

# Careers for Historians: Conservators

By Beth Crist

Do you enjoy caring for antiques or works of art? Can you do precise work using small tools? Do you have a talent for science and an eye for details? Are you patient? If you answered “yes” to these questions, you may have what it takes to be a conservator.

Conservators can best be described as doctors for museum objects. Just as doctors examine patients, conservators examine objects. After making diagnoses, they determine what the objects are made of and how they are made. Conservators use this information to decide how to fix damaged objects, just as doctors decide how to treat their patients. Conservators treat objects to slow their deterioration and sometimes restore objects to their original appearance. They keep records of their examinations, diagnoses, treatments, long-term care, and storage and handling plans. They also document the condition of objects before, during, and after treatment.

Conservators, like doctors, practice preventive care. Many things, such as light, humidity, air pollution, mold, fungus, water leaks, insects, and rodents, can damage objects. Disasters such as fires, floods, and earthquakes can also cause damage. Even people sometimes damage objects when they handle and move them. Because of these risks, conservators plan how objects are stored, exhibited, and handled. Some objects, for instance, must be kept in rooms or exhibit cases with carefully controlled temperature and humidity levels.

Doctors work closely with nurses, pharmacists, and other medical professionals to give their patients the best care. In the same way, conservators work with curators, exhibit designers, handlers, registrars, and other museum professionals to give objects the best care.

Conservators, like doctors, need a wide range of knowledge. They must know about chemistry, physics, history, computers, and more. Some conservators work with many types of objects. Others work with only certain objects. For instance, they may work with textiles, metal or wooden objects, photographs, books, or paintings.

Most conservators have master’s degrees in conservation and have completed internships or apprenticeships. The job outlook for conservators is bright. Museums, libraries, historical societies, corporations, universities, archives, government agencies, art galleries, and private collectors employ conservators. People often seek the help of conservators in preserving family and community heirlooms. Conservation requires attention to detail, a broad range of knowledge, and patience, but conservators are rewarded with a variety of tasks, job stability,

and a sense of fulfillment.

### To learn more:

- Check out the following Web sites:

#### **Conservation Training in the United States**

<http://aic.stanford.edu/education/becoming/contrain.pdf>

Learn how people become conservators and what they do as professionals.

#### **Conservator's Journal**

<http://www.hfmgv.org/dymaxion/journal/index.html>

Follow the work of the Henry Ford Museum's conservation staff as they examine, document, treat, and reerect a special house.

#### **Conservators Enjoy Solving Puzzles from the Past**

<http://www.nextsteps.org/steps/apr01/featart2.htm>

Get a feel for what conservators do every day through these interviews.

#### **Definitions of Conservation Terminology**

<http://aic.stanford.edu/geninfo/defin.html>

Learn the lingo that conservators use.

#### **The QAR Project: Artifact Conservation**

<http://www.qaronline.org/conservation/consintro.htm>

Learn how conservators are caring for artifacts found in the wreck of Blackbeard's flagship Queen Anne's Revenge.

#### **Virtual Tour**

[http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/about-cci/virtual-tour/index\\_e.aspx](http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/about-cci/virtual-tour/index_e.aspx)

See interior views of the conservation laboratories at the Canadian Conservation Institute.

- Arrange a behind-the-scenes tour with a conservator at a local museum. Come prepared with a list of questions: What do you do on a typical day? Do you work with particular objects? What is your favorite part of the job? How and when did you decide to become a conservator? What is your educational background?

### Try it out:

- Find items in your house that are damaged or showing signs of wear. Examine the objects and answer the following questions: Was damage due to improper storage or handling? What are the objects made of? Research ways to store the items and develop a storage plan, such as keeping photographs in acid-free pockets (<http://aic.stanford.edu/treasure/> is a

good place to start your research). If some items are damaged from improper handling, develop a plan to protect them from future harm.

- Complete the following Web activities:

**You Be the Conservator**

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/kids/santos/>

**Preservation 101: An Internet Course on Paper Preservation**

<http://www.nedcc.org/p101cs/p101wel.htm>

## Interview with Paige Myers

*Paige Myers, a costume and textile conservator, has worked at the North Carolina Museum of History for two and a half years.*

### **Beth Crist: What is your educational background?**

**Paige Myers:** I have an associate of arts degree in liberal arts from Chowan College and a bachelor of arts degree in clothing and textiles from East Carolina University. I also have a graduate degree in human ecology (clothing and textile conservation) from the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada.

### **BC: When did you become interested in conservation?**

**PM:** I first knew that I wanted to work with old clothes while I was at ECU. The program emphasized the industrial and retail areas of the textile industry. I tailored the program to my interests, so it included courses in historic costumes and historic textiles. I did not know what conservation was all about until I entered graduate school. But I was exposed to conservation as a volunteer here at the museum after my graduation from ECU in 1990 and was very interested in research. I helped with research for the women's history exhibit that the museum presented from 1994 to 1996.

### **BC: Have you had any other history-related jobs?**

**PM:** As a costumer for six years at Raleigh Creative Costumes, I created clothes representing different time periods for plays and events. I was also in charge of caring for some of the older pieces in the shop, and I decided if they were too fragile to be used on stage or rented. Those pieces went to places like museums that could care for or better appreciate them.

### **BC: What do you do at work on a typical day?**

**PM:** I mainly stabilize garments and textiles. Sometimes wet cleaning and bleaching is required, but mostly I stitch and vacuum items. If an exhibit or photography session requires a mannequin, I add polyester batting to the

mannequin to create a shape that matches the shape of the garment. I also do the detail work on hat forms. I check items in storage regularly for damage from hanging and make repairs. I make conservation reports for the items I conserve. I occasionally check light-meter readings in the exhibit galleries to see if artifacts are receiving too much light and answer questions from staff or museum visitors, such as How do I care for my christening dress? I even give lectures on the care of antique textiles and clothing to groups such as the Durham Quilters Guild.

**BC: What do you like best about your job?**

**PM:** Learning about the people who made and wore the clothing, such as the sewing shortcuts they used or how they made alterations. For Civil War uniforms, I sometimes learn how the people who wore them were injured or how they died. Also, it's fun to find surprises such as a monogrammed handkerchief in the back pocket of a governor's frock coat. The handkerchief had probably been there for more than one hundred years, and everyone had overlooked it. There were still bits of tobacco inside the folds of the handkerchief. These little details reveal a lot about people and the times they lived in.

**BC: What advice do you have for students who are interested in becoming conservators?**

**PM:** Volunteer at museums and historic sites. Visit museums around the United States and world and look at how things are exhibited. Talk to museum conservators and ask them how they do their jobs. Take chemistry classes! Conservators use many different substances to clean artifacts. Most are safe, but you should always be aware of chemicals and take care when using them. Investigate the best university programs for your field of interest, whether it is textiles, wood, furniture, photography, or metals. Join organizations such as the American Institute of Conservation. It has a wealth of information on its Web site and publishes a quarterly journal.

**BC: What has been your favorite project?**

**PM:** Probably the dress that Margaret French McLean, wife of Governor Angus W. McLean, wore to the 1925 Inaugural Ball. It is made of metallic threads with a sheer silk lining and has two very heavy rhinestone decorations on each hip. This dress is very fragile and was last exhibited flat in a case. My challenge was to put this dress on a form without destroying it. The project took six to eight months, including planning how to mount the dress on a form. First, I stitched a lining support to the dress. Next, I stitched twill tape supports to the new lining and also to the cover over the form. The dress was supposed to float on the form. So far this treatment has worked! The dress will be in the First Families of North Carolina exhibit through January 6, 2002.