

# CONSERVATION TREATMENT METHODOLOGY



BARBARA APPELBAUM



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Barbara Appelbaum



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Butterworth-Heinemann is an imprint of Elsevier  
Linacre House, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8DP, UK  
30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA

First edition 2007

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#### British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 13: 978-0-75068-274-9

For information on all Butterworth-Heinemann publications  
visit our web site at [books.elsevier.com](http://books.elsevier.com)

Printed and bound in Great Britain

07 08 09 10 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# *Acknowledgements* —

The premise of this book is that it is possible to discuss conservation treatments in a general way, without reference to any specific object or material. That idea has been brewing in my mind since early in my career. I recall reading case studies of treatments of a variety of objects during my training and trying to figure out what they had in common. Those first steps started me on the long road that led to this book.

I was encouraged by Susanne P. Sack, the Chief Conservator at the Brooklyn Museum, my first employer. As a recent graduate and the only objects conservator in a lab of paintings conservators, I had to justify my treatment choices in detail. Sue always made sure that we remembered the fundamental reasons for our treatments, and I learned a lot from her about why we do conservation in the first place.

The path to this book was paved when I received a Samuel H. Kress/FAIC Fellowship for Advanced Conservation Publication in 1997. The Kress has shown extraordinary patience with us slow-writing conservator/authors and kept supporting the program even at times when there were few actual books to show for the effort. We have a lot to thank them for. At the time of our first grant, many conservators questioned the idea that we were even capable of writing books.

I also owe a debt to Sarah Rosenberg, a former Executive Director of AIC, who worked with me as Chair of the AIC Publications

## xiv Acknowledgements

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Committee in the early 1990s to create the grant proposal that became what we now simply call The Kress. She understood our profession better than many of us do.

Conservators are a generous group of people, always passionate about their work, and always happy to talk about it. By and large, they are innovative thinkers, eager to embrace new ideas as well as new materials and techniques. The ideas in this book came out of dozens, if not hundreds, of invaluable conversations with colleagues. Inspiration came from their drive to do the best job possible and from their doubts and difficulties as well. Conservation publications and presentations at professional meetings provided the needed doses of reality to the theoretical structure I was working in.

So this book is a group effort.

Special thanks are due to my long-time business partner, Paul Himmelstein. Paul is always willing to indulge my musings about conservation theory—and to put them into practice. His attention to ethics and his kindness to clients and colleagues alike are a reminder of why we do this work in the first place.

I am also exceedingly grateful to Dr Robert Feller, who carefully read the technical chapters to comment on my use of scientific principles. He also prodded me, with great tact, toward greater clarity in writing. Dr Feller's work forms much of the scientific basis for the field of conservation, for which we are all in his debt. I hope the book meets his high standards.

Thanks are also due to the many conservators who reviewed portions of the text. Patsy Orlovsky and Dan Kushel have been enthusiastic supporters whose energy and optimism encouraged me to keep going. Irene Br ckle, Dr Salvador Mu oz Vi as,

Martin Burke, and Chris Caple read the first few chapters and provided invaluable suggestions.

Writing, even in a specialized field, should be clear to any well-educated person. Ronald Slusky, a published author in his own right, but a patent attorney, not a conservator, moved me in the direction of precise organization and reader-friendly language. Critical readers willing to suggest improvements after pointing out what needs to be improved are rare, and he devoted countless hours to doing just that.

Many thanks, of course, to my family, who have had to listen to my musings about how the methodology of conservation can be applied to real life.

Thanks are also due to Sarah Vanstone, Stephani Allison, and Lanh Te at Elsevier. I am also very grateful to Vidya Vijayan, my project manager, and her staff, whose attention to detail and quick response made preparation of the manuscript worry-free.

Working daily on the strange and wonderful things that come into my lab is a fabulous job. I am grateful to my clients for putting their trust in me. And I am also grateful to the scores of people I know in only one limited way—through the things that they made.

*Barbara Appelbaum*

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# *Introduction* \_\_\_\_\_

We conservators have a difficult job.

We work on a wide variety of things for a wide variety of owners while following ethical restrictions they are largely unaware of. We devote our professional lives to preserving for all eternity objects that we think of as the world's patrimony, even while the objects' custodians use them, exhibit them, and sometimes love them to death.

