

Chapter One

Introduction

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Tangible Heritage Conservation (THC) is a new programme at the School of the Arts, Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria (UP) and the first such programme offered at a university in sub-Saharan Africa. The programme, inaugurated in 2019, had been in development since 2015. It is a two-year, full-time, lectured master's programme with core and specialisation modules in the first year and internships and a mini-dissertation in the second year. The primary motivating factor for this degree was and is the safeguarding of South Africa's and the continent's heritage as expressed in the African Union's 'Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want' (African Union 2015: 7–8) as well as a [South African] national imperative in the National Development Plan and Vision 2030 (National Development Plan 2013)' (McGinn 2017: 40). However, the development of this new programme is the culmination of many years of developments which converged at the proverbial 'right place at the right time'. 19

By 2015, the University of Pretoria was one of three institutions in South Africa to offer a qualification in museum studies—a postgraduate diploma since 1976 and an honours in museum studies since 2004 (UP Archives, MKD timeline). In addition, like many institutions of higher learning, the University of Pretoria has, over its 100-year existence, collected some 80 collections through purchase, donations, bequests, or while carrying out research, teaching and training across a range of academic subjects such as medicine, natural history, archaeology, art, history and cultural history, and architecture to name a few (De Kamper 2018: 4). By 1922, the University's first dedicated museum space showcasing a few artworks and sculptures was opened to the public on the University's main campus, and in 1937, a gallery was opened on the upper floor of the Old Merensky Building, which today houses the UP sculptural collections. By 1999, the University recognised the need to exhibit the Mapungubwe Gold Collection, but the collection was fragile and required conservation. As there was little to no expertise available in the country, the Department of Metals Conservation at the British Museum in London was tasked with stabilising and restoring Mapungubwe's crown jewels, namely the gold sceptre, bowl and rhino figurine, to allow them to

be placed safely on exhibit to the public (McGinn & Tiley-Nel 2018: 8).

By 2004, a dedicated conservation space was created in the Old Arts Building to address the dire need for preventive and remedial conservation of the University collections (Barrier 2008: 18), and four years later, Isabelle McGinn, a specialist in ceramics conservation, became the University of Pretoria Museums' first in-house conservator. From that point, conservation became a full-time activity at the museums; workshops were held, and preventive conservation was integrated into the museum studies programmes at the University. In addition, the University had been considering establishing an additional art centre as a public-private partnership. Discussions surrounding the funding and building of this new art centre, which was to become the Javett-UP Art Centre, led members of the University executive committee to tour a number of institutions in the United States, facilitated by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

20 The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is at the origin of numerous endeavours to develop, advance, and transform heritage conservation worldwide (McGinn 2021: 181). These institutions highlighted the strategic value and importance of having in-house facilities to manage, maintain and conserve collections, and the University, in turn, saw the potential to create a unique centre of excellence, as no academic conservation training was available in South Africa (McGinn 2021: 182). In general, heritage conservation is globally dedicated to ensuring the ongoing survival of cultural objects and traditions—whether these objects are classified as fine art, functional objects, oral traditions or literature within the contexts of art, antiquity, archaeology, the built environment, the land and the marine environment. All of these objects and contexts inform our local and global diversity, which are entangled to make us human (Reddy in Panyane Sa). Thus, all the support structures for a proposal that the University implement teaching and training in conservation were already in place (McGinn 2021: 179).

In 2015, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation initiated a brief survey questionnaire, which resulted in the institution of an art conservation workshop. The questionnaire was aimed at 'South African national, regional, private and public institutions involved in heritage education, curation and conservation.

Respondents included curators, conservators, administrators and academics from 16 institutions' (McGinn 2017: 35–36). After responses from the questionnaire were reviewed, it was found that a workshop at UP would be required to further investigate four key issues: 'Is there a need and potential for university-based training in conservation in South Africa? What components should such

a programme have and what competencies would it foster? Who could plan, launch, test and develop such a programme? And finally, should alternatives to a formal academic programme be considered in the meantime, or in addition to formal academic training?’ (Westermann in McGinn 2017: 36).

Isabelle McGinn (2017: 36), lecturer and conservator in Tangible Heritage Conservation, noted that after the workshop, there was

an agreement that the provision of postgraduate training and education for conservators by universities and related partner institutions could constitute one of the key mechanisms to promote the conservation of cultural heritage. It was decided that South Africa could benefit from the development of a master’s degree programme in the theory and practice of conservation. The envisioned academic programme would serve to build the research capacity of a new generation of conservators and applied research on materials research, collections-based research, and documentation of such ongoing research; thereby contributing toward diversifying the demographics in the current conservation profession.

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After the survey questionnaire and successful art conservation workshop, UP received a multi-disciplinary grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to develop and plan the Tangible Heritage Conservation curriculum. Thus, between 2015 and the inaugural year 2019, McGinn and UP initiated a diverse and representative series of conversations and consultations with stakeholders in the South African heritage sector (McGinn 2017: 36). The outcomes of these collaborations echoed the difficulties observed during the art conservation workshop, which included: ‘diminishing subsidies, freezing of posts, ageing infrastructure, overcrowding of repositories, a lack of dedicated budgets for conservation, a misunderstanding of the role and purpose of conservation, scant expertise and research, a non-existent publication record on local content, conservation practitioners close to retirement, poor succession planning, and a lack of local training opportunities’ (McGinn 2017: 37).

