

## Chapter eight

### Conclusion

#### **Maggi Loubser and Salomé le Roux**

The master's programme in Tangible Heritage Conservation was born from necessity, but also from passion. Isabelle McGinn said that

Prior to the start of the development grant in 2016, I had been appointed as the University of Pretoria's first in-house museum conservator. Although I had some colleagues who were quite knowledgeable about collections care and the importance of both preventive and remedial conservation, I generally worked in isolation. There are so few practitioners in South Africa and no professional body or networking possibilities for conservator-restorers, and I found this to be enormously challenging as a novice restorer entering the field, particularly when faced with complex treatment options there is limited opportunity for consultation and thinking through problem-solving. It was this sense of isolation and curiosity to know if there were others 'out there' who had the same questions and faced similar challenges.

295

The reality was that South African heritage resources were neglected, underfunded, mismanaged and unpreserved. The lack of a conservation community and general awareness of conservation led to conservation being put on the back burner in many local and southern African repositories of cultural heritage. Even though the programme began from necessity, it also became the culmination of many individuals' passions and dreams. McGinn inherited the development of the programme in 2016 and made it her goal to bring to fruition a degree that not only taught conservation but also ethical and philosophical aspects of caring for cultural heritage.

McGinn further stated that

The negotiations with various stakeholders came at a time when South Africa was experiencing an extensive and disruptive period of student protests, and although these were focused on the issue of fees and access to higher education, the protests also focussed on calls for decolonisation and curriculum transformation. Both 'decolonisation' and 'transformation' are particularly relevant to heritage, but specifically, when it comes to heritage preservation, as what is preserved is what is seen to be valued. Who selects what is significant and according to whose criteria allows some voices and narratives to dominate whilst others are silenced. The calls for decolonisation and transformation bolstered further calls for decolonisation and repatriation of cultural material to their originator communities.

296

Tangible Heritage Conservation is one starting point for ensuring the repatriation of cultural heritage to its people of origin. With the creation of centres of excellence across southern Africa by graduates of the programme, conservators of cultural heritage will understand conservation approaches in both a global and local context. Repatriation has been a consistent theme throughout international museology discussions, and with that came the counter-argument that Africa does not have the resources to care for its own heritage. THC stakeholders beg to differ, but we do know there is a dearth of trained conservation professionals, as in Africa, most people working in conservation enter the profession through various different pathways, often without the broader insight that an academic programme offers. Our initial reach is limited, and UP's THC programme will take many years to even start addressing this gap, but initiating the centres of excellence is a major vision of the programme. These centres can, under THC's guidance, provide training on the different levels necessary to accelerate the development of conservation as a profession across the continent. The programme already has graduates from Namibia and Lesotho who are employed in the museum industry and a Zimbabwean PhD student (whom Loubser is co-supervising), who is a lecturer in museum studies at Midlands University. Another Namibian student, who started her degree in 2022, spent two weeks at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin at the beginning of March 2022 as part of a capacity-building workshop on the conservation and preparation of artefacts that were repatriated

to Namibia. She will facilitate a workshop on preventive conservation with a group of museum employees from regional museums in Namibia on her return. This is the kind of model we would like to develop.

Closely related is the employability of the graduates in a challenging economic climate where the heritage sector is very low on national priority lists. Of the first three graduates, one is employed with us as a part-time lecturer (and editor of this book), one is employed with the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney, Australia, and one is furthering her studies with a PhD. Of the second set of graduates, one is about to start a career at Brenthurst Library, one is appointed at UCT to be part of the conservation team (after THC's involvement in the salvaging operation as described in the annual reports), the Lesotho graduate is still employed by the Department of Culture in Lesotho, and the Namibian graduate is employed by Windhoek City Museum.

This publication has brought together multiple voices to reflect on certain aspects of the first three years of the programme. In Chapter Two, the story of the first three years was told from the perspective of Maggi Loubser, course coordinator and senior lecturer. She discussed the students, their progress, and their strengths. Loubser also reflected on the challenges and successes of each year—2019 to 2021. It is evident from Chapter Two that she is strongly invested in the future of the programme and that she has continuously fought for the survival of THC during and towards the end of the period of the Andrew W Mellon grant. From Loubser's three annual reports, it is evident that the programme has grown from strength to strength and that each graduate from the programme has a bright future while always having a home at THC.

Chapter Three gave a glimpse into the marvellous first-year coursework of the THC programme. Although it represents the perspectives of two students who had to survive the rigorous first year during a global pandemic, the chapter reveals their enjoyment of the programme. The first year's five modules—THC 801, THC 802, THC 803, THC 804 and a speciality module—keep the students very busy, but each individual grows in their knowledge and perseverance. Chapter Four provides the description and layout of each of these modules, as well as the internship and the mini-dissertation. The chapter looks at each module's purpose, outcomes, content and articulation with other modules. It ends with an example of a first-year assessment breakdown.

Chapter Five describes the innovative solution devised for one of the modules, THC 804, to keep students on track during level 5 COVID-19 lockdown

in South Africa. Loubser and McGinn carefully put discovery kits together to prevent students from becoming stagnant and enable them to continue their hybrid learning. These kits were a massive success and were distributed again in 2021 and 2022. Chapter Six explores the fruits of year two. Each graduate's thesis title and abstract is included, along with the class of 2022's proposed dissertation titles. From these sections, it is easy to discern the variety of outputs the THC students have investigated and achieved. The future of THC graduates is rooted in their research skills developed during their numerous assignments, tasks, quizzes and reports written during the first year—as seen in some of the examples included in Chapter Seven. The assignments chosen for this book show the diversity of thought encouraged in THC. Because THC is the first course of its kind in southern Africa, the conservation community needs creative thinking and problem-solving to address issues and situations that are unique to our continent.

298

In three years, the programme has ingrained itself successfully in the local and international conservation community, firstly through community involvement projects as described in the annual reports, but also through contributions to international conferences, including hosting the Global Consortium for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage. Participation in international forums included Maggi Loubser's role as an international advisory member of the Netherlands Institute for Art Conservation and Science Mellon project and active membership of the Academic Conservation Education Sharing Site (AcCESS) and Conservation Science Education Online (CSEO), where she was one of the invited speakers at their inaugural conference. The Yale IPCH collaboration is continuing, and a formal Memorandum of Understanding is currently in place for the next five years. A similar local MOU exists with Javett-UP, another is currently being drawn up with Iziko Museums, and a third is being renewed with Ditsong Museums.

At this point in time, the programme is only a drop in the bucket of cultural heritage conservation in Africa, but the aim remains to change the context of African conservation.