

Inconvenient questions and the question of neutrality

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Abstract This paper challenges concepts and approaches that may seem to be taken for granted in conservation. Access to collections is not always better and neither is keeping things for longer: there is nothing absolute in conservation decisions. Just as reversibility, minimal intervention and re-treatability are all valuable concepts, none of them are universally required. The main focus of this paper is on the concept of keeping things for longer and asks why this has become a subtle but ubiquitous virtue for conservation. By opening up our existing values for examination, we create space to ask: what values are not consistently underpinning our work? Conservators' ethical codes have begun to include sustainability as a decision-making criteria but this must go beyond the selection and recycling of materials. How are social sustainability, social justice, equity and inclusion represented in conservation decisions? Are these issues central? How do we navigate a decision if 'restitution' and 'keeping or caring' appear to be in conflict?

Introduction

Imagine a friend had been photographed by their partner in 'a compromising position' but after a messy separation that partner decided to share it among all their friends and sent you a copy. What would be your first response? It would probably sit somewhere on the spectrum between calling the police to try to get it stopped to calling your friend to find out if you could help to undo the harm that this widespread access to the image had caused. I suspect no reader is thinking, 'How do I share this photograph a bit better to make it more accessible?'

My next example is from Dan Hicks's book *The Brutish Museum* (2020) in which he documents in meticulous and painful detail the acquisition process of the Benin bronzes by UK and European museums, citing documents of the time explaining how objects were 'acquired'. This short account describes one of the attacks on the ancient city of Benin that preceded items being transported to collectors and museums in the UK. Take a moment to reflect on the quote:

Captain Gallway of the East Lancashire regiment [was] sent on a political mission in 1892. Four years later a larger mission under Consul Phillips, was attacked on its way up from the coast, and the majority of the party were massacred. This outrage led to the dispatch of a military expedition, which destroyed Benin city, and made accessible to students of ethnography the interesting works of native art that form the subject of the following page (Hicks 2020: 6).

How do you feel about a massacre that led to making artefacts and records more accessible to students of ethnography? Implicit in this statement is of course the unstated bias that students of ethnography would be located in the UK. How do you feel about the person making the photograph more accessible?

This example differs only from the looting of Ge'ez manuscripts from Ethiopia (described later) by the materials that were looted: the violence, the refusal to return and the appropriation of cultural and intellectual heritage by Western countries at the expense of the originating communities is depressingly similar (Woldeyes 2020). Access to such documents in European institutions represents a lack of access to them in communities from which they were removed; in this case, access is harmful.

Making things more accessible is one of those things that may feel like universal good within our sector, but I would argue it is just one option. In common with any other option, it has good and bad aspects. A decision to support greater access, like any other conservation decision, should be 'informed by an assessment of consequences' (Icon 2020).

No simple rules

These examples are not particularly challenging – I imagine they barely present an ethical or moral dilemma for most professionals – but what they show is that collecting objects and creating access to them does not represent inherent good. Without understanding who wishes to have access and what they will gain from it – and indeed who else might have a stake in the decision – we cannot assume that access is a positive outcome. Some have described conservation as perpetuating a problematic 'no touch' culture (Smith 2021), but the solutions offered are sometimes an equal oversimplification. Counterposing a 'no access' approach with a 'full access' approach replaces one procedure with another without inquiry into the context of the decision. Just as there is no widely accepted conservation code that states no one can use collections, neither is there one that offers a conservation route to giving all access to all people under any circumstance. Decisions should be 'governed by thorough understanding of the item and its significance, including its tangible and intangible qualities' (Icon 2020).

As a profession, conservation has become more comfortable acknowledging that our decisions reside in a social and cultural context. We recognise that we have the chance – should we choose to take it – to examine context as we plan, undertake and review our conservation practice. I would argue that a further shift in practice is still needed. To start to help unpack our perspectives we can question apparently instinctive truths of conservation such as reversibility, cleaning, minimal intervention, discreet repairs and conservators working quietly in the background. By throwing a light on the decisions that we currently make, and the criteria that inform them, we create a space and opportunity to ask which decisions we do not actively process and which decision-making criteria are not being factored into our thinking.