We treat world-famous art as well as family possessions that no one outside the family cares about. We treat ten-ton chunks of stone and microscopic threads of long-dead fungi. The objects we deal with have unique physical characteristics that are virtually impossible to discern, but few of us have access to scientific testing that would help us to understand them.

We depend for our livelihoods on custodians who have no idea of what conservation is about and no way to distinguish good work from bad.

We often feel pulled in several directions at once. We want to do what custodians ask—make old stains go away or make a fragile artifact safe for a world tour. But we shy away from any treatment that might affect the object adversely, even if on a microscopic scale and even if changes would not be apparent for a century or more.

On top of that, we agonize, afraid that we are making the wrong choices, and are sometimes frozen into inaction by the fear of being criticized no matter which choice we make. If we fix signs of age, we obliterate the object's history, but if we do not, we are not respecting the creator's intent. If we do a more invasive treatment, it may not be reversible, but if we do less, the object may remain vulnerable to damage.

Our uncertainty about whether we are making the best choices is only getting stronger as our profession takes on the care of an increasingly diverse variety of projects in an ever-widening range of settings. Further complicating the task is a post-modern intellectual climate that asks such questions as: What does better mean? What is art? Do the cultural prejudices of our Euro-centered post-Enlightenment mindset taint our decision-making? How do conservation ethics fit into a multi-cultural world?

Conservation training is material-based, and yet our dilemmas are not primarily material ones. We can spot paint cleavage at twenty paces. We know how to fix rips and remove grime from fragile surfaces. But the most difficult questions are not about what we *can* do, but what we *should* do. Codes of ethics say that conservation treatments should be appropriate. Appropriate to what exactly? We have no training, no terminology even to address these non-material aspects.

Much of the terminology and concepts used to discuss non-material aspects of objects in this text are informed by readings in the social sciences, a rich source for insight into human beings' attachment to objects.<sup>1</sup> A few simple axioms lay the groundwork

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<sup>1</sup> See Selected Readings for a list of books, largely outside of conservation, that are relevant to conservation concerns.

for the non-material side of conservation work the way that principles of the hard sciences underlie the material side:

1. Objects have different meanings to different people. The differences are derived from culture, individual personality, social class, and the personal connection of the owner to the object in question.
2. Institutions that own objects give them meanings based on their missions and programs.
3. The meanings that objects hold for their custodians, and for society at large, affect the desirable goal of treatment.

### **The methodology**

There are no clear lines that define for all time and in all cases the boundaries between proper and improper conservation treatments. Each object and its context must be evaluated individually, and every decision involves value judgements. This book presents a way through the morass of conflicting demands and difficult decisions that face conservators every time they take on an object for treatment. It describes a systematic methodology for conservation treatments of all kinds that addresses all of the issues relevant to treatment decision-making.

The methodology consists of eight steps. They are:

1. Characterize the object;
2. Reconstruct a history of the object;
3. Determine the *ideal state* for the object;
4. Decide on a *realistic goal* of treatment;
5. Choose the treatment methods and materials;
6. Prepare pre-treatment documentation;

7. Carry out the treatment;
8. Prepare final treatment documentation.

Much of the novel material in this book lies in the first four steps. These steps involve gathering, analyzing, and organizing a wide range of material and non-material information. They lay out an explicit and mutually agreed-upon foundation for the more technical decisions to follow. Steps 5 through 8 are the daily bread of practicing conservators and are the subject of most of the conservation literature related to treatment.

Step 1 is object characterization. This involves not only the standard physical examination but also an inquiry into the values the object holds for the custodian and other stakeholders and an investigation of other culture-based information.

Reconstructing the full history of the object in Step 2 leads to the choice of the ideal state of the object in Step 3. The ideal state is the past state of the object with the most meaning for its current owners and serves as the foundation for the realistic goal of treatment established in Step 4.

Once the first four steps are complete, we are prepared to plan and then execute a treatment. Without these steps, we risk arriving at a treatment that, although perhaps technically flawless, may not be appropriate for a particular object or its custodian.

