On the Ethics of Cultural Heritage Conservation

Salvador Muñoz Viñas

Archetype Publications
www.archetype.co.uk

First published 2020 by Archetype Publications Ltd
Archetype Publications Ltd
c/o International Academic Projects
1 Birdcage Walk
London SW1H 9JJ
www.archetype.co.uk

ISBN: 978-1-909492-70-7

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Designed by Marcus Nichols at PDQ Digital Media Solutions Ltd
Typeset by PDQ Digital Media Solutions Ltd, Bungay
Printed in the UK by Hobbs the Printers Ltd, Totton, Hampshire

7 On conservation

Introduction

Conservation is supposed to conserve what it deals with: this is almost a tautology, and it seems in fact a kind of built-in principle of conservation. Indeed, for many this is the main reason behind conservation as a widespread, socially accepted activity: conservators care for valuable items, preserving them for the future. However, things may seem somewhat different if looked at carefully. 'The Frankenstein syndrome' posits that conservation is, so to speak, an oxymoronic activity, as it works by altering the objects with which it deals. This is perhaps clearer when an object is *restored*, but as it turns out, it is often the case when an object is *preserved*: with the only possible exception of preventive conservation, conservation modifies its objects and thus in a sense betrays itself.

It is perhaps opportune here to note that this idea is not intended as a criticism against conservation; furthermore, it *is not* a criticism against conservation. Rather the opposite: altering the object to some extent is a trait of conservation that is not necessarily good or bad. However, expecting conservation not to alter the object treated (or letting others expect it) is not a good idea: setting impossible goals often leads to melancholy and disappointment.

The Frankenstein syndrome[1]

Valencia is a medium-sized city on the Mediterranean coast of Spain. It was founded by the Romans and remained under Muslim domination during much of the medieval period. In the 13th century, King Jaume I conquered it and reimposed Christian rule. Soon after, it was decided that a new cathedral should be built in the centre of the old, battered city.

As usual in those times, the construction of the cathedral spanned several centuries. The long building time can be observed in the different styles. The oldest door is Romanesque, while on the opposite side of the cathedral there is a Gothic door. In fact, most of the cathedral was built in the Gothic style.

By the 15th century, most of the building had already been completed. The only relevant addition from this period was due to a fire that damaged the chancel. After this accident, two Italian Renaissance painters, Francesco Pagano and Paolo de San Leocadio, were commissioned to paint the ceiling of the half-dome of the apse above the main altar. In the 17th century, the chancel was refurbished in a rich Baroque style by architect Pérez Castiel. The Gothic half-dome with the Renaissance paintings was beautifully covered with a Baroque spherical half-dome with a large, gilt keystone and heavily decorated, thick ribs, while the walls of the apse were covered with Baroque ornaments. At the beginning of the 18th century, the southern façade was renovated by German architect Conrad Rudolf, who built a profusely decorated curved surface reminiscent of San Carlino alle Quattro Fontane in Rome. A few decades later, the severe Gothic interior was covered entirely with moulded and gilded

