

**UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA ORATOR'S INTRODUCTION  
OF DR. MARIE-LOU FLORIAN (Hon. D.Sc.)  
TO THE UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA CONVOCATION,  
JUNE 14, 2011.**

Mr. Chancellor, it is my privilege to introduce Mary-Lou Florian, Research Associate Emerita at the Royal British Columbia Museum, and a scientist renowned for her pioneer work in conservation.

Mary-Lou completed degrees in Botany and Zoology at UBC and the University of Texas, then pursued post-graduate work at Carleton and UBC. The study of plants, insects, and especially fungi, together with her interests as a practicing artist for over twenty years, led to an unusual career: the preservation of artifacts of historical and cultural significance. She has helped transform our understanding of how to lengthen the life of perishable museum objects.

When Ottawa set up the Conservation Institute in the 1970s, Mary-Lou was the first biologist to be hired. Her research and publications concerned the structure, deterioration and treatment of materials such as wood, textiles, leather, bones, and fibres used in basketry.

In 1978, when she joined the Royal British Columbia Museum, preservation typically involved "fogging" collections with pesticide. Mary-Lou was one of the first to recognize the hazards of this procedure - which often did not even eliminate the pests. Gleaning information from the food industry, forestry, pharmacology, aeronautics, she arrived at a simple but original solution: routine inspections for early detection, and destruction of pests by freezing. It worked: there has been no serious infestation in the Museum's vast collections since, and the process has been influential all over the globe.

At the Royal British Columbia Museum she took a particular interest in First Nations' materials, including water-logged totem poles. She would become known affectionately as "the rotten wood lady." In this capacity she served on the *Jason Project*, an expedition organized by Robert Ballard (famous as the discoverer of the sunken Titanic). As a result, in Victoria, fourteen thousand children enjoyed learning via satellite about ancient shipwrecks in the Mediterranean.

That was in keeping with Mary-Lou's lifelong commitment as educator. Over six decades she has reached students from high-school to university, and in courses and conferences world-wide, she has trained new generations of conservators.

Retirement from her position as Chief of Conservation Services in 1991 gave Mary-Lou more time for writing, including three books synthesizing her findings. She was Guest Scholar at the Los Angeles-based Getty Conservation Institute, and remains an

independent researcher, presently funded by a Fellowship from the prestigious Kress Foundation in New York, her latest interest being the preservation of paper and paintings.

Mary-Lou is an Honorary Member of the American Institute for Conservation, the recipient of a 125<sup>th</sup> Commemorative Medal from the Governor-General of Canada, a British Columbia Museums Association Distinguished Service Award, and a Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections Lifetime Achievement Award.

Victoria has benefited from Mary-Lou's presence for more than thirty years: in her work at the Museum where she endowed an internship for conservators, in her teaching and advising at UVic, and in her contribution to the wider heritage community. It is fitting that today our university officially recognizes the breadth of her achievement, in educational outreach as well as innovative research, and her international reputation as a pioneer of conservation science.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to present Mary-Lou Florian for the degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*.

Dr. Judith Terry, Orator.

**ADDRESS  
BY DR. MARIE-LOU FLORIAN TO THE UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA  
CONVOCATION,  
JUNE 14, 2011.**

I thank the University of Victoria Senate, the Chancellor and President for bestowing on me this most prestigious honorary doctorate degree of science.

I would like to direct my following comments to my fellow graduates.  
You and I are both here for the same reason.

We both have acquired with great discipline and curiosity, new knowledge

We have used this knowledge with our creativity and intuition to develop a thesis, to solve a problem, describe phenomena, make something new, and so on.

Most importantly- we have shared the results, openly with pride and generosity with our peers and others by writing about it, showing it off, talking about it.

And for that, today, we both are being rewarded with a prestigious degree.

But you are about begin a new career and I am about to end mine.

I am a conservation scientist of cultural heritage.

