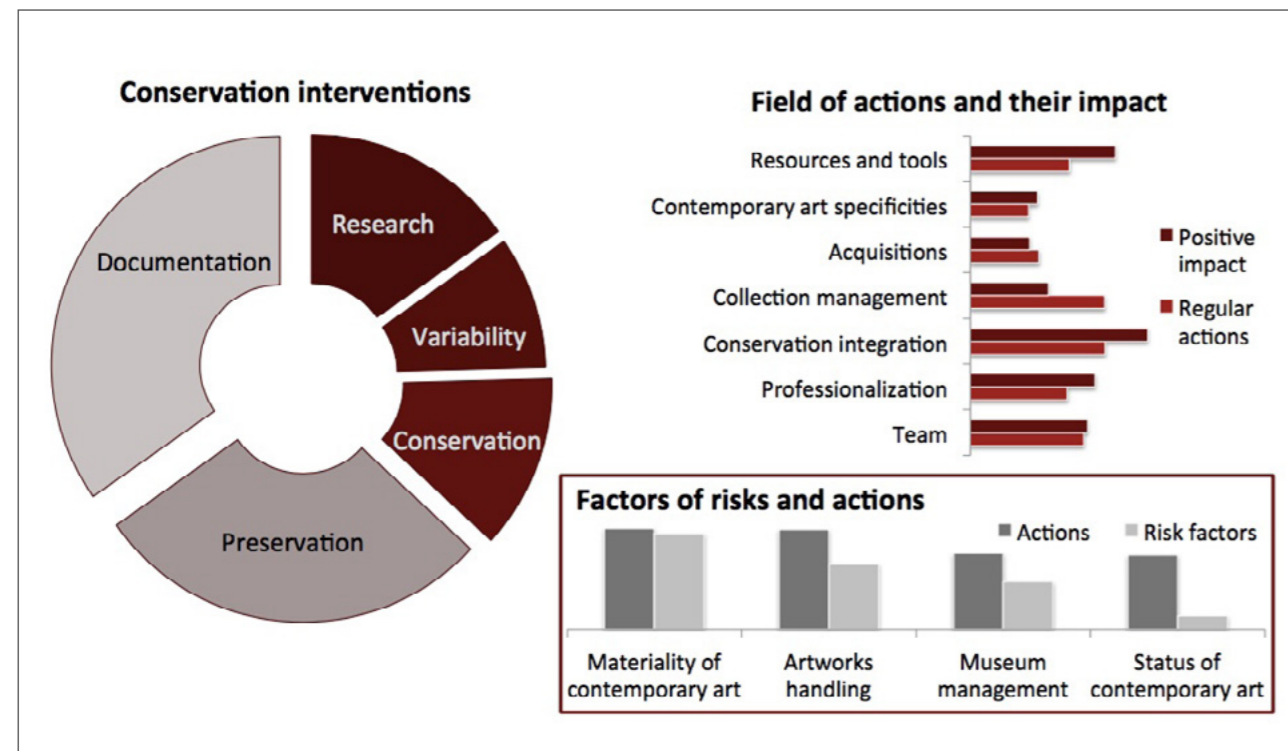
## RESULTS BY OBJECTIVES

Four main types of contemporary art collections responded to the poll, conducted in 2015. Most of them were mid-sized<sup>11</sup> European public collections; large public Anglo-Saxon collections; small groups of mid- or small-sized private European collections that have in-house conservators; and small European corporate collections without conservators. We collected responses from 28 collections and 46 individuals in all categories (private, public, and corporate), of variable sizes, and across almost all continents (except Africa).

### How do the Collections Manage Conservation Issues?

The results related to the management of the conservation of the collections allow us to understand the needs of the collections.