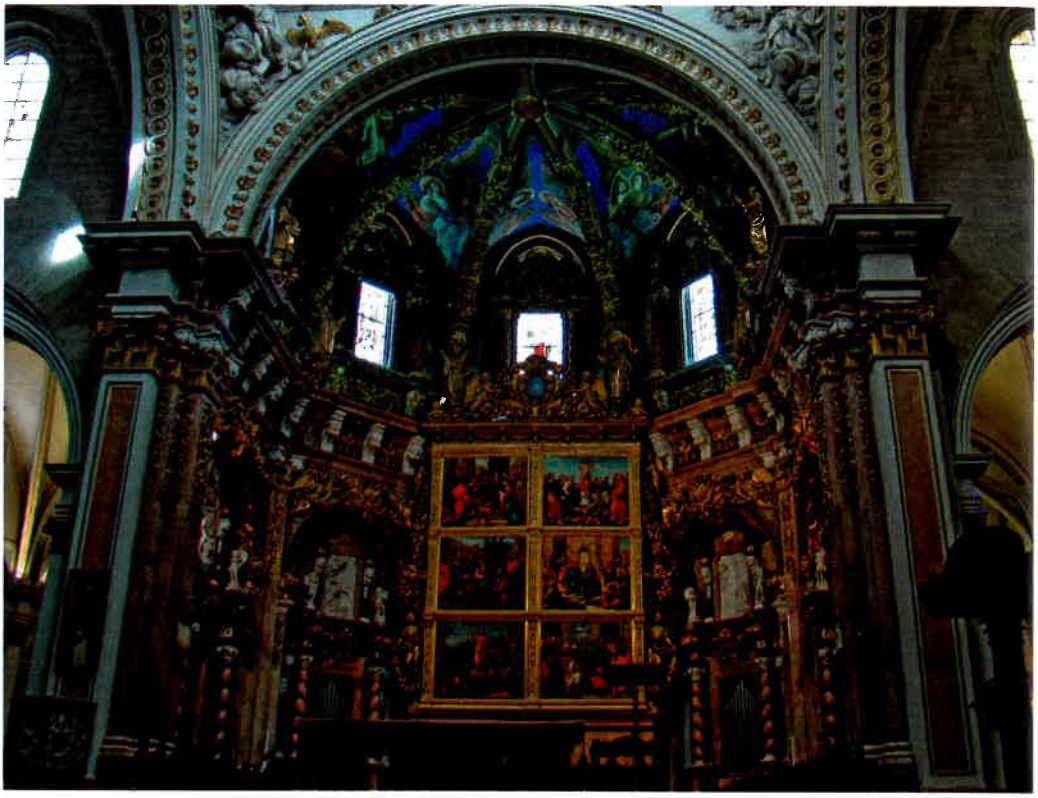

Figure 7.1 The chancel of the cathedral of Valencia. The original Gothic chancel was fully refurbished in the Baroque style. In the early 21st century, the Baroque ceiling was removed in order to uncover the Renaissance paintings. (Photo © Salvador Muñoz Viñas.)

plaster, reflecting the emerging post-Baroque, Neoclassical taste; thus, the round columns were transformed into much thicker, square columns, the apexes of the Gothic arches were rounded out to resemble perfectly round semicircles, and the austere Gothic stone was covered with Neoclassical shapes and gilt motifs.

The cathedral remained in this condition for many years with little change until the late 1970s and early 80s, when the authorities decided to restore the building to its original Gothic appearance. The restoration was not particularly complex as it mostly consisted of scraping off the Neoclassical plaster to reveal the Gothic stone. Most of the building received this treatment, but the conservators decided to leave the chancel and other parts of the building in the Baroque and Neoclassical style, probably due to technical difficulties or perhaps because of the sheer beauty of the refurbishment.

In 2004, as part of routine conservation work being carried out in the chancel, a team of conservators was assessing the condition of the half-dome of the main chapel. At some point, it was decided to make a small perforation in the Baroque ceiling, large enough to introduce a small camera into the narrow space between it and the older Gothic ceiling. Using this simple system, some photographs were taken at random, in the hope of gathering enough visual information to tentatively identify the condition of both ceilings. When they were reviewed, the conservators were amazed to discover that those responsible for the Baroque refurbishment of

the half-dome above the main altar had carefully respected the old Renaissance paintings. Under the harsh light of the camera flash, the paintings looked extremely well preserved, showing little or no damage at all.

The paintings depict a group of angels playing old musical instruments over an intense blue starry background. Subsequent research confirmed not only that the paintings were in extremely good condition but also that they were of very high artistic quality. Following a public awareness campaign, the decision was taken to uncover these hidden jewels.

The restoration of the paintings was conducted in an environment of almost complete social and academic consensus. Conservators and art historians from several countries discussed the matter, and the nearly unanimous conclusion was that restoring the Renaissance paintings was the right thing to do. The general public was no less enthusiastic about the idea of rediscovering a treasure that had been concealed in their old cathedral: according to a 2006 poll conducted by the local newspaper *Levante-EMV*, 93% of the people supported the decision to uncover the Renaissance paintings, while only 7% preferred the Baroque ceiling to remain in place.[2]

Thus, in the following years, Pérez Castiel's half-dome was partially dismantled: the large central keystone was removed as well as the part of the Baroque ribs next to it, exposing the original, austere Gothic ribs near the centre of the dome. The Baroque decoration covering the remaining part of the Gothic ribs was left intact, but the Baroque ceiling between the ribs was completely removed to reveal the Renaissance frescoes on the Gothic ceiling.

The restoration made an enormous impact. In 2007, when the restoration work was finished, people rushed to see the newly recovered paintings. Politicians surrounded by microphones inaugurated the work to the accompaniment of camera flashes from different media, visitors waited in long lines outside the cathedral to buy entry tickets to view the restored chancel, guided tours were organised, lectures and talks were given, exhibitions were held in Spain and Italy, national and international magazines featured the story, and in most cases, both the public and specialists endorsed the decision to restore the paintings as perfectly correct, almost as a social duty. The whole conservation and restoration process was generally regarded as a complete success; the most widespread opinion was that the cathedral of Valencia now had a new, valuable treasure on display.