A particular strength of the methodology is its protocols for incorporating non-material issues in treatment decision-making. Conservators tend to be most comfortable in the realm of the practical, trading information about materials and techniques, tools and equipment. Aspects of treatment decision-making relating to the intangible aspects of objects are seldom made explicit. Typical treatment documentation focuses on what is wrong with an object and how those conditions can be fixed. That

focus slights questions of a different kind: What does the custodian want the object to look like? Should it be made to look as much as possible like new ; or decidedly *not* like new ; or (as many custodians express it) just better ? What does better mean? Should various kinds of damage be repaired and hidden, or are they desirable signs of the object's history? In general, what bearing does an object's history have on its treatment?

The methodology systematically addresses these sometimes unsettling questions by looking at the underlying nature of conservation treatment and its effect on objects. A treatment is an interpretation chosen to enhance the meanings for which the object is valued and to accommodate its intended future. That interpretation is based on one of its past states—its *ideal state*.

Many of the issues that inform the decision-making process fall into the gap between the material world of conservators and the cultural world of the humanities, and therefore do not fit the common terminology of either group. The text introduces terminology to fill that gap and to facilitate communication both among conservators and between conservators and outsiders.

A particular focus of the methodology is the multiple roles of custodians in treatment decision-making. Custodians are the source of important information about the object and its history. They also supply information on their future use of the object, their aesthetic preferences, and the resources available for the job and for post-treatment care. The conservator must, in turn, furnish custodians with information sufficient for them to make informed treatment choices. The methodology's systematic approach to the needs of owners, custodians, and other decision-makers helps conservators refine their treatment goals and work with those unfamiliar with conservation.

The eight steps of the methodology represent a new way of organizing much of what we conservators already do. Parts of the steps are carried out by many conservators some of the time. However, a single uniform decision-making process has never been suggested before, and the book's terminology for many familiar concepts is, likewise, new. The methodology provides a way to assure that all relevant issues are addressed explicitly and in every treatment. This benefits the object, the custodian, *and* the conservator.

### **Universal applicability**

The methodology addresses the broad spectrum of issues that arise across all conservation practice, independent of specialty, setting, and object use. Although conservators working on different kinds of objects tend to focus on different issues, *all* those issues have potential application to *all* objects. The methodology combines those issues—and ways to resolve them—into one package. Of course, not every issue drives every treatment, but we cannot know which issues are relevant until we ask the same questions about every object.

For example, some ethnographic conservators look closely at the religious beliefs of the culture of origin.<sup>2</sup> Archival conservators focus on preserving information contained in a document while

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<sup>2</sup>For example, Nancy Odegaard's *Artists' Intent: Material Culture Studies and the Conservator*, *JAIC* 34 (1995): 187–193, would appear by its title to address a broad topic of potential relevance to a wide variety of objects but only cites Native American ethnography. In the same vein, in Mary Peever, *Characterization of Alterations to Artifacts*, in *Symposium 86: The Care and Preservation of Ethnological Materials* (Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, 1988), 142–146, the first sentence is *Examination of an ethnographic object requires characterization of all alterations, as though this is only true when the object is an ethnographic one.*

preserving the object itself as well. Art conservators, particularly those who treat the works of famous artists, are interested in what the artist thought about the work and in the identification of artists' materials. Industrial conservators take a special interest in the incremental technological advances embodied in the objects they treat.

None of these concerns is unique to a single conservation specialty. Many objects from a variety of cultures are religious in origin. All objects contain information as well as having intrinsic value as artifacts. Their creators thought about what they were doing and chose materials and fabrication techniques from among those available to them, so every object embodies the technology of its time. All of these concerns could be relevant to any conservation treatment.

Many issues, like those related to objects in use, cross specialty lines. For example, many Christian religious objects are exhibited in museums as art, but conservators treat some of the same kind of objects currently in use. Understanding how those treatments might differ and whether those differences apply to objects from other religions would help conservators deal with many issues related to use.

The methodology gives particular attention to current use as a driving force in treatment decision-making. Objects of all kinds are used for many different purposes, and the same object can have different uses based on its current setting. Display is a use, but a multi-faceted one, since objects can be exhibited for a variety of reasons. Objects in research or archival collections have a different range of uses, although some may be also be exhibited. Private owners have their own needs for usability. In every case, treatments need to accommodate the physical demands of future environments and uses as well as the object's interpretation.

