Chapter Three

First Years' Perspectives

Laura Esser and Daniéle Knoetze

Introduction

Intangible values that we ascribe to heritage cannot be dissociated from the material. As a result, a shift in conservation theory and practice took place over the last few decades—from the conservation of materiality to the conservation of value and belief systems. This is our perspective of the first year of attending Tangible Heritage Conservation during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Van Wouw House

Figure 3.1: The front exterior of the Van Wouw House (photograph by Daniele Knoetze).

Van Wouw House is located off-campus in a residential area in Brooklyn, Pretoria. It is a Norman Eaton-designed house that was home to the sculptor Anton van Wouw (1862–1945). The entire house is used for the THC programme and includes a large laboratory with natural light, a lecture room, a second-year students' studio, an imaging lab, a kitchen and Loubser and McGinn's offices. The house was donated to the University of Pretoria by Anton Rupert in 1974, and declared a national heritage building in 1989. Our favourite spots are the veranda and the garden!

Figure 3.2: The 2020 intake of students (photography by Henry Nakale)

The team

Henry Nakale, from Namibia
Mampopi Namane, from Lesotho
Mabokang Mokotjo, from Lesotho
Laura Esser, from Germany
Daniéle Knoetze, from South Africa

THC 801: Introduction

This module focuses on the importance of understanding the use of cultural heritage and the value ascribed to it. The ways in which values and uses of heritage change and fluctuate from culture to culture become clear. Understanding this makes the idea of universality problematic within the field of conservation. Reading materials, lectures and videos are given to the students to grant them the knowledge they need to engage with collections and communities and to teach them how to safeguard cultural heritage. With this platform, the roles and responsibilities of custodians, conservators and curators in the conservation decision-making process become clear. With a focus on the ethical issues related to conservation, we as students develop an understanding that conservation is not an easy, straightforward task but rather a complex duty that must be respected as such. Finally, students started examining conservation and the care of cultural elements. This included investigating traditional methods of maintenance and the repair of cultural heritage materials, while constantly being aware of the elements' context before and after interventions.

THC 802: Chemistry

THC 802 covers the basics of chemistry, focusing on organic chemistry. It may sound scary at first, seeing as most of us had not done chemistry since grade 9, but it ended up being a lot of fun! The approach to the module is very practical, as you can see in the pictures. We worked with models and colours, and nobody got left behind when something was not understood. Even though we covered most of this module in online classes during the lockdown, everybody managed.

Figure 3.3: Maggi Loubser presenting THC 802 (photograph by Henry Nakale)

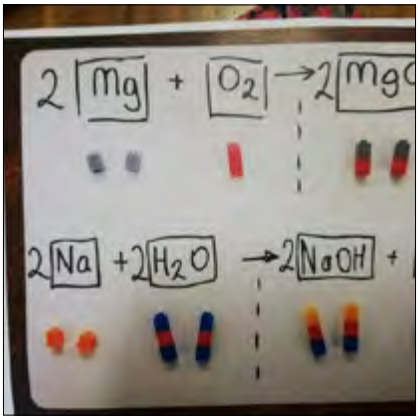

Figure 3.4: Maggi Loubser visualising redox reactions in THC 802 (photograph by Laura Esser)

THC 803: Analytical methods

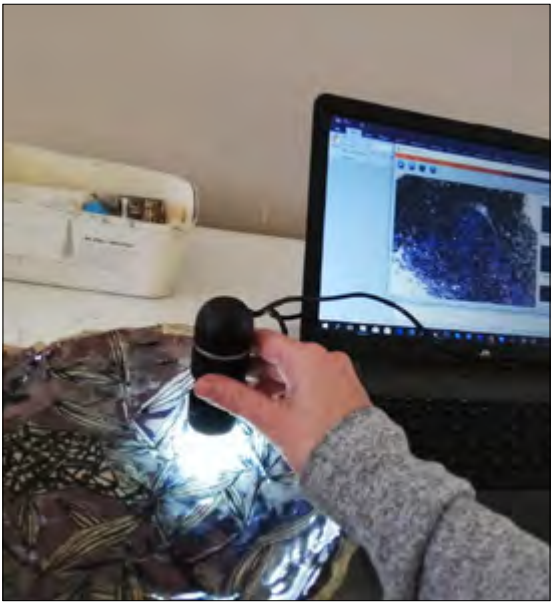

Figure 3.5: Daniéle Knoetze looking at a ceramic object with a USB microscope (photograph by Laura Esser)

This module was presented by Aniko Bezur and Loubser. It covered techniques for analysing materials by identifying elements and atoms, as well as providing a closer look at the surface of an object and what is underneath it. The main topics included microscopy, technical photography, chromatography and spectroscopy. We learned about invasive and non-invasive techniques and how they can be applied to museum objects and artworks. This module was enjoyed by all of us as it opened our eyes to the science behind working as a conservator and what techniques can be used to identify pigments, varnish or adhesive, among many other things. At the end of the module, we had a big assignment in which we categorised the techniques we learned so that we would be able to find appropriate techniques for our future research and work. Generally, all assignments given in this programme serve as future reference guides.

