

The ADVOCATE AWARD

Across the world there are those who are deeply committed to the preservation of heritage but are not necessarily heritage professionals. These world visionaries may work in museums, government posts, or within the private sector. They may be artists, pioneers in the communications industry, scientists, architects, authors, educators, or entrepreneurs. They may be involved in the arts, the sciences, commerce or politics and policy. What they share is the understanding of the value of heritage to the future and the need to care for that heritage in a sustainable way. The IIC wishes to acknowledge this support with the announcement of the Advocate Award. This award is given in recognition of those who use their influence, resources and talents to support the efforts of heritage preservation.

We congratulate the first recipient of the IIC Advocate Award, Anna Summers Cocks. This award recognizes her work to promote conservation through the growing presence of conservation news and reporting in the Art Newspaper; her tireless efforts as Chairperson of the Venice in Peril Foundation; and her ongoing scholarship and public support of heritage conservation world-wide.

To celebrate this award and the achievements of Anna Somers Cocks, Jerry Podany, President of IIC, spoke with her on February 25th 2011 and asked her about the Art Newspaper, changes in the world of heritage conservation and her dedication to the city of Venice.

A conversation with Anna Somers Cocks

JP: When did you become aware of heritage conservation and how has it changed since then?

ASC: It was when I joined the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1973. The department had been called the Art Workshops. The people there were considered craftsmen and they wore brown coats, but shortly before I arrived the same people had been redefined as technicians and were given white coats. About then the first scientific head was appointed and that defined future direction of conservation. The first thing I learned to say was that the effort was to *conserve*, not to restore. The change in terms was considered a very important distinction and we still hold to it today.

As for how conservation has changed, I think there is a greater awareness of the fragility of our world. Perhaps the heritage conservation world has grown as the ecological conservation world has grown; we are now more keenly aware that things get used up, they are finite. The “penny dropped” for me when someone told me about the fragility of textiles: “You can choose if something is to last 50 years, 100 years or 500 years, depending on how you treat it,” I was told. You have to make a choice and recognise that we have power over the future of objects, over their survival.

And of course there has been enormous growth in the influence that conservation departments have. They often have the final say as to how things are exhibited or for how long, or even where, although there seems to be a bit of a backlash now by some museum directors who are questioning whether the high standards being insisted upon by conservators are really necessary. I am not an expert in that area but I can certainly see that there is a degree of hypocrisy in it all. I remember taking some art works to an exhibition where another lending museum had insisted on some very demanding conditions, which we all knew were never met back home. When it comes to the conservation of archaeological materials, we were of course quite aware of the 1970 UNESCO treaty against the trade in looted material and this was respected at the V&A. We would not ever have acquired an object if it did not have a good provenance. It was simply not interesting to have an object you knew nothing about. The legal wrangles that have arisen lately are the consequence of re-emerging nationalism and archaeology being used as a political arm. When the “source countries” have ceased to feel they are the weaker side they may well begin to ask themselves whether they are looking after their heritage as well as they might, and whether their policies are conducive to heritage preservation. For example, in some countries construction work is completely stopped if archaeological remains are found in order that excavation can take place. Of course that is a very good idea, but resources must be made available to archaeologists to assure that this rescue work is done in a reasonable amount of time, so that development can then proceed.

JP: You predicted some time ago the “end of the MBA approach to museum administration”, changing not only the way things are done in museums but much of their focus. What do you predict are some of the changes coming to heritage conservation? And what do you think are the required changes?

ASC: One of the changes relates to what I was just saying about looting. I actually believe there could be officially sanctioned trade in archaeological artefacts. I think it would be healthy and would help squeeze out the illicit trade. I asked a high-ranking Italian official with responsibility for the country’s archaeological patrimony what they planned to do with all the material that is being uncovered and will be uncovered in the future, since everything below the ground belongs to the Italian State, and he had no answer. To start becoming more realistic about our approach to heritage is an absolutely essential change and funding rescue archaeology in the face of development is another vital need. Take, for example, the building of the big dams in Turkey or in China, where very large chapters of the world’s history simply disappeared because there were not enough archaeologists to carry out excavations in sufficient time. We need to develop international teams of rescue archaeologists, with the emphasis on the rescue of knowledge even more than the rescue of artefacts, although the two obviously go hand in hand.

JP Do you foresee any changes in the area of collections conservation?

ASC: Certainly the desire for greater access has presented new challenges for conservation. The idea that when something enters the museum, it will be only handled by the “initiated” is changing, although I can’t see it going too far. Greater general use of the collections would certainly put more pressure on conservation resources.

JP: You once said that “the art world is a microcosm of the larger world” and this reminded me of something you said when you were part of the IIC dialogue “Conservation in Crisis” (<http://www.iiconservation.org/dialogues>). You noted that conservators often “...miss the real or

bigger story” related to what they do. Let’s talk about that for a moment. How do you think conservators need to change their approach to communication?

