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Sharing, to grow together... or not to grow. Comments on the genesis and contents of the International Course on Paper Conservation in Latin America: Meeting East

Luis Crespo Arcá*

*Biblioteca Nacional de España

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Translated by Daniela Acevedo Carrión

Abstract

Since 2012, the International Course on Paper Conservation in Latin America: Meeting East has been held in Mexico City. The Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural (CNCPC) of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia sponsors the course. It aims to introduce some of the tools, materials, and paper conservation techniques in the centuries-old Japanese tradition. The course combines, on the one hand, the technical aspects of the knowledge and use of these techniques explained by the Japanese Masters, together with the adaptations achieved by the Latin American teachers, to make them as useful and accessible as possible to the participants invited to each edition. The aim is to help improve the technical level of paper restoration professionals and provide intangible values that give them a new perspective when facing their work.

Keywords

Education; paper; Japanese; conservation.



The thought "I have achieved something" is not present in the beginner's mind- All self-centered thoughts limit our great mind. When we do not think of achievement, when we do not think of self, we are true beginners. That is when we can truly learn something.

Shunryu Suzuki¹

The invisible thread

The year is 2011. In March a terrible tsunami sweeps into Honshū, Japan's main island, specifically in the Fukushima area, causing devastation among the coastal towns in the northeast above the capital, Tokyo. Along with the loss of life and property, a nuclear disaster is on the cards... but despite this, life must go on. Therefore, the conservation professionals working at the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo (NRICP) together with those responsible for ICCROM's training courses at the time decide that their training course for foreign professionals should continue to be held. Given the precarious security situation in the capital, the usual venue for the course, it was decided that all the equipment and materials necessary for the course would be moved to Fukuoka, on the island of Kyūshū, and more specifically to the facilities of the Kyushu National Museum in the small town of Dazaifu. The course in question is the International Course on Conservation of Japanese Paper (JPC), jointly organized by NRICP and ICCROM. The author of this paper was one of the participants in that anomalous edition.

In December of the same year, Marie Vander Meeren, one of the participants in the first editions of the courses in Japan, and a member of the Taller de Documentos Gráficos (TDG)² of the Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural (CNCPC),³ managed to organize an evaluation seminar on Japanese techniques and materials applied to the conservation-restoration of objects made with Western paper. She managed to bring together professionals from various Latin American countries and Spain who had participated in some of the editions of the training course in Japan. Along with these Latin American professionals, the Japanese director of the international training courses of NRICP and a representative of ICCROM's training area were also present. Marie Vander Meeren's idea, a brilliant idea of great transcendence in the region as the course of events have shown,⁴ was that these professionals should share what they had implemented and adapted what they learned in Japan into their work routines, as well as disseminating it among specialists in their respective countries.

¹ Original quote: "En la mente del principiante no está presente el pensamiento "he logrado algo" - Todos los pensamientos autocentrados limitan nuestra gran mente. Cuando no pensamos en logros, cuando no pensamos en el yo, somos verdaderos principiantes. Entonces es cuando podemos verdaderamente aprender algo." Suzuki, Shunryu (2011) *Mente Zen, mente de principiante*, trad. Miguel Iribarren, Madrid, Gaia Ediciones.

² Documentary Heritage Conservation Studio (note from the translator).

³ National Agency for Cultural Heritage Conservation (note from the translator).

⁴ Because of the training of the professionals invited as participants in the various editions, it has been possible to explain, both theoretically and practically, the new approach to the work described in this paper. The course has generated new visions and practices in the conservation and restoration of bibliographic and documentary heritage.

The seminar would become the origin of a course that, in this author's opinion –contrasted with the flow of communication he has maintained with some of the participants of the various editions– will be transcendental in providing a new professional vision. Thus, helping the evolution or improvement of the work of the paper conservation and restoration professionals in Latin America (including Spain and Portugal) trained in it. The course that emerged from this seminar is the International Course on Paper Conservation in Latin America, organized by the CNCPC, ICCROM and the NRICP.

The seed

In the 1980s, under the umbrella of UNESCO, the master Katsuhiko Masuda,⁵ an expert in the conservation of Japanese-style paintings on paper and silk, gave several workshops aimed at training/introducing specialists in the techniques, materials and tools of traditional Japanese conservation. The recipients were small, select groups (only five professionals were admitted per course, lasting three weeks) of Western conservator-restorers specializing in the treatment of documents and works fundamentally on cellulose support.