The decision to clean a document is a statement about the relative value of the layers of time represented on it. It is a decision reflecting a judgement that the events that brought

the ‘contamination’ to the surface devalues our current or perhaps future use of the object. Yet how is such a decision formed? Looking back over my own career, I could identify situations where the pH of the contaminant, its chemical composition or its disfigurement of the surface aesthetic have been cited as reasons for cleaning. Reasons for leaving a layer tended to be pragmatic, such as a lack of time for conservation or to retain the stability created by a patina. I rarely heard of reasons for leaving a contaminant such as to record the neglect, the abandonment, heavy use, involvement in an event or process. There are always exceptional cases: Jackie Kennedy’s pink jacket (Horyn 2013) or the retention of paint on the Colston statue (Bristol Museums 2021), for example, but so much ‘cleaning’ is routinised. Whether removing dust from documents or mud from archaeological finds, these routinised actions stem from a practice that is not always reflective. Understandably so when you have a backlog of tasks, and your role is seen as technical and separate from archival or curatorial practice.

Perspective

In engaging in a discussion about neutrality and bias, I believe it is important to acknowledge my own. I can offer my own perspective which I fully acknowledge to be one of privilege: that of a white academic working in a university predominantly on the culture and heritage of Wales and their associated institutions. I believe that you could and should seek and consider perspectives other than your own. To start this process requires that you question your assumptions and that you ask difficult questions about things you hold to be self-evident, such as:

- Does this document need to be ‘cleaned’ or repaired?
- Is it important to keep this?
- If an action will accelerate the decay of the tangible aspects is this against conservation principles?
- Am I or should I be an advocate for this thing?
- Do I imagine myself as the spokesperson for this artefact and if so, may I be denying or talking over someone else’s voice?

Conservators act to care for objects so it can be tempting to think of ourselves as their advocates. Borrowing from medical analogy: a medical professional who fails to listen to those who speak for the patient allows their technical knowledge to override all other relevant factors and this is a problem we can all recognise.

The business of serving the vision and mandate of an employing organisation and addressing important societal questions or issues should not stop at the entrance to the conservation studio. The challenge of decolonisation goes beyond acquisitions, interpretation labels and retention strategies. Inclusion, access and engagement by conservators could offer so much more than a ‘behind the scenes’ trip to the conservation laboratory to look in awe at the miraculous near-imperceptible repairs. The

challenge of decolonisation, equity and exclusion could be factored into all of our conservation decisions.

Decisions in context

Having established that conservation actions can never be separated from context, and therefore decisions must be informed by it, we liberate ourselves for a full examination of our practice. We give ourselves permission to ask difficult questions. Collecting items and looking after them cannot be separated from how they came to be in our sphere of influence. The present condition is material evidence for how things are used now and informs how they could be used in the future. The most apparently neutral conservation sentiment – honouring only the material, focusing on condition and decay and not on what the object itself is – is in fact entirely political. This reductionist approach ignores the value and significance ascribed to an object while simultaneously failing to examine any power imbalances behind its current status. The purely materialist approach silences all voices other than the technical speaker cloaked in an imagined but entirely illusory neutrality. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the decisions we make in conservation are political – even the simple decision to conserve.

Do we have to keep things?

An assumption that conservation could examine is ‘Why do we keep things?’, and is it a conservator's duty to help to keep things for as long as possible? Between collecting institutions there will be a crossing of boundaries as to who should collect and keep an item. A politician's personal archive could go to the record office in their constituency or to a national collection, a rapid response collection that seeks to capture an event as it unfolds could go to the archive or the museum, and a collection representing a conflict could be wanted by ‘both sides’ to support their narratives. In the UK, museums have struggled to articulate a rationale for retaining items acquired under duress, and still deploy the ‘we care for it best’ defence. There are many layers of discussion and debate around the right of individuals or institutions to collect and retain items. People will have a sense that some objects ‘belong to the nation’ and as such feel that all interactions with them should be mediated and managed by professionals on behalf of the nation. This might apply to an archaeological site, historic document, historic building or work of art. Where the state or large organisation holds collections on behalf of the public, then actions to care for and manage the collections held within them are affected by the history of acquisition and retention. In disputes about the correct geographical place to hold, exhibit, use or even rebury something, conservation has far more to offer than simply statements about how to keep it. In the context of museums refusing to return looted artefacts, an argument has been made that the investment of resources in keeping an object mediates against restitution of that item to the people from whom it was stolen. The act of conservation and care has been used as a counterpoint to original ownership and means of acquisition, however brutal.