### **More choices, more answers, better outcomes**

It was once suggested to the author that the application of a prescribed methodology might make it harder to think outside the box.<sup>3</sup> The contrary is the case. Thinking through each conservation treatment from the beginning keeps us from becoming trapped in the box in the first place. In fact, there is, no box.

A single methodology does not mean an imposed uniformity. Asking the same questions for all treatments means finding different answers. We should always ask, What is the goal of this treatment? but if the answers are different, then different treatment approaches are not only acceptable, but desirable. Not only does a prescribed conservation treatment methodology *not* impose uniformity, it actually supports different results appropriate to the many variables that treatments must address.

The same object in different settings *should* receive different treatments based on its differing use and meaning. The conservator's sensitive response to physical aspects of the objects' current environment and use and to the object's meaning and context is crucial to optimal treatments. That a particular object might receive different treatments in different settings is not a weakness but a strength. Starting at a neutral point and making decisions from scratch each time produces even more diverse approaches than are commonly seen at present.

A student of the author's once observed, with notable discomfort, that looking at a treatment from many different points of view might mean that there is no one right way to treat a particular object. The student was right. But judgements of right and wrong are not appropriate measures of the quality of a conservation treatment. Morality is not the issue.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Proctor, personal communication, 1 June 2001.

Nor is ethics the issue. Conservators often refer to codes of ethics for guidance, and there is no doubt that ethical concerns define the profession of conservation and separate conservators from the many other people that fix things. However, ethical codes broadly bracket many possible alternatives. They mark boundaries beyond which one should not go, but within which lie a range of ethically acceptable choices. Those choices are not, however, equally appropriate. Ethical codes do not provide the guidance needed to choose from among the acceptable treatment alternatives. And using the language of ethics as a guide to practice has led to the regrettable habit of mind in which, if one choice is right and therefore ethical, another one has to be wrong and unethical. The language of morality can inhibit reasoned discussion of conflicting points of view.

An open and reasoned discussion about the ways that an object will gain or lose certain meanings by the proposed intervention is more likely to lead to the best outcome. An optimal treatment will rely on explicit decisions shared with all stakeholders, not by the formulaic application of familiar pre-conceived patterns of treatment. A uniform methodology provides the structured space within which such discussions can take place.

## **The goal of treatment**

The methodology addresses the two major goals of conservation treatment, preservation and interpretation. Preservation is often described as the primary goal of the conservation profession<sup>4</sup> and seems to receive more attention. But preservation and interpretation should not—and cannot—be separated.

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<sup>4</sup> Preamble to Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, [www.aic-faic.org](http://www.aic-faic.org).

A term that economists use—utility—combines the benefits of treatment in a single measure. Utility is the total of the benefits that people get from objects multiplied by the time span over which such benefits accrue.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, the purpose of conservation treatment is to maximize an object's utility. The immediate improvement in an object's state (interpretation) that results from treatment and the span of time over which such improvements will last (preservation) are equal factors in the utility of a treated object: degree of improvement multiplied by time equals utility. The concept of utility is probably as good a measure of treatment quality as we can find.

Treatments that improve the aesthetics, usability, or lifespan of an object all increase its utility. Treatment of a book with broken boards makes it readable. Treatment of a fragile mosaic panel that lies flat on a storeroom shelf allows it to be exhibited vertically. Treatment improves the appearance of a stained etching.

Slowing an object's deterioration also increases utility.

The overall goal of conservation treatment is to maximize usability *and* longevity. Use and preservation are not antagonists.<sup>6</sup> An object that cannot be used—for research, exhibition, or any other physical or intellectual use—provides no benefit. Simple arithmetic tells us that an unusable object, even if it lasts forever, has zero utility.

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<sup>5</sup> William D. Grampp, *Pricing the Priceless: Art, Artists, and Economics* (New York: Basic Books, Inc.) 1989, 16–17, 35.

<sup>6</sup> This is not a common sentiment. At the 2006 AIC Annual Meeting, where the topic was "Using Artifacts: Is Conservation Compromised?" several presenters answered the question in the negative, but some were begrudging about it. They seemed to be yielding to the inevitability of losing the eternal argument and the political correctness of enhanced accessibility for collections. No speaker disagreed that there *was* a conflict, and none expressed the idea that use and preservation are mutually supportive.