Given the great expectations and demand these courses generated, two institutions decided to organize a course with the same teaching base. Still, they modified and extended it to reach more professionals from all over the world, carrying out the course every two years from 1992 until 2010 and annually since 2011. The name of the course would become the International Course on Conservation of Japanese Paper, being the NRICP together with ICCROM its promoters and responsible for its implementation. This course is usually held at the NRICP building in Tokyo. It aims to enable participants to understand the principles of conservation of the cultural property on paper in Japan, its materials, and conservation techniques, and thus to help professionals from other countries to possibly apply them to the conservation of Western cultural property (which has very different materiality and problems from Japanese works of art on paper).

The course includes theoretical and practical content for participants from all over the world to learn about the nature and properties of Japanese paper used to create and conserve Japanese cultural properties on paper, as well as its traditional materials such as adhesives, tools or mounting techniques (called *hyōgu* or *sōkō* in Japan). This training is done through lectures and practical work, including topics such as 'lining' (attaching a second support to the original of a work for various reasons) or how to cut and join papers with a variety of subsequent uses in mind. The course also includes a study trip to specialized shops and studios of professionals and institutions involved in conservation-restoration with traditional Japanese materials and techniques for a deeper understanding of their way of working.

Notions of the Japanese cultural context that influence the didactics of the course

The course being held in Mexico City not only introduces the participant to new knowledge of techniques for the restoration and conservation of works on paper in the Japanese way. It also seeks, according to the Japanese masters, to open their minds to a new and different concept of the training and practice of restoration and conservation of cultural heritage on paper in its many variants.

⁵ For more information on training between East and West, we recommend the following article: Masuda, Katsuhiko (2017) "From East to West: The flow of materials and techniques in paper conservation" in *Adapt & Evolve 2015. East Asian materials and techniques in Western conservation. Proceedings from the International Conference of the Icon Book & Paper Group*, London 8-10 April 2015, London, The Institute of Conservation, pp. 1-11.



What aspects make the Japanese way of organizing and working different from what a Westerner is used to?⁶ We can start by explaining the way they organize their laboratory workspaces, which is perhaps best understood by going back to the 1960s when the Toyota company proposed its work system called “5S” (the 5 S’s), a system aimed at the efficient management of business resources, which perfectly explains what one finds in a Japanese conservation workshop. Each S is referred to a Japanese word intended to define each of the stages that help to achieve better organized, tidier, and cleaner workplaces to increase the quality of the working environment (more pleasant and focused on the tasks to be carried out) as well as productivity. The Japanese terms are:

- *Seiri* - “to separate the unnecessary”: to eliminate that which is superfluous from the workspace.
- *Seiton* - “to place necessities”: to organize the workspace effectively
- *Seisō* - “to remove dirt”: to improve the level of cleanliness of areas
- *Seiketsu* - “to signal anomalies”: to prevent the appearance of dirt and clutter
- *Shitsuke* - “keep improving”: to encourage efforts in this direction.

This system achieves, among other things, a pleasant, safe, clean, and tidy workplace. It reduces energy costs, the risk of accidents, and improves the quality of the work carried out. Anyone involved in conservation work, whether in a public institution or a private workshop, will appreciate that the values defined are precious when carrying out conservation/restoration work on objects classified as cultural heritage.

Concerning the knowledge of the materials, and the learning of the techniques themselves, the Japanese teaching methodology does not usually lead to the intellectual behavior to which we Westerners are so accustomed. There is no speculation, no elaborate mental discourse, the teacher “simply” executes, the student observes with as much concentration as possible and tries to execute by imitating what he has observed. In the JPC course, this form of teaching comes naturally. However, it is fair to say that Japanese teachers make an effort with oral and graphic explanations to enable maximum learning in the time available. In addition to the values mentioned above, three other concepts are fundamental in the way they approach their conservation work and can be directly integrated into the improvement of teaching and the application of restoration-conservation treatments by Westerners: *Rei* (respect), *Ishin denshin* (teaching from heart to heart without words) and maintaining *Wabi-Sabi* (the aesthetic values inherent to the work and its vital evolution).

The concept of *Rei* goes beyond the mere bowing of the head in a polite greeting, as the West often understands the Japanese greeting in a very simplistic way. In the field of conservation-restoration, it implies the study of the piece to be restored from a sense of humility. It is not a matter of the restorer is “going to do something to an object,” instead, it is the object after being observed, listened to, –sensed, in short– that “tells” the restorer what it needs. This study time can last from several hours to several days.

⁶ There is no distinction to be made here between the different origins of Westerners - whether Latin, Anglo-Saxon, etc. - given how alien the Japanese concept of work, respect, etc., is to any of our cultures.