Posing open questions about the specificities of contemporary art as well as mid-open questions about existing situations, risks, actions undertaken, and influential factors, we observed that the risks linked to the conservation of contemporary art were mentioned in most of the responses (70%



**FIGURE 2**  
Collection management. Results of the survey concerning actions undertaken as conservation interventions, general organisation (fields of action), and their considered impacts on conservation and collection management depending on the previously identified risk factors

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of collections), even if they are not regularly encountered (only 28%) (figure 2). A search for prevention is evident (with 92% conducting documentation and 75% preservation). In the same way, more delicate interventions such as replacements, reproductions, industrial applications, etc. remain very punctual (represented as 'variability' in the graph at 25%).

There is a significant difference between the importance given to the impact of integrating conservation (85% positive) in general terms (monitoring, auditing, planning) and the considered impact of concrete actions in the day-to-day management of the collection (38%). Similarly, measures of management (tools and resources) do not seem to be considered important risk factors (only 35%), even if their impact is considered positive (by 70%). All the other indirect elements (acquisitions, ethics, research, artist collaboration, skills, etc.) are considered as scarcely linked to conservation.

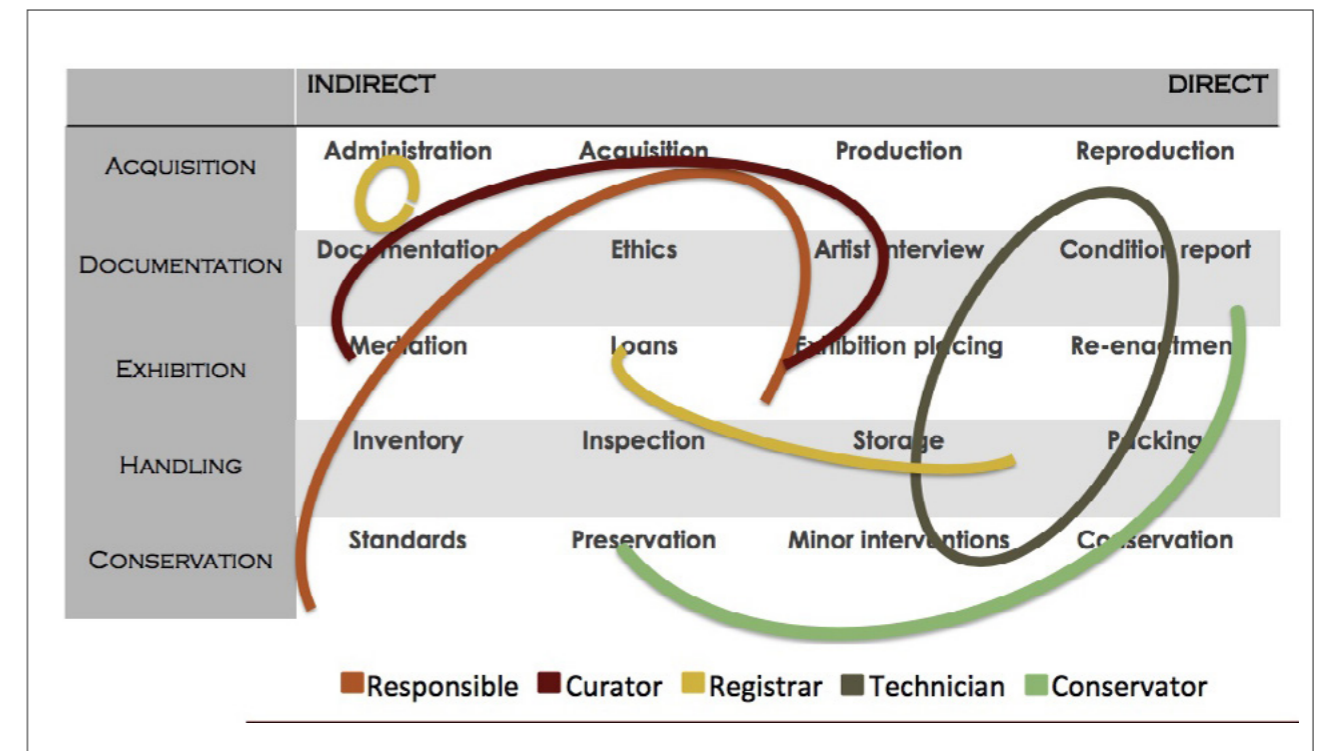
On the other hand, direct action in artworks is considered the most important in terms of risks and

actions (70% and 74%). Interventions that are less interventionist and more linked to everyday life and movements or the artworks' statuses are also more extensively undertaken than aesthetic or structural restoration treatment (33%), without considering taking a conservation action.

