

Conservator, Curator, Visitor: the fine line between Aesthetics and Deceit

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All conservation actions aim to be ‘appropriate to the context [and] guided by common principles of professional good practice’,¹ yet this vague guideline cannot provide conservators with a full understanding of the implications of their work. These actions rarely have only material or chemical effects, but rather affect wider cultural perceptions and experiences. It is precisely the public nature of museums that affect the ways in which conservators must interact with objects, forging a blurred definition of responsibility between aesthetics and deceit, defining the ways in which artefacts are valued and perceived, and potentially rewriting public understandings of the past. Here I draw upon the implications of conservation procedures on culturally and theologically important artefacts. When such emotionally-invested articles are placed in a publicly defined sphere, they in particular are emblematic of wider issues, issues that must be addressed by general museum staff, curators, and conservators. The relation between the object and the site of viewing is a further consideration; to what extent should original sites should be preserved as artefacts in themselves, or indeed, should they be preserved at all? The primary challenge is to forge a path between the potentially conflicting values of enclosed protection or site-based public use.

Laurent Lévi-Strauss writes: ‘Historic cities and sacred places are not only built by human beings but experienced by them. Beyond their functions, they can survive only if the ways of life, values, norms and representations that they bear are also respected’.² This understanding is crucial for conservators in order to work with objects in a sensitive way, comprehending the underlying implications of their actions. Indeed, active organisational efforts to follow this have been vital to the development of the profession. During World War II, the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives section of the United States military, and more recently the International Blue Shield program were formed to safeguard these culturally significant objects.³ ICOM has stated that museums are ‘a powerful force for human development [...] where the public can look for the meaning of the world around them’.⁴ The museum is a site in which a ‘manufactured “object” [may be transformed] into a multi-faceted “thing”’,⁵ moving from ‘technofunction to socio or ideofunction’,⁶ a ‘thing’ existing at a certain temporal and spatial location in an interwoven web of relations. We must make a distinction between ‘utility’, an economist’s term delineating monetary worth or purpose and ‘value’, a term with cultural and emotional implications. The use of these definitions in conservation proposals must be carefully noted, otherwise there is a danger that we lose precisely the value of the object that caused us to safeguard it. The use of ‘site’ here refers to a ‘thing’ with added value, in the context of a ‘site of meaning’ encompassing the concept of an object being lived, experienced, and located in a cultural milieu.

Our reasons for conserving are varied, but all interventions are primarily value-based, as ‘value [...] makes heritage, [and] all heritage is valued for different reasons’.⁷ Sacred sites carry these values very differently from regular materials despite material similarities. This is particularly evident with regard to war goods, where value is generally increased only with clear provenance and occasionally *due* to the object’s physically deteriorated state. ‘Holocaust artefacts in particular seldom have interventive conservation’, as is clearly seen in the response of conservators to an exhibit of shoes at the United States Memorial Museum.⁸ These shoes were displayed caked in mud, accumulated only after the Holocaust. The decision was taken to clean them, as for some time this soil had been attributed by visitors to qualify events themselves, and thus acquired a false value that distorted the public view. This decision was also taken with the awareness that the retention of this attribute may distort future conservation decisions.⁹

The ‘site of memory’ must not only be focused on the past, but also on the living present. In certain cases, the vital nature of objects, perceived as ‘living’ sites of meaning require a deep awareness on the part of the conservator. Often treatments involving these objects are less involved with the ethics of conservation as the ethics of medicine, each treatment threatening life itself. However, there are also examples of repeated treatments being an integral part of sacred ritual, for example, the Japanese *Shikinen Sengu*: the painstaking and ritualised reconstruction of a sacred shrine every twenty years in an elaborate act of regeneration and sacrifice. Isao Tokoro notes that as ‘the architecture is freshly reconstructed and the religious treasures are reproduced exactly like the

originals [...] it [becomes] a new, invigorated sacred sanctuary [...] permeated with the force of everlasting youth [...] as it forms a symbiotic relationship with nature'.¹⁰ Not only is the architecture preserved despite the material frailty of the wooden shrines, the twenty-year cyclical process safeguards the traditional technologies of a nation. The definition of conservation here has radically evolved from the preservation of material to the preservation of identity.

In his study of the Mazanar National Historic Site in the United States, Frank Hays notes four different forms of interventions for artefacts, in general order of strength:¹¹ reconstruction (to reform an object after damage or destruction), restoration (to return to its former or original condition), conservation (to protect from further harm or destruction) and preservation (to maintain it in its existing state).¹² In the *Shikinen Sengu* case, restoration is certainly invasive but ritually necessary. The majority of museum artefacts do not have this same tolerance and thus '[our] intervention [...] inherently increases the risk of damage, whether that intervention is for improved stability or improved appearance'.¹³ Any action must be minimal, reversible, and stable in order to best protect objects from damage; most conservators would attempt the least invasive procedure first: preservation or conservation. Depending on the proposed usage levels of that artefact and its current condition – itself an inherent part of the artefact's meaning – the degree of this mild intervention would then be determined. The realities of limited funding in many museums often compels the prioritising of aesthetic treatment, to the detriment of structural work. This has led many conservators to develop a policy of priority lists, in which the most urgent items must be completed before any lesser aesthetic improvements.