In the case of the concept of *Ishin denshin*, what takes place is a very subtle form of teaching in which there is no spoken word: the master performs his work, and the apprentice observes in order to learn. To understand and apprehend what the teacher shows through his correct attitude and execution, the student must be open and sensitive, which is only possible by remaining in a spiritual state of mindfulness. Many Japanese think that this kind of teaching is inherent to Japan and, therefore, non-Japanese cannot feel/perceive it; however, many other Japanese believe that this is not the case and that it is a field of learning open to any human being. The West is no stranger to this kind of teaching in other fields, although it is true that the modern way of life has pushed aside this way of understanding education, drifting towards the prevailing scientism. However, both teachings are possible and necessary.



Figure 1. Part of a traditional Japanese assembly and restoration studio. On the right, there are two young students on their knees, attentively observing the work of the professionals. They will spend a month of practice, just watching, in order to learn. *Image: ©Luis Crespo Arcá.*

Finally, there is the concept of *Wabi-Sabi*,⁷ something extremely complex to define. During the restoration process, it seeks to maintain those aesthetic values of the objects that comprise concepts such as imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness. These values are particularly dear to the sensibilities of the Japanese people and come from the period of development of the tea ceremony (*Cha-Dō*). They are a challenge for any restorer. We can loosely compare it with the Western concern to maintain that value which we call the “patina of time.” The closest approximation in the West would be the ideas of John Ruskin in his vision of art conservation.

⁷ To understand more about the concept of *Wabi-Sabi* we suggest reading the following books: Koren, Leonard (2015) [1995] *Wabi-Sabi para artistas: diseñadores, poetas y filósofos*, transl. Koren, Leonard (2017) *Wabi-Sabi new considerations*, trans. Marc Jiménez Bucci, Madrid, SD Editions.



The fruit

In 2011, a very intensive work session was held at the seminar mentioned above. At the beginning of the seminar, each participant of the Japanese courses described his or her experience in the edition of his or her course. It should be noted that in the different editions of the course, there were several changes of the Japanese teachers in charge of training and transmission, as well as in the theoretical and practical contents. With this reality, Western logic would lead us to think that the visions and teachings would be different, and, by extension, each Westerner would have perceived the essence of their course differently. Nothing could be further from the truth.

After each participant's presentation, we got down to the seminar's main purpose: what topics should be included in a course held in a Latin American country through the prism of Japanese teaching? When the group started brainstorming, it became clear how the Japanese idiosyncrasy of the way of teaching that has already been briefly discussed had taken hold among the participants. All the participants expressed those teachings from their course that have had the most significant impact on them and, therefore, were considered essential in creating a course in Latin America. The points that emerged unanimously in order of importance were the following:

In the intangible:

- Patience
- Concentration
- Order (cleanliness, management of the workspace)
- Respect
- Open-mindedness
- Teamwork
- Elegance in the routine/precision in each gesture for optimal performance
- Importance of every step in every job
- Learning to learn without words
- Repetition as practice
- Tell me your plan (design an initial project for the execution of each work, but with an open mind to what comes up in each step)

On the technical side:

- History of papers (Western and Japanese)
- Showing objects at the beginning of the course so that participants can touch and feel them, distinguishing the differences.
- Papermaking
- Wheat starch (nature, production, and applications)
- Techniques (direction of the fibers on paper, cutting and joining papers, paper tear repairs, infills, lining, etc.)



- Tools (originals and possible adaptations)
- Characteristics of materials (learning to recognize them)
- Literacy of Japanese materials and tools
- Criteria/confidence for use and adaptation (how to adapt “the Japanese” to our realities of works of different nature, but also the budgets, materials at our disposal, and technical skills)
- Creating a link with the Japanese world (of suppliers, professional literature, further technical support, communication as marketing to disseminate the approach to conservation)
- Review the professional profile

When you attend a professional conservation course to learn specific training on certain materials, techniques, or theoretical aspects, you expect to acquire the part of the teaching that comprises the particular elements of that course. However, in the case of the course that was being created, the aim was to provide the intangible but essential value of Japanese methodology for full assimilation.

An anecdote may help explain this: during the first edition of the course, in 2012, it was already the third week (the course initially consisted of three weeks). At one point, the author of this text talked to the head of the Japanese team, Dr. Kato Masato, about the evolution of the course and how the participants were assimilating its teachings. We noticed an apparently insignificant but essential detail. Until that week, on all the worktables, objects of all kinds could be seen along with the works on which the practices were being carried out. Still, it was precisely from that third week onwards that only the work on which the exercise was to be carried out and the absolutely essential tools for its execution were present. All the rest of the materials, pens, notebooks, cameras, etc., had been placed at the base of the tables. We both agreed that this third week, at last, was reflecting that invisible part of the teaching, i.e., the concepts of *Seiri* – “to separate the unnecessary”: to eliminate from the workspace what is superfluous and *Seiton* – “to place the necessary”: to organize the workspace efficiently. The intangible teachings of the course, that part on which so much emphasis was placed at its genesis, was taking shape.

