

VALUES AND SIGNIFICANCE IN CONSERVATION PRACTICE

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The philosophical framework underlying the conservation profession is rooted in the past. John Ruskin lives on in conservators' fundamental belief in the importance of the physical remains of an object, and in their perception of restoration as a largely destructive process. The traditional model of museums as hallowed halls of learning survives in conservators' conviction that visitors should admire objects but not touch them. The twentieth century political interest in preserving physical things from the past even gave birth to organized conservation in Australia, through the Piggott Report of 1975. These influences have driven the development of a philosophy that puts the preservation of the existing fabric of an object above all else. Change in the fabric of an object is seen by conservators as a dilution of the accuracy with which it can represent the past. It is damage, and therefore must be prevented. The AICCM Code of Ethics enshrines this philosophical approach, and by giving it this seal of approval, implicitly renders other approaches suspect.

In the wider heritage world, however, a revolution has occurred. Significance is now understood to reside not in the physical fabric of the object, but in the meanings that people attribute to it and the feelings of connection and ownership that they have for it. Intangible aspects of the past that are connected with, or experienced through, the object are considered heritage as much as the physical fabric of the object itself. The conservation profession, though, has become disconnected from this broader world of heritage scholarship and concepts of significance and meaning have had very little impact on conservation thought or practice; often, in fact, such concepts are actively rejected as being irrelevant or promoting unethical practices. Conservators who do wish to embrace such ideas find themselves violating the stated ethics of their profession, and frequently suffer both personal guilt and the negative judgment of their peers.

Making significance and meaning part of the rationale of treatment development, however, can assist conservators to balance the long-term survival of an object with its ability to engage people, and should be seen as a raising of philosophical standards rather than as a lowering of technical standards. This presentation will explore the relevance of the significance concept for conservators, and the possibility of reframing conservation ethics to provide more flexible and effective guidance for future challenges.

A CARING PROFESSION

Conservators are, almost without exception, dedicated, earnest, thoughtful, caring and committed. They believe passionately in their mission to save beautiful and interesting objects for future generations. They derive great satisfaction from making objects look beautiful and interesting for present generations. They are gratified when other people are interested in what they have done, and they take pleasure in showing their work off to interested and respectful viewers.

They get worried, though, when people stop interacting with objects just using their eyes and

want to interact with them using their other senses – their fingers, their noses, their ears, even their whole bodies. And they get frankly horrified when people want to change those objects to express the values they personally see in them.

Why are conservators so concerned by such interactions? Well – because they care. They care that one person's way of using an object does not wreck it for everyone else. They care that present generations do not use an object in a way that makes it unavailable for future generations. They care that the meanings that one person or group sees in an object are not allowed to destroy or hide the meanings seen by another person or group. And they

care that the physical components of objects reflect the past truthfully and accurately.

These concerns are about equity, sustainability and truth. They are good concerns, worthy of dedication and commitment. They are about standing up for the ‘innocents’ of heritage, those who have a stake but little or no voice in how heritage is used – the objects themselves, unborn generations, and people without heritage expertise. Conservation ethics and principles are designed to protect these “innocents”, and therefore to go against such ethics and principles is, by implication, to allow such innocents to be harmed or deprived of their birthright. As mentioned above, conservators are caring people, and to allow such harm to occur is unthinkable.

Conservators are, however, guided in their caring by codes of ethics and practice that embody very particular philosophies and approaches, and are the products of very particular cultures, times and systems of thought. They are profoundly influenced, on the one hand, by the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment movement, which revolutionised Western thought and entrenched a belief in the power of science to discover truth and solve problems (Clavir 1998: 3-6; Richmond and Bracker 2009: xvi). They are, perhaps paradoxically, equally influenced by the emotive “anti-scrape” movement of the nineteenth century, which saw unrestored original fabric as a spiritual bridge, that should not be tampered with (Rée 2009: 1-3). They are also informed by concepts of connoisseurship and expertise, that imply a structured hierarchy of people whose formal subject knowledge gives them the right – indeed the obligation – to make decisions on behalf of those who are less informed (Viñas 2005: 161). And they subscribe to a canon of thought that defines heritage predominantly as material that has survived from the past rather than as practices that are recreated in the present (Smith 2006: 3-4). As noted by Laurajane Smith (2006: 88):

Heritage management, conservation, preservation and restoration are not just objective technical procedures, they are themselves part of the subjective heritage

performance in which meaning is re/created and maintained.