THC 804: Materials

Figure 3.6: Tools and materials from our discovery kits (photograph by Daniéle Knoetze).

Figure 3.7: Daniéle Knoetze, Mampopi Namane and Henry Nakale working on heritage objects during THC 804 (Photographs by Isabelle McGinn)

This module entailed taking what we had learned so far into the 'lab'. Due to COVID-19, we could not go to the laboratory, but Isabelle McGinn put together a toolkit with all the necessary equipment and materials we needed to continue with our practical work online. With her guidance, we could start exploring and practising on objects covered in THC 804 (stone, glass, ceramics, metals, organics, books, paper and photography). In every practical assignment, we had to keep track of what we were doing through photos. Not only did we

learn what an object (for example, a ceramic vessel) is made of, but also of the chemical processes behind it, preventive care, treatment, damage identification, documentation and labelling. This module involves a lot of practical work, including treating commissions, museum objects and objects we brought from home.

Figure 3.8: Top left Laura Esser cleaned a granite rock (photograph by Daniéle Knoetze); bottom left is broken glass shards from a cup (photograph by Laura Esser); and, right is organic and photographic materials (photograph by Laura Esser).

Figure 3.9: Left, Laura Esser filled a crack in a ceramic cup (photograph by Daniéle Knoetze); right, Laura Esser worked on a Thembi Nala Uphiso (photograph by Daniéle Knoetze)

In THC 804, materials including ceramics, glass, stone, organic materials, paper, books and photographs are discussed. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, we have not yet had the opportunity to discuss plastic and textiles. Most of the lectures given in this module had to be presented online. To be able to practise at home, each student received a toolbox with basic conservation equipment and tools, as well as materials relevant to each topic covered in this module. All previous modules were considered and included in THC 804 and played an important role in understanding the materials and conservation processes. Parts of the module were presented by Nancy Child (organic material and metals) and Anupam Sah (stone), which gave us the opportunity to connect with conservators from all over the world.

Figure 3.10: Left, Mabokang Mokotjo, Laura Esser and Mampopi Namane made storage containers for ceramic coasters (photograph by Daniéle Knoetze); right, ceramic shards used to practice labelling, damage identification and microscopy (photograph by Isabelle McGinn)

Figure 3.11: Left, ceramics included in the discovery kits (photograph by Laura Esser); middle, broken ceramic bowl during treatment (photograph by Daniéle Knoetze); right, ceramic bowl before treatment due to yellow and brittle adhesive (photograph by Daniéle Knoetze).

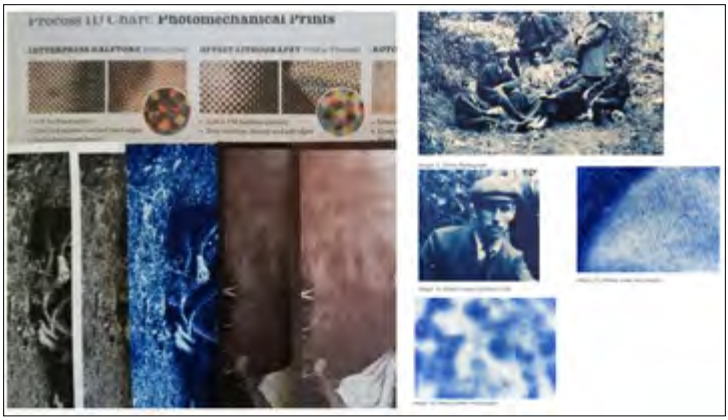

Figure 3.12: Examples of different photographic processes (photograph by Laura Esser)

Figure 3.13: Left, an excerpt from paper-making assignment as examples of how different mediums write on self-made paper (screenshot by Daniéle Knoetze); middle, Mabokang Mokotjo prepared drawings, paintings and prints for her archival fascicule (photograph by Isabelle McGinn); right, Torn and self-made paper with writing in different medium (photograph by Laura Esser)

Figure 3.14: Left, archival fascicule in the making (photograph by Laura Esser); middle, documents and photographs for a group project - Laura Esser's personal family archive was made into a fascicule (photograph by Laura Esser); right, prints and paintings for the individual fascicules of each students to be used as reference material (photograph by Isabelle McGinn).

Conclusion

To conclude, what we as future conservators have learned this year is to understand how objects and artefacts are embedded within social, cultural, religious and political attributes. They are not innocent; they do not stand alone, but rather carry the weight of the societies that created them. They carry meaning, stories, memories and histories. This knowledge helps with conveying the artist and the community's identity to a larger audience. These artefacts and the art that fills our lives are embedded within these histories and must be investigated and respected. Careful consideration of whose history is being preserved and

the way in which cultural heritage is being conserved is crucial and should be constantly challenged and questioned.

This year has been challenging to say the least. Despite this, our online classes have become our safe space and something we all looked forward to. It made the world feel a little less crazy. We have met so many amazing people despite the lockdown. These connections will forever influence us as young conservators.