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CAMERA ROLLING, SPEED...AND ACTION: EXHIBITING THE CONSERVATION OF BANNERS THROUGH FILM

LEANNE C. TONKIN AND KATE CHATFIELD

ABSTRACT – The Textile Conservation Studio (TCS) based at the People's History Museum in Manchester, United Kingdom has been a centre for the conservation of banners since 1990. A survey undertaken to analyze the effectiveness of the public's access to the TCS through a panoramic viewing window prompted debate amongst the museum's exhibition and conservation teams. In response, a film project was initiated to demonstrate some of the skills and time involved when conserving a banner. This paper will report the collaborative efforts of completing the film project. Specifically, this article presents the outcomes of filming the conservation of the Amalgamated Stevedores Labour Protection League banner ca. 1918; a two-sided, oil painted silk banner designed by George Tutill. This case study introduces the overall aims and objectives of the exhibition manager as well as the challenges faced by the textile conservator in presenting and ensuring that appropriate footage was captured for public understanding. Further outcomes include the relationship between the film producer and the textile conservator and their collaboration during filming. Trust and flexibility involving all parties was essential in order to make the project work and to allow for a successful learning process for all involved.

RESUMEN – El Estudio de Conservación Textil (TCS) ubicado en el Museo Histórico de Manchester, Reino Unido, ha sido un centro de conservación de banderas desde 1990. Una encuesta realizada para analizar la efectividad del acceso del público al TCS a través de una ventana con vista panorámica motivó el debate entre los equipos de exhibición y conservación del museo. Como respuesta, se comenzó a desarrollar un proyecto para demostrar algunas de las habilidades y el tiempo que se necesitan para conservar una bandera. Este documento muestra los esfuerzos colaborativos realizados para llevar a cabo el proyecto de la película. Específicamente, este artículo presenta los resultados de la filmación de la conservación de la bandera de la Liga de Protección Laboral de Estibadores Unidos de 1918; una bandera de seda pintada al óleo de ambos lados diseñada por George Tutill. Este caso de estudio presenta los objetivos generales del encargado de la exhibición, así como los problemas con que se enfrentó el conservador textil al presentar y procurar que se obtengan las imágenes adecuadas para que el público las entienda. También se muestra la relación entre el productor de la película y el conservador textil y su colaboración durante la filmación. La confianza y flexibilidad de todas las partes involucradas fue fundamental para que el proyecto funcione y para que el proceso de aprendizaje sea útil para todos los participantes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The People's History Museum (PHM) documents the history of democracy in Britain and provides an insight into the UK's social, political and economic life over the last two centuries. Over four hundred banners representing unions, political organizations, trade and friendly societies are held within the collections, as well as, a record number of British trade union banners (Lochhead 2011, 77). The Textile Conservation Studio (TCS) is situated within the main gallery area of the museum and is well known for being a center for the conservation of banners and flags.

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Outreach and advocacy are elements encountered everyday at the TCS, which occupies a large area of the upper gallery floor space. A wide panoramic viewing window enables visitors to have an insight into the space and environment required to operate a fully functional conservation studio designed specifically for the treatment of large flat textiles. In early 2011 a survey was conducted into the effectiveness of the window as a tool for introducing textile conservation, specifically, the conservation of banners and flags. Feedback from the survey prompted discussions concerning the interpretation of the conservation of banners amongst the museum's exhibition and conservation teams. The time taken to conserve a banner can be extensive and vary enormously and the survey highlighted that this aspect of banner conservation continues to be an unknown phenomenon within the viewer's experience. This article presents the orchestration of a film project that was initiated as a response to the feedback from the survey. Film was selected as the medium to demonstrate the level of skill and time involved in conserving a banner, as well as providing an opportunity to exhibit textile conservation in general.

2. PLATFORMING BANNER CONSERVATION THROUGH FILM

Ideas regarding the filming of the conservation of a banner from start to finish emerged in early 2005 between Kate Chatfield, exhibitions manager and Vivian Lochhead, senior conservator, during the research into the exhibition *Carrying the Colours: Banners from our Collection* at the People's History Museum (fig. 1).



