

Touch Decisions

Conservators have a complex relationship with touching things. As a profession, while we look to build more inclusive and diverse practices, this relationship with touch needs to be restructured. As the profession looks to the future, conservators need to become co-creators of access rather than gatekeepers. This essay will review conservation's engagement with touch attempting to extract a more nuanced understanding of the values that can be achieved through touching defined by specific context. Through the development of frameworks designed to conceive a creative and flexible future relationship between thoughtful conservation activities and enabling meaningful physical experience with cultural heritage artefacts. Traditionally, conservation has tended to approach the issue of touch in one of two ways; this can be characterized as the simple obvious and low professional risk of the "do not touch approach" and the contrary permissive driven by engagement of showing willingness to allow the public to touch because there is an awareness that it has value. Neither approach fully engages with the tangible changes resulting from physical contact, and the tangible and intangible human gains that result from physical contact can be managed together well. The familiar narrative that preservation and access are in conflict is identified in the conservation literature and much more easily recognized through the ever visible "do not touch" signs and conversations between colleagues managing collections. Touch management should not be seen as a dichotomy of permissive versus restrictive; an alternative mechanism is required. Flexible solutions should be sought to ensure there are frameworks for appropriate successful resolutions to access. This assessment should balance a detailed understanding of conservation needs as well as that of user needs. All too often, cost-benefit analysis shows a detailed understanding of potential damage (informed by condition audit, understanding of materials, examination of the materials, research, etc.) balanced against a poorly defined definition of the "value" of touch. While it is unarguable that there is a value in connecting emotionally and physically with heritage, that value is not equivalent in every opportunity to connect. Ideas

of equal access and fairness cannot simply be applied because access to cultural heritage in an institution is rarely equitable. It is therefore inappropriate to transfer the assumption of benefits from the single case to the general. Benefits of touch can be physical and tangible, such as learning the weight, texture, temperature, or flexibility of an object, touch can inform other senses such as empathy by physically carrying a heavy load, for example.

Touch can provide a connection, where a person stands in a place associated with an event. Touch can be used to understand the movement of a mechanism, and finally, touch is essential in learning how to manipulate classes of things. By examining issues surrounding who conservation is for, how conservators discuss touch and the criteria used to define access, this essay invites those in the profession to be more open to the benefits of the variety of touch experiences in a contextually appropriate manner.

NOTE

The full article *Touch Decisions: For Heritage Objects* can be found in the Journal of the American Institute for Conservation at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01971360.2023.2175983>

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