This author has had the good fortune to teach or collaborate in the training of numerous students and professionals in the field, who wanted to learn some of the “Japanese techniques”, an ambiguous term perhaps preceded by the insatiable need to find new fashions to follow in the profession: whether it be exotic products (cleaning with gels, sophisticated products that help to stop the devastating action of the corrosion of certain inks,...), or the use of sophisticated instruments to carry out techniques that are difficult or impossible to access (lasers to clean paper or parchment, nebulizers). Experience shows there are two attitudes to approaching the teaching of the Japanese way of conserving. On the one hand, some approach it only to add to the knowledge they already have, but without modifying its essence; these professionals want to know more about papers, brushes, adhesives, etcetera. This is a legitimate and, obviously, essential aspect since the aim is to learn how to improve skills and theoretical and technical knowledge to carry out better restorations.



However, although a minority, there are a certain number of students and professionals who, during training courses, are “touched” by this other aspect, the invisible one. The latter pierces their inner self and produces an internal revolution that allows them to explore new personal territories that have their visible manifestation in the result of their way of working. Buddhists say that if you want to add more tea to your cup, you must first empty it; otherwise, the new content will spill irremediably outwards without modifying the previous content.

Concentric waves

Throughout these years, thanks to the efforts of the entire Mexican team of the CNCPC workshop and the institution’s support through the financial commitment of those in charge, an incredible number of Latin American professionals have been trained in this course. The transcendence and resonance of the course are gradually becoming apparent. In some countries, progress in its dissemination and implementation has been more significant than in others due to various circumstances beyond the participants’ enthusiasm for sharing or developing these new ways of doing things. Human beings have an innate tendency to be conservative in what they do and accept the unknown with some suspicion, if not with initial rejection. Therefore, when it comes to explaining to other colleagues who are not trained in these techniques that there is a different way of working, whether it’s the use of natural products such as wheat starch or certain algae, or that a considerable number of technical problems can be solved by simply understanding the principles of water balance present in the work and all the materials and workspace. Or that it is not necessary to invest heavily in setting up a sidereal workshop full of increasingly complex and costly machinery, because by investing in low-cost materials and making your tools and preparing your work tables as a luthier,⁸ must of the technical problems of conservation can be saved satisfactorily it is not uncommon for the participants in the Mexico course to feel misunderstood.



Figure 2. A fundamental part of the course is teaching Latino professionals how to create tools or adapt local materials. These materials are essential to apply many of the Japanese techniques, but without the frustration of perhaps not being able to acquire the original materials or tools. *Image: ©Luis Crespo Arcá.*

⁸ An essential part of the Mexico course is to help participants create their own tools (spatulas, prepared boards) with local materials, as well as to find local alternative tools or papers to the expensive (and often unobtainable in Latin America) Japanese materials and tools.

The course aims not to say that what is taught there is “the absolute truth” and that all other approaches are wrong, far from it. It seeks to show another possible approach to the restoration of objects made on any type of paper; that this approach, learned and modified by Latin American professionals from the masters of the Japanese conservation tradition, provides magnificent results on Western objects. But we also want to show those other intangible values that contribute in a decisive way to finding new satisfaction and joy in daily work.



Figure 3. To understand Japanese techniques, it is necessary to learn everything from the ground up, including how to grasp the tools to exploit their potential use. This means that the ratio of teachers to students is the highest in ICCROM's courses. *Image: ©Luis Crespo Arcá.*



Figure 4. As part of the commitment to share Japanese teachings and the lessons learned from the experience of the Mexico course, the studio at the Biblioteca Nacional de España has accepted internship students from Spain, Latin America, and other European countries. The aim is to disseminate tangible and intangible teaching, thus generating an invisible connection between future professionals. *Image: ©Luis Crespo Arcá.*



All this is possible thanks to a fundamental premise that the author heard on the first day of his course in Japan: in the courses under the umbrella of ICCROM, one goes to learn, but with the moral condition that one must then generously share what one has learned. Sharing means growing together and creating a network of professional support and personal relationships. Individualistic and selfish learning does not lead to professional development and evolution. Personally, thanks to being chosen as a collaborating teacher in the course created and supported by the CNCPC, my professional and personal life has changed radically since its inception. The teachings established there are the same ones that I share with all the trainees who pass through the workshop of the Biblioteca Nacional de España or in the conferences or courses to which I am invited. The general acceptance of these values, the excitement, and the new horizons they generate are evident. They are materializing in those professionals who have decided to start and continue on this path.

As a Taoist painter/poet once said:
Together, we contemplate the distant waters
*Alone, I sit in a lonely boat*⁹

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