Conservators need an approach to decision-making that they can carry through from the simplest to the most complex of the challenges that they will face in their careers. A technician-style implementation of instructions will never equip a professional conservator to consider the conflicting and possibly changing demands that can exist for an object or record. There is no objective conservation decision if custodianship is contested. Writing about the looting of manuscripts from Ethiopia, Woldeyes (2020) describes their retention in European institutions as ‘Epistemic Violence’, stating that the manuscripts in European collections are ‘dead artefacts of the past to be preserved for prosperity’, a state which he contrasts with their original purpose as ‘living sources of knowledge that should be put to use in their intended contexts’. With these words Woldeyes offers a compelling narrative that retention in high specification environments in Europe represents the death – the removal of all purpose – of the manuscripts. Only restitution will see these documents return to life. In this context, no act of integrated pest management or relative humidity control will extend their life: such practices would simply serve to extinguish knowledge that can only emerge from the graveyard by their return.

A question of lifetimes

For much of my early career as a conservator, I saw my relationship with decay and preservation as slowing down the rate of loss to extend the amount of time that an object could last. My responsibility as a conservator was to extend the time that value was retained for use. Such a conception privileges the continuity and maintenance of the status quo. The growth of the #MuseumsAreNotNeutral movement,¹ and the evident need to extend this to conservation, made me question how conservators could make a positive experience from use and engagement that did not compromise our ethics or contradict our previous advocacy about care, thus undermining our credibility. This drew me to the concept of broadening the conservator’s responsibility from extending lifetimes to extending life experiences (Henderson 2020). This is not a rejection of preservation principles – simply an extension of them to incorporate beneficiaries other than future users. Conservation practice need not simply be about making something last longer but may equally involve the careful, detailed and informed practice that ensures someone has a better experience when engaging with the cultural heritage, the culture, the record, now. The people of the future are not inherently more important than the users of today. Non-users of today may represent groups of people excluded from an aspect of cultural heritage that is valuable to them whether they find the connection to be difficult or joyous. The opportunities of conservation may serve to increase the lifetime of items or to create greater opportunities for use (Icon 2020).

The move to decolonise collections has rightly called on organisations to address past failings, and this redress must include the option of restitution. Restitution means that the professional staff, including conservators, will have no agency over the care of a returned thing. This need not negate all past work to care for collections: informed conservation can offer the most thoughtful support to the next step, sometimes intended

to extend the lifetime, sometimes to extend the life experience. Reburial, censorship and even destruction may all, in some contexts, represent the most life-enhancing path for the material records of our past. Accepting that extending the lifetime of a record may only be one of the decision-making criteria, and not the dominant one, allows us to examine what other criteria should be factored into our decisions.

Use vs preservation?

Use is sometimes posed as being in conflict with preservation, that conservators must navigate a pathway between use and preservation. For this argument even to be conceived requires that one use is acknowledged but another is not. A schoolchild feeling the weight of a water carrier, an archer picking up a bow, or the victim of a tragedy holding the papers of a lost loved one all interact with things to learn and to recreate and connect with past events through a physical relationship. This is cast as 'use' within the sector, unlike a painting hanging on a wall which is being used as art, or an archaeological soil sample languishing on a basement shelf that is being used as a resource for someone who may one day wish to examine it for snail shells. There is a concept of consumption that masks our concept of use. Keeping a painting on a wall or a sample for analysis is perceived as an act of protection that carries moral good in comparison to handling, which is consumption now. Yet the light with which we illuminate the art 'consumes' its light ration and samples can degrade if analysis is not performed swiftly. Whether an object is in storage or taken on a school visit, these are all forms of use that we should recognise. Conservation cannot exist outside of this totality, so there is no preservation versus use – only forms of preservation and forms of use. Identifying that all states are a form of use enables the conservator to make decisions accountable by identifying whose use, for what purpose, and when.

Fundamental ethics

It is sometimes said that conservators of different materials have different ethical approaches because of their discipline – and even that there are different ethics defined by the material nature of the objects on which conservators work. I would argue that conservators can and should have a recognisable and mappable process that considers evidence and accountability, and that this process can be defined for the whole of our relatively small profession.

I do not believe that objects, documents, art or archaeology reside in fixed categories of being: there will be differences in materials, their composition and decay, and stakeholders may ask for different things, but ultimately the cultural heritage exists in its material or immaterial form to contribute to identity, meaning and purpose of people within a society. Archives, records or museum objects do not exist simply as tokens, tangible things or data. What is just data to one person could offer an important emotional connection to another. What represents the victory of British imperialism to one collector may represent a pinnacle of artistic creation to another or the symbol of

the destruction of their community to support colonial gains. The transference of a poster from a lamppost, to a private collector, to a record office transfers most of the materiality while the social meaning of the poster transforms drastically. It is the context that shapes decisions rather than the materials. The conservation decisions if faced with a Benin bronze as described by Dan Hicks or the Ge'ez manuscripts described by Woldeyes (2020) would have far more in common than an understanding of collection type would indicate. In this case, the materials and decay must be placed in the context of acquisition and retention. For professional practice, a reflective approach is required to define the profession.