It is interesting to note that Hays's focus is primarily on reconstruction. He argues that there are certain conditions that would allow for reconstruction: when no alternative method of accomplishing the site's mission is available and when there is sufficient data to allow accurate reconstruction. However, Hays's scale system, as Ashley-Smith points out, is fundamentally flawed:

In terms of the physical and potential chemical interaction with historic material, [restorative] actions are far less interventive than [...] supporting brittle silk by sticking or stitching [...] Indeed, when it comes to non-interventive conservation such as encapsulation [...] and turning the lights down, the effect is always to detract from the appearance of the object and reduce the amount of information it can provide.¹⁴

Ashley-Smith sought here to reconcile the opposing fields of conservation (protection of material form) and restoration (aesthetic and intellectual revelation of material form) by noting several instances in which restoration techniques for aesthetic reasons have simultaneously strengthened and stabilised an object. He further noted that the negative reputation of restoration is to some degree unjustified, as any intervention for any purpose may result in damage. Non-interventive conservation, such as limits to light levels, inevitably reduces the information available to the viewer or historian and results in intellectual and cultural value loss in the attempt to safeguard monetary or material value. Where should our loyalties lie: with the object or the viewer? How far does a museum's duty of transmission and hospitality extend?

The desire to restore a work to its original state is based on an speculative perception of that work as, for example, the preferential loss of certain colours means that such decisions often would require the complete restoration of certain faded or discoloured areas. At what point does such restorative treatment 'become a [...] misrepresentation to such a degree that it ends up being a travesty'?¹⁵ In the past, the term 'deceptive inpainting' was used in order to differentiate inpainting that appeared original to the viewer, although this term has fallen out of use with the development of ultraviolet equipment with which such additions are obvious.¹⁶ In this debate, Bill Leisher states the general consensus that:

If the element is not a part of the original work [...] it is allowable to paint over it [...] it would [not] be acceptable to scrape it off, because that is an irreversible step. By painting it over with reversible materials [...] as new evidence comes to light, the paint could be removed.¹⁷

Such debates are generally the battleground between conservators, who possess technical skill and must communicate conservation proposals and their implications to other staff members, and the curator, who attempts to ensure that all decisions are made with an understanding of historical contexts and the artist's perceived intention. Collaboration is required, otherwise sensitive objects may be at risk of falling between the divide. All decisions made fall primarily into two motivations, which rarely overlap: protecting these artefacts as 'sites of memory' and educating and entertaining the public view. As such, the appearance and display of objects affects conservation decisions, both in the present and in the future.

This subjective view is evident in a 1989 art installation in Germany by Sigrid Sigurdsson, entitled *Vor der Stille* (Before the Silence), which consisted of 'an archive [...] installed as floor-to-ceiling shelves around an entire room, filled with oversize, handmade bound books'.¹⁸ The exhibit was intended to echo Nazi archives, and thus, rather than 'celebrating the [...] potential for German unification, it apparently reopened old wounds never completely healed'.¹⁹ Sigurdsson challenged viewers to form their own archive, adding their own messages to the bound books, thereby expressing their individual experiences of the past. This exhibition illustrates the challenge faced by all those involved in museums; the creation of a balance between 'hospitality [...] what good manners demand that a site provide for its visitors [...] and] the significance of a place' of challenge, such as a war memorial or museum.²⁰ This is the same challenge faced by conservators; to what extent should an object be aesthetically pleasing, challenge, or deceive the public eye.

In this debate, we must be conscious of the educational role of a museum. Any change, minor or invasive, affects the perception of the public and scholarly eye, and in doing so, affects perceptions of the past, such as the case of the shoes noted above. However, the placement of an object in a museum context – a place of value – automatically forces the viewer to perceive the object as valuable and meaningful, and yet simultaneously draws it away from its original site and thus from any cultural, historical or material implications that site may have had. A museum label is no substitute for an object's original location. This global perspective is exactly the goal of the American Association of Museums (AAM), their mission statement asking: 'How can museums [...] help to nurture a humane citizenry equipped to make informed choices in a democracy [...] and an increasingly global society?'²¹ I believe that conservators are asking the same question when they attempt to balance potential distortion with the protection of history and its vital meaning.

This global element faces distinct challenges, however, particularly when questions are raised regarding the place of conservation in a perpetually degenerating world: is it right to extend the life of these objects beyond their normal length, and as such, should we conserve at all? Often artists have not considered – or have even avoided – the possibility of the extended preservation of their work, particularly in the last few decades, and if these objects are viewed as living is extending their lifespan ethically dubious?