Australian conservators have written (and regularly updated) their own codes of ethics and practice, and these both reflect, and maintain, the values, expectations and philosophies that underpin conservation practice in Australia. A close analysis of these codes makes interesting reading, and serves to illuminate some of the strengths and weaknesses of the conservation profession in contemporary Australia.

In particular, it is notable that, while we may be a caring profession, our ethical principles more closely resemble the strict moral care of an authoritarian religious order than the joyous care of a happy family. The seven principles of ethical behaviour laid out in the current AICCM¹ Code of Ethics conjure conservators to be “governed by ... respect,” to “strive to attain the highest standards,” to “recognise ... their limitations”, and to accept their “obligation to promote ... adherence” to the Code (AICCM 2002). These are principles of obedience, dedication and humility, enforced by the intimation of shame and censure for those who step out of line or fail to meet their obligations. None of these principles mentions inspiration, enthusiasm, multiple viewpoints or compromise; none of them clarifies why conservators do the work they do; and none of them suggests that conservators might have a responsibility to take into account the needs and concerns of other stakeholders in heritage, apart from a brief requirement in Principle 1 to “respect” the creators of cultural property.

These limitations are not confined to the AICCM code of ethics. As Salvador Muñoz-Viñas observes, they are common failings in Western conservation treatises and codes, which typically dictate how a conservator should behave and what a conservator should do, but fail to discuss the reasons for such actions. In particular, says Muñoz-Viñas, such codes should require conservators to ask “why, and for

¹ Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material.

whom, the conservation process is done,” (Muñoz-Viñas 2005: 29, 170) thereby bringing into conservation decision-making the values and needs of people who use the heritage being conserved to enliven and inform their lives.

The AICCM Codes of Ethics and Practice are also, in line with conservation codes of ethics in other Western countries (Clavir 2002: xiii- xxi; Appelbaum 2007: 70), almost entirely focussed on the physical fabric of heritage objects, and not the associated intangible heritage that gives them meaning (or indeed heritage that is entirely intangible in nature). All articles in the Australian codes refer to cultural “property” or “material”, and cultural material is explicitly defined as “Objects, collections, artworks, specimens, structures, or sites.” And while conservators are required to respect the “unique character and significance” of the heritage (Principle 1), and its “historic, aesthetic and cultural integrity” (Principle 2), it does not appear to be mandatory, or even particularly normal to take the significance and meaning of the object into account when making conservation decisions. Article 4 of the Code of Practice states rather reluctantly, “It is recognised that the significance of cultural material *may* have a bearing on conservation decisions” [emphasis added] and goes on to warn that significance should only be allowed to influence conservation decisions if it does not involve “breaching the provisions of the AICCM Code of Ethics”.

As people value heritage in the first place precisely because it has significance, this is an odd point of view, and the dissonance that it causes in conservation practice has been noted by, amongst others, Ford and Smith in their review of lighting recommendations at the National Museum of Australia (Ford and Smith 2011, p. 83).²

² Ford and Smith comment that while conservators do sometimes reluctantly accept the need to allocate higher levels of care to highly significant objects, their discomfort with this process leads them to do so informally, and without making their decisions explicit, systematic or documented.

It is only in relation to the cultural property of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, that the intangible aspects of heritage are decisively acknowledged to be of critical importance, with Article 5 of the Code of Practice stating that “When undertaking conservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders cultural property, the AICCM member should recognise that the objects and the information relevant to them are of equal importance”. Similarly, while Article 5 requires conservators to respect the “cultural and spiritual significance” of cultural material, and to “consult with all relevant stakeholders before making treatment or other decisions,” it is only in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Islander heritage that there is a stipulation that “conservation practice must adapt to cultural requirements”. By implication, for material from other cultures, conservation practice takes precedence over mere “cultural requirements”.

