



To Grow Professionally and to Give Back: An Interview With Conservation Scientist Marie-Claude Corbeil

By Alice Wang

Since its inception in 1972, the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) has engaged with heritage communities in Canada and abroad. One of the ways this is done is through CCI's research and subsequent dissemination of conservation knowledge. To celebrate CCI and the Canadian Heritage Information Network's 50th anniversary, I spoke with Marie-Claude Corbeil about what this pursuit of knowledge looked like in her 33-year career at CCI.



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Figure 1. Marie-Claude Corbeil, a former senior conservation scientist and Manager of the Conservation Science Division at CCI when she retired.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Alice Wang (AW): You've worked extensively on the materials and techniques of many artists, including Jean Paul Riopelle. His largest painting, *Point de rencontre* (1963), was recently installed at [Rideau Hall](#). What was it like studying Riopelle's works?

Marie-Claude Corbeil (MCC): What a fantastic project it was. My study of Canadian artists as part of the Canadian Artists' Materials Project (CAMP) did not start with Riopelle. I helped start CAMP in the early 1990s when I observed that we were often asked to assess the authenticity of Canadian paintings, but we had no database for these artists' materials.

It was unfortunate. For example, if CCI had been asked to look at a potential Monet, we could have looked to our European colleagues' work to help determine if the painting was real because they had documented this artist's paintings and materials. Here in Canada, we had nothing comparable. CAMP was created to address this need.

We worked with museums and galleries to study and catalogue the materials of many artists, such as David Milne and Tom Thomson. By the time we started studying Riopelle, we had developed a methodology for examining a painting's materials, canvas, ground and paint. We also had a database to organize the information, which allowed us to consult a large dataset for research and publication purposes.



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Figure 2. Marie-Claude Corbeil examines the authenticity of a painting attributed to Jean Paul Riopelle.

Early in my research, I connected with Jean Paul Riopelle's eldest daughter, Yseult Riopelle, who had been working on a multi-volume catalogue raisonné of his works. She became very involved in our project and generously shared information about her father's studio and materials.

I also had the opportunity to examine Riopelle's paintings in both Canadian and French collections. In France, I had some interesting adventures. In searching the archives at the Center for Research and Restoration of the Museums of France (C2RMF), I discovered a painting that was unknown to Yseult at the time. The painting was located at the Museum of Modern Art located in a small town in the south of France called Céret. I travelled across France by train and bus in one day to examine the work at the museum and take samples.

The painting was signed "Riopelle" and dated 1958 on the back of the canvas. It also had an inscription that read, "Pour M. Haviland," who was one of the museum's founders. The museum's collection was built through donations from artists, often those who had come to the area to work; Riopelle had donated this one himself. We always knew that Riopelle painted in Paris and was involved with other artists and intellectuals. It was very interesting for me to learn that he was also active in other circles, such as in the south of France. I was glad to add that painting to Yseult's catalogue raisonné.

AW: CCI was created to engage with heritage communities nationally and internationally. What did this look like for you during your career?

MCC: When I started at CCI, I knew nothing about heritage communities. I came straight from university after completing graduate studies in chemistry. When I was hired at CCI, it was almost like a revelation.

What I found fabulous throughout my career as a conservation scientist and later as the division manager was working with our clients in Canada and abroad. Every time an institution contacted us, they had great questions about real issues, and we felt that we could really help them and contribute to advancing knowledge.

National and international heritage communities have been so generous in sharing their knowledge. From conferences to journals, the opportunities for exchange through associations such as the Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property, the Canadian Association of Professional Conservators, the International Council of Museums – Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) and the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works have been invaluable in growing the profession and disseminating knowledge. It is through sharing their findings in journals and at conferences that professionals realize that they have experienced or observed similar phenomena. For example, one may say, "Yes, I also saw these crystals growing on the surface of my painting. What is happening?" That's how we learn!

