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Interview with Elizabeth Pye

Interview conducted by Brian Hole 23rd November 2011

Elizabeth Pye is Professor of Archaeological and Museum Conservation and the longest serving Institute of Archaeology staff member. In this interview she talks about the Institute and its members over the years, conservation's major trends, its practice in the developing world, and the role of women within it. Of special interest to new students, she also recommends several important areas for future study.

Elizabeth Pye at the Institute in 2011 and 1974.

PIA: What got you involved in archaeology to begin with?

EP: I was given a child's book, a couple of books, on early man. I think I was probably about five and I was already bitten – hooked, and it remained an interest from then on. I was involved through a friend of the family in some small local excavations, and later with Henry Cleere at Bardown, and John Alexander in Cambridge. So then when it came to university I decided that archaeology was what I wanted to do.

PIA: Where did you begin your studies?

EP: At the time (the 1960s) there were only two universities in the UK where you could study archaeology as an undergraduate, one was Cambridge and the other was Edinburgh. I went to Edinburgh and took a four year MA in Prehistoric Archaeology with Stuart Piggott which I really enjoyed. I didn't gain a PhD – as I was aiming for a career in conservation it wasn't seen as a necessity. There wasn't the same automatic undergraduate to postgraduate progression.

PIA: So after Edinburgh you came to the Institute of Archaeology and decided to specialise in conservation...

EP: Yes - I came to the Institute to train as a conservator, because I'd always had that interest too. My interest in archaeology had always focused on material culture. Most people do not discover conservation as early as I did. When I was about 15 my father brought the then bible of conservation, Harold Plenderleith's *Conservation of Antiquities,* home from his college library. I read it and I was fascinated. So I actually first visited the Institute in about 1960 as a teenager to find out about conservation. But I was told by Ione Gedye and Henry Hodges that I should go off and get a degree first, so that's how my university career evolved. When I came back to the Institute I took the Diploma in

conservation. Undergraduate courses didn't happen for another ten years or so.

PIA: What were the strong features of the Institute of Archaeology when you first arrived, and do they still resonate today?

EP: It was very friendly, and had a common room used by both staff and students, which of course generated that friendliness. It was also much smaller, with many fewer people around, and it still had a kind of leisurely postgraduate atmosphere, because the Institute had only just welcomed the first undergraduates (in 1968). Since then the size has changed, but I think it's maintained its friendliness, which is quite impressive considering how big it is now. I think it's a pity we don't still have a staff student common room but it's not surprising.

PIA: You also experienced the Institute of Archaeology becoming part of UCL in the 1980s. Did that mean a great deal of change?

EP: Well it certainly changed the sort of managerial systems we had, and we suddenly became part of a much larger organisation with set ways of doing things. That included positive things like sabbaticals, which we hadn't really had before, but of course it also introduced rules and regulations which we hadn't apparently had much of either. Some people resisted and still talked about the college as if it was a completely separate entity, a bit like the way we, as a nation, have tended to behave with Europe.

PIA: Who were some of the key figures who added character to the Institute over the years?

EP: When I was a conservation student, Ione Gedye, Henry Hodges, and Pam Pratt (now French) were important figures in the Conservation Department. Some other characters who I remember vividly from that time include Stan Robinson, who was one of the porters (a cross between a beadle and a receptionist). He ran the Institute, in a way, from his little cubbyhole in the entrance hall, knew everybody, and was immensely diplomatic. He'd had an equivalent job at the RAC club and was reputed to have been much in demand to smooth out disputes centred on card games. If he could sort those out, he could manage anything that happened here! And there was the other porter John, who'd been in the navy, who was always very spruce but also slightly irascible. They were very visible as the first people you saw as you came in, and you couldn't just walk past - they always greeted you and you greeted them. It is perhaps symptomatic of the manners of the time that they were always just 'Stan' and 'John' and I cannot remember John's surname. Then at the other end of the hierarchy were the Directors who were influential in a different and more distant way. Professor Grimes, who was the director when I first arrived always wore formal morning dress with a carnation in his buttonhole, and looked immensely distinguished. And our caretaker Mr Dance, who lived in a flat in the Institute basement, could also look equally distinguished. He sometimes presided over the entrance hall in a brown corduroy suit, complete with waistcoat, and gold watch and chain. Visitors may have thought he was the director!

PIA: The Institute also changed a fair amount under Peter Ucko. How did conservation fit into his plans?

EP: Well, he didn't apparently know much about conservation and he was rather suspicious, so we definitely felt that we might be for the chop. But we fought and I think Peter certainly respected people who fought their corner. He eventually started talking about conservation as if he knew much more about it than we did, so we felt the future was going to be all right. He had also

wanted to get rid of Museum Studies. He wanted to make room for Public Archaeology and Cultural Heritage. At the time I was head of the internal department of Conservation and Museum Studies, and I can remember lying awake all night before what I thought was to be a crunch meeting. At the meeting I said "why can't we keep museum studies *and* introduce public archaeology and cultural heritage?" Sitting, looking inscrutable in the corner he simply said "oh, all right then" – he had clearly made that decision already.

