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**'ETHCON' – TEACHING  
ETHICS IN CONSERVATION  
OF ETHNOGRAPHIC  
OBJECTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

When students of conservation make their first contact with ethnographic collections they are confronted with a large diversity of objects and materials of maybe unknown function or spiritual context. They may face a set of questions on various ethical aspects that are nearly impossible solvable without collaboration with the respective experts. The framework of a European interdisciplinary seminar was chosen in order to use the cultural and professional differences amongst the participants as a resource for learning from each other. This paper presents this multinational project called EthCon (Ethics and Ethnographic Objects Conservation) jointly organized by three universities teaching conservation together with ethnographic museums and funded by the European ERASMUS Programme. The execution of three seminars and the results that were achieved, opening student's minds, exercising interdisciplinary and international cooperation, as well as the method of group working and the applied conservation methodologies are described.

**RÉSUMÉ**

Lorsque les étudiants en conservation entrent en contact pour la première fois avec des collections ethnographiques, ils sont confrontés à une grande variété d'objets et de matériaux, dont la fonction ou le contexte spirituel sont parfois inconnus. Ils peuvent se trouver face à un ensemble de questions portant sur divers aspects ethniques pratiquement insolubles à défaut d'une collaboration avec les spécialistes respectifs. Le format d'un séminaire européen interdisciplinaire a été choisi afin de valoriser les différences culturelles et professionnelles entre les participants pour en faire une ressource d'apprentissage mutuelle.

**INTRODUCTION****Educational challenge**

When students in conservation make their first contact with ethnographic collections, they are confronted with a large diversity of objects, made out of a lot of different materials: substances that are in many cases badly known, easily degradable and often formed in elaborate constructions. An even higher grade of complexity results from combining the viewpoint of material science with the cultural context from which the object originates: what was the original meaning or use of the object? What was the original appearance, the colour? What is meant by authenticity with regards to the object and its context? What is the objects' cultural significance today compared to its original meaning and who decides it? How should one detect the possible religious and mystical meanings of objects? And finally: how should one respect and maintain meanings and authenticity during storage, display and how to establish goals for possible conservation treatment? Insular or solitary answers to this set of questions can be provided by all professions involved in museum work, but an understanding of the ethical aspects incorporated and a common language is needed for the decision-making process and for defining goals for preservation. The important qualities of the object to be preserved have to be defined together by all of the stakeholders.

Ethical concepts like 'minimal intervention', 'reversibility', 'conservation prioritizes restoration' as well as analysis and examination have been fundamentals of conservation since before the first international ethical code for conservators.<sup>1</sup> But since then the conservation field has undergone some changes, one of the changes being the growing legitimate influence of indigenous peoples on decisions concerning the treatment and handling of objects originating from their cultures. According to Clavir (2009, 147) broadening the conservation world, to include reflection on social and cultural concepts, enables conservators to better discuss and participate in decision making on what is the cultural significance of museum objects.

To meet this educational challenge in teaching diversity of object types and material, as well as the wide range of ethical aspects the three partners of this project, University for Applied Sciences and Arts Hildesheim (HAWK, Germany), Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences (Metropolia,

Cet article présente ce projet multinational intitulé EthCon (Déontologie et conservation des objets ethnographiques) et financé par le programme européen ERASMUS. Il est organisé conjointement par trois universités proposant un cursus en conservation, auxquelles se sont associés des musées ethnographiques. Le déroulement de trois séminaires et les résultats obtenus, soit l'ouverture d'esprit acquise par les étudiants, qui ont pu pratiquer la coopération interdisciplinaire et internationale, ainsi que la méthode de travail en groupe et les méthodologies de conservation appliquées sont décrits.

## RESUMEN

Cuando los estudiantes de conservación tienen su primer contacto con las colecciones etnográficas, se enfrentan a una gran diversidad de objetos y materiales, cuyas funciones o contextos espirituales pueden ser desconocidos. Es posible que se enfrenten a una serie de preguntas sobre varios aspectos éticos, que son prácticamente imposibles de solucionar sin la colaboración de los expertos correspondientes. Se eligió el marco de un seminario interdisciplinario europeo para, a partir de las diferencias culturales y profesionales entre los participantes, aprender los unos de los otros. Este artículo presenta el proyecto multinacional llamado EthCon (en inglés, Ética y Conservación de Objetos Etnográficos), organizado conjuntamente por tres universidades que imparten clases de conservación y museos etnográficos, un proyecto financiado por el Programa europeo ERASMUS. Se describe la impartición de tres seminarios y los resultados alcanzados para que los estudiantes desarrollen una mentalidad abierta y una cooperación interdisciplinaria e internacional, así como el método de trabajo en grupo y las metodologías de conservación aplicados.

