



Contexts for Conservation

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Are all objects equal?

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Abstract

This paper will examine two aspects of the question ‘Are all objects equal?’ It will consider their equality in terms of significance and fragility. It will start from the assumption that until recently many conservators have adopted the precautionary principle by treating all objects as equally significant and equally fragile. However, in the 21st century in order for museums and heritage organisations to be sustainable hard decisions have to be made about what is affordable – financially and ecologically. This paper will demonstrate how a risk-based approach can lead to a more sustainable future for museums and heritage organisations using two case studies. The first is about recommendations for environmental conditions for international loans between countries with different climates. The second is about the use of objects in the presentation and interpretation of collections in historic houses.

Keywords

Significance, fragility, precautionary principle, preventive conservation, risk management

Introduction

The last time I spoke at a conference in Australia was the IIC Congress in Melbourne in 2000 when I gave the Forbes Prize Lecture. My subject was ‘Conservation: Significance, Relevance and Sustainability’ (Staniforth 2000). In this lecture I said:

...I think that conservators need to have a very clear idea of the significance of an object before planning its conservation. We must accept that the significance of an object may change with time, depending on historical events and cultural attitudes. This sounds difficult, particularly if we are saying that what is regarded as significant now may not be so in 50 years time. The pragmatic way of dealing with this has been to exercise the precautionary principle by undertaking minimum intervention, making treatments reversible, and trying to preserve everything, for who knows what will be regarded as significant in the future. However, this is not a realistic position, as we do

not have enough resources and must be selective. We have not explored this avenue of thought sufficiently in the conservation of historic and artistic works and we should consider whether we can adopt a charter such as the Burra Charter to guide our work, or whether we need to develop a new charter. If so, this charter should be designed to provide clear policy, principles, standards and guidelines for the profession.

I would like to use the opportunity of returning to Australia, the home of the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS 1999), to pick up this topic and to reflect on how another thirteen years of working for an organisation that is responsible for the conservation of natural and cultural heritage has informed my thinking about the relative significance of objects.

There is a second way in which objects are not equal and that is in their robustness or fragility. In an ideal world no-one can argue against providing excellent conditions for the care of all objects, but some objects do not need it. In order for museums and heritage organisations to be sustainable hard decisions have to be made about what is affordable – financially and ecologically. Conservators can help by identifying relative fragility.

Significance

The National Trust (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) is the custodian of a wide-range of natural and cultural environments, including coast, countryside, woodlands, parks and gardens and well as historic houses and the artifacts that they contain. We have drawn extensively on the Burra Charter in developing our own conservation principles (National Trust 2008). Our definition of conservation is:

Conservation is the careful management of change. It is about revealing and sharing the significance of places and ensuring that their special qualities are protected, enhanced, enjoyed and understood by present and future generations.

The first conservation principle is: ‘We will ensure that all decisions are informed by an appropriate level of understanding of the significance and ‘spirit of place’ of each of our properties, and why we and others value them.’ The statement of significance is the first step in writing a conservation management plan and along with our understanding of what visitors and other communities of interest cherish about our properties helps to inform spirit of place. Spirit of place, or *genius loci*, is the touchstone against which all activities at properties are judged and our property managers assume the role of guardians of spirit of place.

I have had no problem thinking about collections in terms of a hierarchy of values: artistic, historic, financial, use, rarity etc because this has become second nature through the use of conservation management plans, but I have had the advantage of working alongside heritage professionals steeped in the Burra Charter and related documents for over twenty five years. The idea that not all objects have equal importance requires museum professionals to think more like heritage professionals, yet I observe that my museum colleagues in the UK, Europe and North America tend to resist such hierarchies when considering the objects in their collections. I shall be very interested to discuss with AICCM colleagues if the Burra Charter has had more influence on the museum world in Australia.

Having said that, there are now some good examples of museums that are beginning to grade their collections in terms of value and significance, so that they can make decisions about their future management, including disposal. At a national level, the 1999 Delta Plan for the

Preservation of the Cultural Heritage has made The Netherlands a leader in the field of preventive conservation (Talley 1999). The plan assessed all the country's collection in terms of their conservation needs and graded them in terms of their importance, leading to a practical programme for clearing conservation backlogs. Four categories of objects were assigned in the Delta Plan, ranging from unique objects through to those that should never have entered collections in the first place.

In the UK there are very clear criteria, introduced in 1913 with the Ancient Monuments Act (Thurley 2013), for the grading of significant buildings. Approximately 374,000 buildings are listed in three grades from those of exceptional interest, sometimes considered to be internationally important and of special interest (English Heritage 2011). The only criteria that are available for the grading of objects are the Waverley Criteria, which are used for the granting of an export license (ACE 2013). In a sense, the Waverley criteria define the national treasures of the UK. There are three criteria covering history, aesthetics, and scholarship. But these only cover the most significant objects, there are no lower grades. Arts Council England (ACE) is currently reviewing the criteria for designated museums and I am hoping that they may take the opportunity to use this to indicate where most significant objects are located as well as whole collections. Other countries have systems for defining national treasures, for example, in Japan, where 20% of the national treasures are structures and the remaining 80% are artefacts. Each national treasure must show outstanding workmanship, a high value for world cultural history, or exceptional value for scholarship.