However, there is something paradoxical behind these views. What could and still can be seen by the visitors of the cathedral, whether tourists, churchgoers or art historians, is a blend of historical features that were never intended to be seen together. The half-dome of the Baroque main chapel now displays a Gothic-shaped ceiling together with the Renaissance paintings by San Leocadio and Pagano, but strangely the Gothic ribs are only visible in the section near the keystone; other parts of the ribs are still covered with the profuse, gilt Baroque motifs created by Pérez Castiel. Furthermore, the keystone has now become a minimalist, geometric stone block that looks somewhat modern – it is certainly neither truly Gothic, nor Renaissance nor Baroque. In summary, the chancel now resembles a mixture of fragments with different origins. It can safely be described as an innovative composite made from parts varying in provenance: a brand new object, a creative collage. In a way, it could be described as a sort of historical Frankenstein monster: after the restoration, the half-dome in the main chapel of the cathedral has become a new creation made from fragments of different origin, just as the fictional humanoid created by Dr Frankenstein was made of body parts from different corpses.

The reader could rightly argue that this is not so: not because the chancel is not a composite, but because Mary Shelley, the author of the original novel, never described Victor Frankenstein looking for corpses, severing parts of their bodies and putting them together to create something different. From a purely academic point of view, the reader would be right: Shelley does not tell us that the creature was made of body parts from different corpses. However, it must be reckoned

Figure 7.2 Detail of the half-dome of the chancel of the cathedral of Valencia. The photo shows the Gothic ceiling with the Renaissance paintings, the central ends of the Gothic ribs, the Baroque ornaments in the outer ends of the ribs and the modern, minimalist cornerstone: a creative, truly innovative blend of elements from different times and styles. (Photo © Salvador Muñoz Viñas.)

that most of us do not have a philologically correct idea of what the Frankenstein monster actually is: for most of us, having lived through the 20th century and well into the 21st, the idea that the Frankenstein monster conveys is derived not from Mary Shelley's literary masterwork, but from another masterwork: James Whale's rendition of the myth.

James Whale directed the movie *Frankenstein*, produced by Universal Studios in 1931. This movie is based on Mary Shelley's book, but it introduces a number of variations. Among other things, the sinister use of corpses and the making of the monster from their parts are not mentioned in the novel. And unlike the novel, the real star in the movie is not Frankenstein himself, but his creation, the monster played by an unforgettable Boris Karloff – so unforgettable, in fact, that the first image that comes to mind when we think of the Frankenstein monster is very likely that of a scar-ridden Boris Karloff, or of one of the many Frankenstein-monster-like creatures it inspired in other movies and TV series. This is why the Frankenstein monster we know is made of body parts from different corpses: the 1931 audiovisual rendition of the myth is so powerful that it has eclipsed the real – or at least the *original* – literary story. This is very telling in itself, but what now matters is that the Frankenstein monster in this reflection is the one we all know: the monster that was 'bred from a dozen corpses', as described in one of the posters for the movie *The Evil of Frankenstein*.[3] It is in this regard that the chancel of the cathedral of Valencia can be

described as a historical Frankenstein monster. And yet, most importantly, the restoration was a success for most people including both experts and laypersons.

Can a restoration produce something akin to a monster and still be successful? In order to clarify this apparent contradiction, we can reflect upon another interesting case: the treatment of the paintings in the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi, Italy. This well-known story is indeed sad. It all started in the early hours of 26 November 1997, when a tremor shook the Umbrian region in northern Italy, damaging the early Renaissance paintings in the basilica and causing small fragments to fall down from the ceiling. In the morning of that same day, when a number of specialists were assessing the damage and collecting the fragments, another stronger quake caused the ceiling to collapse entirely, with catastrophic results: four people were crushed to death and the paintings on the ceiling, including works by Cimabue and Giotto, were almost totally destroyed.

As would be expected, falling from a height of approximately 15 metres, brick, mortar and plaster break into very minute pieces. The largest fragments measured 50–75 mm; the smaller, more abundant ones were barely visible particles. More importantly, only a small percentage of these fragments actually included remnants from the painted surface of the ceiling. Apparently, all that remained was a pile of rubble and dust.