Finland) and the University of Amsterdam (UvA, The Netherlands), pooled their efforts in teaching the conservation of ethnographic objects. The idea was to underline reflection on different social and cultural concepts and to work closely with other disciplines by bringing their points of view into the discussion.

The following pages describe the organisation, subject matters and results of the 'EthCon – Ethics and Ethnographic Objects Conservation' project.

## PROJECT LAYOUT

The EthCon project is funded for three years by the European ERASMUS Programme as a so-called 'Intensive Programme (IP)', available to universities that have signed the ERASMUS–Charta. An IP aims to:

- 'encourage efficient and multinational teaching of specialist topics which might otherwise not be taught at all, or only in a very restricted number of higher education institutions
- enable students and teachers to work together in multinational groups and so benefit from special learning and teaching conditions not available in a single institution, and to gain new perspectives on the topic being studied
- allow members of the teaching staff to exchange views on teaching content and new curricula approaches and to test teaching methods in an international classroom environment'.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore the framework of a European seminar seemed to fit our goals perfectly by using the cultural and professional differences as a resource for learning from each other. As ethics are a reflection of cultural identity, each nationality may have a different point of view on ethnographic objects due to its (colonial or non-colonial) history and traditions. At the same time we wanted to work in an interdisciplinary fashion together, with all kinds of (museum) specialists working with ethnographic objects in various ways: e.g. anthropologists, curators, collection managers, exhibition designers and natural scientists. Focus was placed on the ethical approach of heritage professionals to objects and entire collections, in order to try to develop an interdisciplinary methodology for the preservation of ethnographic objects including handling and preventive conservation during display, storage and possible travels. Furthermore, it was also planned to deal with some subjects generally affecting ethics, such as material analyses (invasive/non-invasive), risk assessment, the illicit traffic of cultural goods, pesticides and health hazards.

Intensive Programmes (IPs) are funded yearly for a period of not more than three years. Consequently, it was decided to undertake the IPs at the home of each institution and to use different local partners for each IP: the first year in Amsterdam, the second year in Hildesheim and the third year in Helsinki. Major museums agreed to co-operate in the project offering locations, expertise and objects from their collections for the case studies.

In the first year, the Tropenmuseum (Amsterdam), the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities and the National Museum of Ethnology in the Netherlands (both Leiden) were the partners. In 2009, in Germany, the Roemer-und Pelizaeus-Museum in Hildesheim and the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Göttingen, with its famous Cook/Forster collection, were the project hosts. In 2010 we worked together with the Museum of Cultures (Helsinki) and the Helinä Rautavaara Museum (Espoo).

Ten working days is the minimum length of an IP; including weekend and travel days the total is 14 days. This duration of the IPs fitted best into the curricula of the three participating universities. It is worth mentioning that an IP has to be fully recognized by the participating Universities and students should gain ECTS credits when participating in them. In order to support a maximum number of students, the ERASMUS Programme does not allow students to take part twice in the same IP. Therefore each year we had a new group of about 25 students, varying between 6–10 students from each country. A maximum ratio of 1:5, teachers to students, is fixed in the regulations and proved to be quite reasonable.

According to our experiences, it is very important that the partners plan the IP together and are fully participating in all phases of the IP. Each IP project needs a coordinator who hands in the IP funding application to the national ERASMUS Agency in his/her country. The daily programme was worked out each year by the host university together with the respective national partners. Preparatory meetings were held occasionally amongst the universities to talk to the participating museums to determine together the available resources and to select the objects for case studies.

An information and communication portal called 'EthCon-Forum'<sup>3</sup> has been set up, thus enabling students as well as teachers (and specialists) to prepare themselves for the subject and to communicate amongst each other. Readings, relevant information from the museum partners and internet links were selected by the teachers and provided in the forum to ensure that the group would have the same level of knowledge on some topics and could use the same vocabulary in the discussions (the working language throughout the project was English). After each seminar, common information like working group presentations, learning diaries and photos were put on the EthCon website.