With this claim, the author admits to be walking on thin ice. Conservators are often criticized—only half in jest—as wanting to lock the world’s entire cultural heritage in a climate-controlled vault. The criticism has some validity. We *do* want to preserve things for the future. But how far into the future do we have to go before it would be okay for *someone* to use them? Isn’t *now* the future that we were talking about last year?

The use of objects is not the antithesis of preservation.

We can look at questions of preservation and use in a more global way: of all the things that human beings have found or made, some have been kept over many years while others were thrown out. Individuals and institutions want to keep many things and do not want them to be destroyed any more than conservators do. These users are not our enemies. But no one is willing to expend time, effort, and money to preserve roomful of things that are unusable, dirty, or broken. Custodians rely on conservators to make their stuff usable or nicer looking, and treatment is supposed to provide the physical strength to make those improvements last. The goal of treatment is to enhance the values, use, and meaning the object has to its custodians and other stakeholders into the indefinite future.

### **Questions of terminology**

This book uses the term *objects* to describe all the things that conservators treat, even though *object* is used by conservators for a category of three-dimensional entities that are not paintings, works on paper, textiles, and a few other things. The text uses the term for everything from paintings, textiles, and paper-based material to ceramics, taxidermy specimens, and skis.

There seems to be no ideal solution to this vocabulary dilemma.

The term *material culture* is sometimes used to describe the cultural artifacts that others call *cultural property*, *cultural patrimony*, or *cultural heritage*. The terms *property* and *patrimony* have been rejected in some quarters as imperialistic and sexist, respectively, while *heritage* includes non-material things like songs and dances. *Material culture* includes food preparation, alterations in the landscape, and changes in animals, people, and plants brought about by human intervention.

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) has adopted the term *cultural property* rather than *object*, partly as a response to architectural conservators who insist that, if anything, a building is not a single object but a collection of objects. Natural history specimens, both geological and biological, are sometimes considered to lie outside the category of culture. It could be said that the removal of such objects from the natural world and their inclusion in a collection for permanent preservation makes them *cultural property*. In any case, the phrase *cultural property* is awkward in writing, and the term *object* will be used in the absence of a better alternative.

Another dilemma of writing is the use of the personal pronoun. The author routinely uses *she* for the conservator and *he* for the custodian.

## Looking forward

The idea that the conservation profession lacks an overarching methodology and is the worse for not having one is not new. Lelekov, for example, observed decades ago that [t]he absence of empirically applicable theory in the sphere of museum collections prevents any further progress in this field and leaves

it overburdened with huge and quite unmanageable heaps of contradictory theoretical theses and postulates.<sup>7</sup>

Conservators may disagree about the exact nature of a conservation treatment methodology, what it can and should do, and even if such a thing makes sense at all. They *should* disagree; there is nothing like open disagreement to move things forward. The explicit decision-making steps of the methodology should help to clarify the nature of disagreements and make discussion easier.

The practice of conservation is much more than the application of clever material-specific techniques to reach long-ago agreed-upon goals. Our task is the preservation and interpretation of tangible objects that have value to their owners or to society in general. Carrying out that task requires that we understand the ways that treatment can affect the meaning of objects, and that we use that knowledge to *enhance* their meaning. Ultimately, then, the optimal practice of conservation rests not in our hands but in our heads.

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<sup>7</sup>L. A. Lelekov, 'Theoretical Aspects of Restoration,' in *Preprints, ICOM Committee for Conservation, 6th Triennial Meeting, Ottawa, 1981*, 81/11/5.

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# Section I

## Characterizing the object

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# *Introduction to section I* \_\_\_\_\_

The first step of the methodology is characterization of the object. A full characterization is more than just a physical description. It includes information about both material and non-material aspects of an object—its so-called dual nature. A compilation of this information produces an in-depth view of the object in all its aspects.

The material aspects of an object relate to its physical characteristics such as component materials, construction, and the appearance of its surfaces. This information comes primarily from the physical examination, a complex process that is a basic part of the conservator's expertise. In many ways, the object is our real client, and we study it in order to learn how to treat it.

