



Reconciliation: A Professional Commitment and a Personal Reflection

By **Amanda Salmon and Alice Wang**

As federal civil servants, reconciliation can be both a professional commitment and a personal reflection. In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), I spoke with Conservator [Amanda Salmon](#) about some pivotal moments in the organization's history that helped shape her approach to the conservation of Indigenous belongings throughout her career.

Amanda first joined CCI as an intern in 2007. In 2011, she accepted a position as a full-time conservator with a specialization in furniture and wooden objects. In recent years, Amanda has been instrumental in reviewing CCI's programs and policies through the lens of equity, diversity and inclusion. This work has been done in tandem with her support for CCI's contribution to reconciliation. Here, Amanda reflects on a major international symposium hosted by CCI in 2007 and her recent assessment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission commemoration project.

Alice Wang (AW): In 2007, CCI hosted the symposium "Preserving Aboriginal Heritage: Technical and Traditional Approaches." You were an intern at CCI at the time. What was it like attending the symposium? Did it leave a lasting impact on you throughout your career?

Amanda Salmon (AS): The 2007 symposium remains the most enlightening heritage conference I have attended. For me, it was first and foremost an introduction to several different Indigenous cultures, as I had had little exposure to these communities previously. It was also a diverse and informative overview of contemporary efforts by Western and Indigenous heritage practitioners and communities to preserve Indigenous heritage in Canada and abroad through traditional, technical and blended conservation approaches.



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Figure 1. Members of the CCI 2007 Symposium Planning Committee and Advisory Committee.

To this day, I remain struck by the willingness of the Indigenous participants, elders, professionals and advisors to engage, to share knowledge about their cultural practices and to collaborate with the Western conservation community so graciously. Each day of the symposium began with a ceremony, including smudging or lighting of the qulliq. These moments helped to ground and frame the stories and lessons shared through the various presentations in respect, humility and a spirit of shared learning.

The symposium program included frank explorations of complex and sensitive ethical issues, such as the damaging impact of colonialist museum practices on Indigenous communities. Memorable lectures included John Moses' appeal for employment equity and pluralism in the field with proposals for practical application. There were several talks about collaborative community projects, such as the integration of community curators and Indigenous advisory boards into exhibition planning. Lectures on the unique context and needs for the preservation of intangible culture and the exploration of traditional Indigenous worldviews, values and practices were particularly eye-opening for me.

Along with attending the lectures, I participated in an associated hide tanning workshop held on Victoria Island, a sacred site in the middle of the Ottawa River on the traditional, unceded territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin Nation. I learned how to prepare a deer hide using traditional methods from the instructor Morgan Baillargeon, a Métis artist, writer and curator, and fellow attendees such as tanner Steven Tamayo. We worked the hide into soft leather beneath towering totem poles juxtaposed against a view of Parliament Hill across the water. I also had the great honour and pleasure of watching grass dancers in their vibrant regalia and hearing Inuit throat singers for the first time at the symposium dinner. These were all new, exhilarating and profound experiences for me.

The case studies presented at the symposium became reference points for me that informed my work as a conservator, even though I have not had that many opportunities to treat Indigenous belongings during my career. When I have had the rare privilege, I am sad to say that engaging source communities was not always a priority. I wish that I could report that CCI's practices regarding the preservation of Indigenous heritage evolved significantly following this intensely collaborative and progressive event, but I think our path towards reconciliation has been a slow and circuitous one. However, progress isn't always linear, and the lessons we have learned from our mistakes are valuable. I am glad my colleagues and I have had more recent opportunities at CCI to work towards implementing the relevant Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*. Personally, my intentions are more meaningful now; my awareness and my practice have evolved.

AW: Recently, you and Conservator [Anne-Stéphanie Etienne](#) completed a conservation assessment of the [Witness Blanket](#). The mixed media installation created by Kwakwak'awakw artist and master carver, Carey Newman, was one of the commemoration projects commissioned by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. What was it like working on the assessment of the *Witness Blanket*?

AS: Collaborating with the artist, his team, the team from the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) and CCI colleagues to conduct the assessment of the *Witness Blanket* was an illuminating,

emotional and transformative experience. I was grateful to all the team members for approaching our work together not only with impressive professionalism, but with unrelenting empathy and kindness. It pervaded our interactions, created instant connections and ensured a productive project.



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Figure 2. CCI conservators Amanda Salmon (second from left) and Anne-Stéphanie Etienne (left) with members of the artist's team and CMHR staff.

Carey Newman's creative tribute to his father, all residential school survivors and intergenerational survivors is moving and impressive. Contrary to assumptions that may exist about the neutrality of the conservator's work, the tragic and disturbing stories and the resilience of survivors embodied in the artwork could not be separated from the conservation strategy. We were so lucky to have the opportunity to consult the artist and confirm his wishes for the preservation of his artwork. Honouring the victims and ancestors, as articulated through the artist's directions, was a foundational objective for the assessment, and it was our starting point. It was also wonderful to know the artist's true intent in order to avoid the doubts that plague the development of treatment proposals where makers are not consulted or where definitive archival evidence is absent.

From a technical perspective, the consideration of so many different materials and object types in various conditions was demanding. Likewise, the structural assessment of the unique, free-hanging cedar block assembly comprising the tiled blanket presented some novel challenges. It was also incredibly interesting to discuss and reflect on the implications of any proposed treatments on both the intangible and tangible aspects of the artwork with the artist and our colleagues.

I didn't learn about the dark legacy of residential schools during my formative studies. This project deepened my awareness of our histories, and it marked the beginning of a new learning journey and period of personal reflection and growth for me.

AW: Thank you for sharing, Amanda. Any final reflections on CCI and what's in store for its future?

AS: CCI has a long history of working with Indigenous communities to preserve their heritage. It is important to acknowledge that this history is filled with as many shortcomings as successes. The origins of CCI were deeply grounded in the colonialist impulse to recreate a European example, and there is no evidence that the organization meaningfully considered the unique issues relating to Indigenous heritage at the time of its foundation. Certainly, our ethics and approach have evolved since then, but there is still so much more progress to make. We still have a lot of reflection, learning and work to do to meaningfully advance reconciliation at CCI. We must rethink and redevelop our practices to be more inclusive and pluralistic, move forward in areas such as source community engagement and Indigenous data governance, and actively support Indigenous self-determination.

I am heartened that we are setting our intentions and formulating an organizational strategy to review and revise our current policies and practices, to recognize and address bias and barriers and to provide more effective tools for Indigenous communities who wish to engage us in support of their heritage preservation. I am grateful to be involved in this work, and I am excited to be part of a diverse and inclusive organization that fully recognizes its obligations to Indigenous communities and grows to meet those responsibilities in thoughtful, effective, empathetic and innovative ways.

Bibliography

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Further reading

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