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Can objects die and if so who decides? A conversation with @LJaneHenderson and @OriginalLizz <https://www.icon.org.uk/news/can-objects-die-and-if-so-who-decides/>

Can objects die and if so who decides?

This blog flows from an online discussion in August which engaged the twitterati from around the world. Thanks to the many contributors. In this blog Jane Henderson **JH** of Cardiff University and Lizz Thrasher **LT** of the Diefenbunker Museum develop the points a little further in conversation.

**JH** Recently a Cardiff Uni student Catherine Fairless, was working on a significance statement for an object in very poor condition. It raised the question when do objects have no value left and who calls it? Or put another way 'can objects die?'

As conservators we are used to discussing the value of objects, whether social, cultural knowledge or experience. Many erudite papers and books explore the topic. We are good at measuring loss in value, we can count our just noticeable fades, quantify the fraction susceptible and the loss in value. What is the point at which this crystalizes into total loss? Conservators are well placed to call the future of materials, silk shattered by light, leather crumbling with rot, plastic curling and oozing, but can we say 'there is nothing left here'? This cannot be a decision made without consultation: owners, custodians and the community might have views about preserving the last fragments of a relic or retouching and replacing to continue the spirit of an item. Is there a point when no one speaks up for the use or retention of the object and the treatment is so complex or intense and the outcomes so limited that we say there is no point going on and that this object is 'dead'?

**LT** There are objects that are beyond salvation: usually those that already contain an element of inherent vice that precludes any long term stability. The painful reality is that space and budget restraints mean that we have to decide where resources are best spent.

Where an object would represent a sizeable expenditure in treatment or specialized storage, **and** when most information as to its importance or construction is lost, then yes, it is 'dead'.

Theoretically, there might be some use in making an object of that nature part of a 'study collection' or giving it over to research, but I think that we have to be ready and able to say "There is nothing I can do."

This is not a decision that is made lightly. And even once it is made, extensive documentation should be undertaken, to preserve what little information that may remain. The decision must be made between conservators, curators and the community, but conservators, are best able to address the needs of the object, the likely outcome, and the practical reality.

It is somewhat disheartening to make this decision, but it is necessary. It's not something that we are particularly trained for, or even something that is really discussed. Although it might feel like an admission of defeat, it is better viewed as a way of moving forward with treatments and projects that are more viable.

**JH** So if there is an end point and we are an essential part of the team what is the basis on which we make the decision? Lizz mentioned that we don't talk about this much as a profession. Conservation is a sociocultural process and related to more than the tangible. It is the conservation of value (or significance) that we aim for, and that value is expressed by people. In making a decision that an object is dead can we ever consult with all of the current stakeholders and or represent the views of future users? Is there a cultural bias in those whose opinions we seek out? When working with first people's collections we can look back on past decision-making and see that we failed to ask or understand a different perspective on preservation. As Lex Townsend asked, are there things we were not aware of because we did not ask? While we are asking can objects have different (non-monetary) values that mean that there is no presumption that they should all be treated equally? Lastly, if we are essential to the decision to 'call it a day', do we have any ethical or practical guidance? Does any organisation have criteria for disposal based on condition beyond the basic statements of disposal policies<sup>i</sup>

**LT:** According to my training, objects on the bench are treated equally, without regard for tangible or intangible value. Conservation has to be purely objective. Objects are material X, created by process Y. My job (as I see it) is to treat the object so that the core information it contains (form, function, material and technique) can be interpreted by curatorial and community members.

However, once the core information represented by the object has been obscured or lost due to hopelessly irreversible degradation or damage, then interventive treatment is no longer an option, and preventative care and stabilization are all that remain as courses of action. In extreme cases, stabilization and preventative care will be unsuccessful as well.

This is where I feel that the decision to declare the object "dead" becomes open for discussion with curatorial staff and the members of the relevant cultural communities.

Ultimately, we are stewards, not owners. Consultation with the relevant cultural community is key. We should be prepared to explain the situation with the object and be able to work with the cultural community to honour the object's significance. And I think this could be facilitated in a variety of ways depending on the cultural community and its traditions. And I think that this is one area where the use of sympathetic reconstructions is warranted.

Is it possible to consult with everyone and cover all contingencies and concerns? Most likely, no. But I think a careful and extensive documentation could act as a failsafe. Technologically we are better prepared to do this than we have been in the past.

Are there formal guidelines and procedures? I am not aware of any. I'd be interested in any information on that topic. I do think that it is a discussion that needs to happen, especially in view of the increasing presence of more diverse materials in collections.

**JH** When considering the future or lack of future for an object I believe that objectivity has only a limited value. Yes, we can predict the survival of a material like cellulose with some precision but without knowing what an object is for or how it is valued we cannot expect a good decision-making process. I agree with Lizz that more discussions of the principles and process of disposal and the end of value would be useful. In the meantime, I don't think we can say that an object has died, only that it currently has no discernible value and we will no longer care for it.

Tweets that I would like to refer to

<https://twitter.com/cefairless/status/784140723130073088?s=20>

**Catherine Fairless @cefairless**

This significance assessment is making me feel like Pontius Pilate. It's like signing a death warrant for an innocent object [#hellforleather](#)

**Lex Townsend @abouthalfthree Aug 17**

When significance assessment describes value in context of collection it reproduces ignorances /absences in collection. Overlooks things

**ProtectHeritage @ProtectHeritage**

**@abouthalfthree @LJaneHenderson @Conservators uk** Is there value in unobservable parts of our universe? In alternate multiverses? Not to us.

- 18 Aug 2016

<https://twitter.com/LJaneHenderson/status/776393201640845316?s=20>

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<sup>i</sup> Items that are damaged or deteriorated beyond the museum's ability to repair There may be items that are damaged beyond the museum's ability to repair them and therefore are unable to be used. Such items may be considered for disposal. Things to consider

- is the item beyond repair?
- what would be the cost of conserving/ repairing the item?
- is the cost of conserving and repairing the item within the resources of the museum?
- is another owner, such as a specialist or enthusiasts' group better able to use or repair the item