

To Protect and Serve: Conservation and the Social Role of Museums

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Introduction

I wish others could touch the past, as I have. Like many people in the museum world, direct interaction with objects of cultural property first attracted me to the field of conservation. My first job was building boxes for broken cathode ray tubes. While none-too-glamorous, I felt special because I was allowed to touch and examine them. Even broken, they were still valuable to the collection. I puzzled over how to house the awkward yet fragile pieces. My interaction with the objects led me to want to learn more about them and the society that made them.

Although I did not know as much as the curator about the objects in terms of their context or history, I felt that my proximity and knowledge of materials gave me an insight and intimacy with them that was unique. Recalling that experience confirms for me the power invested in objects and the value of sharing them with people. Real objects, even humble ones, contain information and authenticity that is the fundamental core of libraries and museums.

It is the conservator's charge to protect the physical object from damage, repair the object when needed, and advise on ways of sharing the object with the public. Conservators are not in this effort alone. Curators preserve the object's content and context. Catalogers and collection managers cover the complexities of collection organization. Reading room and registrar staff alert us of condition and other problems. Educators and interpreters develop object-based experiences for visitors. We are part of a team of museum and library staff who all try to strike the right balance between protecting the objects and serving them to the public.

To Protect and Serve: Conservation and the Social Role of Museums

A museum or library conservator has the quintessential behind-the-scenes job. We are often alone with objects in chilly storage areas or in hospital-like spaces with broad tables, white lab coats, and equipment used for close examination, analysis, and treatment. Our work demands that we have special, even intimate, access to a wide array of remarkable collection materials. While there is an active conservation society and conservators participate in other professional capacities, we rarely get to tell the public what we know or how we know it. It might seem that we are not aware of or concerned with the social role of museums, but that depends on how you understand the institution's social obligations.

Museums and libraries have a complex social compact with the communities they serve. The museum provides a welcoming place for people to engage with the cultural, historical, and artistic collections that have shaped our world. The social role of museums and libraries is based on the preservation and interpretation of these objects. Within these institutions, objects and related information are made available to the public to ensure that people know about, learn from, and value them. The institution's curators, catalogers, collection managers, educators and others all have their specific roles in the fulfillment of this compact. Each position is assigned aspects of the object's care and their relationship with the public is prescribed. We all touch the object in some way and the object touches the public through us in some way. The present is tied to the past and the future through the objects.

All institutions have limitations in terms of time, staff, and financial resources. All institutions must set priorities for conservation treatment and not all objects are selected. The presence of an object in the conservation lab indicates interest by someone. Someone wanted to see, exhibit, digitize or otherwise use the object. If an item is never used, if no one wants it, then for better or worse, it is very unlikely that it will be treated.

Conservators serve not one, but three societies. The past, which created, valued and saved the object; the present that seeks to engage with the object now; and the future that may want or need the object to be around for their use. While the concepts and functions overlap, it is useful for the conservator to consider the interests of each of these three societies. In this way, the complexity and challenges of fulfilling the social role of museums runs directly through the conservation lab.

PAST

Many ideas in this paper draw from Paul Banks' lectures on conservation and the implications of storing, treating, and documenting artifacts. He was a pioneer in the field of conservation and taught library and archival conservation at Columbia University in New York and the University of Texas at Austin during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Paul Banks understood that the physical medium of the object contains information, beyond that which it was explicitly created to convey. For example, in addition to the words contained in the text of a book, the book's paper, ink, printing technique, binding and condition also communicate information.

Conservators look at objects to discover traditions and values of past societies. They examine objects for evidence of historical use and note ways in which the object's condition has changed over time. Examination at this level can add context in terms of the object's original creation as well as provenance. We learn about the society that created the object and others who have encountered it in the past. While most examples in this paper are book and archival materials, the same ideas hold true for other artifacts, works of art and natural history specimens.

