

# ETHICS AND ECONOMICS: MIND THE GAP

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The symbolic values that we assign to conservation objects are intangible, subjective and transitory. They depend on what is important for a particular social group. These values may be cultural, religious, scientific, historical, etc.; they evolve from our ethical value systems. They are the reasons why we conserve, restore and preserve. These ethical values do not share a common denominator with economic values; however conservation projects are assessed, analysed and processed according to economic values. This dichotomy creates a difficult terrain for necessary dialogue. The field of conservation needs to take the economic factor on board and embrace it more closely into its multidisciplinary nature, especially in the decision making process.

## ETHICS AND CONSERVATION

Ethical rules are established according to philosophical and axiological values; they provide a way of measuring behaviour. Ethical behaviour is all about complying with these rules, which exist in different variations according to each society. Ethics are what create our identity. We need ethics to be able to decide about the rights and wrongs; they facilitate the decision making process.

Conservation is about caring for objects, but not just any object. As we tend to assign intangible values to tangible objects, in conservation we refer to them as metanarrative (Michalski 1994) or symbolic (Muñoz-Viñas 2005) values. These values are subjective, because they affect the subject, rather than the

object. And they are transitory, because values in societies shift and change, they are never static.

The conservation object has an assigned value and meaning (or series of values) which transform that object into something symbolic. Specific values are revealed, reinforced or restored in the conservation process.

Values are necessary in conservation to establish criteria in the decision making process (Ashley-Smith, 1999). Indeed values have always been the basis of distinctive conservation theories throughout its relatively short history, reflecting different ideologies (Carbonara, 1976; Brandi, 1977; Baldini, 1978; Walden,

1985; Bomford, 1994; Kirby Tally Jr., 1997; Ashley-Smith, 1999; Mansfield, 2000; Muñoz-Viñas, 2005). Ever since the first classical theories, right up until the present day, these artistic, historic, scientific, aesthetic, symbolic, social, etc. values have



**Figure 1** | Quentin Metsys, *The Moneychanger and his Wife*, 1514.

contributed to the philosophy of conservation, and to its development as a field in its own right.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary theories of conservation are based on democratic metanarrative ideologies, which substitute the classical aesthetic, artistic or scientific discourse (Caple 2000; Pye 2001; Ashley-Smith 1999; Muñoz-Viñas 2003, Australia ICOMOS 1999; UNESCO *et al* 1994). These theories enable us to understand that the activity of conservation is about subjectivity rather than objectivity. We now know that decision making in conservation affects the object<sup>2</sup> and as a consequence the subjects are affected by the object.

Conservation of an object is always carried out for a public, for the “stakeholders”

(Muñoz-Viñas 2005: 160-163). They may consist of a varied group with a diversity of interests and there may be conflictive interests within that group.

This principle has direct consequences on the ethical dilemmas that the conservator affronts: “The conservator has to make choices, and there are, indeed, some ethical considerations involved in them because these choices will not only affect an object, but will also affect the people for whom that object has some significance” (Muñoz-Viñas 2005: 167).

Ethics are the corner stone of all conservation activity.

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<sup>1</sup> In this text, the term “cultural values” will represent all these distinctive values.

<sup>2</sup> In this text, the “object” refers to the object to be conserved, artwork, etc.

## ECONOMICS AND CONSERVATION

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The necessity of ethics in conservation is evident in the different Codes of Ethics which have been elaborated by conservators associations all over the world.<sup>3</sup> They are about the important cultural values in conservation, however strangely enough they almost all avoid the subject of economics. This demonstrates that the economic aspect of our profession is just not being dealt with. Yet the relevance of economic values in conservation seems to be considered in an ambivalent role; as a main mast to the professions activity and concurrently a *persona non grata*.



**Figure 2** | Giotto, *Judas' Kiss of Betrayal*, 1303.

When conservation decisions are made, the

importance of the economic factor is not always apparent or even included in the reasoning process, yet paradoxically budgets are what determine our activity's existence. Economics is not considered as a necessary subject in the recommended syllabus of conservation training, it is seldom mentioned in any Code of Ethics and it is rarely underlined in the rationale behind the decision making process or even mentioned in technical choices or preferences. Yet money is the key that ignites the starter motor in any conservation project. Indeed it may well be the ruling factor; as Randall Mason from the Getty Conservation Institute explains “Economics, for many different reasons, is one of the increasingly dominant ways that heritage and conservation are valued” (Mason 1998).

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<sup>3</sup> i.e. AICCM, AIC, ICON, ECCO, etc.

The importance of the role of economics in the field of conservation has been cause for interesting debate in public forums such as the Getty conferences in Los Angeles (1998) or the recent international Brussels reunion (2011).

