

Introduction

The main purpose of the Collections Care and Conservation Strategy is ***to ensure the long-term preservation of the Collection*** and to support the museum's key strategic priority to ***safeguard, manage and develop the Collections*** (See *Statement of Strategy 2016 – 2020*).

The Collections Care and Conservation Strategy aims to strike a balance between the long-term preservation of the Collections and the provision of access. This will be achieved through the management of risks to the Collections, prioritisation of conservation activities, management of resources and professional development of staff.

The Conservation staff are responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the Strategy. Every member of staff, however, plays a vital role in the care of the Collections, by visually monitoring the objects during handling, on display and in storage, and using the correct handling methods and supports provided.

Strategic Priorities

The Strategy clearly defines four key priorities for the next five years (2019 – 2023):

1. To manage and mitigate risks to the Collections
2. To ensure the long-term preservation of the Collections
3. To increase access to the Collections
4. To advocate best practice in collections care and conservation

Collections Care and Conservation at the Chester Beatty

The enduring mission of the Chester Beatty is *to maintain and preserve the Collections and to make them available in the most appropriate ways for the use and enjoyment of the public and for scholarly study and research, in order to promote a wider appreciation and understanding of the international cultural heritage embodied in the Collections and to foster relations between Ireland and the peoples whose cultures are represented in the Collections.*

Chester Beatty has a dedicated Conservation Laboratory that specialises in book and paper conservation, which was established in 2003. Currently, the Laboratory has just one dedicated permanent member of staff, a Book and Paper Conservator, while the Head of Collections is covering the Head of Conservation post. In addition, there is a Senior Book Conservator on a fixed-term contract as well as an intern as part of the annual internship programme, funded by the Patrons and the Heritage Council.

Conservation staff play a vital role in protecting the artistic and cultural heritage of Chester Beatty's remarkable Collections. They ensure that the Collections are safeguarded during handling, digitisation, storage, display and transport, and work closely with Curators on major projects to conserve material of particular importance. The Conservation staff are involved in almost every aspect of museum activities, including working on loans and exhibitions, undertaking important research and providing training for staff, volunteers, interns and professional conservators.

All conservation treatments are governed by a policy of minimum intervention to ensure the historical integrity of the object is preserved. Due to the wide variety of material in the collection, specialist conservators are consulted to treat materials such as textiles and ceramics. All work is carried out in accordance with a strict professional code of conduct.

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Staff undertake technical examination and research, and attend conferences and workshops, all of which contributes to a better understanding of the collections in their care and the development of practical conservation techniques. This information is disseminated through training interns and conservators, professional publications, the conservation blog, public lectures, the museum's education programme and social media.

Situation Review

There have been some key developments across the organisation since the adoption of the first version of this strategy in 2013. In 2014, the Chester Beatty achieved and continues to maintain full accreditation through the Museum Standards Programme of Ireland (MSPI). This process has formally embedded standards across the Institution.

The management team annually reviews its policies and procedures to ensure compliance with relevant legislation, codes and guidelines. This work combined with a cycle of internal audits has resulted in the development of further policies and procedures, all of which have had a positive impact on collections care.

The establishment of the Digital Department enabled the museum to commence in-house digitisation and launch the first phase of the digital collections online in 2018. This has had a direct impact on the workload of the conservation team, as all objects are assessed and treated as required prior to photography. In addition, with the availability of the Collections online there has been a marked increase in requests for access, and this has resulted in additional pressure to ensure that objects are available for scholars to study in the Reading Room. Balancing these new requirements while maintaining the loan and exhibition schedule will be key over the next five years to ensure strategic priorities can be met.

To address increasing workloads and to enable successful strategic planning, the provision of adequate staffing in conservation remains a priority. The appointment of a Registrar in 2017 has driven improvements to the collections management database (Adlib) and tightened procedures around collections management. A Book and Paper Conservator post was also created in 2017. It is now a priority to fill the Head of Conservation position.

Strategic Priorities:

1. To manage and mitigate risks to the Collections
2. To ensure the long-term preservation of the Collections
3. To increase access to the Collections
4. To advocate best practice in collections care and conservation

Each priority generates a list of objectives and, in turn, these lead into multiple actions which are agreed annually in the strategic implementation plan for the organisation.

Priority 1: To manage and mitigate risks to the Collections

A key element of risk management is safeguarding the Collections during storage and ensuring their recovery in the event of an emergency situation. All activities which involve the use of collections, such as handling, transportation and display carry a potential of risk to the longevity and overall condition of an object. The Chester Beatty aims to manage and mitigate these risks to a level which is acceptable, balanced against the need to ensure collections are accessible.

Objectives

- To ensure the Emergency Response Plan (ERP) is maintained and effective
- To provide stable environmental conditions for the Collections at all times
- To ensure compliance with all policies and procedures relating to the management of the Collections
- To ensure that all staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities for caring for the Collections, and provided with training and guidance in object handling

Priority 2: To ensure the long-term preservation of the Collections

The Collections are cared for and maintained in conditions intended to preserve and extend their physical integrity. All treatments are conducted by qualified conservators in accordance with international best practice and guidelines. The condition of the objects is regularly assessed and monitored to quantify the needs of the Collection and enable annual strategic planning. The activities of the conservation team are prioritised in response to research and exhibition needs, public access requirements, funding and staff resources, and urgency of care.

Objectives

- To maintain best practice in the care and conservation of the Collections
- To continually monitor the condition and complete the full condition survey of the Collections
- To maintain accurate and accessible records on all condition assessments and treatments carried out
- To identify targeted fundraising opportunities to ensure key conservation treatment priorities are met
- To address lack of permanent staffing in Conservation to ensure continuity of expertise

Priority 3: To increase access to the Collections

Research into the Collections creates fresh insights and new interpretations of the past and is a core function of the Chester Beatty. It drives our exhibition and public programmes and has the potential to extend the international reach of the museum and attract new audiences. Scientific examination and analysis are used to increase understanding of how objects were created and to maintain and improve the preservation and treatment of the Collections.

Objectives

- To increase access to the Collections through the conservation process
- To ensure that all treatments employ safe, tested materials that where possible will not compromise future conservation treatment or scientific examination or the authenticity of the object
- To undertake scientific investigation and analysis
- To further partnerships with national and international academic institutions to encourage collections-based teaching and research
- To disseminate research through publications, training and participation in professional conferences
- To promote the Chester Beatty nationally and internationally as a research centre of excellence

Priority 4: To advocate best practice in collections care and conservation

The Chester Beatty is the pre-eminent centre in Ireland for the understanding of world cultures, advancing knowledge and engagement through our expertise and collaborations. Despite having a relatively small staff, the Conservation Department has managed to position itself as leaders in the field of collections care and conservation, both nationally and internationally.

Objectives

- To teach best practice in collections care and conservation through the provision of internships, training of professional conservators and participation in professional conferences
- To maintain accreditation through the Heritage Council's Museums Standards Programme for Ireland (MSPI)
- To promote the Chester Beatty nationally and internationally, and to enhance our reputation as one of the finest museums in the world
- To provide CPD training for all conservation staff and support of professional accreditation

Approval/Revision History

This Collections Care and Conservation Strategy is version 2.0, formally approved by the Trustees on 12 June 2019. This Strategy is for a five year period (2019 – 2023), it will be reviewed annually by the Head of Collections.