Peter stimulated some important changes in the way we taught conservation, and that was healthy. He also gave me a sabbatical year which was an interesting decision because it was a big risk. He had no idea what I would do in the year, because conservators traditionally hadn't done much research, they hadn't published nearly enough, and still don't. Peter just said "you can have a year and you've got to write a book." The year was liberating! I discovered how much I enjoyed research and writing. I am immensely grateful to him.

PIA: There are a lot of female students now joining the Institute's programmes. Was it a similar situation when you arrived in the 1970s?

EP: I think there always were quite a lot of women – particularly in conservation. So it doesn't really seem much different. Interestingly there were also quite a lot of women amongst the senior staff back then. Their numbers dipped after that, but now they're climbing again.

PIA: Do you consider conservation to be a male-dominated discipline?

EP: No, it isn't. It's always been a subject that has attracted a lot of women. Exactly why, I'm not sure. It may be a fascination with objects, or it may be the sort of manual skills and patience involved - there may be lots of reasons. Somebody ought to research this!

However many conservation managers have been men, and often materials scientists rather than practising conservators, while many of the people actually working on objects are women. It's comparatively unusual for practising conservators to reach high managerial positions. There have been, I think, three who have reached deputy or full museum director level in the UK, but they are still considered unusual.

I should add, though, that in terms of the overall 'heritage hierarchy', conservation has been seen as a rather lowly activity. I think that's changed, and is changing still, but earlier conservators were seen as technicians rather than on a par with curatorial staff or academics. That's certainly what it was like at the start of my career. My first job was at the British Museum. When I was interviewed I was actually asked why I wanted to work as a conservator, as I already had a degree in archaeology! I think that says a lot about the general attitude to conservation then.

PIA: What does conservation mean to you?

EP: I must say that when I was writing a book during my sabbatical, the thing I found most difficult was to define conservation satisfactorily, as it draws on a range of other disciplines and is still very much evolving. For me personally, I still find conservation fascinating. The material we work on, the kinds of discoveries we make in the process, the problems presented, and the need to use informed judgement in deciding what to do next, are all extremely interesting and challenging. It hasn't grown stale on me at all.

PIA: What do you think are the most urgent issues in conservation today?

EP: I think the biggest issue in the current climate is that in any money saving exer-

cise conservation is likely to be the sufferer. It's not thought as important as putting on exhibitions, for example, because it's not seen as being part of the public face of heritage. How much that invisibility is our fault is an interesting problem. I think we could do much more to communicate the importance of conservation, and this is now happening, including holding exhibitions on conservation itself.

People making the financial decisions may not understand conservation. They may think it's quite an easy thing to pick up at a later stage, "we'll do it in the future when there's more money." They perhaps don't realise the sort of slow attrition that happens if you don't keep an eye on the condition of the material in a collection.

I think we've been overprotective - we have huge amounts of stuff in stores and museums, which never sees the light of day, and is not available to anyone.

PIA: Conservation is often a problem in developing countries. Has the Institute been involved in this area?

EP: Yes, though I'm sure we could be doing more. One of the most interesting things that I've done is to work on a conservation training project based in Sub-Saharan Africa, through ICCROM [the International Centre for Conservation, Rome]. I became involved in about 1987, when it was recognised that there was a real crisis in museums there. This was because there were very few trained people, and there were also huge problems such as rampant insect damage – many stored collections were being more or less destroyed. Encouraging effective preventive conservation became an ICCROM project, starting off with African personnel being trained in Rome. I got involved at that stage, and then gradually we moved the teaching into Africa, and the training has been developing well ever since, both in Francophone and Anglophone countries.

Peter Ucko was very supportive of my involvement with that, but sadly when I tried to get the College to waive the fees for some African students to come here after having done the rather more foundational course in Africa, I did not succeed.

A related issue is that most of the literature we're likely to use in our teaching has a definite western bias featuring practice based on having complex and expensive equipment and good access to materials, which it's inappropriate to apply to developing countries. I've tried to incorporate this understanding into my teaching, in terms of saying "you have to make do". You can't say that you have to use only this or that particular material, which costs a lot and has to be imported from the States or somewhere similar. You must be prepared to go around the corner and see what's available in the market, and then test it and decide whether it is good enough. Storage isn't quite so much of a problem as there are usually relatively suitable local materials available. We have also tended to say, for example, that you need air conditioning, forgetting that in many developing countries there may be power for only parts of the day.

As for our work now, Renata Peters has been working in parts of South America. Paul Basu and I have had preliminary discussions about building on the successor to the Anglophone branch of the ICCROM project (now the Centre for Museum Development in Africa [CHDA] based in Mombasa, Kenya). I'd like us to support this if we can be useful. I found working in Africa fascinating, and I learnt a huge amount from it. Another venture, started by former Institute conservation students, is Heritage without Borders and they have been doing excellent work in parts of the world where there is little conservation expertise.

