

Science-based reports

A proposal for presentation

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The presentation of science-based research is a current topic of debate among conservators. This proposal keeps the needs of the commissioning client in view.

There has been much debate among conservators about the importance of presenting scientific evidence in a clear and useful manner. At De Montfort University's conference on 9 September 2002, 'Where Conservation meets Conservation,' speakers and delegates stressed the need for improved communication between members of the conservation research team and clear presentation of scientific evidence.

In a keynote lecture at the United Kingdom Institute for Conservation's annual general meeting on 9 July 2003, Norman Tennent of the University of Amsterdam, advised that science-based research reports should be written to be readily understood by commissioning clients. If not, he warned, it was increasingly likely that the results of scientific investigation may be ignored. Conservation scientists who use technical jargon, unexplained data, inappropriate formats and conclusions presented in unexplained spectrograms or stratigraphies help no one.

Most technical investigations are commissioned by informed professionals who expect information to be delivered in user-friendly packages, enabling them move a project forward. If they do not understand a report, it is the author who is at fault.

Research collaboration

Ian Jardin, the project manager of English Heritage's conservation of Danson House, London, stated that the success of that project was due to the willingness of the research team, historians, building analysts, curators and conservation scientists to share their results and develop ideas collectively. In the modern conservation world, despite the constraints of time and budgets, such collaboration is essential for the timely delivery of high quality research.

A proposal for reports

To ensure that scientific investigation plays its proper role in conservation, scientific and technical reports should be written in two parts.

Part I

The first part should present the brief, research findings and recommendations in a simple manner, using illustrations and summary charts. In architectural paint research reports, for example, it is useful to distil the findings into a narrative of the history of a building and its occupants, supported by a simple chart of key developments.

Part II

The second part – or appendix – should provide the supporting technical data. If clients are interested in the details that support the conclusions in Part I, they may refer to this data.

To keep the whole team abreast of developments during the course of the research phase, the project manager should circulate a 'research update chart' by email. All team members would summarise their findings to date and add references to newly discovered data, with the understanding that this is work in progress, to be altered if new discoveries are made. This chart would encourage communication between disciplines and provide an unexpected research synergy that could result in dramatic discoveries. □

REFERENCE

Jardin, I 2002 'Architectural paint research in practice', in Hughes, H (ed) *Layers of Understanding: Setting standards for architectural paint research*. Shaftesbury, Dorset, and Massachusetts: English Heritage in association with Donhead, 27–30