ASC: I think there should be a large banner hung up in every studio or laboratory reading, “The best is the enemy of the good”. I’ll give you an example. The Venice in Peril Fund is now helping to fund the restoration of a 19th century crane in the Arsenale in Venice. It is a very important and rare industrial artefact. However, the people who are restoring it come from architectural conservation and are treating it as if it were a building by Palladio. Their preparatory study of the crane has been enormously detailed and expensive—every rivet has been measured and drawn—and to my mind they are overdoing it. We need to be more flexible and realistic.

The other thing is that we need to collaborate with other disciplines to bring life to an object that is being conserved. There is a wonderful example of this that I have spoken about before. It has to do with an early 16th-century Tuscan wooden crucifix that belongs to the Curia in Venice. The object was conserved a few years ago, and when the presentation was made to the public the conservators went on and on about the technical aspect of the treatment and restoration. Then there was a rather dull discussion about the stylistic attribution of the object. What was missed, and what was far more interesting, was that this crucifix had for centuries been carried in procession in front of condemned prisoners as they walked from the Carceri next to the Doge’s Palace to the space between the two columns of the Piazzetta to be decapitated. You have to think about what will catch the imagination of the public and, for that matter, the trustees, if you are going to defend your budgets and your existence.

JP: Is it fair to say that conservators need to expand their vocabulary and reach out to other disciplines and to the larger world?

ASC: Full technical reports are vital, but you don’t have to burden lay people with them. You should be able to communicate the essence of what has been done in plain English. When I was at the V&A the conservation department wore white coats, represented science and were “over there”, while the art historians were somewhere else and there was very little interaction. That has to change.

JP: You have certainly made this effort on behalf of conservation in The Art Newspaper by carrying a growing number of articles about the field. How do you think this coverage has influenced all of the various worlds from which your readers come?

ASC: People are fascinated by the making of a work of art, and they are equally intrigued by how an object is “fixed”. That appeals as a story, just as in the fashion magazines, people love “make overs”, the before and after. The conservation profession has people’s natural curiosity on their side right from the beginning, and that is what The Art Newspaper tries to kindle.

JP: Print real-estate is expensive, why does the Art Newspaper report on conservation at all?

ASC: The Art Newspaper covers all aspects of the art world, and conservation has been a very important aspect of that world for a very long time. Just think of the Cavaceppi workshop sculpting the missing parts of Roman statues in the 18th century. The history of art is entwined with the history of restoration and conservation, and the direct influence of conservation on the world’s art is something that cannot be ignored and should be both valued and openly discussed.

JP: This award is about recognizing people who, although not directly conservation professionals themselves, have given a great deal of support and made a difference to the efforts of conservation. Recipients are policy makers, influential thinkers and creative supporters. As one of those people who influence the perception of heritage conservation, what would be your advice to the profession so that it remains sustainable, particularly in this time of economic downturn.

ASC: I would draw attention to the time bomb that awaits us in the form of the art of the 20th century and onward. A lot of this art is auto-destructing because craftsmanship was not part of the artist's intentions. I would advise the conservation sector to look at the art market and look at where the interest is: contemporary art is now more important in terms of the market than older art. I believe there will be a need for a large number of professionals who can deal with the multifarious objects and materials that artists have chosen and will choose to make their art works. It is going to be very scientifically challenging.

JP: Another challenge for heritage conservation is presented by living historic places. This was explored in the recent IIC Istanbul Round Table "Between Home and History" (<http://www.iiconservation.org/dialogues/>). Gentrification, tourism, neglect all constitute enormous problems that are made more complex when a historic area is also called home. Venice is among the best known examples of an inhabited historic city, with world renowned works of art, masterpieces of architecture, stunning urban planning—and millions of tourists. And it is in danger. Share with us your passion for the preservation of Venice.

ASC: I serve as the chairman of the *Venice in Peril Fund* (<http://www.veniceinperil.com/>), which was founded after the great flood of 1966. In those days there was not a real recognition on the part of the government of the special needs of Venice, so we began by responding to an obvious need, with the conservation and restoration of its monuments and buildings. From the start, Venice in Peril adopted an holistic approach to the conservation of a building and its contents, which at the time was rather new. However, there are much deeper, core problems for Venice. One now has to look at the very big picture for somewhere as complex as Venice and what we see is absolutely terrifying. The fact is that the water level is inexorably rising and the mean water level is already 23cm higher than it was in 1897, when the zero point was established. The predictions are that this will rise by another 50 to 75cm by 2100, and the barriers that are currently being built (estimated completion 2014) to stop the acute flooding events can do nothing against this chronic problem. It is astonishing, but there is no official government policy on how to begin to deal with this problem.

Venice is one of the world's great treasures and the heritage preservation community must band together to insist on sufficient efforts and support to save it. And we have to be more creative in our search for solutions while also being realistic. Seventeen and a half million tourists come to Venice every year and they should be asked to contribute to the efforts its preservation.

In many ways, what is needed to save Venice is also what is needed throughout the preservation community: flexibility, creativity, outreach and realism, added to the already deep commitment to saving our world's heritage.