The paintings could have been considered irremediably lost forever. However, the Italian authorities thought otherwise, and decided to restore the paintings despite the formidable, possibly insurmountable technical problems. The task was so challenging that it was suggested to be *utopian*.[4]

The work lasted for several years and involved a number of specialists from different fields and many volunteers both from Italy and abroad. The process was very cumbersome. First, the relevant fragments (those with recognisable remnants of the paintings) had to be retrieved from the rubble. The original location of these fragments was then identified, something much easier to say than to accomplish. The fragments that could be relocated were glued together on full-size reproductions of the paintings, which were in turn mounted on light honeycomb core laminate panels. Finally, the panels were put in place in the basilica.

This phenomenal, complex work produced mixed results. Some sections of the ceiling were left blank as not enough fragments could be found or relocated. Even in the other sections, only a part of the original painting surface could be recovered from the rubble, giving the new, restored panels a grainy and irregular appearance. However, it is undeniable that what the visitors to the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi now see is, at least to some extent, by the hands of Cimabue and Giotto.

And yet, if we analyse this work under the same light as before, we will realise that, again, we are viewing a historical composite: 600-year-old pigments next to a photo-reproduction made of modern synthetic dyes; plaster dating from the early Renaissance impregnated with modern glues to hold it in place; honeycomb core panels such as those used in the aerospace industry mounted in the ceiling of a Romanesque church; and the images conceived by Giotto and Cimabue next to blank panels akin to our intentionally neutral, minimalist taste. Again, a historical, Frankenstein-like monster: a new creation made of fragments with very disparate origins.

This line of analysis can be extended to many other examples or even further developed into something slightly different. Consider, for instance the fairly typical case of ceramic vases that are reconstructed from an incomplete set of fragments. In these cases, the fragments are repositioned in accordance with the presumed original shape, while the missing parts are replaced by a different matter, often some sort of modern clay of different colour than the original, so that the viewer can differentiate the original, ancient parts from the new additions.

Again, this is a composite: different materials from different ages next to each other as a result of conservation. However, this example could give way to a new metaphor beyond that of Frankenstein, a metaphor that lacks the academic

Figure 7.3 Treatment of a large 19th-century map. The map was originally mounted on cotton canvas, and the paper had become extremely fragile (a). Its original cotton backing was removed (b) and replaced with Japanese paper (c). The paper-lined map was finally mounted on a linen canvas stretched on a wooden frame (d). (Photos © Salvador Muñoz Viñas.)

pedigree of Frankenstein, but nevertheless works quite well. This new metaphor relates to Dutch movie director Paul Verhoeven's most famous film: *Robocop*.

Robocop was produced by Orion Pictures in 1987. It tells the story of Murphy, a policeman who is severely injured trying to catch some thugs. Rather than being allowed to die, he is the object of a technical experiment: the damaged or missing parts of his body are replaced by high-tech mechanical parts and electronics. As the movie poster states, he becomes 'part man, part machine'.

The relationship between the archaeological vases and *Robocop* is pretty straightforward: just as Murphy is supplemented with new, modern materials, thus creating a new composite, the fragmented ceramic vases that undergo conservation treatment have also been supplemented with some sort of new material, thereby creating a new, different object.

The addition of new material that becomes an integral part of the object is in fact a common occurrence in conservation practice. Consider, for instance, the conservation treatment of a large 19th-century map developed by some of my students as part of their classwork. The map was printed on several pieces of paper, now aged, yellowed, and weakened. The pieces of paper had fragmented, but remained in place because the map had originally been lined with cotton cloth; two wooden sticks attached at the upper and lower edges allowed the map to be rolled for storage or hung on a wall for display. Both the cloth and the paper pieces were severely distorted, giving the map an undulating surface. A decision was made to remove the acidic by-products of paper chemical deterioration, so the paper was

washed in water and a calcium hydroxide solution to prevent further acidification. In addition, the distorted, weak cotton backing was removed. The map was then lined with a suitable type of *washi* (Japanese handmade paper), since the original paper was too fragile to survive unsupported. The weak, stained and distorted cotton cloth was replaced by more stable linen cloth. The *washi*- and linen-cloth-lined map was supported on a wooden frame to allow it to be permanently displayed without compromising its new, flat look. The result was successful, and is, in fact, representative of many treatments of this kind.

