

DISRUPTIVE CONSERVATION IN THE MATERIAL TRANSMISSION OF PAST TO FUTURE

Authors:

ELEANOR SWEETNAM, JANE HENDERSON

Affiliation:

The International Institute for Conservation for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works.
Professor of Conservation, Cardiff University, GB

INTRODUCTION

When objects move into museums, the location and nature of their associated power shifts. For example, a confederate statue may be removed from the public square and placed in a museum to ‘neutralise’ its symbolism. The symbolism of the statue is mediated by this curated public space, and the power shifts and changes in form, passing in some form to the museum impacting on all acts of its operations from the staff to its reputation. When an object is ‘collected’ during an imperial conquest that transference is not simply a matter of the location of the art but rather it is symbolic of the destruction of a culture and the dominance of another.¹ Removing the power of association of things to place is a symbol of control and domination and is an act intimately connected with colonialism. Museums use objects to transmit stories, when those stories tell stories of violence and oppression those who work in museums must consider this in their actions.

CONSERVATION IN THE TRANSMISSION OF PAST TO FUTURE

Conservation is ‘the measures taken to extend the life of cultural heritage while strengthening transmission of its significant heritage messages and values’.² Conservation is practiced in the present with the intent of supporting the transmission of value from past to present and future users. In most cases conservation will involve actions that change the tangible manifestation of the object. A challenge for those of us working in the heritage sector is to examine our practice both personally and on behalf of a wider professional community to consider our impact.³ Conservators care for scientific and heritage collections in museums through active means – intervening on objects and passive means by intervening on the environment around objects.

Much of the discussion of conservation practice considers the tangible impact that is had on objects. As our work shapes the way that an object transitions into the future such examination is justified. However, much of this examination holds a focus on the tangible and measurable changes with less focus on the intangible. We believe that the language and approach of conservation as benign or neutral helps avoid the difficult examination of how conservation expresses the power of the museum and in downplaying the often-violent stories that are associated with objects kept within them. As such, a metaphor that will be used in this paper to examine the neutrality of conservation, is of a broken and repaired ceramic vessel. Museum visitors will be able to conjure up an image of an archetypal ceramic repair, perhaps a terracotta ceramic body with missing parts filled with a beige conspicuous in its ‘neutrality’.

NEUTRALITY AND THE MUSEUM

‘Museums are not neutral in their preservation of history. In fact, arguably, they are sites of forgetfulness and fantasy.’⁴ As such, they must be viewed as political spaces, for many their histories and collections are based on the colonial practices so actions taken by those in the Institutions can and often do continue the perpetuation of this colonialisation. Even something that can be considered the foundation of museums, the ‘keeping’ of objects, symbolises a political act and one that is often in conflict with the meanings or origin especially where its value lies in its decay.⁵ We cannot continue with the ideology that objects which represent a harmful or damaging past have no effects upon the present day.⁶ While museums may claim an objective or neutral stance on certain storylines and approach to our historical narrative, the conservation, curation, and presentation take on almost a propagandist like approach.⁷ This apparently neutral practice is exclusionary – often not ‘overt or conscious’⁸ – but one that perpetuates the continue of harmful stereotypes that materialised via colonialisation.⁹ When we begin to question the broader concept of the museum environment, we can also transition this line of questioning into the role of specific functions of the museum, and as such encourage the creation of both responses and outcomes that do not typically conform with the most common current approaches.