There is no internationally agreed way of evaluating the significance of collections, and while this would inevitably be problematic to introduce, it may become more of an imperative as museum managers struggle with the demands of maintaining even increasing collections in the context of diminishing resources. So I shall repeat the question that I asked in Melbourne in 2000 and ask if the museum world should adopt a charter such as the Burra Charter to guide our work, or should we develop a new charter. If so, this charter should be designed to provide clear policy, principles, standards and guidelines for the profession.

Fragility

In April 2013 a book that I have been working on since 2008 was published (Staniforth 2013). It is in the Getty Readings in Conservation series and is called '*Historic Perspectives in Preventive Conservation*'. The research for this book has given me the opportunity to re-read much of the literature that covers the development of understanding of the fragility of objects, and in particular the more recent developments in risk-based approaches for preventive conservation. I have been particularly influenced by those authors who have attempted to relate the response and behaviour of objects to the conditions in which they are kept. The research of David Erhardt, Charles Tumosa and Marion Mecklenburg at the Conservation Analytical Laboratory at the Smithsonian Institute (Erhardt & Mecklenburg 1994; Mecklenburg, Tumosa & Erhardt 1998; Erhardt, Tumosa & Mecklenburg 2007) summarises the evidence, or indeed lack of evidence, that supports the development of recommendations for the climate in museums, and shows that objects that were previously thought of as fragile were actually able to withstand considerable fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity.

In the late 1980s and 1990s authors began to write about risk assessment and conservation management reminding the conservation world of the need to consider a wider range of

agents of deterioration beyond temperature, relative humidity and light. In his 1990 paper for the ICOM-CC (International Council of Museums – Conservation Committee) Triennial meeting in Dresden, Stefan Michalski of the Canadian Conservation Institute described nine agents of deterioration (Michalski 1990). This paper systematised the way in which preventive conservation was thought about in museums and has proved highly influential in encouraging conservators not only to think about the museum environment but also to take a more holistic view of the causes of deterioration. Robert Waller has written a series of articles refining the application of risk assessment and risk management to preventive conservation (Waller 1994; Waller 1995; Waller 2008). The large collection of natural history specimens at the Canadian Museum of Nature, where Waller worked, proved a good test for the emerging methodology, which also recognised a hierarchy of value among objects.

Jonathan Ashley-Smith, former head of conservation at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London, wrote a number of articles and a book on risk assessment in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Ashley-Smith 1999; Ashley-Smith 2002; Ashley-Smith 2003). These writings informed his thinking on the precautionary principle, and he observed that from a conservator's perspective, if the environment is controlled to a level that will protect the most sensitive component of an object or collection, then one can never be wrong. But this may not achieve the best result from the museum manager's perspective, as the control method may be too expensive or restrict the visitor's enjoyment of the object.

Environmental conditions for international loans

I shall not dwell for too long on this subject, since Julian Bickersteth will be covering this issue in his paper (Bickersteth 2013), which is proving considerably more controversial than those of us who started working with museum directors in 2008 anticipated! But I will set some context for why I think we are where we are, and show how it relates to the precautionary principle and a desire to treat all objects as equal.

There can be no doubt that museum and heritage organisations are responding to the growing impact of climate change and are looking at the environmental impact of their institutions. Most are making the buildings that house collections more resilient and better equipped to meet the needs of maintenance and preventive conservation; and they are reducing their environmental footprint. By looking again at the needs of collections and the buildings that house them, and creating an appropriate rather than 'ideal' environment, museum managers are able to initiate a virtuous circle whereby the museums' impact on the wider environment is minimised, which reduces its carbon footprint, which in turn reduces climate change impacts. Specifically, many museums are re-examining the stringent RH specifications developed in the second half of the 20th century, which were more governed by what it was possible to achieve through air conditioning technology than by the needs of collections, and asking if such tightly controlled – and expensive to implement – conditions are really necessary. In 2008 a group of UK Heads of Conservation came together under the umbrella of the UK National Museum Directors' Conference and wrote guiding principles for reducing museums' carbon footprint (NMDC 2009). The first guiding principle is: 'Environmental standards should become more intelligent and better tailored to clearly identified needs. Blanket conditions should no longer apply. Instead conditions should be determined by the requirements of individual objects or groups of objects and the climate in the part of the world in which the museum is located.' At a workshop in the Boston Museum of Fine Art in 2009

these guiding principles were shared with the Heads of Conservation of many large North American museums. With a few tweaking of words the principles were accepted.

