The development of conservation in the years 1950–2000 in Austria: Tacit Knowledge and Disciplinary Professionalization (extended abstract)

Vývoj konzervování a restaurování v letech 1950–2000 v Rakousku: tacitní poznání a profesionalizace oboru

Catherine Bouvier

Magdalena Schindler

Supervisors: Wolfgang Baatz – Sigrid Eyb-Green

ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS VIENNA
INSTITUTE FOR CONSERVATION-RESTORATION

The key objective of the project [1] is to research the history of conservation in the second half of the 20th century. Originating in the arts and craftsmanship, it experienced intensive professionalization in these years. Implicit knowledge assumed an important position and was passed on either verbally or through practice while scientific dissemination of results and new techniques remained an afterthought. Thus, many crucial parts of the history and scientific development are not readily available. They remain intangibly locked away in the memories of the experts who shaped the field. With every loss of such an expert our understanding of the subject suffers, too. To solve this problem, we perform, for the first time in Austria, a systematic survey to record the history in a neutral manner. Since artworks and cultural heritage are always the product of their biography, the preserved knowledge and our increased understanding thereof will be instrumental to future measures. We investigate the development of the discipline and the profession in Austria in the second half of the 20th century and put it into a historical context. During this time, fundamental changes in conservation took place: the establishment of international organisations, the institutionalisation and specialisation of education and the development of many new methods and materials. These changes also transformed the public perception and self-understanding of conservators.

We focus on two very diverse sub-areas—wall paintings and paper conservation. This focus was set in order to reflect the growing diversification in conservation during this period, which also shaped conservation practice. At the same time however, the comparison allows to observe and incorporate general developments and trends. The project is the first phase of a continuous effort to collect and analyse interviews with conservators from different sub-areas, to preserve knowledge for posterity. The findings can be further consolidated in the future and the history of conservation in Austria continued to be written. The Audiovisual Archive [2] as a cooperation partner will store the interviews for future research as well.

The research design is based on a mixed-methods design [3] used in social sciences. More specifically, it is a sequential mixed-methods design: the focus of the first qualitative phase is conducting interviews with conservators. The choice of the interview partners is based on their specialisation, age, location (we try to cover all relevant regions of Austria), institutional affiliations (libraries, archives, art collections, private practice, educational institutions), education (we found that there is an abundance of ways how people became conservators) and last but not least availability and willingness to contribute.

The interview format we are using is the so-called *Problem centred expert interview* [4]. By design it is very open, the structure is mainly defined by the narrator. At first, a so-called "story-telling entry question" is usually followed by a long narration. The interviewers try not to interfere, especially during this first phase of the interview. After that, questions can be asked. Either *immanent* questions, which have popped up during the narration or *exmanent* questions about topics which may not have been mentioned yet. The interview guideline, prepared before the interview, is a very helpful tool. It consists of four main topics with related questions and is adapted for every interview partner. This list is not meant to be strictly adhered to but rather be used as a blueprint. Statistical data that may help with the analysis can be collected afterwards if not mentioned during the interview.

The interviews are being recorded either as an audio or video file and transcribed with a software called f4 [5]. The interview partners have the opportunity to read the transcript, make corrections or annotations and withdraw passages they are not comfortable with. This is usually followed by a meeting where unanswered questions and uncertainties can be addressed. In social sciences this step is called *communicative validation* [6].

For the examination of the interviews we perform qualitative content analysis, according to Phillip Mayring. [7] This step is facilitated by the use of ATLAS.ti, a software commonly used in social sciences. [8]

The results from these interviews are the basis for the second quantitative phase: a quantitatively-oriented questionnaire survey will be conducted later on. The aim is to reach as many protagonists as possible who were active within the time frame (1950–2000) and specialisations of interest (paper and wall paintings con-servation). Topics of interest include, but are not limited to education, career stages, availability/use of literature, methods and materials and activities within the community.

Methodically, the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches tries to compensate the weaknesses of the one by the strengths of the other method and vice versa. [9]

Memories are not very reliable. Therefore it is crucial to verify statements –if possible– with the help of literature, archival documents, accidental sources like diaries and journals, recipe books, documentations, annual reports from institutions, records of all kind but also statements by other contemporary witnesses. In general, the method of triangulation [10] is employed throughout the entire research process.

Last but not least some ethical aspects need to be addressed: in the field of sociology absolute anonymity must be guaranteed to the interview partners. In our case this is not possible due to the small field of protagonists. Nevertheless, we try to respect two important principles: the principle of non-damage and the principle of informed consent. [11] This means that our interview partners know the aim of the project and what we intend to do with the information they provide. As mentioned before, they get the opportunity to delete passages from the interview. This is unusual in the field of social sciences but unavoidable in our case given the fact that full anonymity cannot be guaranteed. At the same time, we try to transform the collected information into generalised statements to protect personal rights, which is a central objective to us. After all, this project is not only meant to unveil the early days of conservation in Austria but also to honour the pioneers of our profession.

Notes

1 | Funding: Jubiläumsfonds der Österreichischen Nationalbank Projekt Nr. 17909, https://www.oenb.at/jublfonds/jublfonds/projectsearch?id=6195&action=detailview&origin=resultlist (accessed 4 January 2020).

2 | http://audiovisuellesarchiv.org/ (accessed 4 January 2020).

3 | Pelto, J. P., 'What Is So New About Mixed Methods?', *Qualitative Health Research,* vol. 25, no. 6, 2015, pp. 734.

4 | Witzel, A. and Reiter, H., The Problem-centred Interview, Principles and Practice. London, Sage Publications, 2012.

5 | https://www.audiotranskription.de/f4 (accessed 3 January 2020).

6 | Stracke, E., 'Communicative validation of interview data', *Making a difference: challenges for applied linguistics,* Cambridge Scholars, 2009, pp. 188–198.

7 | Mayring, P., 'Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse', Uwe Flick et al. (ed.), *Qualitative Forschung, ein Handbuch,* 2015, pp. 468–469.

8 | https://atlasti.com/ (accessed 4 January 2020).

9 | Kuckartz, U., Mixed Methods. Methodologie, Forschungsdesigns und Analyseverfahren, Wiesbaden, Springer VS, 2014, pp. 33ff.

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