

Conservation as museology act

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Conservation is a crucial part of a museum's operation, although not as well publicized as the actual exhibition of the artifacts. Conservation takes place away from the public eye, but it is a very important function, as its effects compliment the information inherent in a museum object.

Exhibition visualizes and conveys information and ideas, connects the past with the present through the particular viewpoints and approaches chosen by the museum staff. Planning an exhibition, a different message can be conveyed through policy, individual choice and particular approach chosen. Could it be that conservation policy could also play a part of similar importance? How can "invisible" museum activities play an important part in the development of an exhibition?

Let's start from the common item, which is the object itself, the museum artifact. Museum collections are preserved and exhibited according to the value attributed to them. Each object is unique, but cultural, historical, aesthetical and symbolic values attributed to an object are evaluated differently accordingly the time the object is studied or exhibited, and its potential interpretations could vary accordingly. The act of conservation is an important part of this interpretative procedure, since the results of the restoration on an artifact could be a source of additional information not only about itself at the beginning of its existence, but as an interpretation of the restoration in a specific moment of time and by persons acting under a prescribed framework. In other words, restoration itself is a part of an object's history, adding to the wealth of information that one can derive from its current exhibition.

Conservation has its own codes and ethics, but also many choices and styles. Let's not forget that conservation and restoration have the power to illuminate or downgrade aspects of the history, the use, the initial appearance, the symbolism, or the artistic value of an object, so it is clear that they are important museological choices, sometimes even political acts in a wider sense.

Speaking of choices and styles, let's consider that an object may actually look different after conservation, compared to its original appearance or after damage from

time or accident. This particular change of appearance may often mirror a change of policy or interest by the museum staff, regarding the information or aspect of its history that needs to be illuminated each time.

If the restored object itself is to serve the reason of its exhibition, which is to serve the message that needs to be conveyed, then, in order to fulfill this role, it must follow the conceptual framework of the particular exhibition.

For example, let's take an item of religious function, an item of sacred art. Such an item, created for ceremonial usage in places of worship, should be restored and displayed accordingly. Wouldn't it be unfitting for it to be restored and exhibited like it was meant for an art gallery? Obviously, it would not be proper for such an item to be restored only according to its aesthetic values, whitewashing its history by eliminating and polishing all markings and scars of its use and its symbolic meaning.

It is clear, then, that the role of a conservator is not so simple and straightforward during the procedure of the exhibition development.

Many people consider conservation a simple, mechanical task that needs only specific skills. Museum conservators are often viewed as skilled craftsmen, and the conceptual part in planning an exhibition is considered irrelevant to their work.

In some other cases, the collaboration between conservators and other museum professionals such as curators, architects etc is limited in specific issues that are not a part of the museum's communication policy.

But, how can an object be in harmony with the spirit of the exhibition and support its scenario, if the person that restores it does not know the interpretative frame within which his work will be placed?

Considering the changes that take place in our days in the museum community, both in the theoretical as well as the practical level, the contribution of the conservators is finally put in a totally new perspective.

According to the new ideas adopted by many contemporary museums, the development of exhibitions is no longer a matter concerning the curators and nobody else. Today, an exhibition is the result of the work of a large interdisciplinary team consisting of writers, museum educators, designers of interpretative means, story tellers and quite often the visitors themselves that are asked to contribute in different ways.

Conservators cannot be absent from this cooperative effort, as the messages conveyed and the human stories intended to be told, have a direct relation to the way objects are restored.

The consideration of conservation as a museographical act gives a new dimension to the way conservation is integrated into the museum structure, often needing revisions to the status, procedures, operations and interaction between various departments.

A final consideration following this contemporary approach to conservation as a part of the interpretative procedure is a specific balance needed between conservation ethics and museum needs. Put simply, the conservator should be able to balance the needs of the communicative procedure of an exhibition, with the principles of the minimization of treatment and reversibility of all changes. In this way, not only the conservation ethics are followed, but also a window of choice is left open for the future, for possibly new approaches to conservation and exhibition of an object under new light and interpretation.