

## **Abstract**

The power of conservation to legitimize claims about the past through preservation is an important facet of the discipline in the twenty-first century. The process of transforming cultural heritage into accepted narratives has been an integral part of conservation practice with its origins in the development of nationalism as a political and ideological tool in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Efforts to acknowledge, re-examine, and critically understand the pervasive and continued impact of colonialism and marginalisation of the “other” in favour of Western ideologies is a crucial part of ongoing and necessary discussions by the profession. Further, the process of decolonizing how cultural heritage is used by institutions and experts requires significant reassessment of the impact of conservation practice, as well as related curricula and pedagogy on how we understand the past.

Whether used to construct and substantiate understandings of history, identity, and nationhood, the practice of conservation requires more than neutrality and scientific impartiality. Unpacking the ways in which conservation can and has been used as a political tool requires review of hierarchical choices made by experts and institutions during the practice of conservation in various settings (museums, universities, and archaeological sites, etc.) in the past and the present. The critical relationships between experts have profound impact on the evolution of the mechanisms by which conservation expertise, knowledge, and terminology is codified and used to authenticate accepted histories by other experts. Further, the importance of disciplinary authority in negotiating preservation and substantiating these narratives requires more synthetic discussion by the profession.

This paper investigates the social construction of conservation expertise, as well as the identity of associated actors engaged in preservation. It highlights the use of conservation as a tool to develop concepts of nationalism and identity. Case studies will examine how conservators and other actors (artists, archaeologists, and scientists, etc.) apply and use conservation to legitimize claims to authority about the past in museums, universities and archaeological sites through exhibition, publication, and training. Investigation and critical assessment of published and unpublished documents allows one to reconstruct the subtle, and not so subtle, power struggles between experts, technicians, and native stakeholders, as they investigate and construct narratives of the past. Finally, this process of negotiation along disciplinary lines has resulted in a hierarchical system of expertise that continues to have ramifications for contemporary conservation practice, professionalization, and decolonization of the field.