The first task is to define "The Object." What do we, the institution, see as the complete object? When a framed print is brought into the lab, the conservator understands that the print is important, but what about the mat? What about the

tag on the back of the mat? The frame? Is this print part of a larger group or series? Are we trying to save and share both the physical object and the textual information? Is one aspect of the object more important to preserve than another?

Even determining when the object was “made” can be a problematic. A scrapbook may be purchased as an empty binding, but we do not typically consider an empty scrapbook as a complete object. Is it only complete after images, invitations, letters and clippings have been adhered to the pages. Or perhaps, after inscriptions are added. But what if inscriptions were added decades later by the scrapbook’s original compiler? What if someone else added them? Multiple past societies may have been involved in creating an object.

Use also comes into play in defining “The Object.” Most objects show evidence of their function from their “first life,” before they were collected as exemplars or objects of study. These signs of use can be interpreted as historically significant and worth retaining or as damage that should be minimized. For example, highlighting and notes written in the margin of a book have traditionally been seen as damage that defaces and devalues the volume. Hundreds of years later, the same type of markings may be regarded as historically significant marginalia that highlights the object’s social role in the past. The difference is in the eye of the beholder.

Some objects come to the conservator with a storied social past. They were intended to be actively used and they were. A paper fan advertising Duke Ellington at the Cotton Club from the National Museum of American History has a drink ring on it. A Native American ledger drawing from the Benson Latin American Collection is smudged with fingerprints around the edges from being passed around during winter stories. These are not bystanders to history, but participants. Some were in use only briefly, but others were continually in use

by the same community for decades or longer. We can learn about the society that created them and that which used them. Their condition gives us hints into that past. These objects proudly wear their damage as part of what makes them complete.

There are some objects for which the change, the damage, has become a significant part of its history, helping us see the object with collective meaning. These objects provide evidence of some type of social upheaval or change in values. The U.S. Holocaust Museum holds numerous Jewish cultural objects that were partially burned, defaced or otherwise damaged during World War II. The damage inflicted upon those objects has marked them as evidence of a time of significant turmoil. Conservation treatments that attempt to remove graffiti or evidence of burning risk compromising a critical part of the object's history. In another example, the privately owned Archimedes Palimpsest, a 10th c. manuscript of an otherwise unknown work by the Greek mathematician, Archimedes, was erased and overwritten during the 13th c. At that time, it was more valued as a piece of parchment than for the original manuscript. Both manuscripts are seen as valuable today and both clearly relate to different societies.

Defining the object and aspects of its condition that are historically significant is an important step in understanding the past. Serving the societies of the past means respecting and trying to understand the culture that created the object, but may also give us some understanding of the cultures that used, maintained, and eventually collected the object.

PRESENT

Cultural institutions try to have their collections at the ready, available to researchers and able to serve timely topics. Unfortunately, as Paul Banks noted, everything is degrading all of the time. The object may require treatment in order to share it. Treatment is the highest profile part of the conservator's job

and virtually all treatment is use driven. Most treatments are in response to a request to use the object, to participate in or fulfill its social role.

Conservation treatment is done to preserve an object so that it may function as an agent of social engagement. Often this role is threatened due to physical and chemical changes that effect the condition of the object. Change is part of the object's history. Although, some changes are historically significant and others are seen as damage, all are evidence of the object's complete provenance, its history. Treatment means trying to erase or undo part of the provenance, as interpreted by the present.

Once the damage has been determined to be without historic significance, the most unambiguous type of damage to treat is that from external sources. These are commonly the result of being stored in a bad environment or being in the wrong place at the wrong time. These are often short-term and accidental, such as pest or water damage. Typically, conservators simply try to clean away the unwanted dirt, remove the tape, mend the accidental tears, or erase the undesirable notes written in the margin. Of course, the caretakers in the past may have thought they were adequately caring for the object. Researchers working on the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1960s and 70s used tape to reassemble fragments of the manuscript, unaware that staining and brittleness would result. While today's society cannot foresee all the effects of current practices, most external damage can be avoided by storing the objects in a good environment and limiting use.

