

Alumni Reflections

Noël Siver, BSc Archaeological Conservation, 1980–3

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In September 1980 I swapped the sunny shores of northern California for the monotonously grey skies of London to begin the three-year BSc Archaeological Conservation offered by the Institute of Archaeology. I knew I wanted to pursue a career in the conservation of objects, and even more specifically in the conservation of archaeological material, so doing the course at the Institute of Archaeology was the obvious choice.

Our course consisted of both lectures and practical work (see Figure 1). Over the next three years I gained in-depth knowledge of the materials that humankind has used for millennia to make artefacts and ceramics. I was taught why and how ceramics and artefacts deteriorate and learnt how to assess their condition. In the conservation lab on the sixth floor, we were assigned artefacts and ceramics to treat and were introduced to several different methods of examining them. We were taught a wide range of treatments and learnt about the modern materials used for stabilising and restoring objects and ceramics. We also learnt about appropriate conditions and materials for displaying or storing artefacts.



Figure 1 Noël Siver (far right) with Kathy Tubb (second from left) in the Institute's conservation lab, spring 1981 (Source: Wendy Rix)

Most graduates of the Institute's conservation course look for positions in museums that have conservation labs or seek jobs with cultural heritage resource management firms that have lab facilities. A few go into private practice and set up their own studios. I decided that I really wanted to work on archaeological excavations on a year-round basis. Since I did not have aspirations of having a stable home life with children and a mortgage, I was able to have a successful career as a freelance conservator of archaeological material. To date, I have taken part in excavations, post-excavation projects and short-term teaching assignments in 17 different countries and territories with American, English, Spanish, Turkish and Japanese teams (see Figure 2). At the height of my career, I worked on four different projects a year in four different countries.

The Institute's conservation course was excellent but, as the old saying goes, 'Experience is the best teacher'. As soon as I began working on excavations, I quickly learnt to translate what I had been taught in the ivory tower into what works in field situations. Instead of having the luxury of spending days or weeks treating a single object, I learnt to triage and prioritise dozens and dozens, often even hundreds, of objects based on their condition, their rarity, the excavation director's priorities, the project's publication scheme and so on.

I also learnt how most effectively to be a team-player. As the conservator, I am just one member of a chain of individuals who deal with the material the excavators bring in from the field. I need to work closely with the small-finds registrar, who is like the ringmaster of the three-ring circus. During the course of treatment, I gain an intimate knowledge of each artefact. It is often in my own best interest to assist the photographer with the handling of very fragile pieces. If it will make the illustrator's job easier, I try to mend a jar in two halves lengthwise so that they can accurately record the shape of the jar's section.



Figure 2 Noël Siver smoothing a plaster gap-fill in an Iron Age sandstone architectural element on the Kerkenes Project, Turkey 2007

Working on excavations often means living and working under less-than-ideal conditions. There are also occasional wars – think the 1990 Gulf War and the Iraq War that began in 2003 – that result in the cancellation of excavation seasons. However, life in the field also has many compensations. There have been opportunities to travel to different countries and to different areas within each country. Camaraderie among team members is almost always a constant. Being the first person to get to know an object or ceramic intimately is very rewarding. I often tell people that while a career as a freelance conservator has not always been very lucrative, I have had experiences – both personal and professional – that money could not buy!