## **TEACHING METHODS**

In the seminars, a mixed set of teaching methods was applied: lectures from teachers and museum specialists, group working on case studies including student presentations of results, visits to exhibitions and storage rooms. Discussions to question and to reflect on the heard subjects were very important. This is something we do in our everyday teaching. What was new for us was the learning method of 'Communities of Inquiry'. The strength of the method lies in the merging of the knowledge of all of the participants. It was strongly stressed that every participant should reflect his/her role in the group, not to mention trying to listen and learn

something from every member of the group. What is new about this 'working together' is the systematic way in which all available knowledge is used to create a new comprehension of the subject. It is also based on the belief that everyone can input something and is a valuable member of the group. The teachers' role varied from being pretty much involved like in the first year, standing outside as observers (the second IP) and being a mentor for the group in the last IP. According to our opinion the last was most successful.

### **SUBJECT MATTER OF THE SEMINARS**

The range of ethical questions relating to the conservation of ethnographic objects is wide, so they had to be narrowed down to an amount that could be 'worked' on within the two weeks of the seminar. This was discussed with the museum partners and decisions about the topics were made together. The subjects were chosen on the basis of the collections, collection history and knowledge available at the institutions, also taking into consideration any special national points of view due to the differing colonial or non-colonial history of the host country. Each year the focus differed a little bit from the previous years, depending on the partners and our own evaluation. The evaluation was done in many phases and the results used in developing and planning the next years IP. Nevertheless, the emphasis was always placed on a similar set of aspects: human remains, spiritual meaning(s), changing context ('original' and nowadays) and authenticity.

We intended to have several lectures by ethnologists/anthropologists on the basis of their profession, on their approach to the cultures, the objects and the collection as a whole, to historic collecting and today's policies. This included also the exhibition, storage (care and handling) and the loaning policies of objects. The case studies were scheduled (when possible) after this introductory information and some visits to exhibitions. Students' presentation of the group working results and the final discussions rounded off the two weeks.

In the first year, when the IP was undertaken in Amsterdam and Leiden, a regional focus was laid on the former Dutch colonies in the South Seas (Indonesia and Papua-New Guinea). The lectures also dealt with the collection policy and today's fieldwork. It was very interesting to hear how and what kind of objects museums are collecting today. In the case studies students worked with a Papuan ancestor skull and a sacred witch doctors herbal container, a (tourist) boat model reflecting upon exhibiting human remains, spiritual aspects, authenticity and the objects context. The overseas loan of an unstable, brittle mummy and a model of Indian funeral architecture model were also considered and discussed using the same criteria. The students were asked to work out a short examination of the condition and materials, to consult and discuss with the museum specialists and to try to collect available information around the object. At the National Museum of Antiquities (Leiden) a special exhibition called 'Forbidden collections' was running at the time of the IP. This exhibition

was a great opportunity to discuss the themes chosen with very illustrative examples.

The second year, when Hildesheim hosted the seminar, the regional focus was laid on the wider South Sea region, as the participating Roemer- and Pelizaeus-Museum presented objects from Oceania collected in the German colonies. Students this year heard about collection history and collectors, and the ritual and immaterial aspects of objects in Java today. An example of the preservation of immaterial values was presented by Dr. Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin of Goettingen University when she showed the regular physical maintenance of objects as part of a ritual in Bali. To approach the methodology question lectures were prepared on conservation theory, methodological aspects on decision making and the conservators approach according to Barbara Appelbaum (Appelbaum 2007), Alois Riegl's Denkmalswerte (von der Goltz 2010), and the SMBK Decision Making Model (SMBK 1999). For the group working case study, objects from Oceania were available to be briefly examined, and then students collected information on the objects and the context, having the chance to interview an expert for the region and reflected and discussed the possible issues outlined earlier.

No regional focus was laid in the third year, though case study objects came mainly from Africa and Haiti. The scope of the lecture included the history of the museum partners' collections, the collectors, exhibiting a private collection, display of human remains, spiritual aspects in Voodoo cult and the ethnology of the Finno-Ugrian culture. That year, the collector's influence on the building of a collection and the alteration of objects by the collector were major topics, especially at the Helinä Rautavaara Museum. This collection was assembled by one person and each object is linked to the person who collected it. The resulting unusual museum approach was found to be very interesting. The questions of authenticity, meaning and use that were evaluated in this context provided a lot of input to discussions.