We must ask why we are conserving these materials and how we choose to define these objects, now and for the future. All materials held in a museum have some form of social, geographic, religious or cultural meaning and must be treated with these in mind. The Director of the museum at Auschwitz wrote in 2006: 'Ordinary words do not fit this place. Today, it is called a memorial, a cemetery, a monument, a museum...'.²² In conserving a site of meaning we are forced to choose a definition and work to that goal. The website of the museum states that:

In view of the exceptional nature of the [Birkenau] site [...] which is above all a cemetery, no exhibitions have been situated there. An effort has been made to preserve the site in a state close to the original.²³

However, 'the museum inaccurately characterises the sanctity of Birkenau as the sole reason for the lack of facilities there [...] [In fact,] the exhibits are in the wrong place: the heartbreaking collections [...] were moved from Birkenau to Auschwitz I [shortly] after the war'.²⁴ The objects were originally moved to hide the mass graves of Birkenau. They have remained there for public ease: a distortion in aid of hospitality. Cultural memorialisation and the place of Auschwitz in history are being distorted by the misplacement of our commemorations. Physical manifestations of horror at any site, perhaps most famously the uniform First World War memorials of the Imperial War Graves

Commission, act as both a release of grief and a future warning, but when they are placed in a landscape distanced from the most of the atrocities, can they truly serve these purposes? In this case, however, while the focus of the viewer may have shifted as a result of the movement of a small number of collected objects, the buildings of the site have remained in place. As Leo Schmidt writes:

Memory clings to places and objects. Objects [...] are identified with memory. By consequence, many objects [...] have been destroyed because they stood for a painful memory whilst other buildings [...] are the focus of highly emotional debates on reconstruction.²⁵

This site, like many other sites and museums, serves as an educational tool and highlights events that could otherwise be forgotten. In this sense, conservation is far more extensive than material protection alone but reaches towards concepts of memorialisation, historical truth, and the formation of our collective identities.

In order for this memorialisation to be effective, an active, visible ‘site of memory’ is required, of whatever size, as ‘the aura of a thing [...] is not intrinsic [...] but must be constituted in performance’, in how an object is displayed.²⁶ Historical distortion is a question of theatrics; to what extent do we display or reconstitute the gaps and damage of these ‘sites of memory’ in order to fill the voids of silence? Our speech will always be distorted and flawed, but does this pressure us not to speak? When only fragments of an object remain, should these fragments be reformed or allowed to crumble? In the case of the Berlin wall, only a few fragments remain, yet ‘the Berlin border is a landscape of memory offering many chances of discoveries’.²⁷ Schmidt continues: ‘this emptiness [...] must be seen as a component part of the monumental entity [...] Even an emptiness can claim to be [...] of ‘cultural significance’.²⁸ Thus, in the case of a fragmented object, the fact of its fragmentation may be of value in a museum setting as this indicates the extent of its use and value to the culture that produced it.

These gaps, whether physical or in memory, are defined by their position, shape and dimensions; their borders. Any reconstructed object ought to reveal its flaws and fragments as these gaps and borders contain an element of its past heritage. It is not the place of a conservator to define the permanent prospective view of an object, regardless of its current fragmented state.

Finally, I shall consider the ethical dilemma surrounding Schulz’s murals, which were removed from their original site in Drohobych, Poland, to Yad Vashem Institute, Jerusalem. These murals were seized quickly and sections of the mural were removed before the entire work had been uncovered, fragmenting the work. Furthermore, ‘the paintings look much better than before [...] which arises the suspicion that the restorers have simply added missing fragments.’²⁹ However, according to Yad Vashem, the murals could have been damaged if they remained in Drohobych. Here, the question of value again comes to the fore. ICOM principle 6.7. calls on museums to ‘promote well-being’,³⁰ but in this scenario, whose well-being is preferential – the Jewish museum seeking to memorialise those who perished during the Holocaust or the Polish people, who see Schulz as a unifying national symbol? Furthermore, the destruction of the murals presumably lowers the value of the work in both an art historical and financial sense, and may work against the ideal view of museums as places where people can ‘be inspired, one object at a time [...] to be led from beauty to justice by a lateral distribution of caring’.³¹

Conservation, therefore, should serve as this caring element; each carefully protected artefact leading those who experience it towards an aesthetic ethic which they are encouraged to transmit into the rest of their world. If an object is deceptively restored, the viewer is given a glimpse through time but is restricted from seeing the implications of the fragmentation of that object on the present world, and thus may not garner an understanding of the fragility of existence and their place in its comprehension and protection. Conservators are Robin Hood figures, ‘minor players in safeguarding [...] the Memory of the World entrusted to them’, holding some responsibility for both our contemporary view of the past and our view of the future.³² Any intervention must be minimal, reversible, and stable, thus maintaining the place of our heritage in a current and future sphere of influence. The gaps and distortions of memory and value for aesthetic purposes are unavoidable, but can be tempered by the ability of museum staff to make these artefacts relevant to the present

day. Conservation consists of people, who seek, and indeed ought to seek to make a difference, to make things literally matter. Herein lies the rebellion of the conservator.

NOTES

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8. Helen Evans, 'Royal College of Art: Helen Evans PhD Statement', <<http://www.rca.ac.uk/Default.aspx?ContentID=156956&CategoryID=36646>> [accessed 18 March 2009].
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