



## NOT ONLY MASTERPIECES! CULTURAL CONSERVATION SCIENCE ON A LOCAL SCALE

The research I am undertaking tries to answer a dilemma I have faced myself as a young conservator of paintings: educated in a western, developed country, I have been practicing my profession in a country lacking awareness for recent heritage preservation methodology. Thus, I faced several issues such as the scarcity of materials and equipment for conservation as well as the insufficient qualification of human resources. I was aware of the pressing need for Algeria, my country of origin, to get a structure dedicated to Heritage Conservation, but where to start and, more importantly, where to set the standards for acquiring the costly equipment and instruments?

A RESEARCH TALE BY



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Conservation of artworks and cultural property is the spine for any initiative aiming at cultural heritage transmission. And to that extent, it is crucial to assure physical integrity of significant objects and material evidence of important events, traditions and manifestations.

Since ancient times, various civilizations in their own manner have given special care in keeping the integrity of valuable representations of their beliefs and lifestyle in general. The means to provide this care is, and has always been, variable according to the access to the methodology and knowhow on one hand, and to the technology and substances involved on the other.

Disparities in the attention given to cultural property also depend on the value associated with each object. One could think of the disparities in accessing health services as a parallel: we are not treating human beings equally with the same medical protocol regardless of their age, background, position and function in the society.



Thus, accessibility is not the only hinderer to the spreading of equivalent or standardized protocols of treatment. Some artefacts such as exceptional masterpieces would get much more attention than any other similar artwork of the same period and even of the same artist. You may think, as an example, of the restoration of a minor drawing of Leonardo da Vinci that obviously wouldn't make a fuss in a fuss in comparison with the important polemic restoration of *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* or better yet, the *Mona Lisa* itself!

Fortunately, not only masterpieces are being restored and studied in conservation centers nowadays. In addition to the most beautiful or complete objects, we tend to preserve also ordinary past remains that have gained a better position in our museums and research institutions because of their informative potential about the context that has produced them. Thanks to the application of scientific analysis and further investigations on cultural property, we can extract valuable Knowledge for better understanding each object's technological conception, its evolution through time, but also to learn about decay phenomena involved in its alteration and reflect on various options to prevent it from irreversible destruction.

This is mainly what conservators do! They collaborate with other scientists to examine artefacts and artworks from various perspectives.

As conservation science has become increasingly multidisciplinary, the workplace for conservation has consequently evolved and changed according to this need for confrontation and collaboration. It has stepped-out from the "workshop" to the "laboratory" and is now, according to international standards, fully recognized as a scientific discipline after being relegated exclusively to handy craftsmen activity for a long time.

These statements lead us to rethink the situation of access to conservation services, from a critical point of view, insisting on the aspect of equipment selection. In the perspective of training myself for the set-up of a conservation laboratory

in Algeria, my country of origin, I thought that focusing my research on this problem could be helpful for other persons confronting similar tasks. How do designers of new conservation laboratories set their criteria and choose one focusing my research on this problem could be helpful for other persons confronting similar tasks. How do designers of new conservation laboratories set their criteria and choose one instrument rather than another? What is the actual need they are addressing in this process? Moreover, when these designers, in the framework of international cooperation projects, are requested to make the selection for other countries, other contexts, and different needs than their own: what is influencing their recommendation? Is it complying with international standards (set mainly by developed Western countries) or could it be a thorough investigation of the local needs and potentialities of the beneficiary?

This research aims to give an overview of the distribution of conservation laboratories that are sorted in a database by countries, with specific feedback on international cooperation programs. In addition, providing a mapping of these laboratories will encourage their future development according to geographic proximity by pooling the investments in facilities at a larger scale, thereby minimizing costs. I seek through this work to counter the psychological and financial preconceptions about the inaccessibility of certain state-of-the-art technologies, or simply overestimating their impact on a restoration viability and durability. And by exploring the concept of sustainability, my research will give orientations on how a dynamic restoration center in developing countries should be maintained, above all when considering outdated technology and lack of human capacity.

I believe that it is only by learning from past experiences that we can make a better future, so I hope my research outcomes would encourage decision makers to rely on my comparative study of worldwide conservation laboratories to help them design their future own tailor-made lab.