### Who are the Stakeholders Involved in Each Step?

The position of the conservators has been analysed as well as the points of view of the various stakeholders on the distribution of tasks, sorted from indirect to direct and by the different steps through which an artwork is processed in the collection (figure 3).

The conservator turns out to have very limited involvement in material and institutional management: loans, exhibitions, and acquisitions (28%). They have slightly more involvement in storage, inspection, re-enactment, and documentation. They are primarily involved in direct conservation



**FIGURE 3**  
Stakeholder's role. The division of the key tasks between stakeholders in a collection. This scheme also shows the division between tasks and stakeholders

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interventions (65%), but it is interesting to note that other stakeholders may also be involved in such tasks. The tasks of production or reproduction are not clearly attributed to anyone. Specific actions linked to contemporary art are also rarely attributed, as well as ethics, inventory, and inspection, even if they are done.<sup>12</sup>

Artists intervene regularly, but not often (+/- at 20%). Present at each step, technicians are the staff members with the best overview of the collection situation. The scientific aspect is, however, hardly taken into account, since no scientist or research centre is involved. The larger the collection, the more conservators are part of the institution's in-house staff, and the more the tasks are divided.

### What is the Conservator's Role?

According to the survey responses, 1/3 of collections have an in-house conservator, 1/3 consult an external workforce when necessary, and 1/3 support conservators through both types of contracts (in-house and external). These conservators are mostly chosen based on their treatment proposals or competences (43 % and 50 %), but the choice to undertake a treatment nearly always depends on urgency, a loan, or an exhibition (89 % and 68 %) (figure 4). The conservator is generally consulted when a need for aesthetic or structural intervention arises.

## DISCUSSION

Although most of the institutions agreed that there is a need for specialist professional conservation of contemporary art, its integration within collections scarcely applied. Most of the collections' activities are undertaken for the daily exhibition schedule but are not particularly considered as linked to conservation issues, even if they are clearly preventing a worrisome risk. Issues and specific needs of contemporary art are worrisome. Therefore, a great deal of research is done, but their conclusions are not often applied in the day-to-day management of collections. The non-attribution of specific tasks to stakeholders concerning the conservation of contemporary art is understandable given their novelty in the collections and the need for interdisciplinary collaboration. Difficulties linked to materials are the most current concern: they also represent the most visible aspect of conservation. The artworks' statuses are not considered a risk factor, but many actions concerning the artworks' statuses are undertaken. This is perhaps due to the fact that

the heads of collection who responded to the survey are mainly art historians. The theoretical importance of conservation seems to be well perceived, but its application and potential impact are not integrated in daily collection management and are much more rooted in urgency and artworks movement.

This separation is also linked to the division of the conservators' activities. Their expertise is generally limited to treatment proposal and implementation as well as advice but not to implement such advice or decide which artwork to treat at what moment. On the one hand, their expertise is regarded as practical and has a direct implication on the physical preservation of the work. However, this takes place generally for the pre-selected works by curators or managers during handling (in which process conservators are hardly involved). On the other hand, their expertise is considered as theoretical advice, but the impact of this advice is more difficult to evaluate because its implementation will be decided and applied by others. An attempt to link conservation and institutionalisation is nevertheless visible, as its integration is considered necessary, specifically during the acquisition process.

