

Heritage Conservation and Restoration in Puno: Report on a Professional Visit

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In June 2022 the author, a conservator-restorer of cultural heritage based in Canada, travelled to the region of Puno for a professional visit to develop expertise in the conservation of at-risk heritage. The conservator was based in Ayaviri at the Centro Cultural San Juan Pablo II¹ which hosts a library, a regional conserva-

1 For more information: <https://www.centroculturalsanjuanpablo.com/> and <https://www.facebook.com/Centroculturalsanjuanpablo>.

tion-restoration studio, and a museum focusing on local Andean culture in all its forms. Additionally, the center facilitates public programming, workshops, training, and preservation projects in the region. The center and its studio have been operating in their current form for several years and arose from a large project addressing the restoration of the Ayaviri Cathedral.² An institution of this type is a rather unique initiative outside of Lima or of important regional capitals such as Cusco.

The conservator accompanied the team during outreach visits across the region where they promoted the expertise and services of the center and advocated for heritage preservation, both tangible and intangible. Most of the tangible heritage in the region is actively used by its various communities, and the center staff has developed sustainable strategies to address its conservation with limited resources, incorporating local knowledge and input. For example, the replication of important sculptures used during religious processions has been developed as an acceptable way to preserve the unique original while the replica is carried out outside, sometimes for days. Being exposed to this dynamic approach has resulted in many interesting professional exchanges and discussions. To highlight similarities and differences, Vincent shared his experience working with a Buddhist community in South-East Asia to help them conserve their documentary heritage.

During the visit, time was also spent in the studio with the restoration team assisting with a variety of projects, the majority involving fascinating polychrome sculptures from the Baroque era. The field of conservation-restoration has the reputation of being slow-paced and labour-intensive and this was never clearer here where the team expertly and patiently pared down failing inpainting layers with scalpels, meticulously carved out missing limbs out of agave wood, and slowly warmed animal glue to prepare tradi-

2 The project is documented in Rivera Oliva y Guillén Chávez (2021).

tional gessos and *coletta*. Another project was the improvement of in-house diagnostic capabilities with the help of materials and instruments brought from Canada. Notably, a set of traditional art materials³ and adhesives samples was prepared to be used as a reference during the inspection of artworks under ultraviolet light. The fluorescence can give information on the nature of materials present and help identify original materials from later additions which informs treatment decisions.

Vincent, who specializes in the care of paper objects, had the chance to complete condition assessments and preventive conservation consultations for the archives of the Ayaviri and Sicuani prelatures, helping to advocate for the care of 500 years of documentary heritage and the collective memory it holds.⁴ Vincent was impressed with the material qualities⁵ and state of conservation of the documents, many of which dated from the early 17th century. The conservator was also pleased to see that these collections had their own locked storage areas and that care had been taken to provide adequate enclosures and interleaving to important parish books and documents when they were described and catalogued. The cataloguing projects at both archives were conducted by the Instituto de Pastoral Andina with funding from the «Program for Latin American Libraries and Archives» of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University. While the

3 These included various pigments, fillers, resins used as varnishes, and animal glues. Modern materials such as synthetic resins were also included in the set.

4 The archives in Ayaviri have been used for historical research recently published in Zegarra Moretti and Rodrich Portugal (2012) as well as two paleographic transcriptions of important accounting books by Zegarra Moretti (2011, 2014).

5 All paper used in the documents and books inspected was handmade with strong cotton and/or linen fibers and few chemicals, which gives it better longevity than the wood pulp papers developed during the industrial revolution. Many of the volumes were firmly bound with untanned skins, likely from local sources.

enclosures protect from dust, light and handling, the thin interleaving paper serves as a buffer against the acidic iron-gall ink found on many of the pages. During the assessment of the documents, many interesting watermarks⁶ were uncovered, which piqued the interest of everyone on site about the history and techniques used in papermaking. The conservator also noted how the region's climate (cold and dry for most of the year) and the relative lack of insects in the environment supported the preservation of these materials by slowing down the natural decay of cellulose and proteins. However, even with these favourable conditions, the physical integrity of the objects is still threatened by accidental fires, floods and other disasters, and the information they contain is at risk of being lost if the collections remain inaccessible and neglected. Any organization holding important documentary heritage should strive to ensure access, visibility and perpetuity by initiating cataloguing and digitization projects, upgrading storage spaces and housing methods, and by having a disaster response and recovery plan in place.

At the end of the visit, a workshop on paper preservation and a demonstration of conservation techniques were given at the center using works on paper belonging to local private collections. In addition to staff, the public was invited to attend in person and virtually through a live stream on social media where they were able to ask questions. Paper conservation is a highly specialized field of work which requires extensive training and education.⁷ The work-

6 Watermarks (*marca de agua* or *filigrana* in Spanish) are images visible in paper when viewed in transmitted light. They are due to a difference in density in the sheet created by a wire design added in the papermaking mould screen. Distinct watermarks were used by different paper mills and their products and they can be used in identifying provenance and to help dating. Many databases and books on watermarks exist for those used in Spain and Latin America. See: *Papel y Filigranas en España* (<https://diazdemiranda.com/es/filigranas/pfes/>) and *Filigranas Hispánicas* (https://www.cultura.gob.es/filigranas/buscador_init).

7 In Peru, such education and training is only available in Lima, including at the Escuela Nacional de Archivística (<https://www.ena.edu.pe/>).

shop was intended to be an introduction to the identification of condition issues, the safe handling and basic stabilization methods for documents and books, and educating participants to recognize situations where a professional conservator is needed.

From sourcing Maguey wood in the wild to preparing traditional coletta, and seeing how traditional adobe bricks are prepared in the restoration of a 16th-century church, the visit made for a unique professional development and networking opportunities. Its success was made possible by the dedication of the Center's Director, Michaela Novotna and its Heritage Restorers Jaime Quinte and Vicente Torres. Financial support for travel and specialized materials was obtained through a Professional Development Bursary from the Canadian Association for Conservation (www.cac-accr.ca) and generous donations from the Canadian conservation community.



FIGURE 1. Visitors, center staff and director during Paper Preservation Workshop. Photographer: Vincent Dion.



FIGURE 2. Local collector, center director and conservator during Paper Preservation Workshop. Photographer: Jaime Quinte.

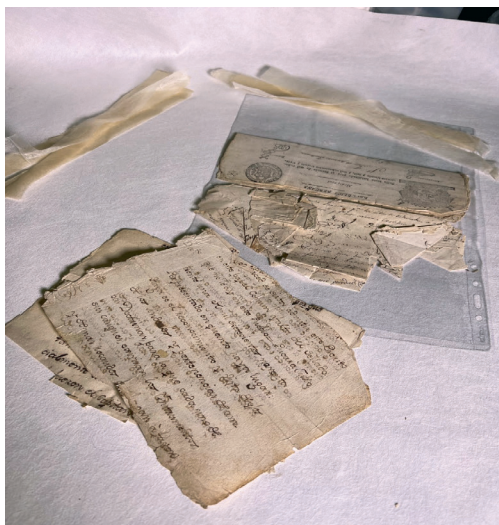


FIGURE 3. Detail of some of the documents used during the workshop. Photographer: Michaela Novotna.

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