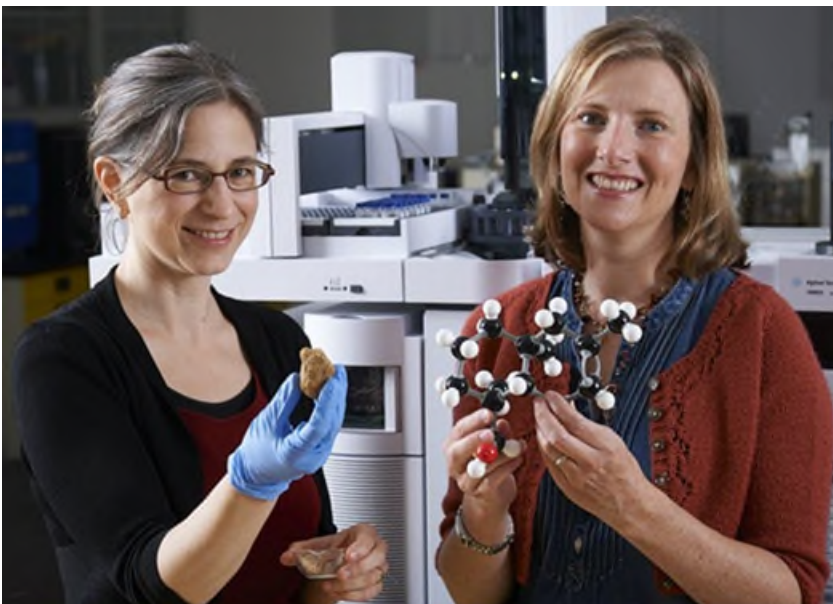
CCI has also played an active role on the associations' boards, editorial teams and conference organizing committees. For example, for the ICOM-CC's 50th anniversary in 2017, I did some calculations. CCI had played a role on the ICOM-CC's board for 30 of its 50 years, 18 of those as the chair. That's enormous! Being involved in associations is a great way to grow professionally and to give back to the community that gives us so much.

CCI also made its research and specialized knowledge available from the start. It had its own [publishing program](#), including [CCI Notes](#) and [CCI Technical Bulletins](#). Conservators and conservation scientists also published in professional journals and conference proceedings, contributing greatly to the field. For many years, I was an editor for *Studies in Conservation*. Many scientists and conservators considered it important to publish there, because it was one of the main ways to share information among professionals.

AW: Speaking of publications, in reflecting on the field of conservation science in 2015, you wrote, “If conservation science is to be recognized as an important scientific field, conservation science articles should not attempt such a degree of scientific popularization that would jeopardize their scientific profile.” Can you say more about what you mean by that? Perhaps give an example?

MCC: I can give you an example from my colleague, Senior Conservation Scientist [Jennifer Poulin](#). On one of her research projects, she discovered a new type of amber that was chemically different from all the other types we knew.

That discovery, and how it was made, was very complicated scientifically. The conservators may not be interested in the chemical details of how the discovery was made or the scientific arguments for proving that the material exists. But they may be interested to know that the amber from that source in Canada’s Arctic differs from the amber found in Europe. This information may be very useful to them or to curators or archaeologists.



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Figure 3. Senior conservation scientists Kate Helwig (left) and Jennifer Poulin (right), holding specimens and the molecular structure of the newly discovered Class Id amber from the [fossil forest in Canada’s Arctic](#).

To fulfill her role as a scientist, Jennifer needed to publish the details of her discovery in a scientific journal: how it unfolded and the scientific argument proving that the new amber exists. She did just that. Later, she published an article in less detail, for a different audience, about where the amber was found in relation to other sources in Canada and the chemical differences between them.

She could have said, “I’m going to publish just one article because for the conservation audience, all that matters is that a new form exists.” But as a scientist, you always want to prove your discovery. It’s not enough to say, “Oh, I’ve done it. Believe me.” That’s why when people say, “It’s too complicated for our audience; we shouldn’t go into these details,” I disagree. To me, that’s popularization because it doesn’t get into the essence of our work as scientists.

That’s why in my 2015 article, I talked about the importance of different publishing channels for different aspects of our work. This may mean publishing two articles about the same work because you have different audiences for different information. We need to continue this practice. There is value in retaining the details through multiple communication products.

AW: Thank you for sharing, Marie-Claude. Any final thoughts?

MCC: CCI was a wonderful place to work. I was moved by the respect and gratitude people had for CCI. I am also grateful for the generosity of the conservation communities worldwide. I hope CCI continues on its wonderful journey for the next 50 years. I’m sure some things will change. It’s normal. What’s important is to keep its prominent place on the national and international conservation scene.

Watch Marie-Claude Corbeil, CCI Senior Conservation Scientist [Kate Helwig](#) and CCI Senior Scientific Documentation Technologist [Mylène Choquette](#) assess the authenticity of a painting attributed to Jean Paul Riopelle in an episode of the Radio-Canada TV show *Découverte*, “[Tableau : Le vrai ou faux](#)” (French only).

For more personal reflections from CCI conservation scientists, check out the podcast [CCI and CHIN: In Our Words](#) and listen to the episodes with Charlie Costain and Season Tse.

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