A CHANGING CONTEXT

The explicit exceptions made in the Codes of Ethics and Practice to accommodate the cultural meanings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are a product of a wider debate in heritage. Indigenous and non-Western scholars and communities have increasingly questioned the Western emphasis on the material remains of the past, and the assumption that these remains contain inherent or universal cultural value and significance. Indeed, as Laurajane Smith notes, it is increasingly recognised that heritage does not reside in objects themselves but in the meanings those objects hold for people, and it is only through the renewal and passing on of those meanings that heritage is maintained (Smith 2006: 3-6, 46). In conservation terms this debate is perfectly encapsulated by the example of the tradition of rebuilding shrines in Japan, where the heritage to be preserved is not actually the building but the building skills themselves, and the reverence and ceremony of the process of building (Inaba 2009: 157). The resulting physical monument is a product of the renewal of those heritage traditions, but is not in itself of primary heritage significance.

Although this issue has been raised and discussed primarily in the context of non-Western heritage, it is equally applicable to Western heritage. In Western cultures, just as much as in non-Western ones, heritage can be understood as a set of beliefs and practices rather than as a set of objects. If those beliefs and practices are allowed to die out, any objects associated with them will cease to be thought of as meaningful and are likely to be neglected and eventually discarded. As Michael Petzet commented in the seminal conference on authenticity held at Nara in 1994, conservation that “is one-sidedly concentrated on the care of ‘historic fabric’ leads... to a dead end if the authentic message of the monument is no longer understood” (Petzet 1994: 93). The “cultural requirements” that preserve and recreate a sense of personal and community connection with objects are therefore vital to their survival, and as such should be central to conservation decision-making processes. Smith notes that heritage is not just about the past but is “a process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present” (Smith 2006: 1), and it would seem to be obvious that conservation decisions should incorporate these processes of meaning making as positive rather than negative influences, whatever the originating culture of the heritage.

Another change that has taken place in heritage thinking is that the definition of what makes heritage real and authentic has widened to include things that cannot, and should not stay the same forever, things that in fact begin to lose their authenticity when they are ‘frozen’ in time and prevented from evolving either physically or intellectually. Gardens, for instance, continually change in their physical details, both through the seasons and as key plantings mature, die and must be replaced (Añon Feliú 1994: 220-21). Cities retain their reputations as vibrant centres of cultural heritage as much through the new cultural forms created by their inhabitants in the present as through the preservation or recreation of earlier cultural forms (Zancheti 2009: 167). Industrial sites, such as the Heinrichshütte blast furnace complex in the

German Ruhr valley become gradually colonised and rehabilitated by animals and plants, breathing a new life and vitality into places that had long been known for their pollution and contamination as much as their demonstration of power and human ingenuity. To prevent change in these environments would require the replacement of real plants with artificial ones, cultural innovation with social repression, and new life with herbicides and exterminators. Not only would such actions be manifestly unethical and unsustainable, but they would result in the heritage being perceived as dead and artificial. Indeed, cultural forms that are rigidly prevented from changing can be perceived as being dead or as having lost the spiritual authenticity of creative evolution. Britta Rudolff notes that documentation of an art form, for instance, can have the effect of “freezing” it, as the documented version becomes accepted as the standard and orthodox version, and the creativity and variability of the original withers away (Rudolff 2006: 142).

A third change that has occurred in heritage is that ideas about how heritage should be presented and interpreted for audiences have broadened. Traditional, didactic presentations involve objects which are chosen and interpreted by heritage ‘experts’, and are presented as static displays, usually on plinths or in glass cases that serve to separate the objects from the viewer and limit sensory interaction to visual inspection. Such displays, however, privilege tangible over intangible heritage, passive viewing over participation, and the engagement of the visual sense rather than other senses. It also presents objects in a highly ‘museumised’ way – clean, unmoving, and surrounded by the quiet respectfulness of the museum context rather than the often loud, busy, dirty contexts of real life. This type of presentation provides a authoritative, contemplative museum experience that is appealing to a significant number of visitors, not least because it is what many regular museum visitors have been brought up to expect, and people are strongly inclined to feel satisfaction and enjoyment when their expectations are met (Falk and Dierking 2000: 116-8). It also has

connotations of high status, affluence and education that may attract visitors who feel they possess or aspire to such characteristics – many studies have noted the tendency for museum audiences to be of above average levels of wealth and education (see for example Merriman 1991: 2, 5).³ For many other visitors however, these traditional forms of presentation can seem dull, remote and unengaging (Merriman 1997: 45). To reach a greater diversity of people, and to engage and empower them, interpreters are increasingly turning to display methods that encourage exploration, participation and personal experience. They are encouraging people to experience some of the intangible aspects of heritage – especially through physical participation – and to engage in the practice of heritage by contributing their own meanings and stories.⁴

