

Education in Conservation in Malta – Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The University of Malta set up the first full-time course with a conservation theme in 1996, when an MSc in Conservation Technology for Masonry Buildings was organised by the then Institute for Masonry and Construction Research – now integrated within the Faculty for the Built Environment as the Department of the Built Heritage. This course, which is still being held on a biennial basis, is mostly (but not only) attended by young Architects and Civil Engineers who wish to work on building conservation. In 1999, the first hands-on courses in conservation started in Malta – run by the then Malta Centre for Restoration. These courses were divided into four areas, and covered most Cultural Heritage objects, ranging from books to textiles, from canvas paintings to archaeological artefacts. Once the Centre was absorbed into the National heritage agency, Heritage Malta, these undergraduate courses (Bachelor in Conservation and Restoration Studies [Honours]) continued to be run by this organization in strict collaboration with the University of Malta. As of October 2010, all of these courses have fallen under the direct care of the Department of the Built Heritage. The changing needs of the conservation world, both in Malta and abroad, the small numbers of students subscribing to the hands-on courses, the recommendations of ENCoRE, and the restructuring of undergraduate engineering and architecture course of studies led to a recent re-thinking of these conservation courses. Changes are being designed in the case of both courses, which are giving rise to some challenges and a great deal of opportunities. These changes include a revision of the MSc in Conservation Technology for Masonry Buildings, also in the light of structural changes taking place at undergraduate and postgraduate levels within the Faculty for the Built Environment, which lead to the creation of a number of professional and specialisation Masters courses. Even more fundamental are the changes taking place with regards to educating hands-on Conservators. As of October 2012, this training will only take place in Malta at a Masters (MSc) level. The first course will lead to an MSc in the Conservation of Decorative Architectural Surfaces, which will be open to graduates, both Maltese and foreign, from a large number of undergraduate degrees, both in the Sciences and Humanities. This teaching and training will develop in conjunction with legislative changes currently being proposed for the Malta Cultural Heritage Act 2002 (revised 2005), which, for the first time in Malta, had established a Warrant for Conservator-Restorers as mandatory for the practice of the profession in Malta. All these changes are aimed at producing professionals of international standing, capable of working in any European country, and prepared to deliver excellent service to the world of Cultural Heritage.

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Introduction

Lying in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, at the cross-roads between Europe and North Africa, lie the Maltese Islands, tiny in area, but extremely rich in cultural heritage, with roots in both its neighbouring land masses. Starting in the Neolithic period, when the Islands were first occupied, magnificent temple complexes were built in local limestone, archaeological wonders which today still stand as testimony to the first inhabitants of the Islands. Classical Roman remains are scattered about the Islands, ranging from Villas to Baths, a reminder of the days when Rome also occupied Malta and Gozo. The names of the Islands' numerous towns and villages, as well as their wealth of vernacular architecture, with their thick walls and flat roofs, are evidence of the Arab occupation of the two small Isles, over the period 870-1090 AD. Not only the secular, but also the religious buildings are numerous - impressively large and ornate Baroque village churches characterise the landscape, their large domes towering over the small village houses. The Maltese Baroque heritage is revealed even more impressively by the walled cities of Valletta and Mdina, respectively, the present and past capital cities of the Islands. These conurbations house magnificent palaces and churches as well as kilometres of fortifications. The British period, starting from the mid-19th century, also left behind an important legacy which is not only military. All of these limestone buildings house a myriad of items of movable cultural heritage, ranging from canvas and panel paintings, to books and manuscripts, to statuary and suits of armour, to vestments and tapestries. All of this heritage, movable and immovable, requires great care and conservation if it is to be passed on to future generations. And this in a climate rich in marine salts, with high levels of humidity and widespread insect damage, which, when uncontrolled, wreaks havoc on wood, paper, textiles, metals, and even stone.

The awareness that the conservation of our cultural heritage must be a priority has been growing over many decades – the setting up of the largest NGO dedicated to cultural heritage preservation, Din l-Art Ħelwa, (<http://www.dinlarthelwa.org/>) in 1965 is evidence of this. However, formal education in conservation required long years abroad in order to train as a professional, since no full-time university conservation education was available until 1996, when a full-time postgraduate degree leading to an MSc in Conservation Technology for Masonry Buildings was set up by the then Institute for Masonry and Construction Research – now integrated within the Faculty for the Built Environment of the University of Malta as the Department of the Built Heritage. This course, which is still being held on a biennial basis, is for the most part attended by young built environment professionals (architects, civil engineers) who wish to work on the conservation of the built heritage. Hands-on full-time university courses on movable cultural heritage started even later, in 1999.

MSc in Conservation Technology for Masonry Buildings

This MSc course has, over the years, proved to be very successful. It has accepted between 3 and 8 postgraduate students per course, usually graduates in Engineering and Architecture. Some students with Conservation Science and Materials Engineering backgrounds have also followed the course. The course offers two semesters as a taught course, based on formal

lectures, and practical assignments. This is followed by a research-based dissertation, which may also be completed on a part-time basis over another two semesters (<http://www.um.edu.mt/ben/overview/PMSCCTMFTT9-2011-2-O>). The topics covered during the taught course include Theory, Development and Context of Conservation, Building Technology, Structures and Materials, Documentation and Research, Materials and Structures, Deterioration and Conservation of Materials and Deterioration, and Structural Interventions. Dissertation topics researched in the past have included strategic and methodological studies as well as conservation studies on particular buildings, and materials-based dissertations (<http://www.um.edu.mt/ben/builtheritage/dissertations>). Currently eight postgraduate students are carrying out dissertation-based research. The students who have graduated from this course have gone on to occupy posts in both the private and public entities, with the greater number (five) being employed by the Restoration Directorate of the Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs (<http://www.resources.gov.mt/rd>), and two by Heritage Malta, the National Agency for Museums, Conservation Practice and Cultural Heritage (<http://www.heritagemalta.org/>). Students who successfully complete the taught part of the course but choose not to proceed with the dissertation are awarded a Postgraduate Diploma.