Other types of damage are internal. Inherent vice is a term conservators use to describe the self-destructive nature of some objects. These types of damage relate specifically to the creation of the object. Newspapers were made to exist for one day, yet we are pushing them to exist for decades and centuries. Although newsprint is an inherently unstable paper, it fulfilled the creator's goal of producing paper cheaply. In another example, iron gall ink was used especially

on legal documents because it burns into the paper and can't be completely erased. It is naturally acidic and over time it is destined to eventually burn through the paper. The damage is not coming from the outside, but from the formulation of the ink itself. The rapid aging that results from these types of materials is directly related to the object's original creation. These internal changes are ones that we usually know are going to happen, we see coming for years, and we are often at a loss to treat. Inherent vice can be slowed, but not stopped by storing the object in an appropriate, controlled environment.

In treating inherent vice, we must change a fundamental part of the object. Today's society decides which part of the object trumps the others. We may chemically remove a component of the ink, the iron (II) ion, from the iron gall ink to save the paper. We may remount the scroll to save the painting. We may rebind the book to save the textblock. Treating inherent vice can be ethically challenging and quite humbling, since we are knowingly altering the original object. The conservator, the professional dedicated to preserving the physical object, is forever altering that object based on today's attitudes and values.

The conservation treatment itself may take many forms, and depends on factors including the conservator's skill and knowledge, the time and supplies available, and technology. Although repairs have been made to cultural property for centuries, it is only in the last fifty years or so that conservation has developed as a profession. Only recently have past treatments been evaluated, materials investigated, solutions discovered, and information shared. We have learned that treatment should only proceed with permission from the curators and with a desire to formulate a treatment that will be as reversible and non-invasive as possible.

Of these requirements, permission from the curator comes first. The curator provides guidance, negotiating the social compact between past and present. The curator indicates to the conservator why the object was and remains

important, identifying the most significant features. The conservator takes that information and translates it into action. Together, the curator and conservator develop a proposed treatment that is appropriate, feasible and reversible. The concept of reversible, non-invasive treatments leaves room for fallibility in the treatment plan.

While we strive for reversibility, no treatment can be truly undone (Banks). One of the most basic treatments performed is dusting or removing surface dirt from an object. That dirt can never be replaced. That authenticity can never be restored. While we strive for non-invasive treatments, all treatments alter the object, changing its path through history. Even something that may seem straightforward like mending a tear will leave residues that become part of the object forever. Conservation treatment is interpretation of the object (Banks). We do not return the object to its original condition. We alter and hide evidence of its past, resulting in a new, non-original condition. The conservation treatment becomes part of the object's provenance.

There are many unknowns within the conservation profession. One certainty is that an object stored in an environmentally controlled room, in a dark box, will degrade more slowly than one in a fluctuating environment, exposed to light and handling. Conservators struggle with the fundamental conflict between our commitment to preservation and our institution's goal to provide access to the collection. We know that use causes wear (Banks). No one wants to expose objects to less-than-ideal conditions, and providing physical access to collections or putting them into exhibition spaces will likely increase the rate of degradation. No matter how hard we try, deterioration is irreversible (Banks). But we must share the object. In an age when so much questionable information is at our digital fingertips the foundation provided by authentic objects and primary research is essential to making meaning of our world in the present.

Exhibitions are the most common method of sharing in museums and are of increasing prominence in special collections libraries. Through exhibition the cultural institution realizes its goal of connecting with the community and engaging with the world. Exhibitions allow visitors to see the object in the context of the story interpreted in a social setting that may inspire dialogue and engagement within the communities we serve.

Direct interaction is another way of sharing objects. While it is expected that library materials will be placed in the researcher's hand, there are circumstances in which museums share their materials in a similar way. For example, in Chicago, visitors can climb on board a genuine World War II-era submarine at the Museum of Science and Industry, touch a relic from the Great Chicago Fire at the Chicago History Museum, or access documentary and photographic collections in research centers within several of the city's cultural institutions. Some use new touchable facsimiles adjacent to exhibition cases holding the historic object. This can allow the audience to manipulate and examine a surrogate without risk to the original.