PIA: You've also put an emphasis in your teaching on the power of touching - why do you think it is important for us to be physically engaged with our past?

EP: Why I think this is important is because it's what conservators really enjoy and gain great satisfaction from. Though not all conservators would agree with me that we should make this privilege more available to others. It's, of course, a luxury for me to be sitting here and promoting handling when I don't have direct responsibility for a collection. But we do have handling collections both in the College and here in the Institute, and I'm continually amazed by what good condition they're in, considering that they are being handled by people who don't have specific training. I think, as conservators, we've been overprotective - we have huge amounts of stuff in stores and museums, which never sees the light of day, and is not available to anyone.

If you think about our interaction with objects in our normal daily lives, we don't sit with our hands behind our backs. We handle things all the time, and we learn a huge amount through this, like the apparent temperature, the texture, the weight - these are all important qualities. I've done a bit of work with blind people, and for them it's deeply frustrating not being able to touch objects, because it's their way of understanding, and they are often expert handlers, much less likely to do damage than many of the rest of us. I think that it's an important accessibility issue. Of course we would never make all objects available, but it could be like deciding on what to send across the world for an exhibition. We don't send the things we think are going to suffer, and we wouldn't hand something to somebody to touch if we thought touching was really going to damage it.

An important aspect is that we've always said that touching damages, but we don't know exactly what kind of damage occurs, over how long a period and what variables there are, and we really need to do some research into that –so that we can make better informed decisions.

PIA: A lot of work has been done looking at damage caused by book and manuscript handling at the British Library. So you're suggesting similar work at the institute for other objects?

EP: Yes, and actually the Library is a good example because their policy as I understand it is that, barring the most precious items, their material should be physically accessible to the public. I think we, as objects conservators, should learn from that. I don't think there's been such a ready assumption that museum objects should be available in the same way, and there should be.

PIA: Based on your international experience, how has 'digging abroad' changed over the years?

EP: My first experience was working in Libya in the 1970s on a Roman site in Benghazi. I was responsible for the conservation of acres of fragmentary wall plaster, which had largely been brought up in a bulldozer when the site was being cleared for a new road. What characterised that was that it was a British dig, with the support of the Libyan Department of Antiquities, but not really a collaborative team effort. There were no Libyan archaeologists working alongside British archaeologists. I think the biggest change that I've seen over the years has been a shift to much greater collaboration. Take Çatalhöyük as an example. That's an international collaborative project - there are Turkish archaeologists and specialists of several nationalities fully involved, and the project aims not only to involve the local people but ultimately to hand the care of the site over to them. I think that epitomises the kind of changes that have happened on a wider scale in both archaeology and conservation.

PIA: Is there any kind of similar move towards allowing communities to conserve their own objects?

EP: I think there should be, and we ought to be taking more account of well-established, traditional ways of conserving things. There are well-known traditions for instance for dealing with eastern art, and the British Museum has its own Japanese-style studio, especially equipped for conservation using Japanese techniques But there are other traditions that we haven't really investigated. This was something that we were beginning to think about in Africa, such as trying to discover how objects were stored traditionally and whether, and how, these approaches contributed to conserving the material.

PIA: What have been the most important trends in conservation, and where would you like to see it headed?

There's been a healthy move away from considering that conservators need only to be trained in the technical practice of conservation to emphasising that they also need to be academically educated, introducing a strong element of research and a much stronger theoretical base. That's a big change for which we at the Institute have been partly instrumental. An important shift in practice and thinking has been the emphasis now put on preventive conservation rather than simply reacting to damage that's already taken place. More recently we have started to explore the 'why' not just the 'what' and 'how' - for example asking who we are conserving objects for – what could be called social conservation. An earlier innovation which has affected us a lot is the use of modern synthetic polymers as adhesives and consolidants. In the 1950s and '60s everybody thought that these were wonderful and the answer to everything. We now realise, however, that they are quite problematic, and so we're re-evaluating traditional natural materials such as starch pastes. This has been an interesting development. And we're also now having to struggle with conservation of plastic objects in museums, as these tend to be very unstable.

For the future, I hope there will be a relaxation in access to objects, and a move away from Western-centric approaches to conservation. There are great strengths in that kind of practice, but a little more flexibility in embracing other approaches would be a good thing. I hope there will be more research into conservation issues and practice. We have some interesting research happening here at the Institute, but we need to encourage more, and more publication.

PIA: Finally, what do you most look forward to from here on?

EP: Well, I'll retire at the end of the next academic year. I'd like to continue to contribute to conservation in some way, if that is welcomed, and I have already been asked to teach a short course in Qatar. I'd also like to go back to my family roots and take up art more seriously again – painting, drawing and making. Something else I would like to be able to do, though I haven't explored this yet, is to contribute in some way to the welfare of younger people, especially in terms of literacy. It's a sad situation that we have so many people leaving school without good reading skills, so I'd like to help there if I can.