Inclusive and community-minded as all these new ideas are, they present a real challenge for the strictly brought-up traditional conservator. As noted above, conservation codes of ethics both in Australia and elsewhere explicitly state that the primary role of the conservator is to preserve the physical fabric of heritage items, which means that where the preservation of tangible and intangible aspects of heritage are in conflict, it is the tangible heritage that the conservator usually feels obliged to prioritise. Faced, for example, with the question of whether to restore a steam engine to working condition, a process that generally involves considerable change to the fabric of the object, but facilitates the preservation of the engineering skills and culture that make up the intangible heritage associated with such an engine, most conservators are very conscious of the potential for loss of physical evidence. They are, however, typically

almost oblivious to the loss of tacit knowledge, way of life and understanding of the working engine that will be caused by the engine being mothballed and ceasing to work.

FINDING A NEW BALANCE

In his recent book *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Stephen Conn tells the tale of the concern in the 1850s that paintings in the National Gallery in London might be destroyed, both by the crowds that came to see them, and by the air pollution in the centre of London. The proposal to move the paintings to a more distant location, which would be less polluted but inaccessible to the many working people who regularly visited the gallery, was quashed by High Court Justice Coleridge, who came down firmly on the side of community use, remarking that: “The existence of the pictures is not the end of the collection but a means to give the people ennobling enjoyment. If while so employed a great picture perished in the using, it could not be said that the picture had not fulfilled the best purpose of its purchase or that it had been lost in its results to the nation.” (Conn 2010: 10).

The nineteenth century conviction that the proper purpose of museums and galleries is to provide “ennobling enjoyment” for the poorly educated may now seem patronizing and elitist, but the idea that a balance should be struck between the preservation of objects and the use of those objects to inspire and engage audiences is one that is very relevant to the modern world of heritage production. The exponential growth in collections and museums, for instance, raises the question of how much material can sustainably be collected and preserved, an issue recently discussed by Jerry Podany. Podany also points out that the inherently finite life of many objects also raises questions about how long we can reasonably expect them to last (particularly if they are actually used to provide an experience of heritage, rather than just kept in storage), and how we should understand and manage change in their condition (Podany in Macdonald and Levin 2011: 20-21). Barbara Appelbaum also discusses this issue,

³ Although Falk and Dierking have raised the possibility that it is not having education already that makes people want to visit museums, but a love of learning that predisposes people both to higher educational goals and to museum visiting (2000: 74).

⁴ Lisa Roberts provides an extended discussion of changes in interpretive practice, with particular emphasis on the influence of educational ideas (1997: 60-79).

noting that preserving things forever, or even for long, is not necessarily possible, and that in some cases the cultural significance of an object actively requires that it be used up, or allowed to “die”, in which case the conservator’s role may be to “let the patient die with dignity” (Appelbaum 2007: 271, 275). In the context of sites and buildings, Nicholas Stanley-Price notes that many ruins (monuments where substantial change and deterioration occurred far enough in the past for their ruined state to be accepted as normal and itself historic) have long been seen as deeply romantic and charming, at least by Western eyes, and have become the inspiration for significant new cultural creations in art, music and literature (Stanley-Price 2009: 37).

The continuous processes of change and evolution in living cultures mean that we must expect changes in the way people in the future will want to engage with their heritage, but our inability to predict these changes makes it hard to plan for them in our treatments. For example, as time moves on, will people have a greater desire to touch objects because of their mysterious, other-worldly nature, or a reduced desire to touch them because they no longer conjure up personal memories and connections? In other words, in limiting access to an object to preserve it, are we merely ensuring that no one gets to see it or interact with it during the period when, as an object from living memory, it is of most interest? Or are we, in fact, preserving it until it becomes an object of such rarity that it is of far more interest than earlier in its heritage career? A balance needs to be found in each case between preservation and access, the present and the future, the tangible and the intangible, and physical evidence and emotional understanding. But how might conservators decide what is the right balance, and what needs to be taken into account to achieve that balance?