Figure 1: Promotional flyer for *Carrying the Colours: Banners from our Exhibition*, an exhibition held at the People's History Museum, Manchester, UK, in 2006. Courtesy of People's History Museum, Manchester, UK.

The exhibition took place between January and October in 2006. Funding for the exhibition was awarded through the Designated Challenge Fund (DCF), a UK government funded initiative.¹ A defined area of the exhibition would explore some aspects of the conservation of banners, adding a further dimension to the exhibition while strengthening the importance of preserving these objects on display. Film was considered a potential tool to animate the process of conserving banners, allowing visitors a route into observing conservation in progress. Despite all best intentions, the schedule and time constraints the TCS was working under at the time of these discussions meant there was not an appropriate banner ready to undergo conservation in the time that had been allocated for the exhibition. The filming project was postponed but remained a possibility for future exploration. The exhibition and conservation teams felt additional interpretation regarding conservation should still be incorporated into the exhibition. To accomplish this, interpretative text, an interactive display that allowed visitors to handle conservation materials, a display case exhibiting some of the tools used to conserve banners (fig. 2), and detailed before and after conservation shots were installed. An interactive touch screen program was developed using DigitalView's DV Studio software which featured a section on 'how we care for banners'.



Figure 2: Display case exhibiting some of the tools and above some before and after shots of conserving banners which was installed for the *Carrying the Colours: Banners from our Exhibition* in 2006. Courtesy of People's History Museum, Manchester, UK.

2.1 REVIEWING PUBLIC ACCESS TO THE CONSERVATION OF BANNERS

The PHM closed for major redevelopment in 2007. In 2010 the newly expanded museum re-opened and visitors now have the opportunity to witness the process of conserving textiles in the TCS through a panoramic window (fig. 3). The window is easily accessible from the main upper gallery floor and the height of the window was specified to allow access for wheelchair users and children. Additional interactive material situated along the bottom of the window further explains how various agents can cause damage to historic textiles. Further interpretation explains that conserving large painted textiles

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can take time and is an intricate and often difficult process. A simple method of writing on the window with waterproof pens was devised to explain current projects, allowing the information to be easily and quickly updated as projects progress. The writing is combined with photographs of the objects which provide an insight for visitors and museum staff to the various stages of treatments being undertaken (Lochhead and Tonkin 2012).



Figure 3: Panoramic window into the Textile Conservation Studio enabling visitors to view the conservation of banners in progress from the main gallery floor. Courtesy of People's History Museum, Manchester, UK.

Anne Mok Nga Yi, a work placement student from the University of East Anglia, studying for her Master of Arts in Cultural Heritage and Museums Studies, assessed the effectiveness of the viewing window. The survey involved written questionnaires for visitors to complete, as well as discussions to help assess their experience. Overall results indicated visitors liked having access to the conservation studio and watching conservators at work (Mok 2011) (table 1). The survey of 148 visitors revealed 95% of visitors thought conservation was necessary. It also highlighted visitors' fascination with the time it takes to conserve a banner; being able to get close to the process of conservation is another facet of visitor appeal. Despite having access to all this available information, visitors still wanted to know more. Interactive material and additional interpretation on the window was good but often not enough, in particular if conservators were not present in the studio at the time of their visit. Based on this feedback from the survey, ideas began to re-emerge about incorporating a film project to help expand visitors' knowledge of the function of the TCS.

Do you think conservation is necessary?

Yes	141
No	7

What do you expect to see in the viewing area?

Explanation of the conservation procedure the conservator is undertaking	80
Conservators working on banners	85
Information on textile conservation	79
Information about banners currently under conservation	73
Information on conservation in general (paper, textile, metal, photography, etc.)	67
Video showing textile conservation work	52
Others	7

What would you like to learn about conservation in general?

The importance of conservation in relation to an object on display	80
Principles behind conservation work	71
How conservation relates to our everyday life and studies	62
I am not interested	13
Others	6

What would you like to learn about textile conservation?