The non-material aspects of an object relate to its meaning, function, or intended use, the owner's interest in it, the values that society places on it, and various other cultural data that cannot be found in the object itself. Although aesthetics, monetary value, and many other non-material aspects of objects are based on and refer to the physical object, they are not derived directly from it, but from human judgements. For example, rarity is a matter of physical fact, but the idea that rarity affects the value

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of an object is a cultural judgement applied only to certain kinds of objects.

Establishing a goal of treatment appropriate to the object and acceptable to all concerned parties invariably requires both physical and cultural data. Emblematic of the dual nature of objects is the caption of a photograph in a published paper about an ivory figurine plagued by efflorescence of soluble salts. The label reads: Salty Egyptian Concubine. <sup>1</sup> Surely, it was the ivory rather than the concubine that was salty.

The dual nature of art has been described by Susan Sontag. Art, she observes, is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text or commentary on the world. <sup>2</sup> All objects, in fact, are both something and about something. Their histories reveal changes in both their physical nature and their cultural meaning which interact with each other in complex ways. A useful object, for example, becomes art when moved into a museum, where it is transformed into something to be looked at. But the way museum-goers see the aesthetic qualities of a utilitarian object is partly related to its previous function. Viewers read a glass pitcher not only by appreciating its color, shape, and decoration, but also by reflecting on the way it would feel in their hands, the way it would transfer heat, and the way it would pour. An understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Carol E. Snow and Terry Drayman Weisser, The Examination and Treatment of Ivory and Related Materials, in *Adhesives and Consolidants, Preprints of the Contributions to the Paris Congress*, 28 September 1984, eds N. S. Brommelle, Elizabeth M. Pye, Perry Smith, and Garry Thomson (London: The International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 1984), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, On Style, in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1969) as quoted in Stephen E. Weil, Publicly-Chosen Art: What Standards Apply? in *A Cabinet of Curiosities: Inquiries into Museums and Their Prospects* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 58.

the interactions between the material and non-material aspects of an object is vital to its successful treatment.

The mix of the tangible and intangible is a major part of what makes conservation fascinating. On the one side is scientific fact that can be verified by quantitative investigation. On the other side are the attitudes of owners and viewers that can only be studied through the qualitative methods of the liberal arts. Conservators need to give both sides their due, while at the same time respecting the boundaries that separate fact from feeling.

Misunderstanding may arise if we undertake to treat only the physical object. For example, describing an object as a bronze may tempt the conservator to assume that only the bronze elements constitute the object. If such an object were presented for cleaning, a natural first step would be to investigate methods used to clean bronze. There is a tendency to jump into technical aspects of how such a process could be carried out rather than questioning the decision itself. What is it exactly that is to be removed and what preserved? Are all meaningful parts of the object bronze? In the end, some kind of cleaning may prove to be appropriate. However, consideration of both the material and non-material aspects of an object will help to avoid the mistake of, for example, removing an accretion that adds value.

Broadly speaking, the dual nature of objects parallels the two primary treatment goals of preservation and interpretation. We take for granted the conservator's role in preserving the physical object, but the conservator's role in interpretation is not so obvious. Yet interpretation of an object is unavoidably embedded in every conservation treatment, whether the conservator has a particular interpretation in mind or not. This is why characterization of an object requires a thorough analysis of its non-material aspects.

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The way that treatment inevitably embodies interpretation was illustrated during the drafting of the Commentaries to the AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice.<sup>3</sup>

In writing the commentaries dealing with compensation for loss, the drafting committee found it difficult to define loss, because doing so requires defining the state from which loss detracts, something for which conservators do not have a single term. If an object is defined as art and was made by someone defined as an artist, the reference point can be the state at which the artist considered the work to be finished, the so-called original state. With other kinds of objects, however, the state from which loss detracts may be a later state, perhaps after users have added purposeful accretions or after use of the object has altered it in some other way. To complicate the matter, compensation sometimes deals with defects other than loss, like stains or other types of disfigurement.

