

[ICOM-CC 18th Triennial Conference](#), Copenhagen, September 2017

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Being one of 1000 delegates from 58 countries was an extraordinary experience, all gathered together for a week to discuss and exchange ideas. The conference illustrated so clearly the scope and impact of [ICOM-CC](#) (ICOM International Committee for Conservation) across the world. It was refreshing to be at a forum where conservators could acknowledge that there are likely to be “troubles ahead” and that it is only through collaboration that they are likely to be solved. The opening plenary sessions offered reflective and stimulating sessions about what has been achieved over the last 50 years of the conservation committee’s existence, how conservation is perceived currently and where the future is likely to lead.

With 150 papers, 100 posters and plenary sessions, the choice of what to learn was daunting but I wanted to focus on what would be useful to my current job at the National Trust as well as what might stimulate me to think in different ways and borrow techniques from other disciplines. With the textile group papers concentrated over the first day and half, this left plenty of time to learn from other disciplines. The textile papers ranged from research into identifying mordants and dyes to techniques of removing aged adhesives from textiles, from looking at the materials we use in conservation to evaluating past craft practices to established their relevance today. I found the papers on dyes particularly useful, giving me a broader understanding of their impact on the degradation of fibres.



One of the most interesting papers was Yvonne Shashoua’s on sustainable future alternatives to petroleum-based polymeric conservation materials. The conclusion was that there are options but they are currently not economically viable. As one of the National Trust’s central tenets is conservation and sustainability, it was good to hear that we should be able to move to vegetable based materials in the coming years. Other papers have prompted me to review and reintroduce formal reflection and evaluation of treatments with my whole studio team, to understand how I could use microfading parameters in discussions with curators and designers for exhibitions, to update my knowledge on the current software packages available to use in documenting condition and treatment on objects from a tablet and the latest research in evaluating the volatile organic compounds emitted from storage and display materials used in conservation.

The conference ably demonstrated how technology is now part of everything we do in our work from research to visitor engagement. But for all its benefits, it can bring with it the demands for instant and constant updates and the need to feed the insatiable desire for ‘action’ when conservation is a careful, painstaking occupation of detection, documentation, research and finally action. This dichotomy stimulated discussion on how to make our work relevant to the Instagram generation – not only to value our work in terms of the object but also in terms of value for money and finally to attract the next generation of conservators. A paper by Jonathan Ashley Smith questioning the use and need for a code of ethics/conduct sat well with the

whole debate, challenging us to reconsider and prioritise the values placed on objects in an ever changing world. I found the whole debate stimulating and energising!

I also enjoyed broadening my horizons by hearing about two objects I am unlikely to come across in my day-to-day job; one was a modern outdoor sculpture and the other a historic blue whale skeleton. The papers presented the challenges faced in conserving them; in the former, the research and decisions had to be made in conjunction with the living artist and in the latter, it was a matter of size and fragility. Although my studio's expertise lies in conserving large, complex fragile textiles, these were on another scale!



The group funded by ICOM UK (through [travel bursaries](#)) came together at the beginning of the week and I was very pleased to meet everyone. It was good to put faces to names not least as I had had a query, only the week before, which I had referred to the Leather Conservation Centre. The conference also gave me the opportunity to meet and reconnect with many others conservators from across the world.

I found the week thoroughly engaging and came back with a spring in my step, having met so many people and learnt so much. I gave a feedback session to my studio and it stimulated a discussion on the use of different detergents and their efficacy and it has also encouraged me to introduce more studio wide reflective discussions about our work. I will be blogging about my experience shortly and have also written a review for the Textile Group's [ICON](#) news pages.

It was worth waiting 20 years, and thank you so much to ICOM UK for making it possible!