The hierarchy of the care of cultural heritage objects — whether it be a building or a piece of fine lace is, the owner the curator, the conservator and then the conservation scientist.

The owners- are the first nations, religious groups , a museum, a gallery, or archive etc.

Then the curators- they are the social scientists- the archaeologists , archivists , art museum staff, historians, etc., who document and historically place the heritage object. Many of you are pursuing one of these social science disciplines.

Then the conservators- who care for the heritage object- they protect it, monitor its environment, prevent deterioration, store it, and may treat it to stabilize it.

Finally the conservation scientist -that's me.

My job is to answer the questions of the owner, curator or conservator. Questions on the material of the heritage objects- what is it, what has caused deterioration, what can be done to stabilize it?

I have given them relevant information so they can answer their own questions according to their own professional ethics. I do not tell them what to do.

The information was gleaned by an interdisciplinary approach –

All information from the morphology to the molecules of the heritage materials and its environment had to be understood.

Information was gleaned from literature on biology, ethnology, commercial industries, medicine and even dentistry.

The biofilms on your teeth are similar to biofilms on a marble sculpture. Safety, health and ethical issues also had to be understood.

This has made my job incredible. It personally has enriched my knowledge of my world and given me much pleasure.

For example:

I enjoyed so much undertaking an assessment of the impacts of the natural environment on living and dead, Australian aboriginal carved trees in New South Wales and the totem poles in the natural sites on the Queen Charlotte Islands - and both along with their owners

In the middle of the Mediterranean ocean, Johnny on the spot, I had to devise methods to stabilize the anaerobic environment of ancient amphora, freshly excavated by an underwater rover, until they reach Woodshole Massachusetts

At that same time, students at the RBCM, were able to watch me with the help of Turner broadcasting and satellite beaming.

It was a challenge - 30 years ago - but I had to examine all aspects of a 13 story museum building, look at its thousands of heritage objects and learn the life style of the buildings insect pests- all to solve the building's insect problem to protect the collections in it.

Since that time the collections have been free of insect pests.

I was terribly excited that I was able to determine the source of damage to the Star Spangled Banner in Washington DC from just one wool hair. That was all that could be taken from it. I recognized the clothes moth's mandible bit - the culprit, and what luck.

I enjoyed teaching heritage material for Continuing Studies at UVIC, the RBCM and all over the world. It was always a two-way exchange - we learned from each other.

While giving a paper in Florence at the Galileo Museum, on fungal fox spots on paper I felt my feet slide into foot depressions made by many feet over the centuries in the ancient marble floor. I felt humbled, thinking that Galileo himself must have stood in these same depressions.

Along the way, any information I felt was of relevance to other conservators, I always shared- I presented papers, wrote notes for newsletter, chapters in books, and books, and taught- all to share this information.

In the 1960's when I first was introduced to conservation, conservators were just janitors with a broom closet and a bottle of insecticides.

Paintings were restored to look like new, not respecting the artist's intention or its history. I was thrilled to work with an international task force - our goal was to recommend curricula for teaching conservation.

At that time we included for the first time conservation of natural history specimens making them heritage specimens not just research specimens. I am proud of the professional status of Cultural Heritage Conservation today. Conservators now have either an accredited diploma or master degree.

There are relatively few conservation scientists compared to conservators. They are mainly in the Conservation institutes that undertake research and assist museums and the public.

For example in North America the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa, the

Getty Conservation Institute in LA and Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute in, Washington DC.

Many large museums also may have conservation research associated with conservation services.

My first job was at the Canadian Conservation Institute and while at Royal BC Museum I undertook many joint research projects with the Getty Conservation Institute.

So fellow graduates the greatest thing you can do for your new profession and for yourself — is to continue your pursuit of knowledge with joy, be interdisciplinary, stretch the envelope, look at all three sides of a coin, and most importantly share your information, enjoy yourself and laugh a lot.

Again I thank the Chancellor, and President for this wonderful occasion and the prestigious honorary doctorate degree in Science.

Thank you.