In both the general heritage industry, and increasingly (and internationally) in the conservation profession, it is being recognised that, as the production of heritage is a process entirely founded on cultural values, it is a conscious

recognition of cultural values that must form the basis for heritage decision making. The internationally recognised Burra Charter, for instance, recommends that heritage be evaluated according to the criteria of aesthetic, historic, scientific and social significance, a policy also followed by the document Significance 2.0, which does much to apply the principles of the Burra Charter to movable cultural heritage (Australia ICOMOS 1999: 12; Russell and Winkworth 2009: 10). Stefan Michalski sees objects as being valued for their personal, impersonal (social) or scientific significance (Michalski 1994, quoted in Muñoz-Viñas 2005: 66). Formal heritage listing processes rate heritage according to its perceived regional, national or world significance. Most heritage, however, can be seen to have meaning and significance under several of these criteria at the same time, and evaluations of the level and type of significance of heritage will change according to the people, the culture, and the time by which they are being assessed.

The assessment of cultural values is also complicated by the fact that they frequently go unrecognised; they are so embedded in the way people think and act that it seems that they are natural, common-sense and unquestionable. Smith refers to this process of naturalisation when she talks about the ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’ (AHD), a phrase she uses to describe the Western cultural presumption that heritage is most commonly found in elite, and often monumental, material things and sites (Smith 2006). Michael Ettema, Ghislaine Lawrence and Lisa Roberts refer to it when they discuss nineteenth and early twentieth century presumptions that the working classes would be better off if they learned to appreciate art and history in the same way as their “betters”, the middle and upper classes (Ettema 1987: 64ff; Lawrence 1990: 108; Roberts 1997: 61-2). Miriam Clavir and Salvador Muñoz-Viñas refer to it when they describe the conservation profession’s presumption that conservation decisions should be based on the scientific and material knowledge of

trained experts (Clavir 1998, p. 6, Muñoz-Viñas 2005: 78-9).

The presumption that conservation decisions should be based on scientific and material knowledge rather than significance and meaning can be seen in the following quotes from the AICCM Code of Practice:

Materials and Methods: ... The advantages of the materials and methods chosen must be balanced against their potential adverse effects on *future examination, scientific investigation, treatment, function and ageing*. [Emphasis added.]

Integration of Losses: Any integration of losses should be documented in treatment records and reports and should be detectable by common examination methods. Such integration should be *removable; not detrimental to the cultural property; and should not modify the known aesthetic, conceptual, and physical characteristics of the cultural property*, especially by removing or obscuring original material. [Emphasis added.]

In both these quotes the potential adverse effects of treatment on the physical nature of the object are considered, but not the potential adverse effects on the ability of the object to communicate values and meanings. And while conservators are sternly advised to ensure that treatment should not be detrimental to the object, or modify its characteristics, there is no indication of who should decide what type and level of change might be considered “detrimental” or which are the characteristics that should not be changed. All the decision-making strategies identified relate to physical intervention for the object (or, in the previous section on preventive care, the object’s physical environment); there is no requirement to ask those with a personal interest in the object how treatment would affect the values they see in it, or to consider how the cultural significance of the object might best be communicated to new audiences who do not yet have a personal connection with it.

Using values and meanings as the basis for decision-making is, however, increasingly being seen as the

way forward in many conservation situations (Richmond 2009: xv-xvi). Perhaps as a result of the influence of the Burra Charter such an approach is already relatively common in Australia in the conservation of built heritage, where architectural conservators use significance assessments and community values to help them decide which elements and phases of a building should be preserved or removed and how the building can be sensitively adapted to modern uses. Of course, site and buildings conservators could be said to have stumbled across this approach because it is hard for them to avoid it. Buildings are inherently visible to the communities around them, and any attempt to remove or change a building which has meaning for a community is liable to initiate a forceful public debate (Johnston 1992: 4). Both the means and the incentive for understanding the value of a place or building are therefore not merely to hand, but often “in the face” of site and buildings conservators, in a way that they are not for conservators who work with institutional collections. The very act of collecting an object (or evidence of less tangible heritage) for a museum, gallery or archive involves taking that element of heritage away from its original or service context, which tends to sever, or at least attenuate, feelings of personal or community connection. Traditional cataloguing processes are also usually focussed on “formalist” information – facts such as date of manufacture, maker, place of origin, materials and function (Ettema 1987: 63) – and often fail to preserve information about the meanings such objects held for their original owners. In this situation, and especially when faced with scant resources and tight exhibition deadlines, it can be hard for conservators to find out much about the meaning an object had for its original owner or community.