The need to interact with the real object is addressed by the Smithsonian Institution's Museum Support Center and the National Museum of the American Indian, at which objects can be "checked out" for use by tribal members in the purpose-built ceremonial center. These are objects such as masks, pipes, and drums that were not just artistic works to contemplate, but meant for physical interaction as part of long-standing social traditions and ceremonies. The masks and costumes were meant to be seen in motion while being worn. While use may be limited, such as having the historic mask present during a dance performed wearing replicas, physical interaction at some level is still possible. Part of the idea is that the objects are not complete when cut off from their still-vibrant communities. While no object can return to the past, in some cases, the museum can mediate between past and present members of the society that created it. As each generation engages with the object, the community

develops memory and knowledge and the object acquires a richer provenance. This expands our understanding of the social role of museums.

In service to the present society, conservators perform conservation treatments and devise methods of sharing the object. The challenge for conservators is to find ways to foster significant and meaningful engagement in the present and to preserve the unadulterated object for future encounters.

FUTURE

While conservators serve the past and the present, we imagine voices from future societies reminding us that no one can have access to an object that no longer exists (Banks). In some ways we care for objects because of our ties to the past, our ancestral relationships. However, as we study, respect, and learn from the past, our goal must be forward looking.

The most obvious way in which conservators look toward the future is through preservation. Since everything is degrading all of the time (Banks), preserving objects is a never-ending task. Preserving the physical object has some basic tenants to follow: collections care involves maintaining a good environment in terms of temperature and humidity; light levels must be limited; the collection needs to be kept safe from pests, and pollutants; disasters should be anticipated; limit use. We build elaborate protective enclosures and specify detailed conditions for storage and use. When we are thinking exclusively about the future, we often say “no” in the present.

A less obvious way in which we look toward the future is through our documentation. We document to share the intimate details about the object with others of our time and with future conservators and curators, to allow them to integrate our learning into their interaction with the object. While the amount of documentation varies for different objects, it typically involves written and photographic information that describes the object as originally created, changes

in condition, and any treatment performed. In many cases it involves not only close examination of the object, but also a search of literature, scientific analysis, and consultation with experts such as curators, conservation scientists, industrial chemists, or religious authorities.

The description portion of our documentation tends to be segmented into materials, components and techniques. Materials would be the place to note the use of ultramarine or lapis lazuli, which in the 1400s indicated trade routes to Afghanistan. Components would be the place to note the presence of a fore edge flap attached to the back board, typical of Arabic influence. In techniques we would describe things like the sewing pattern used. Sewing two textblock sections on to the binding at the same time was an innovation that became common in Europe in the 1600s.

In service to the society of the past, bibliographers perform “Descriptive Bibliography” to explain how a book was printed and constructed. It is an old joke in the bibliographic field that this should be called “Destructive Bibliography,” as forcing a book to open well enough to get a good look at the sewing can have negative consequences. Since the conservator is often the only person to see a book unbound, with all parts revealed, our documentation must be thorough. If during the course of a treatment, we are going to expose the spine of a book, revealing sewing patterns and spine linings, we need to record that information before we alter the original binding for repairs or hide it when we recover the book. By recording and sharing what we see and do, we retain access to aspects of the object that either no longer exist or are hidden while on exhibition or during ordinary use.

Just as we document the general description and condition of objects, we also document their treatment. Here, we let future curators, scholars and conservators know why this object was selected for treatment, our rationale in determining the chosen treatment, and our hopes for how that treatment will

preserve the object for the future. Treatment documentation is a letter to our professional heirs. A message from our society to theirs concerning an object that we found valuable and worth saving.

Conclusion

Our objects, our collections of objects, and the way we use and care for them, will teach future generations not only about their creation, but also about our society, our values. Our objects are the connective tissue between not only the past and present, but also the future. Cultural property is the social network uniting our ancestors and our descendants.

