

# Accreditation goes East

Conservators in Singapore decided that they wanted the professional recognition provided by the UK's professional practice assessment process – PACR

The Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC), Singapore, approached Icon in 2011 to discuss the possibilities of the PACR process being made available for some of its conservation team. A proposal was presented to identify costs over and above the normal rates of PACR and a timetable was agreed. A PACR clinic was set up via Skype for the potential applicants and a training day was organised for potential PACR assessors – both with the support of Katharine St Paul who had recently been accredited and was now working in Singapore. Rachel Witt, another new ACR working at HCC, also acted as a mentor.

The four HCC applicants followed the same timetable and process as all other PACR applicants and in May 2012 they were assessed by Louise Bacon, Deborah Cane, Corinne Hillman-Farmer and Lesley Thomas, acting in different combinations as the primary or secondary assessor for the object and paper conservators being assessed.

Icon really values the exceptional input from all those involved in this opportunity to test the PACR process further afield and thanks them very much.

This article presents some of the projects used in the assessments at HCC, starting with an introduction from Mr Robin Liu, who led this initiative, to present the HCC perspective.

*Susan Bradshaw*

Icon's Professional Development Manager

## THE HCC PERSPECTIVE

The Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC), Singapore, is committed to ensuring the continuing professional development of our conservators. The initiative to support and nominate four of our conservators for professional assessment for accreditation to a professional body is part of our overall efforts to raise the standards of preventive and interventive conservation practice in Singapore. The accreditation process is also a learning journey for HCC as an institution as it is a framework which allows us to generate greater awareness of current developments in the profession.

The successful accreditation of these conservators serves as a fitting recognition for their years of experience and contribution in taking care of the National Collection of Singapore. The Centre views this accreditation as verification of their conservation knowledge and practical skills. It confirms their ability to apply their knowledge and experience to practice. They will serve as role models and motivation for their colleagues in pursuing a fruitful career in conservation.

HCC is an institution of the National Heritage Board, Singapore. Our key responsibility is to manage, care for and facilitate access to Singapore's National Collection. The Centre also promotes practical standards of heritage preservation through outreach, continuous research and professional development. The Centre is housed in a purpose built centralised collection repository and conservation laboratories. More information about the centre can be found on the website, [www.hcc.sg](http://www.hcc.sg).

In addition, the new ACRs would like to acknowledge and thank National Heritage Board and Heritage Conservation Centre, as well as their mentors for the encouragement, support and advice given to them during their journey to accreditation.

*Mr Robin Liu*, Senior Assistant Director (Conservation Services)

## SOME OF THE CANDIDATES' PROJECTS

**Ms Lee Swee Mun**, Assistant Director/Senior Conservator (Objects), presented **The Pleasure of Being, Crying, Dying and Eating**, a mixed media installation artwork by Montien Boonma (1953–2000) acquired by the National Heritage Board, Singapore.

She writes: The key structure of the artwork is a pagoda-like tower comprising more than a thousand glazed ceramic bowls stacked up together. Standing at 255cm tall with a diameter at 180cm, one intuitively stands an arm's length away from the ceramic tower for mutual safety as well as for appreciating the beauty of the artwork. Every curious mind would probably wonder how these bowls could stack so high up so stably. Well known for his sculptures and installations, the artist had used cyanoacrylate based adhesive, commonly known as superglue to adhere every bowl securely layer upon layer. During de-installation, warm air from the hair dryer was applied to soften the adhesive to take the bowls apart. However, the adhesive remained on the bowls. Due to the substantial efforts and resources which would be required for



Swee Mun carrying out treatment on a drum

conservation, the adhesive stains were left untreated.