TRANSITIONING THROUGH TIME

When an object moves through spatio-temporal dimensions, having originated from its raw concept (‘In the beginning there was clay’¹⁰), to its physical form, through use and discovery to acknowledgement and display, it accumulates multiples value and significances. Conservation acknowledges that change is constant¹¹ – it is not only material and chemical changes that happen to the physical object but a multitude of values, significances and relationships that accumulate and shift. The museum can be seen as both a ‘womb and tomb’¹²; when the object is imprisoned within its glass case, it dies and is then reincarnated into an object of our choosing. Whilst the things we place in museums accrued and changed their meanings becoming associated with complex and fluid histories¹³ when it enters the collection is labelled and placed within the glass case of the museum it ‘freezes’¹⁴, becoming permanently frozen in its determined state. The material and contextual transition from past to future is halted within its present – the stratifications of time and interchanging values become concrete. Forcing the past to perform a static existence in the present can be described as the ‘dominant interpretation’¹⁵ which has the ability to ‘overwhelm other interpretations and discourses integral to its layered significance’.¹⁶ Within built heritage formal recognition through listing performs the same function. Attempts to define how a place conforms to recognised universal values fixes a single static identity, ‘in creating universal narratives, conservation steps away from the messy, multiplicity of stories and stakeholders at the heart of the heritage creating process’.¹⁷

Our unexamined treatment methodologies and approaches, such as the use of a beige fill on the ceramic vessel creates a ‘forgery of the original’.¹⁸ The ‘neutral’ interventions presents a singular narrative of the object’s true life reducing the evidence of the conservator’s interpretation and creating a false alignment for the viewer. This supports the continuation and perpetuation of the dangerous and harmful narratives of oppression¹⁹ that exist within the museums power dynamic. When objects become recognised as changeable entities²⁰, conservation should be able to mould itself with these shifts, both material and contextual, and provide a structure that allows the object to perform as whole.

NEUTRALITY AND CONSERVATION

The conservator's role is to comprehend the materiality and significance of an object to prevent decay while also enhancing the understanding of them.²¹ Often presented as neutral choices, even work that is presented as *behind the scenes* is always shaped by context. It is through their responsibility and ultimately, their power, that the conservator determines how the object can be understood by the viewer. When the decision-making process deems conservation a necessary undertaking, it is the conservator who determines how that object will be and which notion(s) of the past are passed on.²² These acts seen through the piecing together of a story hidden away in the body of an object, places us within this power struggle. How can conservators decide on strategies without acknowledgment of these struggles and the contexts of their own specific working practices?

The social and cultural environment within the museum is complex and, in many museums, the colonial legacies reign supreme in shaping their presentation, interpretation and management.²³ Hölling's position is that the archive can be used as tool in deciphering cultural, social and political orders²⁴, but we can also translate this into our understanding of objects. Museums normally contain thousands if not millions of objects whereas conservators who treat those objects will normally treat 10s or 100s in a year. There is a selection process in what we do, and this means that the very nature of what we conserve is a political act.²⁵ Accordingly, the decision making and treatment options we choose are also political.

Balachandran argues that conservators hide behind their benches, and that this has gone unchallenged for too long.²⁶ The terminology used by conservators allows us to frame our work as benign. We conceal ourselves and absolve ourselves of the consequences of our actions behinds words such as 'reversible', 'identifiable' and 'minimal' when we know deep down that our impact may never fulfil any of these aims. Even if an adhesive can be reversed, the surface that was cleaned before it was applied cannot be uncleaned, the dust once removed cannot be replaced. By engaging in the performative ethics such as 'minimal intervention', we can create an illusion that we are not part of this object's life or create an outcome detectable only by a select few. Yet all our decisions in practice will be represented in the material truth of the object so conservation is always present. The issue is whether that presence is acknowledged. Through our collective self-deception we avoid acknowledgment of the tangibilisation of our decisions and accordingly fail to answer or address our political stance in the being of this object in this moment.

Conservators are expected to intervene in heritage objects, they must decide for example, what percentage of adhesive to use for a repair or determine optimum and acceptable light levels in a gallery or the co-location of items within a box in a store. All these decisions are linked to power and control. It is these decisions which will affect whether an object will be on display, who has access to it and what form it will take. Each of these choices is an exertion of power and none of them are independent of the pathways by which the object arrived in their care. Traditionally staff in collections management have comforted themselves with their neutrality on wider political questions and have rendered this in practice with choices that sound benign.²⁷ By removing ourselves from any discussion about stories of control we have removed ourselves from responsibility and avoided spaces where we can be critical²⁸ both via action (such as a neutral gap-fill in an archaeological vessel) or stance (as with the museum labelling).