In conservation, we speak of the future not just in decades, but also in much longer terms – multiple generations, hundreds of years, even millennia. On that scale, the relationship becomes more like one society connecting with another than a bridged relationship between individuals. We know about the past and present of museums and libraries, how their values influenced collecting policies, exhibition practices, and treatment decisions. But we don't know what will be interesting or valuable to the future.

Paul Banks taught that most of the people for whom conservators work have not yet been born. We don't know if in the future they will be able to analyze oils from fingerprints, or determine the creation location based on the DNA of the leather, or if they will consider our most glamorous objects out of date and leave them in storage. I am confident that my unborn bosses will want the object in a form as unchanged by time as possible. I hope that they will be able to touch the past, as I have. However, their past will include our present and portions of our future.

While we don't know what will be interesting or possible in the future, we do know that in order for the object to make it to the future it must be valued in the present. In order to be valued, the objects must be shared. While sharing can

sometimes mean providing access to replicas or digital images of collection materials on the web, the electric thrill of the face-to-face encounter with the authentic must also be preserved. If an item becomes so removed from society that it is not recognized as valuable, if it is not part of periodic meaningful engagement, it might not be saved. As time passes, the people engaged with objects within our institutions will change. The people who continue to seek out and make meaning from the objects will change. But the objects will remain and continue to inspire social engagement, if we preserve them.

Resources

American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC), **Defining the Conservator: Essential Competencies**, 20 May 2003, accessed 1 September 2013, http://www.conservation-us.org/_data/n_0001/resources/live/definingcon.pdf

American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC), **Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice**, approved August 1994, accessed 1 September 2013, <http://www.conservation-us.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewPage&pageID=858&nodeID=1>

Paul Banks, "Ten Laws of Conservation," paraphrased from unpublished class notes, University of Texas at Austin, c. 1994.

- Multiplication and dispersal increase the chances for survival of information
- Everything is deteriorating all the time
- Deterioration is irreversible
- Use causes wear
- No one can have access to an object that no longer exists
- The physical medium of an object contains information
- Authenticity cannot be restored
- No reproduction can contain all the information in the original
- Conservation treatment is interpretation
- No treatment is entirely reversible

Recent related publications include: Roberta Pilette, "Paul Banks' Laws of Conservation (rearranged)," part of the discussion group *Managing Preservation without a Preservation Librarian*, American Library Association, ALACTS/PARS, 2009, accessed 1 September 2013, http://www.ala.org/alacts/ano/v20/n3/event/progs_rpt

Jane Klinger, "Objects of Trauma: Finding the Balance," Book and Paper Group, AIC Annual Meeting 2011, accessed 1 September 2013, <http://www.conservators-converse.org/2011/06/39th-annual-meeting-general-session-june-2-objects-of-trauma-finding-the-balance-by-jane-klinger/>

Abigail Quandt, **The Archimedes Palimpsest**, accessed 1 September 2013, <http://archimedespalimpsest.org/about/conservation.php>

Terry Belanger, "Descriptive Bibliography," **Book Collecting: A Modern Guide**, Jean Peters, ed. (New York and London: R. R. Bowker, 1977), 97-101, accessed 1 September 2013, <http://www.bibsocamer.org/bibdef.htm>

"Is it real? The Value and Ethics of Using Surrogates," *Archives Conservation Discussion Group*, moderators Cher Schneider and Tonia Grafakos, Book and Paper Group, AIC Annual Meeting, 2013, accessed 1 September 2013, <http://www.conservators-converse.org/2013/06/41st-annual-meeting-book-and-paper-group-archives-conservation-discussion-group-acdg-may-31-is-it-real-the-value-and-ethics-of-using-surrogates-co-chairs-cher-schneider-and/>

National Museum of the American Indian, Cultural Resource Center, accessed 1 September 2013, <http://nmai.si.edu/explore/collections/crc/>