

The dress and the power of redress

By Jane Henderson

Yes, I was surprised by the decision to allow the Munroe “naked” dress to be worn to the Met Gala last month. [Others](#) have offered a more detailed critique of this situation, but what followed was a very public debate on historic costumes, conservation, museums and the power of artefacts to inspire. I was therefore sad to see the [ICOM Costume Committee’s](#) rather stark response to the situation that stated, “historic garments should not be worn by anybody”.

A mature profession must be able to offer nuance, to hear, consider and integrate context into its practice. Ethical codes should offer us principles rather than rule books, and to have global application, they must be tested internationally. Although the ICOM Costume Committee offered this as a statement, it was set in the context of the ICOM code of ethics. There are questions to ask to unpack the statement. First a simple one: what is a historic garment? Many families carry clothing between generations, whether it is a christening gown, a piece of lace from one wedding dress to another or—in my family’s case—a child’s kilt passed between family members according to fit. Private people have the right to share, wear and adapt their things. Some things should be in a museum.

The act of placing objects in a recognised museum formalises a decision that the thing has a social or cultural value—that it speaks to and from people. Preserving that value requires people to identify what makes the item significant and then work to carry that forward to a display, to a researcher, to a descendent or to a curious stranger. A museum might collect a historic garment to represent a culture, an industry, a horrific moment, or the height of technical and artistic expression. The use society makes of that garment is located both now and in an unknown future; we cannot know how the future will respond to these things. Conservators attempt to preserve the fabric as well as we can to maximise the possibilities of a relationship with it.

As has been pointed out by [Puawai Cains](#) of Te Papa in New Zealand, keeping garments unworn is not always appropriate. Some garments are held in museums with agreement from donors that they can be used for events, others have been recognised as having been separated from their communities by colonial collecting. Wearing garments can be part of a preservation strategy if this maintains and enhances significance. Unfortunately, conservation practice in the past has been associated with stifling an object. We have treated costumes with toxic chemicals, we have labelled and pinned objects to fix an offensive ideology to them. We should invest our ethics in preserving the meaning of a thing. Sometimes this will be in a glass case and sometimes it will be through engagement with other senses—including touch—to reveal composition, form or motion or to connect the tangible to living practices. Conservators work to prevent tears, strain and fading, but this practice can and should sit beside human connection, which might necessitate touch or another sensation. Our ethical challenge is to find words that speak to a consistent and rigorous practice which also adapts to context.

When we insist on “cotton glove” conservation, we are creating a ritual performance, a ritual that speaks of control. Some museum representatives have insisted that however an object was acquired, whatever the context or violence or violation, their act of “caring” cleanses that history and provides absolution. It does not. For some garments cotton gloves can pose a threat to their tangible elements. This is common conservation knowledge, making such language a continuation of practices of power, control and exclusion.

Conservators must be very clear what respect looks like. Respect requires us to draw up ethical principles that have a validity across cultures and peoples. It requires us to understand the meaning of objects and to know this can change and originate from many people. Respect requires us to learn and attend to expert knowledge about the intangible and tangible aspects of a thing. Respect requires listening and sharing; it requires humility and revision. When we make statements about how conservation should be done, we must start from a baseline of considering whose voices are being heard.

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