A QUESTION OF NEUTRALITY: THE NEUTRAL FILL

Consider a broken roman ceramic vessel on display, its dusky salmon fragments held together by network of reversible adhesive and the lacunae – pieces lost through time and space – filled in with a tonally lighter colour. Conservators' actions are governed by ethical frameworks developed over the years by various national and international professional bodies. Within the codes our relationship with objects is often described using terminology such as 'respect', 'authenticity' and 'integrity', terms

which lack a common meaning.²⁹ This semantic uncertainty results in people citing common codes of ethic to guide very different practices. The vocabulary within some of our principles such as reversibility and minimal intervention also paint conservators as an impartial cog³⁰ in a politically neutral process. Minimal intervention, as an example, is a philosophical notion referring to the idea that our interventions should be kept to ‘an absolute minimum’.³¹ Yet paradoxically there are no clear definitions of it within conservation Charters.³² The implementation of these principles that manifest themselves as ‘silent’³³ (Phillips, D. 1997) or neutral, designed to be as unobtrusive as possible, have become a synonym for good practice.³⁴ This (dis)honesty of decision-making and intervention denies the viewer a truthful alignment of not only past and present but also of its future.

Question the implication of a hot-pink coloured replacement section. The creation of such a discernible and attention seeking mend can transcend the static parameters that have been placed upon the object. While the visually unobtrusive gap-fill represents the current neutral conservation techniques, disruptive mends have the potential to create an explicit and public statement drawing attention to the transition of time that the vessel has gone through. The missing piece is not a separate, hidden away past within the object but rather is incorporated and clearly written as evidence of its history – and the act of conservation.

THE CHALLENGE TO CONSERVATION NEUTRALITY

There are many in the sector that acknowledge that our museums and conservation is not a neutral sector.³⁵ The authors have previously discussed the power that conservators hold, and this provides us with the ability to uncover the values the object accumulates and how they are presented to the viewer. If we deploy neutral treatments without any critical thinking as to how to redistribute power and avoid reflexive practice, then we are complicit in the continuation of this faux neutrality. Such avoidance of reflexive practice and the continued use of ‘neutral’ vocabulary and treatments is problematic. ‘Fear of open conflict prevents participants from voicing differing opinions prioritizes those in power’³⁶ working in a culture of perfectionism maintains the static status quo. Any deviation from this traditional perfectionism, sustained via neutral acts and terms, leaves those in power worried about a loss in power³⁷ or fearing disapproval of their peers or visitors.³⁸

A WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES

Heritage professionals, who serve the Institution in which they work, do not always perpetuate the narrative of objects as representations of this single, linear history or one of exclusion. It may be time to ‘rethink the archetypes that condition our understanding of the world’³⁹ and Institutions have the ability to engage audiences in a multitude of ways. One example being the Library of Congress (LoC) where musician and classically trained flautist, Lizzo, was granted permission to play the crystal flute, manufactured in 1813, that belonged to President James Madison. It can be argued that the act of ‘allowing’ Lizzo to play this famous instrument owned by an American Founding Father is an act of political symbolism, the point of which was missed by neither fans nor detractors.⁴⁰ It is not unusual for musical instruments in collections to be played, indeed there are sometimes donor stipulations that an instrument must be played. The LoC stated that that curators determined the flute could be played without damaging the instrument.⁴¹ Whilst Lamb argues that the integrity of an instrument is its sound, it must be acknowledged that its use will change both the tangible and intangible aspects of the instrument. Lamb calls this a ‘destructive process’⁴² but this is a zero-sum concept of destruction that highlights another semantic uncertainty – is destruction a tangible matter only? If the loss of the tangible is mediated by intangible gains does the term ‘destruction’ still apply? In this case the increased knowledge resulting from hearing the instrument, introducing the LoC to a new audience, the sense of excitement that ‘my’ celebrity was accessing collections and the messaging related to ‘racial retribution’

and must also feature in calculations of destruction versus enhancement.⁴³ This balance of choice between an object and the action of being played lies with the values of the decision maker.⁴⁴