Fourteen years later, in 2010, the artwork was selected for display again with less than three months for preparation. The artist has passed on. Little information about the original installation of the artwork was documented. The superglue had yellowed and proved time-consuming to remove. After discussion with the curator, the decision was to display the artwork in its existing condition. Instead of using superglue, a replacement anchoring material with good strength and working properties was sought to safely stack the bowls up whilst enabling ease of complete removal from the surface. A quick test was also conducted on materials available in the laboratory. In summary, 3M's Scotch-Weld 3748 Q jet melt adhesive (a polypropylene based adhesive) turned out to be a very suitable option which not only satisfied the structural safety requirements and good working properties, it also had a setting time which was just right to enable adjustment to the positions of the bowls and make them aesthetically acceptable. The whole adhesive blob could be easily dislodged once in contact with a little ethanol.

After the exhibition closed, the bowls were moved to the laboratory for conservation. A team was formed, including myself, to set up a treatment line to conduct condition assessment and treatment. Aqueous treatment completely removed the old adhesives and other surface dirt and grime. The treatment took 524 hours and was efficiently carried out with minimal use of other chemicals, which reduced risk to human health and maximised safety.

Every contemporary artwork is unique and the conservator often has to be very creative to manage the installation whilst conserving the artwork. This project was selected for accreditation not only because sound conservation strategies continue to play an important role in ensuring structural stability with minimal intervention in presenting works of art, but also because the task of making informed judgments and engaging relevant conservation practice in preserving the

integrity, and presenting the meaning, of a piece of artistic work is also a critical role of the conservator.

**Ms Lee Siew Wah**, Senior Conservator (Paper), presented a conservation project on **the works of art on paper collection of Museum Puri Lukisan in Bali**, funded by the Rudolf Bonnet Foundation.

*She writes:* I selected this project for PACR accreditation because it was one of the most challenging and interesting projects that I had encountered in my career.

The museum collection is based on early modern Balinese art, consisting mainly of watercolours on western papers. A total of eighty one works of art on paper were surveyed in 2010 with assistance from the museum staff and my fellow paper conservator, Mr Tay Jam Meng. There was no climate control and pest management in the museum, hence conditions resulting from humidity, such as cockling and foxing, and insect activities were common. The majority of the artworks were framed with plywood backings, and mounted onto wood-pulp mounts using PVA-like glue or pressure-sensitive tapes. As a result, there were stains and discolouration on many works, as well as some artworks having brittle and fragile supports. The conservation treatments proposed sought to address problems arising from less than satisfying framing materials.

The treatments were conducted in August and October 2011 for six weeks at the Bali museum. Given the time-constraints, we treated nineteen artworks of higher treatment priority. The rest of the collection would be treated by a member of the museum staff, Mr I Wayan Sumadi, who completed his internship in Singapore before the treatment phase commenced.

As conservation materials were not as readily available as basic art materials, we decided to adapt our treatments to the various alternative materials and those we could bring with us. Our intention was also to allow the museum to continue the conservation work independently after our trips and to make use of the materials available in Bali, for example, white non-woven synthetic fabric used for gift wrapping in place of

Demonstrating mounting mock-up to staff of Museum Puri Lukisan



Reemay. We had created a humidification setup using a wooden frame, nylon netting, weights, plastic sheet and a bath towel, which were all found locally.

It was a challenge to preserve the watercolours after the treatments. Fortunately, the museum managed to get from Jakarta museum-quality mountboards and corrugated polyethylene boards for conservation framing. Chinese papers from Bali's art shop and wheat starch were used in hinging and the frames were sealed with pressure-sensitive kraft tapes. Although conservation framing will not address the environmental concerns totally, the corrugated boards and kraft tape sealing should help to reduce moisture and insects from penetrating the frames.

**Ms Esther Ng**, Senior Conservator (Paper), presented **Microclimate Framing in the Tropics** as one of her projects

*She writes:* The natural environment of Singapore ranges between 25–35°C in temperature and 70–90% in RH. Framed works of art on paper are potentially at risk, especially when they are on loan to institutions which have no climate control. The high RH and its constant fluctuations could cause damage, such as structural distortion and/or mould growth, to these works of art.

Microclimate has been discussed widely in conservation literature as a viable solution to problems of distortion and mould on paper artefacts. Hence, this project aims to establish the effectiveness of using different materials to microclimate – frame a work of art on paper and to determine the length of their effectiveness in the tropics, so that some form of guidelines can be established.