Conservation procedures	67
Techniques	72
Average cost of conservation a banner	51
Case study of conserving a banner	58
Causes of damages to banners	60
How to care for textiles	60
Amount of time needed to conserve a banner	54
History of textile conservation	48
Ethical issues	43
Apparatus/tools	38
I am not interested	13
Others	4

What would you like to learn about a textile conservator's work?

Interesting aspects	85
Difficulties encountered	74
Considerations and precautions when conserving a banner	51
How to become a conservator	21
I am not interested	8
Others	5

Do the text written on the cover what you would like to know?

Yes	73
No, other responses	17
n/a	39

Have you learned anything concerning textile conservation that you didn't know before?

Yes	59
No	8
n/a	54

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Which aspects concerning the viewing area are you more interested in? Please rank

	Rank as	1	2	3	General
Seeing conservators at work		53	19	7	4
Textual information		16	21	41	9
Interactive materials		15	36	27	9

Is the information provided adequate for you to gain some general knowledge about textile

Yes	109
Too difficult	4
Too easy	13

Is the textual information easy to understand?

Yes	117
Too difficult	5
Too easy	2

Table 1: Results of a public survey conducted over several months at the People's History Museum, Manchester, UK concerning the effects of the Textile Conservation Studio viewing area. 2011.

2.2 FILMING THE CONSERVATION OF BANNERS: REVISITED

The reasons for implementing the film project were reassessed. Discussions were based upon the initial ideas behind the film project considered six years previously during the research towards the *Carrying the Colors: Banners from our Collection* exhibition. The points discussed included:

- Following the conservation of a banner from beginning to end to allow for the public to understand conservation more clearly
- Providing the public with a personal connection by introducing the conservators working on the banners
- Educating the public about the function of a conservation studio and the various types of equipment used during treatments
- Showing an aspect of banner conservation on the museum's website, thus taking the objectives of the TCS beyond the walls of the museum
- Introducing the museum as an institution that provides specialist knowledge on the care and conservation of banners, helping to reinforce a specialist area of textile conservation

Using film as a medium to interpret the conservation of banners was considered a good method of transferring a lot of information across to the visitor without adding to the amount of text in the galleries. This would make the most of the gallery space designated to the TCS viewing window. Therefore, it was decided to produce a series of short films that would present the information in an engaging way and be easily digestible.

3. AMALGAMATED STEVEDORES LABOUR PROTECTION LEAGUE BANNER: THE CASE STUDY

In early 2011 conservation work was about to commence on a banner known as the Amalgamated Stevedores Labour Protection League banner ca.1918 (fig. 4). The banner is silk and single layered with oil painted images on both sides. The design is typical of George Tutill, a famous 19th century banner-

maker who was based in the UK (Gorman 1986, 57-65). One side of the banner displays the names of stevedores who lost their lives during the First World War (1914-1918)² as shown in figure 4. The banner was therefore included in the exhibition schedule for January 2014 to connect with the national commemoration during the centenary of the First World War. It was decided this was a good time to intervene in the work schedule of the TCS, as the time scale to complete the banner was appropriate. The banner was not due for exhibition until 2014; this allowed plenty of time for the treatment of the banner to evolve and to facilitate any other conservation projects and exhibitions. Additional reasons this case study was considered suitable for filming included the visual and thematic appeal of the banner; it represented the large scale of the painted textiles kept at the PHM and it displayed the distinctive style of George Tutill, which echoes a large proportion of the banner collection held at the museum. Furthermore, the famous stylized designs of George Tutill could create a sense of familiarity for visitors who may recognize the design and construction of these banners. Selecting this case study provided an opportunity to contribute to the centenary of the First World War; by filming the conservation progress the exhibitions team would be able to promote the banner, the film, and the conservation work during the centenary year. Potential funding opportunities surrounding the centenary could help develop the interpretation of the banner, for instance, in purchasing equipment and designing a display that incorporates the film. This would further opportunities to promote the work of the TCS.