Each year there were also lectures about topics which came up during the preparatory phase or during the running of the IPs. In the first year this focused on risk management, especially regarding light damage at the Volkenkunde Museum; in the second year we heard about looting and illicit trafficking of cultural goods; in the last year the subject was pesticides in ethnographic collections.

## **RESULTS**

### **Overall view**

After running the three seminars and two evaluation meetings overall the programme met most of our goals, although some could not be achieved. The most important goal set was to open students' minds to ethnographic objects from outside Europe, as the majority of students stated in the evaluation forms. They faced reality in sometimes missing dating and/



or other context information like place and culture of origin or meaning. Bringing together anthropologists and other museum professionals with the conservation students to discuss together real objects has been very fruitful for all parties involved. Most specialists were grateful to get the chance to have a closer look at the materials and the physical aspects of the objects. At the same time the students trained their 'soft skills': interdisciplinary collaboration, intercultural competences and, last but not least, their English language skills. These 'side-effects' are important issues in EC funding. The networking resulted in several student internships in partner museums, even abroad.

The results described also applied to the teachers, who likewise profited from the professional networking. Moreover the collaboration of the universities was fostered in a profound way through this project and new projects have been organised together including even additional partners.

### **Detailed view**

Out of the whole set of results, some details deserve mentioning. The social learning was more intensive for the travelling students, who lived together in the same location. Because of the financial limits of the budget, they had to prepare their own meals, which can be a challenge depending on the size of the group. The most intense learning experience was in the first year, when all travelling participants lived on-board a little ship moored in Amsterdam harbour. But intercultural communication skills are not only trained in or aimed at the classroom/workshop.

The 'Community of Inquiry' concept for the group working worked very well, better than expected beforehand. At first sight group working may seem easy and well known, but this changes when one works with others from a different background (be it different by culture or by nation). The schematic concept that was applied helped the groups a lot in finding ways to involve all participants. All students' presentations of the results of the group work were of very high quality, even though the time for preparation was short. This was commented on several times by the students in the evaluation. They complained about lack of time to work on the case studies (and the presentations) or that some of the fellow group members focused too strongly on the technical aspects of the presentation. More time and a presentation template that had been prepared in advance may solve this problem in future seminars.

Starting in the second year, some lectures were introduced on conservation theory and methodologies. The consecutive discussions showed that these subjects are complicated and the fact that all participants used a foreign language (English) did not make discussions easier. More intensive preparation is needed prior to the seminars and different key readings should be chosen. The communication forum set up was intended to provide this preparation, as ERASMUS Programmes are expected to use ICT tools and services to support the preparation and follow-up of the IP. The EthCon Forum was developed further and constantly updated for this

purpose, but was poorly used by the students. Other social media should be tested and used in the future.

We managed to achieve the IP interdisciplinarity by involving external lecturers and museum staff from the partners, but we failed to involve students from other disciplines (ethnology, etc.) due to the different time frames of the different curricula. More pre-planning time is needed, which is a crucial point of the Intensive Programmes.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

With this paper we hope to provide and share information on the running of similar multinational student projects with other institutions teaching conservation. According to our experience, this kind of project appears to suit the teaching of ethics in conservation very well, and not only in the field of ethnographic objects. A holistic view may lead to the respectful handling and interaction of the objects in the care of collections and in exhibitions and achieve suitable and sustainable results in conservation.

We would like to suggest more international student projects on this subject possibly beyond European funding boundaries. This might include partners from the cultures from which the objects originate, as was mentioned in discussion when the authors presented the project at an ERASMUS-Conference organized by the DAAD (National Agency for EU Cooperation in Germany).<sup>4</sup>

Finally, one comment by a students' group should be cited here: 'The two weeks of the seminar were very enriching for the master's students. They could participate in a seminar that provided them with an insight into a field of conservation and restoration that was until then unknown. In addition, the collaboration with students from other countries offered plenty of possibilities for exchange and a wide variety of different points of view, all to be valued very positively.'

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## **NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession, adopted by the ICOM-CC at the 7th Triennial Meeting, 1984, Copenhagen.
- <sup>2</sup> Information on the Erasmus Programme can be found at [http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc900\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc900_en.htm).
- <sup>3</sup> The EthCon-Forum is accessible in parts only for the public at [www.hornemann-institute.de/ethcon](http://www.hornemann-institute.de/ethcon).
- <sup>4</sup> The presentation slides and a project abstract can be viewed online (Brune 2007, Häyhä 2007).

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