In order to meet the aims of the project, three sets of framed microclimates were placed in three different scenarios. These scenarios are: a museum environment with controlled temperature and RH; an office environment with only temperature control for ten hours a day, five days a week and lastly, an indoor housing environment without any form of



Esther in the process of microclimate framing one of the test frames

temperature or RH control.

The frames were microclimated in the way that Hugh Phibbs taught. Differences in the frame configurations for the project are listed in the table below.

For monitoring and capturing of data, there is a Temperature and RH datalogger within each individual frame. One logger is also placed in the external environment of each of the three scenarios. The results will be extracted and interpreted at the end of the study.

The project has been in progress for over a year and has yet to yield its final outcome and conclusions. At the end of it, however, the results should not only benefit the centre's national collections, they should also be shared with private and public collections and industry partners in Singapore, such as framers.

**Mr Alvin Tee**, Conservator (Objects), presented a project **Conserving a Straits Chinese Hearse**

*He writes:* The hearse is a large wooden artefact which was conserved for display at the National Museum of Singapore's History Gallery. It is the funerary hearse of Tan Jiak Kim (1859–1917), a prominent individual in Singapore history. A Straits Chinese, he was a merchant and a community leader.

Table showing the test scenarios and frame configurations of the project

## Test Conditions

### Test scenarios

A: Control. Placed in a controlled environment of 23°C and 55% RH

B: Natural environment in a public apartment without climate control

C: Office environment with app. 10 hours of airconditioning for 5 days a week

### Frame configurations

Frame package with perspex glazing and sealed with aluminium/PE laminate

Frame package with glass glazing and sealed with aluminium/PE laminate

Frame package with glass glazing and artsorb and sealed with aluminium/PE laminate

Frame package with glass glazing and mylar as barrier as backing and sealed with aluminium tape

Frame package as glass glazing and framed normally without any microclimate sealing materials. (Only for set B)





Final installation of the hearse in the gallery

The elaborately-carved hearse is a rare Singapore artefact and it represents a period of reform in Straits Chinese funerary practices during the early twentieth century. Its carvings bear distinct evidence of European, Chinese and Malay styles. The hearse was acquired in the 1970s in a completely disassembled state, with no documentation or images of how the parts should be re-constituted, nor what the assembled hearse looks like. Putting the component parts together was one of the challenges of the conservation treatment.

The objective of the treatment was to retain its historical and aesthetic integrity by restoring it to the extent that it can bear its structural load when fully constituted. There were seventeen structural components of which only thirteen were in fairly complete form. Poor storage had resulted in accumulated dirt and metal corrosion. There were numerous broken carvings, severe structural damages, missing structural pieces and termite infestation.

Treatment was carried out in several stages. Thirty to forty per cent of the structure was either damaged or missing. The missing parts included two major roof structures and a wheel – important support structures. Identifying suitable skilled craftsmen to fabricate replacement parts proved another challenge. The specifications then needed to be carefully and precisely communicated to the craftsmen and builders.

The hearse posed challenges in various respects. These ranged from the assessment of the condition, problem-solving, researching the historical background to decisions to replace and restore missing parts, managing stake holders

and the complex installation. I managed this project from start to completion. It pushed my boundaries then and tested my decision-making and judgement.

The accreditation assessment criteria require applicants to demonstrate nuances of in-depth considerations. This hearse project presented various situations where several factors needed to be considered in the decision-making process, and also where decisions needed to be continuously assessed during the work. Hence, I selected it for assessment and feedback.

During the assessment, my assessors provided valuable feedback on our projects and practices. The assessment day is a platform for applicants to interact meaningfully with highly-qualified professionals in our field; it raises opportunities for the applicant to reflect upon our work and consider revisiting some issues or making changes. The whole accreditation process was not a piece of cake but the fruits of the process are definitely sweet.

**P.S. As Mr Liu's overview on page 14 implies, all four of the Singapore candidates were successfully accredited. Hearty congratulations to them all!**