Figure 4: Amalgamated Stevedores Labour Protection League banner ca. 1918. Shown in this picture before treatment. Courtesy of People's History Museum, Manchester, UK.

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4. PRODUCING A FILM ABOUT CONSERVING BANNERS

The conservation and exhibition teams along with Nigel Moore, a freelance project producer, began to have discussions regarding the logistics of filming. Moore was selected because of his extensive experience of filming conservators at work and he had worked with the PHM before, so he was familiar with the museum and its collection. Moore also had an interest in the project because of his previous work with the museum. This was considered important as he would be expected to work around the challenges such a project could pose, for instance, trying to capture the main elements of the conservation work as and when they arose and working within the confines and schedule of the TCS. During Moore's initial visit to discuss filming he was introduced to the case study, the Amalgamated Stevedores Labour Protection League banner. Ideas were presented by the conservation and exhibition teams covering the points discussed in section 2.2. The potential treatment plan was presented and a decision made about how many times Moore may have to come in to the TCS to film. This kind of planning helped with timing and budgeting.

Moore then explained his challenges and vision of what public expectations may be when watching the film. He explained that working with new media brings its own challenges. Film is an effective method of channeling information but maintaining the interest of the general public can be problematic. Creatively this can be challenging, as the aim is to try and make a short film accessible but, at the same time, instant in terms of providing information. Further discussions included the consequences of working along side professionals such as curators and conservators whereby expert knowledge needs to be made interesting and accessible to the public. It was agreed not to produce a plotted view of the conservation of the banner and not to go into too much detail to help avoid losing the interest of the viewer. This would also avoid possible misuse of information if a step-by-step approach was presented. The emphasis of the film was to introduce 'what' conservators did and not 'how' they do it.³

4.1 THE LOGISTICS OF FILMING: CAPTURING CONSERVATION

The planning and production of capturing the conservation of an object from start to finish is different from producing a standard film shoot. Moore explained that the planning, shooting and editing processes would normally take a month for a project. In contrast, when capturing conservation on film, the filming becomes more reactive to what is discovered as progress is made and new issues come to light during conservation work. Filming the conservation of the banner would take longer, be sporadic, and it would not be in response to timetables but instead in response to the progress of the conservator. This scenario gave the conservator extra responsibility as it became important to forecast stages of treatment suitable for capturing on film as an essential part of the conservation process. In this sense, the conservator became part of the production team, anticipating the next stage of treatment that would be of interest. Total flexibility and trust between the conservator and the film producer was necessary in order for the filming to be effective. The film crew worked within the confines of the TCS, which often meant entering the studio during times when conservation work was being conducted on other objects by other conservators. Other restrictions included working within limited spaces and filtering the lighting levels while filming the banner. Moore often filmed the project by himself or with just one other person; this meant the small film crew made the filming process manageable (fig. 5).



Figure 5: Author being filmed in the textile conservation studio discussing some of the conservation treatment of the Amalgamated Stevedores Labour Protection League banner ca. 1918. Courtesy of People's History Museum, Manchester, UK.

Mutual agreement between the conservator and the film producer was essential in terms of how the material being captured would be used in order to showcase the work undertaken within the TCS. The aim was to illustrate the specialty of textile conservation and at the same time present an approachable platform for visitors wanting to gain information about the TCS. These aims became more of a team effort during the editing stages of the filming between the conservation and exhibition teams and the film producer. Overall, the filming project has taken five months to the date of writing and the final stages of evaluating the conservation treatment on the hoist and finally installing the banner for exhibition have yet to be filmed. Four film sequences have been produced and they vary in length; the shortest film being 1 minute and 35 seconds long and the longest sequence is 6 minutes and 7 seconds long (People's History Museum 2011).

During the initial meeting regarding the content of the filming it was decided both the exhibition manager and textile conservator would be interviewed in order to provide audio for added interpretation. This helped when preparing for interview and remaining in touch with the response of the public through the survey. In preparation for the interview, Vivian Lochhead, senior conservator at the PHM was consulted on the main points of the conservation of banners that were important to convey; for instance: the types of deterioration often encountered on banners and the reasons why these types of deterioration can occur, the complexities of conservation treatment, and the reliance on other expert knowledge to guide decision-making during treatment.