It is, however, sometimes possible to recreate connections with interested communities, and in doing so rediscover some of the meanings and the cultural traditions associated with objects. This has been amply demonstrated by engagement with indigenous communities, who are increasingly consulted on the significance, meaning and care of

heritage associated with their cultures, and who have immeasurably enriched both the wider understanding of this heritage and the understanding of the impact of different ways of caring for it (Clavir 2002, especially Chapter 5). There is also a movement to document the practices and expectations of modern artists, so that, in caring for their works, conservators understand what is important to them, and what they feel is important for their audiences (Berndes *et al* 2005: 167-8). These movements are noted as exceptions though – papers are published that explicitly discuss the new approaches that they have developed, and the particular reasons why these approaches are necessary in their fields. Consultation and community involvement are much less common in the conservation of other genres of heritage: many conservators, in fact, explicitly speak of their client being the object rather than a person or community and focus their treatment decisions on the perceived ‘needs’ of the object, sometimes in direct opposition to the desires of the owner or custodian (Appelbaum 2007: 3, 90, Muñoz-Viñas 2005: 155).

As Barbara Appelbaum points out, though, the attitude that conservators have a responsibility to stakeholders other than the owner is “based on the idea that the objects we treat have value to people other than the legal owner,” and that conservators have a duty to speak on behalf of people who have no voice in the decision making process, and who may value and wish to maintain access to very different aspects of the heritage in question (Appelbaum 2007: 89; Muñoz-Viñas 2005: 196). This sense of responsibility to other people can have a very positive outcome when conservators acknowledge and draw into decision-making the many different meanings that an object can have for different communities and stakeholders, and when they use their knowledge to broker solutions to the difficult process of reconciling or prioritising those different meanings through the treatment and management of the heritage. A knowledgeable and impartial facilitator, such as a conservator, is usually required to ensure that any treatment that is decided on is not the one that merely pleases the

most powerful people and the ones with the loudest voices. On the other hand I would suggest that there is a noticeable bias to the people conservators feel most inclined to speak for – they are usually imaginary. They consist of such imagined people as future generations, as-yet-unidentified scientists and possible historians with new social theories – people who are expected to want to use heritage for respectful and minimally interventive research and appreciation. Essentially they are people in our own image, and we give our support to their imagined claim to heritage with the unspoken expectation that they will treat it and appreciate it in the way we do ourselves. In reality, the changes that have occurred in heritage and museums over the past 100 years – particularly the trend towards the democratisation of heritage, which would have been an anathema to the nineteenth century elites who established many of today’s museums – suggest that we might be very shocked if we could see how people in the future might interpret and interact with the heritage that we pass down to them.

There are, however, a number of sources that discuss methods that conservators might find useful in making meaning and significance more prominent in their decision-making; methods that may help in the search for balance between competing interests and options, and in the need to understand the positive aspects of valuing, treating and using heritage in ways that are not part of the traditional conservation canon. Speaking specifically to conservators, for instance, Barbara Appelbaum outlines a methodology for discovering the values and meanings that make an object significant, and of incorporating these values and meanings into the determination of an “ideal state” for the object that can then guide decisions about treatment and management (Appelbaum 2007: especially 65-74 and 173-236). Appelbaum’s method has a strong focus on the personal narrative values (to use Michalski’s term) in an object, which probably reflects her substantial experience in the private conservation sector. Speaking to practitioners working more generally with moveable cultural heritage, Significance 2.0 discusses ways of assessing

significance that focus more on the impersonal narrative values to be found in heritage, in this case probably reflecting its genesis as a government sponsored document with a strong focus on small museums and volunteer heritage workers (Russell and Winkworth 2009). Attempting to straddle the gaps between the public, heritage practitioners and policy makers, the 2006 London conference “Capturing the Public Value of Heritage” presents the approaches of a number of different individuals and organisations to identifying public value and incorporating it into heritage decision-making and policy on a larger scale (Clark 2006).