Decision-making

When I started practising conservation my first concerns were, 'what was this made of and how will it decay' and 'what treatment alternatives are there and how would I choose'? When I started teaching, I would look at an object and know how I would conserve it, but I would also realise that the students did not: my choice was to be a teacher who either told them what to do, leading to technician-level outputs, or to teach them how to frame their own decision-making and choices to deliver professional outcomes. If a student came to me with a torn document that they proposed repairing with Japanese tissue paper and a cellulose ether, or a broken ceramic that they suggested adhering with Paraloid B72, I would ask why they have made that decision, and what factors and whose needs have they considered. This might lead to three hours, three days or even three weeks' worth of work before they return to me with the answers and the continued recommendation for the Japanese tissue paper, which I could then approve. Being a professional conservator is not about using the right adhesive – it is about our decision-making processes. Just as we are no more or less professional if we enable or ban touching of our collection, the use of wheat starch paste is not the definitive characteristic of professional practice; it is understanding how that wheat starch paste was chosen.

How do we make decisions?

I do not believe that the conservation profession currently offers a full disclosure policy to decision-making. We are prepared to share decision trees and flowcharts which represent a small part of how we make decisions. But most decisions made by people are heuristic, that is, decisions that we make without thinking about them (Henderson and Waller 2016). If we continuously operate decision-making without insight, then we will not even notice the factors which played into our decisions. Mike Murawskia reminds us that 'White supremacy thrives within this tyranny of the universal, the neutral, the apolitical, the fair and balanced, and the objective.'² Conservation must question the neutral, the objective and the balanced, and this requires informed and thoughtful practice. In conservation we are familiar with the concept of reflective practice: of undertaking a systematic and rigorous process to develop self-awareness about our performance in undertaking conservation. We may also wish to consider

setting a greater ambition of operating a deeper process of reflexive practice, through which we examine our own perceptions and make them more widely available for scrutiny. In making our decisions we must recognise the limits of our own expertise and seek and acknowledge the expertise of those who have a stake in the objects on which we work.

Conservators of values

I would argue that conservators do not conserve things as much as they conserve the values that those things represent: we conserve the way that people connect to other people and experiences via things, whether objects, artefacts or records. Valuing is an inherently human process. Values do not exist aside from the people who ascribe them. Values can be multiple or contradictory and they may change over time. This leads us to a challenging and uncertain situation of trying to acknowledge that what we are conserving is its intangible existence that is neither singular nor fixed. This is much harder than knowing what something is made of and its decay mechanisms. The benefit of conserving values is that it creates a clear pathway to start to discuss issues such as social inequality, sustainability, injustice and harm, but also joy, opportunity or love within our practice.

I have discussed elsewhere with Ellie Sweetnam (Sweetnam and Henderson 2021) the idea of making conservation repairs that are not intended to be neutral but to represent a story about how the damage occurred. Just as kintsugi, the Japanese technique of making repairs with gold, serves as a reminder to celebrate the flaws and missteps of life, we can ask questions beyond materiality in our benchwork. Conservation practice which is focused on the conservation of values and connections must centre the human needs represented by all the iterations of a thing captured in its current form. Such centring puts human concerns into the heart of conservation decision-making. Issues such as social justice, sustainable development and equity can sit with more familiar issues of materials composition and decay, but reside in the decision-making process. The challenge for practising conservators is to take the time to recognise these complex, challenging and sometimes changing factors, and give them the credence they deserve. It is all too easy to fall back on the measurable while ignoring the important.

Conclusions

Conservation is neither neutral nor representative (Durant 2020), and an examination of who we serve, where we work and the collections on which we work will inform our efforts to change that. We can start by asking ourselves whether what we assume to be safe, default or good represents the continuation of the status quo, the normalising of how things are, and the pressure to continue with more of the same. I believe that if we, as conservators, want to have an effective presence in the wider cultural and creative sector, we need to examine our practice. We must question our practice if we are talking about ethics as a way to avoid people connecting and as an excuse for exclusion. In my

view, access to cultural heritage is a right and should not remain the prerogative of the privileged. If we want the future to look different, then what will we change?

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Notes

1. See <https://www.museumsarenotneutral.com/>.
2. *Ibid.*

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