The Directors of the museums where the Heads of Conservation worked took the principles to the Bizot group of museum directors who participate in international loans, and these were agreed as a new environmental standard for international loans. Most significantly it meant moving away from the very tight specification of 20 +/- 1C and 50 +/- 5%RH to the following proposed interim guideline (NMDC 2009):

For the majority of objects containing hygroscopic material (such as canvas paintings, textiles, ethnographic objects or animal glue) a stable relative humidity (RH) is required in the range of 40 - 60% and a stable temperature in the range 16 - 25°C.

More sensitive materials (e.g. scroll paintings on silk, panel paintings, vellum or parchment) will require specific and tight RH control, specified according to the materials.

Less sensitive materials (e.g. stone, ceramic) can have wider parameters for RH and temperature.

It must be made clear in adopting this guideline that RH conditions outside the range are not acceptable for the majority of hygroscopic materials, and that rigour will be needed to ensure that conditions do not drift outside the specified range. If international agreement for loan conditions for all materials types is to be achieved it must be recognised that the most sensitive material such as scroll paintings on silk, paintings on panel, vellum or parchment will always need tight control of conditions, which might be best achieved through the use of microclimates. Conversely the need for, and extent of, parameters for less sensitive materials should be re-considered and debated.

This has proved controversial among many colleagues in other parts of the world, including in some museums in the UK and North American as well as Europe, and Julian will describe the role that IIC is taking in leading on this debate, including surveying current practice and providing a neutral forum in which the issues and evidence can be discussed.

Bringing places to life and the use of objects

In the past few years, the National Trust has fundamentally changed the way in which it presents historic places to provide a visitor experience which deepens understanding of how historic houses were used over the centuries (Staniforth & Lloyd 2012). This requires a balance between access and conservation, and difficult decisions on whether to conserve and display or use, or to introduce 'sacrificial' substitutes or produce replicas or bring in less significant objects from elsewhere. These decisions have budgetary implications and consequences for routine maintenance and care. The creation of replicas can be as expensive as conserving the 'real thing', but avoids the risk of damaging irreplaceable authentic objects. Risk assessment is used to identify objects which are sufficiently robust to be used by visitors. This means that some carpets can be walked on, chairs can be sat on and pianos played.

To measure the impact of this new approach, we use an exit survey in which visitors are asked to rank their visit on a scale of five from 'not enjoyable' to 'very enjoyable'. Answers to a number of other questions enable us to understand how visitors also register a greater engagement with, and emotional response to, the history of the place and the people who lived and worked there.

The data collected demonstrates that the pleasure visitors derive from the use of collections enhances their appreciation of historic places. This creates a virtuous circle in which visitor numbers increase, which increases the financial bottom line, which creates more funds for conservation work and measure that improve visitor enjoyment still further. In adopting this approach we have made some difficult decisions about which objects can be used, and we have also moved away from the precautionary principle. We believe that this change will result in a goal worth achieving because it helps museums and heritage organisations to become more sustainable.

Conclusion

It will be clear that I do not think that all objects are equal and I realise that the message in this paper may not be a comfortable one. I am convinced that the museum world needs to move away from the safe ground of treating all objects as equal to a less comfortable place where the relative significance and fragility of objects are considered before any decisions about their management are taken. Debate will need to take place about the mechanisms that the conservation profession needs to put in place. I hope that it will not be another thirteen years before we achieve this.

Biography of author

From January 2011 Sarah Staniforth has been Museums and Collections Director at the National Trust. She is also a director of National Trust Enterprises and Historic House Hotels. She was Historic Properties Director from 2005-2010 and Head Conservator from 2002-2004. She joined the National Trust in 1985 as Adviser on Paintings Conservation and Environmental Control. She read chemistry at Oxford University, studied paintings conservation at the Courtauld Institute of Art and worked in the scientific department of the National Gallery from 1980-1985.

For many years Sarah served on the Council of IIC (International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works), initially as a Council Member then as Vice-President. She was elected President of IIC in January 2013. She is currently a member of the Westminster Abbey Fabric Commission, the Gloucester Diocesan Advisory Committee, a Trustee of the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons and the Pilgrim Trust, and a member of the Council of AIM (Association of Independent Museums). She served on the Council of the UK Museums Association from 2005–2011. She was a member of the Directory Board of ICOM-CC (International Council of Museums – Conservation Committee) from 1996-1999. Sarah was a member of the UKIC (United Kingdom Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works) Executive Committee from 1985-1989 and Chair of the UKIC Professional Accreditation as Conservator-Restorer Committee from 2002–2005. She is a Fellow of IIC, the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society of Arts. She chaired the steering group that

developed the UK National Heritage Science Strategy from 2008-2010 and is currently chairing the Board of the UK National Heritage Science Forum.

Sarah has written and lectured extensively on preventive conservation for collections in museums and historic houses; some of this work is recorded in the National Trust Manual of Housekeeping, which was published in 2006 with a revised edition in 2011. She has just completed a book on preventive conservation for the Getty Conservation Institute Readings in Conservation series, *Historical Perspectives on Preventive Conservation* that was published in April 2013. Her interests include: museums and heritage management; buildings and collections conservation; and bringing historic places to life through excellent standards of access, presentation and interpretation.

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