The PHM had received wide publicity since re-opening in 2010. Conservators working at the TCS have found themselves in front of the camera on several occasions, which has provided valuable experience in disseminating our contribution to the museum (The Pilgrim Trust 2011). This experience helped enormously when working with a film producer. A relaxed approach was adopted when being filmed but

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at the same time maintaining the integrity of what was being said was important. Questions were used as prompts to get discussion flowing between the conservator/exhibition manager and the camera. The final cut recorded just the conservator and the exhibitions manager talking as none of the questions being asked were included. This created a sense of fluidity and the final series of films to date present more conversational pieces rather than a formal approach.

The case study proved to be challenging due to later restoration work completed during the 1970s, whereby modern, acrylic-based paints were used to over-paint weak areas on the original oil-painted surface. Synthetic fiber-based textile restoration tape had been applied to help support areas of deterioration, predominantly where the painted surface met the soft silk textile. The tape had also been over-painted with modern paints. During treatment it was decided to keep the restoration work because it was stable and the textile was not undergoing any major deterioration, it also formed part of the banner's history in terms of its use and survival. Also, the date of the restoration work had been inscribed on one side of the banner along-side George Tutill's signature mark. The decision to keep the restoration work meant the options for treatment became severely limited due to the mixed materials used on the painted surface. Due to the relatively good condition of the banner and the treatment being shorter than anticipated, it was decided to use another case study being worked on at the time of filming to illustrate aspects of severe deterioration and the kinds of conservation treatments that were being employed. The film footage of another banner helped to animate the kinds of work completed in the TCS. Despite the decision to select a shorter term treatment solution for the long term benefit of the stevedores banner, it still proved a suitable case study as it illustrated the subtlety of conservation and the large difference that conservation can make to a banner being prepared for free-hang display. There was also the opportunity to discuss the ongoing process of conservation. For instance, if the restoration work completed on the banner begins to fail in the future, the next conservator will have to refer to the conservation report generated from this project to help decide what to do for the next stage of this banner's life. Initial feedback from the public accessing these films found that this aspect of conservation was a revelation. Feedback revealed the surprise in learning that conservation was not just for today's generation but for future generations and conservation was not just for exhibition purposes.

5. LONG-TERM AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE FILM PROJECT

Some of the long-term expectations for the film have already been discussed. In addition, the exhibition team would like to incorporate the films into the viewing area of the TCS, which will help animate periods when the conservators are not in the studio. For instance, on weekends or when the conservators are on site visits. Feedback has shown visitors often return to the viewing area during their visit to ensure they have seen the conservators at work. Ultimately, they are very disappointed when this has not been possible. The PHM hopes the short films will go some way to introduce the conservation of banners while the conservators are not present in the studio.

6. CUT! CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The film project remains an ongoing process and the PHM continues to encourage feedback from viewers. Capturing the conservation of banners on film is an exhausting exercise and takes a huge amount of time to accomplish, although the final results are hugely rewarding and effective. Planning and time allowance is essential to enable everyone to effectively and safely complete his or her responsibilities towards making the film. The film project introduces the function of the TCS and the

conservators working within the studio, therefore placing the conservators as part of the visitor experience. The films will continue to allow the PHM to help understand visitors' experience when encountering textile conservation, specifically the conservation of banners. This is the first time the PHM has ever undertaken a film project of this kind and it continues to be a learning experience. Flexibility and trust involving all parties during the project was essential in order to make the project work and to allow for a successful learning process for all involved.

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END NOTES

¹ The Designated Challenge Fund was a UK government funded initiative that provided funding towards collections that were designated of national importance.

² Stevedores are men who load and unload ships at port.

³ Lochhead, V. 2011. Personal communication. Senior conservator, People's History Museum, Manchester, UK.

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