If we analyse this treatment through the prism of the Frankenstein/Robocop metaphors, however, we realise that it has resulted in yet another brand new composite: the 19th-century, European fourdrinier paper is now pasted to 21st-century handmade *washi* paper from Japan; the highly acidified, wood-pulp paper has been impregnated with newly produced calcium carbonate particles;[5] a linen cloth has been substituted for the original cotton backing; and the original wooden rods have been replaced by a rigid, square wooden frame. In summary, the treated artefact is now a blend of various materials profoundly different from the original.

In fact, most conservation treatments do alter the treated object, resulting in, for example, 17th-century panel paintings held together with metal-alloy, computer-designed frames, Gothic wooden sculptures impregnated with modern synthetic resins, canvas paintings glued to other canvases with an ethylene-vinyl copolymer or early 20th-century newspapers stuffed with magnesium oxide nanoparticles. In all of these cases, as in many other common examples, the end product of the conservation treatment is a different, composite object, in the same way that the Frankenstein monster differs from the original corpses or Robocop differs from Murphy.

Conservation usually works by altering some features of the object it is treating. This may sound like an oxymoron, but it is not just a rhetorical figure: alteration is a trait of conservation. The alteration is done in order to improve the object, of course – for reinforcing, strengthening or stabilising an object or for recovering some lost features – but it often implies blending in some stabilising materials and the concealment or destruction of some historical features of the object that are consciously or unconsciously considered to be expendable (old varnishes, wrinkles, tears, graffiti, etc.). The result is nearly always something different from the object as it actually was before: the object is not actually *conserved*, but altered.

Interestingly, this alteration which inherently results from conservation is rarely acknowledged in charters, ethical guidelines or any similar texts. If at all, it may be considered implicit in those texts. It could not be otherwise: as said above, and with the possible exception of preventive conservation, alteration is a trait of conservation. It is thus necessarily implied in most theoretical reflections on our activity, but the fact remains that it is rarely mentioned or even acknowledged openly.

It may well be that, as conservators, we are not fully aware of this: from my experience, we tend to ignore or underestimate conservation-induced alteration. This kind of selective short-sightedness could be called 'the Frankenstein syndrome': it affects us conservators and allows us to believe that we *just* conserve.

Both in Mary Shelley's novel and in James Whale's version of the story, Frankenstein's creature is condemned to solitude and rejection, with tragic results; and in both accounts, Dr Frankenstein was so eager to achieve his scientific goal to create life from dead matter that he more or less consciously chose to ignore the consequences that his acts would have. In a similar fashion, we conservators may be more or less unconsciously willing to believe that the alterations we make are not there, or are much less important than they are. The crucial difference is that the consequences of Dr Frankenstein's short-sightedness were dire, while conservators' short-sightedness has few, if any, negative consequences.

Still, being aware that alteration is a feature of conservation can have some added benefits. For instance, it can make us more decisive.

Coming to terms with the apparent paradox that conservation does change the objects being treated can help us to overcome some paralysing doubts – the kinds of doubt that can be raised by classical, somewhat naïve views of conservation that stress the need to respect some form of truth embedded in the object. These views usually admonish the conservator to not alter the object (as this is considered a form of falsehood), which would effectively prevent the application of all conservation treatments except, perhaps, preventive conservation. If the conservator becomes aware that change is inherent to conservation, he will feel freer to perform those treatments with less hesitation, although not without reflection.

Reciprocally, by becoming more aware of conservation-induced alteration we may well become more prudent. Through a more complete realisation of the changes conservation can and does introduce in the treated object, we are more likely to become less prone to the uncritical development of many routine treatments that are carried out because it is customary, or just because they can be done.

In conclusion, becoming aware of conservation-induced alteration can make us either more prudent or more decisive but, in any case, it will make us more aware of the consequences of our work. This will not make the decision-making process any easier – in all probability it will make it more complex, difficult and more demanding than it was before when the conservator was able to honestly *not-see* some relevant aspects of his work. However, at the very least, it will be more educated and, very likely, better in the long run.

Acknowledgements

The original version of this paper was revised by Isabelle Brajer. Her valuable suggestions have improved the text in many ways and deserve my sincere gratitude.

Notes

1. Revised version of 'The Frankenstein syndrome', originally published in P. Hatchfield, (ed.), 2013, *Ethics and Critical Thinking*. Washington DC: American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 111–26, in turn based on the homonymous lecture delivered at the Pennsylvania Convention Center, Philadelphia, on 2 June 2011.
2. Anon. 2006.
3. Hammer Film Productions, 1964.
4. Basile 2002, 2007.
5. After exposure to air, calcium hydroxide transforms into calcium carbonate.