Indeed, the different activities affecting the collections are performed almost independently, allowing for limited interaction between the key steps of the artworks entering the collection, exhibitions, handling, and practical conservation. This point is reflected in the disconnection between staff members or stakeholders and their attributed tasks (figure 3). The presence of in-house conservators tends to allow for a balance between preventive and curative actions and the distribution of tasks to other staff members. The internal or external position may give rise to a different relationship between people. This can be reflected in the fact that an in-house conservator should be able to supervise or delegate further tasks to the team through training and follow-up. On the other hand, an external conservator will be considered differently: they do not belong in the team. This situation may lead to very different outcomes and impacts depending on the team and interpersonal relationships. Such a conservator's contribution is, therefore, linked to his relationship with the team.

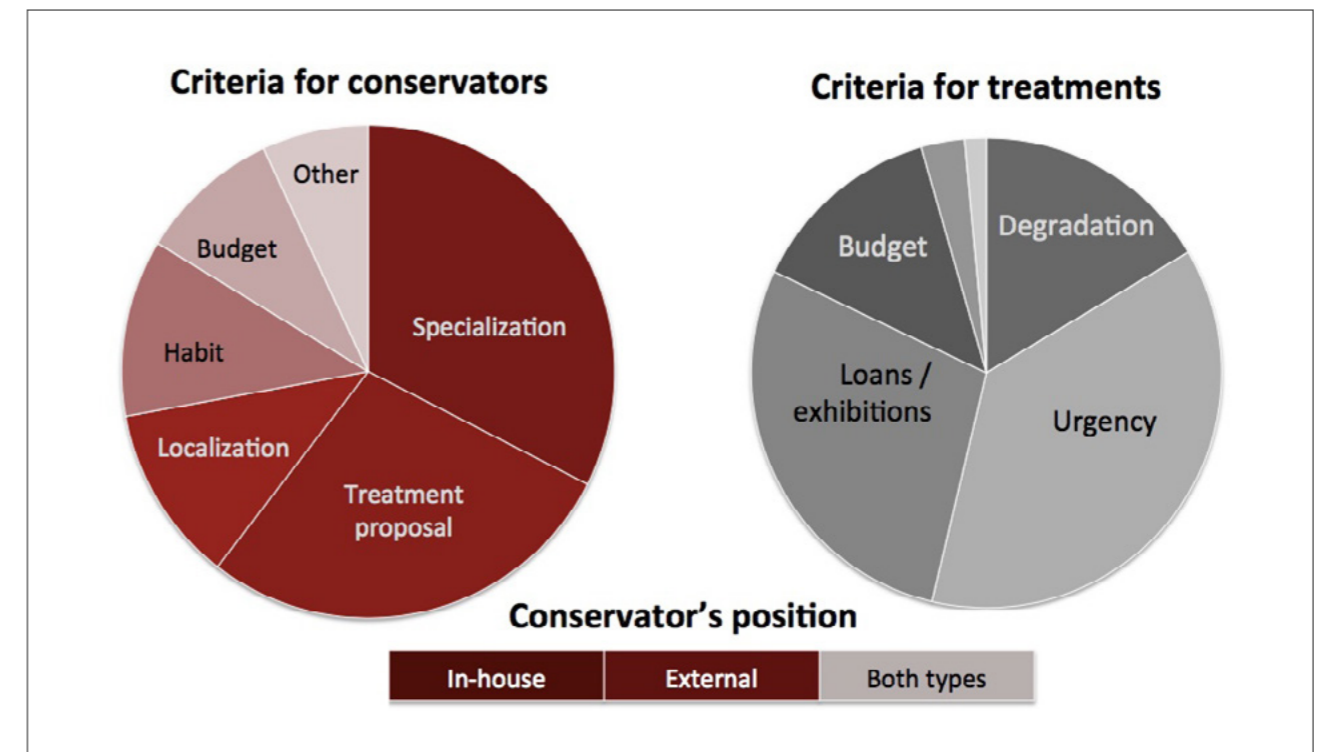


FIGURE 4

Conservators within contemporary art collections. The conservator's position and decision criteria for professional selection and treatment decision

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## CONCLUSION

Our survey provides helpful insights into the current status of conservation management within the context of contemporary art collections. Due to these results, we have been able to address our first hypothesis.