There is no easy answer to what compensation is because there is no simple answer to what constitutes meaningful loss or disfigurement. This, in turn, is because there is no simple definition of the desired state of the object. Every treatment represents an attempt to bring an object to a specific previous state, but the choice of that state is not a foregone conclusion. *Ergo*, any treatment is an interpretation. What we used to think

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<sup>3</sup> Commentary 23 of Guidelines for Practice of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works, [www.aic-faic.org](http://www.aic-faic.org). The introduction to the section on Compensation for Loss reads: This guideline refers to physical loss to the material of a cultural property or loss of original appearance through chemical change. Loss may have a structural and/or visual effect. The baseline for determining the nature and extent of loss is the point at which the cultural property was generally accepted as completed, although compensation need not return the cultural property to this state. The 1979 version of the Code used the phrase damage and loss without definition in sections entitled Limitations on Esthetic Reintegration.

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was straightforward—figure out what’s wrong, then fix it—represents instead the application of a complex set of culturally based interpretations.

Past attempts to describe the elusive something that is the desirable state of an object show its difficulty. For example, Conservation is the means by which the true nature of an object is preserved.<sup>4</sup> The 1963 version of the AIC *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* used the phrase “esthetic, historic and physical integrity”<sup>5</sup> while the current (1994) version sidesteps the issue by referring to “unique character and significance.”<sup>6</sup>

What could an object’s “true nature” or “integrity” be, and how exactly would one recognize such a thing? This is confounding enough even if we are only thinking about the object’s physical being, but its non-material aspects make the question even more problematic. Both the physical state of an object and its cultural meaning shift constantly. An object has no single ineffable unalterably true nature. The current state of an object is an arbitrary, random moment in its history, and its previous states are beyond our reach.

Again, every treatment is an interpretation. The conservator ultimately bears responsibility for identifying the appropriate interpretation after suitable consultation with other parties and

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<sup>4</sup>Corfield 88 as quoted in Mary Brooks, Caroline Clark, Dinah Eastop, and Carla Petschek, “Restoration and Conservation—Issues for Conservators: A Textile Conservation Perspective,” in *Restoration: Is It Acceptable?* ed. Andrew Oddy (London: British Museum Department of Conservation, 1994), 103.

<sup>5</sup>Section II.A, in “The Murray Pease Report,” *SIC* 9 (1964): 116–121. This was the first version of what later became the IIC-AG, and then the AIC, Code of Ethics and Standards for Practice. “Standards” was later changed to “Guidelines.”

<sup>6</sup>Section II in Code of Ethics of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works, [www.aic-faic.org](http://www.aic-faic.org).

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for devising a treatment that embodies it. The involvement of the conservator with the interpretation of objects and with their non-material aspects is under-appreciated and seldom discussed. In addition, the interpretive aspect of treatment is not routinely addressed in conservation documentation. Acknowledging the dual nature of objects therefore creates certain complications in the training of conservators and their level of comfort with the dilemmas they confront.

The material aspects of objects are the primary topic of conservation training and conservation literature, while the non-material aspects are seldom systematically addressed. Although conservators can be expected to have a certain amount of cultural information from their liberal arts educations, the importance of such an education has not been acknowledged as central to conservation practice.<sup>7</sup> For this reason and others, this text discusses the non-material aspects of objects at greater length than material ones.

Conservators have a unique role among the professions that deal with cultural property; they alter the object itself, not just people's ideas about it. Conservators therefore have a special responsibility to consider both material and non-material information in their decision-making. This is what the characterization process helps us to do.

Once a conservator has proceeded through the steps of the characterization, critical points in the object's life will gain clarity. A characterization process carried out at a level appropriate to

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<sup>7</sup> Requirements for admission to the American training programs include courses in art history and other object-based courses such as anthropology, but no other liberal arts courses, in religion or sociology, for example, are included. The Qualifications Task Force of AIC (draft dated 2001) set forth 18 areas of expertise, but general cultural knowledge was not one of them.

the object will insure that the treatment proposed and carried out is optimal for the object and for all of the parties who are stakeholders in its future. This approach facilitates the gathering of all the information necessary to see the object in a holistic way, in the variety of contexts and cultural roles it has held during its lifetime.

In short, the goal of characterization is to see objects intelligently and sympathetically in order to comprehend their entire significance, both intellectually and emotionally.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>M. Kirby Talley, Jr, Conservation Science and Art: Plum Puddings, Towels and Some Steam, *MMC* 15 (1996): 275.