The next course, which is to open in October 2011, will be a significantly revised one. The revisions have been proposed also in the light of significant structural changes taking place in the degree courses, at undergraduate and postgraduate level, offered within the Faculty for the Built Environment. The changes conform to the requirements of the Bologna Process in the sense that the integrated five-year (Bachelors) professional course is being phased out in favour of a multi-tier course structure. The first tier, a three-year Bachelors degree, is intended to provide a broad knowledge-based introduction to the disciplines common to the main professional qualifications. Following successful completion of the first tier stage, students can choose from a number of professional and specialisation Masters degree courses, generally of two-year duration. The MSc in Conservation Technology for Masonry Buildings will be retained as a Specialization Masters course. It is however envisaged that professional Masters courses, with a conservation component (conservation architect, or conservation engineer) will also be developed in the near future.

Hands-on courses

In 1999, the Malta Centre for Restoration (MCR) was set up and began offering the first hands-on courses in conservation, developed in collaboration with the Rome *Istituto Centrale per il Restauro (ICR)* – now the *Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro (ISCR)* – and which courses were later accredited by the University of Malta, as Bachelor in Conservation and Restoration Studies (BCons) (Hons) courses. These courses, which all started in October 1999, covered most Cultural Heritage artefacts and were divided as follows: Area A – canvas, panel and wall paintings; Area B – ceramics, glass, metals and stone; Area C – textiles; Area D – books and paper. Student intake varied, with a total of 15 students registering in the first year; numbers drastically diminished over the years.

In the following years, the MCR developed a number of other courses that the University of Malta sanctioned, including a course leading to the degree of Masters in Applied Conservation Studies (MCons), which was offered twice.

In 2005, changes were enacted to the Cultural Heritage Act of 2002, and following this, the MCR was absorbed into the National heritage agency, Heritage Malta. The undergraduate and postgraduate courses continued to be offered by this organization, in strict collaboration with the University of Malta. An MA (Cultural Heritage Management) course was also set up.

As of October 2010, all of these courses are now being offered by the Department of the Built Heritage, Faculty for the Built Environment. The changing needs of the conservation world, both in Malta and abroad, the small numbers of students recently subscribing to the hands-on courses, and the recommendations of ENCoRE led to a complete re-thinking of these courses, with the decision taken to migrate to conservation education offered only at the Masters level. The first course, currently being designed and which will be launched in October 2012, will lead to an MSc in the Conservation of Decorative Architectural Surfaces, which will be open to graduates, both Maltese and foreign, with first tier degrees both in the Sciences and in the Humanities. Thus, students from diverse educational backgrounds such as History of Art, Archaeology, Science, Engineering and Architecture will be admitted to this course, emphasising and reinforcing the multidisciplinary of conservation education and training. The first course will include an initial one-year course referred to as the Preparatory year, which will be dedicated to teaching Science subjects to those from a Humanities background, and Humanities to those with a Science background, preparing both "streams" to come together for the Masters course to follow. Thus, successful candidates will be able to follow a two-year (5-semester) full-time MSc course; this course will also be open to students who have a formal Conservation education background and who will not need to follow the Preparatory year. The MSc course will include study-units such as Conservation history and ethics, Building and decorative materials, Analysis and deterioration, Environmental assessment, Conservation materials and methods, and Research methods. The practical component will take up approximately half of the time of the course and will include practical sessions held during the four taught semesters, a summer *stage* (with students encouraged to take this *stage* abroad), and a final year research-based dissertation. Once the first course, on Decorative Stone and Statuary, is launched and starts running, other courses will follow; topics to be covered will include wall paintings and mosaics. It is then envisaged that, according to local demand and sustainability considerations, other courses will be designed, developed and offered. It is planned that the development of courses where local expertise is available, and where a Mediterranean facet is particularly present, will be preferred, also in order to be attractive to students from around the Mediterranean Basin. In fact, a Mediterranean focus will be specially developed to emphasise the common cultural heritage, common materials, the common climate, and the common problems that can and should lead to a programme where these can be studied, researched, and discussed in a common forum and where compatible solutions can be developed and applied. This is our vision, our challenge, and our main opportunity.

Warrant

With a new Cultural Heritage Act coming into force in 2002 (revised 2005, and currently undergoing further revision) a Warrant for Conservation/Restoration Professionals became enshrined in the Law

(<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8911&l=1>)

This Warrant ensures that all those who want to practice this Profession in the Maltese Islands must apply for, and be granted, a Warrant. This Warrant will be granted after a period of at least two years of supervised training, carried out after obtaining the relevant academic qualifications. Thus, the new teaching and training programmes are being developed to work in conjunction with the Warrant. This ensures that both the academic background and the hands-on experience of these young professionals will be sufficient and suitable, to ensure that our cultural heritage is in good hands.

Conclusion

These changes, most of which are still under discussion in appropriate local fora, and which may be modified according to the feedback we hope to obtain from our peers and colleagues in other European Educational establishments, and also in ENCoRE (of which the Department is now a member), are part of our wider vision to educate conservation professionals of an international standard, capable of working in any country and prepared to deliver excellent service to the world of Cultural Heritage. These are our challenges and our unique opportunities, which we seek to address boldly whilst being well aware that we have much to learn from those who have gone down this path before us. It is only by looking ahead, without forgetting the past, that we can achieve our goals.