### 1. Contemporary art collections have difficulties with the conservation management of their artworks.

Naturally, there are issues with contemporary art conservation and the specialist field is actively developing solutions. But these solutions are often based on specific cases and are not, therefore, sufficient for guaranteeing the conservation of the whole collection. There is a division between prevention vs conservation improvement; advice vs and implementation and conservation vs general management. Despite an interest in professional development, indirect measures are not considered with an approach to conservation as a global process.

### 2. The potential contribution of the conservator is linked to their position within the collection.

The presence of an in-house conservator does not seem to improve the conservation situation, either due to lack of time or because they are rarely responsible for diagnostics. Their contribution depends on how they may participate in upstream decisions and collaborate with the team. The specialist approach is recognised as necessary, but it is not always integrated in global collection management, even if there is an awareness of the need for a changing process of institutionalisation.

### 3. The upstream, integrated, and global association between conservator and collections helps to optimise the conservation of artworks produced, displayed, and/or preserved there.

We found that the team and collaboration between collections and conservators are important: when working in house, conservators are integrated in a team for conservation intervention. Since the whole collection



management is depending on urgency, loans, and exhibitions, an interdisciplinary approach would help in integrating diagnoses and implementation in an anticipated conservation process. Working with all stakeholders during these activities would increase artworks' visibility by adapting the conservator's activity to the needs of collections.

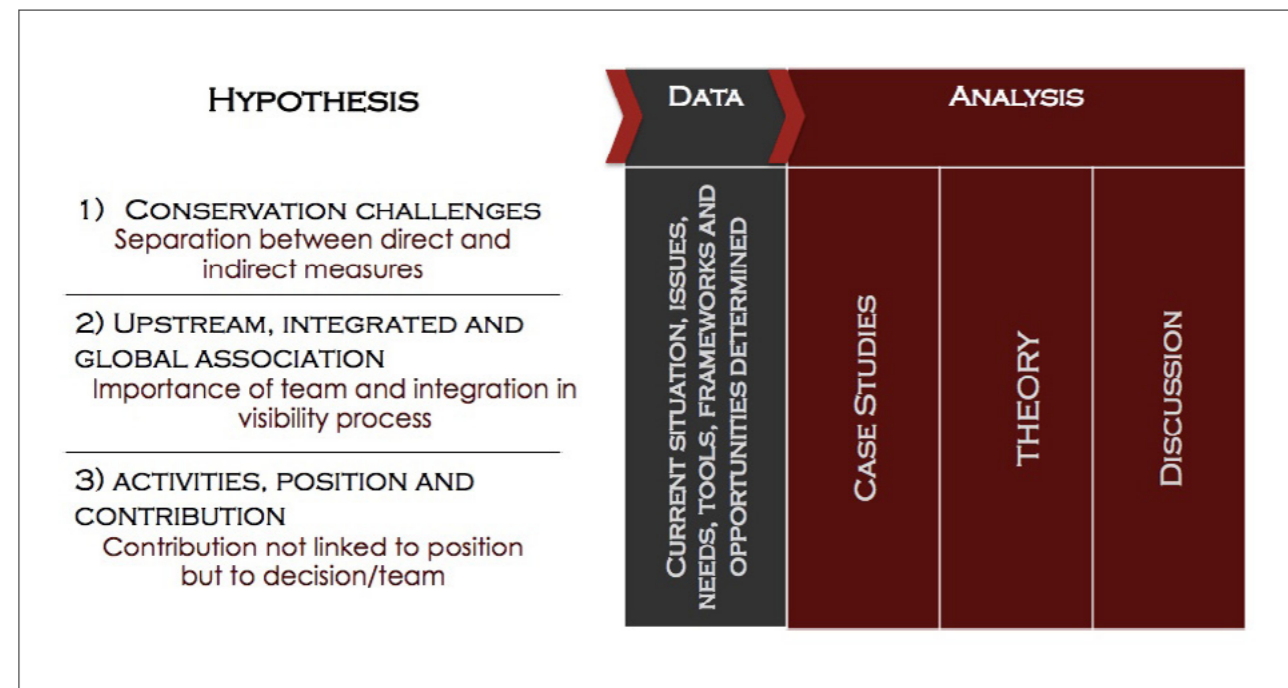
Based on its integration within collections, we will analyse the decision and activity of a conservator's contribution on a practical level using case studies, allowing for an actual verification of the stated hypothesis. An analytical approach will be developed with a focus on societal responsibilities and public