Some of these issues are briefly addressed in local short courses, workshops (which are generally centred around a single material type, such as paper or

books), and postgraduate diplomas—these usually include short and inadequate introductions to conservation principles and considerations. However, they do not aid continuous professional development or teach conservation advocating skills to create awareness of the little-known field of heritage conservation in South Africa (McGinn 2017: 38).

Thus, Tangible Heritage Conservation was aimed at addressing the following issues recognised by McGinn and UP:

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The current state of conservation in South Africa can thus be ascribed to a general misunderstanding at management level that collections form the core of a museum's *raison d'être*, and that preserving the collections ensures the survival of the museum and minimises the need for future costly restoration on the one hand, and on the other hand to limited skills and expertise in conservation. These challenges can be attributed to insufficient exposure to preventive conservation as part of general museological training, a lack of professionally trained conservators in the sector, and no academic qualifications in the field of conservation. What is required then, in both instances, are academically trained professionals, interventive conservators, conservation managers and collection managers who can advocate for heritage preservation and conservation.

The identified issues would be addressed by training and educating graduates to fill leading roles as professional conservators, conservation managers, conservation scientists, and collections care managers in the sub-Saharan museum and heritage management environment. The specialist skills acquired from a master's degree in Tangible Heritage Conservation would allow graduates to 'identify risks to collections, stabilise a variety of materials and attend to remedial treatments' (McGinn 2017: 41). The programme curriculum equips students with analytical skills such as materials analysis, understanding degradation processes of heritage 'objects' and materials, and understanding how to mitigate these risks through preventive conservation.

Although the name of the programme, Tangible Heritage Conservation, refers to cultural objects that are concrete and tactile, it is impossible to disentangle

these objects from the intangible heritage to which they are linked. The intangible is felt, experienced, remembered, heard or lived. McGinn (2017: 39) notes that 'cultural heritage resources are a material link between past, present and future, and are central to the shaping of identity, the exploration of accepted and counter-narratives, and they find a use in the pedagogic sphere and transmission of knowledge, ideas, thereby shaping and aiding in the transformation of South African society.'

Now, more than ever, it is imperative to preserve and safeguard Africa's rich and diverse cultural heritage as this heritage is constantly threatened by detrimental factors such as urbanisation, vandalism, poor handling practices, accidental damage, neglect, climatic influences, and natural ageing processes. The survival of this heritage depends on the availability of educated and trained conservation professionals. The programme builds the requisite skills and expertise to protect, restore, repair, conserve and preserve this heritage, to build conservation capacity in our museums, libraries, archives, and other cultural entities, and to contribute to building and protecting our heritage, no matter how contested it might be (Reddy in Panyane Sa). The programme equips prospective students with specialised knowledge and skills in the arts, sciences and cognate fields, including analytical skills such as materials analysis, understanding degradation processes of heritage 'objects' and materials, and understanding how to mitigate these risks through preventive conservation. In addition, students learn basic concepts in interventive treatment to stabilise the structure, reintegrate the appearance of deteriorated cultural material and adapt to environmental conditions to prolong their life. The overall aim of the programme is to equip students with sufficient knowledge and understanding to take up leading roles and advocate for the importance of heritage preservation in South Africa and the continent (McGinn in Panyane Sa).

In this publication, the first three years of the master's programme in Tangible Heritage Conservation are explored through three annual reports (initially compiled by Maggi Loubser, course coordinator and senior lecturer appointed in 2019), student perspectives, curriculum layouts, student assignments, and photographic visuals. This unconventional format was chosen to highlight the experiences of individuals. The second chapter is the first three years' update reports that include various aspects of each year's start, progress, difficulties, successes and tidbits. These reports were written by Maggi Loubser to Professors

Johnson, Reddy and Duncan. They represent insight from Loubser, who constantly and meticulously fought for this programme's place at UP.

Chapter Three is devoted to two student perspectives written by Laura Esser and Daniele Knoetze, from the 2020 intake, who were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their first year's perspective discusses their experiences in each module. Chapter Four is a breakdown of the various modules and how they are assessed during the two years of study. The module content, outcomes and purpose are from the THC study guide written with care by McGinn and handed out to each student at the start of the degree. Chapter Five is the contents of discovery kits that were meticulously compiled by McGinn and Loubser for the 2020 students when COVID-19 level 5 lockdown was implemented in South Africa. Students had to complete various at-home assignments based on the different material types and identification equipment in their respective kits. The discovery kits were a huge success and were again distributed for the 2021 and 2022 intakes of students. They are now a core aspect of the THC 804 module.

24 Chapter Six is a list of previous students' dissertation titles and abstracts. It also includes 2022 students' titles, but at the time of writing this book, their research was not yet complete, so their abstracts are not included. The dissertations of graduates are available at the UP Repository on the University's library website. Chapter Seven is a compilation of former students' assignments. The assignments were included as they were submitted in order to show the diverse types and formats of assignments. Students truly have the opportunity to express their thoughts and understandings through multiple formats of assignments. The conclusion, Chapter Eight, is a short summary of the content and brings together individuals' experiences as understood throughout the book.

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