None of these texts, I feel, yet covers the needs of conservators comprehensively, but they do provide useful ideas and start points, and it is up to the conservation profession as a whole to develop and refine them further. They are the start of a long process of engagement with the idea of values that will, I believe, change not only the way conservators work but their understanding of what conservators are and do and their relationship to other people and professions in heritage.

ENABLING HERITAGE, ENABLING CONSERVATORS.

As has been discussed above, concepts of heritage have moved beyond the idea that heritage is necessarily defined by or located in tangible things, and towards the idea that heritage actually resides in intangible ideas, memories and performances that may, or may not, be prompted by, associated with or performed using tangible things. The central idea of heritage has thus been transformed, and conservators must either adjust the way they think and work to take these transformations into account, or face a future working at the periphery of heritage. If conservators remain focussed solely on the physical fabric of heritage, they will find themselves excluded from intellectual discussions of what heritage is or means, and relegated to merely being contacted when the tangible material associated

with heritage ideas needs to be ‘fixed up’. This is a trade role rather than a professional or craft/artistic one; it will always involve high levels of hand-skills, but intellectual discussion or creative input will not be expected, and will quite probably not be welcomed.

In fact, this diminishment of the role and value of conservators has already been observed, both in Australia and in some parts of Europe and the United States (Muñoz-Viñas 2005: 20). Conservators, for instance are not typically included as founding or permanent members of exhibition teams– they are instead called in at a fairly late stage of exhibition development once the preliminary lists of objects have already been composed. Many conservators themselves see their involvement before this stage as unnecessary – reasoning that before there is an object list there is nothing for them to discuss – but in fact, by the time this stage has been reached, ideas about the look and feel of the exhibition are already well advanced, and the exhibition team has a strong commitment to them. Presentations are also likely to have been made to powerful stakeholders such as the director of the museum or sponsors, and for the exhibition to get to this stage, those powerful stakeholders must have liked the ideas they have seen and have become interested in key ideas and objects. This is not a good time for a conservator to enter the picture and inform a socially bonded and intellectually committed team of people that the objects they have already set their hearts on cannot survive the display techniques they envisage for them; that they cannot be shown on open display, or toured, or used for revenue raising ‘encounter’ sessions. The values the team have already identified and wish to display in these objects – such as beauty, emotion, and the power to engage audiences in the present – are already well-established in their minds, and conservators will have trouble replacing these with less vivid ideas of historical evidence, possible future scientific examination and potential appeal to unborn generations.

But if conservators are not to be defined (and bounded) by their ability to preserve the physical

fabric of objects, how are they to be seen, both by themselves and others? The answer, I believe, is already encapsulated by the best conservation treatments – conservators *enable* heritage. They enable objects, ideas and information to survive and prosper as heritage; to be robust, to be safe, to be legible and to be usable. To do this conservators may undertake physical treatments to stabilise or restore physical material, but they may also undertake a range of other activities, such as documenting intangible heritage, facilitating the practice of traditional skills, or providing people with opportunities to experience heritage in personal, sensory and interactive ways. The role of conservators should be to enable the survival of heritage in its most significant forms and if, in some cases, this involves relaxing standards of physical care for the object, tolerating physical change so that intangible aspects of heritage can be preserved, this should not be perceived just as negligence, or as ‘giving in’ to ill-judged demands, but as a positive desire to enhance the experience of heritage for visitors and stakeholders and to provide access to and understanding of different aspects of that heritage.

CONCLUSION

The good thing is that, as a profession, I believe we are at least half way there. As I have begun talking about these ideas, I have found that many other conservators have the same desire to draw stakeholder and audience needs into their decision-making processes, the same desire to achieve a better balance between the preservation of tangible and intangible elements of heritage, and the same desire for such efforts to be regarded as a positive step and as a mark of their creativity and integrity rather than as a failure to maintain professional standards.

These conversations are, however, usually accompanied by a sense that boundaries are being crossed and traditions questioned in ways that might not yet be publicly acceptable. Such ideas are certainly used in particular cases by individual

conservators, but at present they remain outside the authorised canon of conservation practice. To achieve legitimacy, and to become a more effective part of conservation thought and practice, they need to be discussed and debated, trialled and reported, critiqued and refined, and this discussion needs to happen explicitly, publicly and constructively.

It should be a fun ride.

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