interest based on the theoretical framework of sociology of the profession and a contribution analysis to link the activities to the position within the organisation. This information will permit us to determine the following:

- Knowing their activities, stakeholders, and the organisation, how might the conservator make a contribution based on their competencies and positions?
- Knowing the issues, measures, and needs, on what might the conservator have a contribution (figure 5).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the collections and individuals who participated in the poll (such as Fondation Folon, ZKM, George Costakis Collection, CAPC, and Deste Foundation) as well as university members for their help in the poll's construction and analysis (S. Fontaine and A. Piazza from Cleo and SMART at ULiège) and Pr. Dr. M. Verbeeck and Pr. Dr. D. Strivay (my thesis supervisors).



**FIGURE 5**

*Second part of the research. Based on the primary research, analysis of the collected data, case studies based on the sociology of the profession, and a contribution analysis will be made to determine how and on what a conservator will make a contribution*

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## ENDNOTES

- [1] See, for example, IIC (ed.), *Saving the Now. Crossing Boundaries to Conserve Contemporary Works*, IIC 2016 Los Angeles Congress Preprints, 61, Los Angeles, Studies in Conservation, 2016.
- [2] ICOM-CC, 'Terminologie de la conservation-restauration du patrimoine culturel matériel', *Résolution adoptée par les membres de l'ICOM-CC à l'occasion de la XV<sup>e</sup> Conférence triennale*, New Delhi, 2008.
- [3] The reader may find some basis sources among others in the field in the references below.
- [4] The reader may find some basis sources among others in the field in the references below.
- [5] The reader may find some basis sources among others in the field in the references below.
- [6] P. Bourdieu Chamboredon, J.-Cl., Passeron, J.-Cl., 'La fausse neutralité des techniques', in *Le métier de sociologue*, Paris, Mouton, 1983;
- [7] C. Javeaux, *L'enquête par questionnaire*, 4<sup>e</sup> éd., Bruxelles, Edition de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1990.
- [8] The level of trust represents the accuracy of the responses, not their representativeness.
- [9] Statistically, the representativeness of the sample for the relevant population (the total number of existing contemporary art collections worldwide) decrease over 20 000.
- [10] C. Javeaux, op. cit.
- [11] The binary analysis is a reading of each question (and variable) to number the responses. The frequency table allows for an analysis by items (variable), giving the average, median, scatter, and frequency results. The cross-tabulation allows us to compare two items (variables) to identify their dependence or independence on each other. It highlights some factors that impact the results.
- [12] Small collections are <1,500 artworks, Mid-sized collections have 1,500-5,000 artworks, and large collections contain >5,000 artworks.
- [13] Unless there is another member of the team who is responsible for these tasks. The survey was limited to heads of collection, curators, conservators, registrars, technicians, or 'other' workers.

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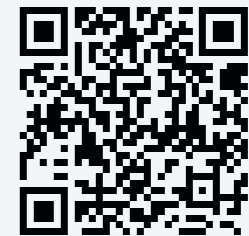
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### Manon D'haenens

Manon D'haenens is a graduate conservator-restorer specialized in contemporary art. She is a Ph.D candidate at the University of Liège (Centre Européen d'Archéométrie) and École Supérieure des Arts Saint-Luc of Liège (Belgium). Her research focuses on the conservator's role within contemporary art collections. Besides her freelance work, she is also a lecturer in conservation at the ESA Saint-Luc Liège and co-founder of SHAKE in Conservation.



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