CONFRONTING THE STATUS QUO

The decisions made in the LoC highlights a necessary redistribution of power between those perceived as being the establishment and their control as represented by their custodianship of symbols of power. The contrast between traditional pale, male and stale representatives of the past and Lizzo challenges dominant narratives that society and Institutions perpetuate. Any assessment of loss or damage must critically engage with both the minute physical changes and an assessment which acknowledges that Carla Hayden, who began this process, is the first woman and African American to lead the LoC.⁴⁵ The heritage environment is complex and often it is colonial legacies that are dominant⁴⁶, Lizzo playing the crystal flute was a powerful visual challenge to those legacies⁴⁷ and demonstrates how the decisions of heritage professionals shape how objects move with the current times and present their past and also our future.

AN ACTIVE MORAL STANCE IN CONSERVATION PRACTICE

With 90% to 95% of African art housed outside of Africa in Institutions such as the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art⁴⁸, it must be acknowledged that access in itself is a privilege. Access through the acquisition and ‘keeping’ of objects is also an inherently political act.⁴⁹ The keeping of objects of significance and immense value is the continuation of the dominant principles of colonialism, dominance, and power – and the continuum of the status quo. This act of ‘epistemic violence’⁵⁰ alongside the obtuse process of repatriation is the “...navigation into European paternalism, arrogance, and anti-blackness.”⁵¹ One version of our ethical codes states that we must not work on stolen or illicitly traded objects⁵², but at what point in time does the fact that these objects were stolen cease to matter.⁵³ Our neutral treatments are an example of the power of choice, and that being neutral, both in action and mindset, is also hidden behind paperwork and glass cases. But being neutral translates to the fact that we are actually the dominant⁵⁴ and are institutionally complicit, which voids conservation from any form of neutrality.⁵⁵

DISRUPTIVE CONSERVATION

When Disruptive Conservation is undertaken, it places the object in a different temporality than that of objects with a conservation response that aims to be inconspicuous ; it presents a striking balance of movement between the past, our ‘all-encompassing present’⁵⁶ and the unknown future. It draws attention to the transition that the object has experienced under the control of the conservator.⁵⁷ It offers a challenge via the conservation intervention to the identification of a singular correct state of existence and stands as a rejection of attempted perfectionism and the implication of neutrality of heritage that masks past injustice within our heritage practice. The authors have previously focussed on gap fills in a hot pink colour to illustrate Disruptive Conservation in action⁵⁸, what the concept fundamentally offers is a ‘thinking process over a colour palette’.⁵⁹ If we follow the notion that our decision making is led by conservators considering stakeholders, objects and contexts through time, *A Manifesto for Disruptive Conservation*’s development acts an alternative substructure to the ingrained and unconscious working processes happening at our lab benches. *A Manifesto for Disruptive Conservation* is a conceptual guide deliberately lacking in specificity than that is perhaps intended within a Code of Conduct. Its deliberate nature allows for its use within multi-faceted contexts and creates a space in which allows the conservator-user to re-examine their working practices.

A MANIFESTO FOR DISRUPTIVE CONSERVATION

1. Listen
2. Question
3. Question some more
4. Challenge the questions
5. Aim to understand
6. To unlearn is to learn
7. Probe
8. Provoke
9. Expose the power

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Both Authors are located in and trained within the UK and as a result have experienced privileged in their access to resources such as publications and to museums holding culture around the world. We acknowledge that this necessarily shapes our perspectives and arguments.

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⁵⁶ Bangstad, “Beyond Presentism: Heritage and the Temporality of Things” in “Shared Spaces – Multispecies Approaches in the Museum” citing François Hartog, 2015

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