Nevertheless economics usually seem to be on someone else's agenda, away from the conservators' domain. Indeed, conservation decisions are always justified in spheres other than the economic. The 'economics' of time or actions, such as minimal intervention are often referred to, but monetary matters are seldom mentioned. If conservation behaviour is apparently driven by other elements, then why is this so?

## NON-TRANSFERABILITY OF ETHICAL AND ECONOMIC VALUES: MIND THE GAP

As we have seen, we conserve objects for their cultural values. In any given value system, a common denominator is essential to enable us the interchange between those values. However cultural values and economic values just do not share that common ground. The values that we consider to be important in conservation are not directly transferable into economic values.

Even though we are aware that culture and economics exist in different spheres, the ethics of cultural values are often called upon to justify economic worthiness and vice versa. Yet these very different sets of values just cannot be interchanged with convivial success. Some experts have underlined that the exclusion of economics in the sphere of conservation is because the activity is driven by

motivations other than monetary, as Ellis (2002: 3) so aptly states:



Figure 3 | Titian, *Danae receiving the Golden Rain*, 1545.

*The oscillating dilemma is between pursuit of mission and financial viability ... because the pursuit of mission is an axiomatically unprofitable activity.*

According to Ashley-Smith, the error lies in trying to group together the distinctive meanings of these values under one single roof, and treat them as a single topic. Along

similar lines, the economist Smith (2002) comments:

*It is difficult sometimes to yoke the subjects of culture and economics. They are very different realms. Values in one don't necessarily translate into values in the other.*

The differences between economic and cultural values are not only in their non-transferability, but also in the difficulty that they have in communicating with or understanding one another. Again, Smith (2002) sums it up:

*How do people in arts and cultural institutions respond to people who try to value cultural activity in terms of economic multipliers, cost-benefit analysis, quantitative outcome measures, and, my current favourite, contingent valuation methodology?*

Other experts reiterate these ideas, as Avrami comments:

*In economics the outcome is valued over the process. Theoretically, we recognize that conservation is a process, but we have not really come to grips with how we value the process versus how we value the outcome. (Avrami 2002).*

The Australian economist David Throsby, who is well known for his research in the field of interpretation of culture in economic terms (cultural capital), also shares this point of view:

*When we think about conservation, we think about things that have nothing to do with the market—historical value, the meaning of objects and sites to people, and even more spiritual things. These can't be captured by processes of monetary exchange. Economists have been trying to come to terms with the fact that a lot of what happens in the arts and cultural heritage exists outside of markets.* (Throsby 1998).

Ethics and Economics seem to have an ever-more widening gap between them.

Many contemporary economists and social critiques are blaming the current crisis on the shift that has occurred in the ethics of economics, or rather the lack thereof. The most apparent social needs just do not coincide with economic objectives. As the Dutch arts economist Arjo Klamer declares “markets don't do well at generating social values.”

## SOLUTIONS: BRIDGING THE GAP

We have looked at the incompatibility of the distinctive polarities of value systems in the conservation field. As adept conservators we need to seek the bridging method that turns this mixture into a viable solution. The overall picture would be best viewed when we consider all its aspects, including the economic.

*Greater engagement between cultural and economic concerns, as well as mutual understanding, is essential for enabling conservation to play a greater role in civil society.*

(Mason 1998: 7).

The active participation of the stakeholders in the decision making process is a better alternative than simply having to accept ideologies that are imposed according to an economic agenda from outside financiers.

Daniel Bluestone comments that the important thing is to be able to find solutions that we can apply to real situations:

*At the local and national levels, the sense is that the way to justify cultural and social values is to embrace an economic model and to insist that jobs, income, wealth, and taxes are all things that can be generated by historic preservation and conservation activity ... It's well worth having people in conservation who*

*are able to marshal economics as part of an argument. But my concern is that the economic arguments are articulated in a way that begins to atrophy the other arguments for conservation.*

(Bluestone 1998).

Just as new mega discoveries of advanced tailored technologies applied to conservation may be useful, if they can be afforded (in all senses: research, acquisition, training and application), equally important are mega ideas to solve conservation problems according to the economic parameters of cultural custodians. After all, there is no use in having solutions that cannot be put into practice.



Figure 4 | Hong Ho, Art Money, 2005.

## CONCLUSIONS

The co-existence of values is what counts in the field of restoration – correlations instead of directly transferable relations, together with proportional participation of representatives of the different affected parties in a conservation project and the dialogue between them. In this idea we will find the key to solve the non-transferability of distinctive values in conservation.

The ethics of economics in conservation is perhaps the subject that needs to be pushed onto agendas, university syllabus, and towards focal points where it is taken under the multidisciplinary wing of our profession. As conservators we need to learn the appropriate skills to be able to communicate and dialogue with lucidity in the negotiating procedures that lead up to the allocation and formulation of budgets.

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Figure 5 | Shell, *Handel with Care*, 1995.

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