

2.7 Defining the Role of the Rock Art Conservator

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The impetus for this discussion emerges from numerous requests received by the GCI and through the International Council of Museums Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) working group on Murals, Stone, and Rock Art asking for technical assistance relating to physical interventions on rock art sites. These requests suggest that hands-on physical interventions are being undertaken on rock art sites, perhaps on a more extensive scale than was previously assumed by the field and are being carried out in large part by non-conservators. This highlights a need for greater access to conservation knowledge and resources that include both principles of rock art conservation as well as technical guidance. Few problems faced in rock art fall within the bounds of one discipline, and identifying gaps in knowledge and practice, as well as clarifying roles and responsibilities in rock art conservation, can help to target efforts by directing scarce resources toward the most pressing needs in the field (fig. 2.16).

FIGURE 2.16. Hands-on physical interventions at rock art sites, seen here removing graffiti at a site in Chongoni Rock Art Area, Malawi, are just one aspect of a rock art conservator's role. Conservators are also trained in documenting and surveying sites, assessing and recording condition, identifying causes and mechanisms of deterioration, and making recommendations that will slow change. Image: Terry Little.



As a typical example of the way in which conservators are sometimes requested to assist, the Lori Wong helped a group of volunteers in 2017 with the removal of Sharpie pen ink at the Sevilla Rock Art Trail in the Cederberg near Clanwilliam, South Africa. The site had been vandalized with graffiti a few months prior, but fortunately only in an area with no paintings. Many rock sites like Sevilla rely on a volunteer workforce to undertake such tasks, often with little to no training. Though the end results were satisfactory, optimal treatment would have included more rigorous testing and evaluation with a wider range of methods and materials before undertaking the removal so that the object is not adversely impacted during the process.

Rock art is one of the most vulnerable and at-risk object types within cultural heritage, often found in remote, exterior outdoor environments without adequate protection. It is subject to a wide range of threats that includes both natural factors, such as from weathering, moisture, solar radiation, and biological (vegetation, animals, and insects), as well as human impact (from tourism, vandalism, development, and neglect) (Agnew et al. 2015). Despite this threatened status, at most rock art sites it is the archaeologist, site manager,

or volunteer who must take responsibility for the preservation and protection of the site—tasks that are usually within the scope and expertise of a conservator.

The reasons why conservators are not commonly employed at rock art sites are numerous: practical considerations, such as limited resources prevent the hiring of any personnel, let alone a specialized conservator; and logistical, as many rock art sites fall outside of an established system of managed care. The sites are frequently isolated and difficult to access, challenging to regularly monitor and maintain. Furthermore, rock art tends to be classified as “archaeology” and in that professional arena conservation is not always considered a mandatory part of the overarching site strategy. Rock art sites are also most typically above ground and already exposed, so don’t require excavation and because of this they are not part of regular field season digs for which a conservator might be contracted.

Conservators are most often employed at archaeological sites to work on stabilizing and helping to present excavated structures, or dealing with post-excavation finds (i.e., the consolidation, cleaning, and storage of excavated artifacts). The latter is perhaps the most stereotypical image of the conservator—as the technician standing before an object with a brush in hand or a white-coated individual hunched over a lab bench laboring on a tiny area of an object. This notion of conservation as an object-focused, museum-based profession is still entrenched and the typical roles of a conservator on archaeological sites may therefore not appear to match the needs of rock art sites. In reality, however, there are many types of conservators, not only those trained to work on discrete objects in a museum setting but also others who specialize in archaeological conservation and are aware of the multitude of challenges presented by on-site work.

Rock art conservation has been broadly defined to include both site protection and management. A conservator’s role has evolved and expanded from that lab-coated individual to one who is responsible for a wide range of activities that can include research, documentation, management and stewardship, education and outreach, and preventive and remedial measures. These areas have been broken down and described within the aforementioned four pillars of Rock Art Conservation Policy and Practice. This essay takes a deeper look into Pillar III: Physical and Cultural Conservation Practice and begins to think through a response to the call to action presented in this publication.

Whereas conservation and archaeology should be considered as conjoined and integral to each profession, conservators have not been widely looked upon as a resource at rock art sites. Pillar III of the Rock Art Conservation Policy and Practice stipulates that physical and cultural conservation take place under careful guidance by people with suitable expertise and that expert knowledge is respected in order to make informed decisions. ICOM-CC’s terminology for conservation states that, “Conservation is complex and demands the collaboration of relevant qualified professionals. In particular, any project involving direct actions on the cultural heritage requires a conservator-restorer.” The American Institute for Conservation (AIC) describes conservators as being “unique in the wider preservation field for the particular expert hands-on technical and decision-making skills they bring to preserving and caring for our tangible history” (American Institute for Conservation n.d.).

Rock art, including both petroglyphs and pictographs, is similar in material composition to stone and wall paintings, however the scope and approaches to rock art conservation have developed with distinct attributes. At the center of this difference is the awareness of the connection between physical and cultural conservation practices which are considered, planned, and undertaken in dialogue with one another. As a result, Traditional Owners,

custodians, and local and regional communities play an active role in determining conservation measures not only when positioned as stakeholders, but also as decision-makers and protectors of the physical and spiritual integrity of sites. The overarching philosophy is to assess and protect all values—tangible and intangible—and not neglect or diminish one over another.

When deterioration is present and is determined to be active with identified values in jeopardy, preference is given first to management strategies over physical interventions. When hands-on work is deemed necessary and appropriate, priority is extended to preventive and protective forms of conservation that respect cultural traditions and practices. When remedial, stabilization-type treatments are needed, these are kept to a minimum and presentation-focused work is generally avoided. Rock art's information value, which can contribute to our knowledge about the past, is also one that weighs into decision-making. Furthermore, because rock art must be considered to be an inherent part of the landscape it inhabits rather than an object in isolation, suitable expertise in landscape and environmental conservation may also be needed.

Conservators are trained in an extensive range of methodological processes that include documenting and surveying sites, assessing and recording condition, and identifying causes and mechanisms of deterioration. In addition to having technical knowledge of both preventive measures and remedial interventions, they are well-equipped to be able to make treatment recommendations that will slow visible and structural changes. The conservator can also contribute to an understanding of the materials and technologies used to create rock art and can employ scientific study where appropriate. They are well versed in the principles, standards, and ethics of conservation practice that aim to preserve and protect the site's values. This last skill holds particular importance with rock art when consulting and working directly with Traditional Owners, custodians, and local and regional communities throughout the conservation process is necessary to ensure that practices don't conflict with spiritual beliefs and other existing systems. Awareness and respect for these beliefs may require conservators to think differently about how they approach and solve conservation issues in a variety of contexts.

References

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