

The background of the cover features a red car, possibly a truck or van, tilted at a steep angle. The car is heavily decorated with Christmas ornaments, including a large red bauble, white and gold tinsel, and various colorful decorations. The car is set against a background of soft, abstract shapes in shades of blue and white, suggesting a sky or a snowy environment. The overall composition is dynamic and festive.

Conservation

Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths

EDITED BY

Alison Richmond • Alison Bracker



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The Aims of Conservation

Chris Caple

Introduction

All societies have objects they retain and cherish and in Europe, in the twenty-first century, that typically means placing them in a museum and letting conservators and other museum staff ‘take care’ of them. But we conservators are invariably focused on *how* and not *why* we are doing this. We spend our time talking to other conservators about ‘ethical approaches’ and obsess about the disparity between the different areas of conservation. We stand uncertain and mute as decisions are made in museums, universities and wider society that threaten the existence of the objects we care for and the institutions in which they reside. Do we have an accurate all-embracing view of conservation, a clear sense of purpose, a lucid series of aims, and can we articulate them in less than 500 pages? (e.g. Stanley-Price *et al.*, 1996).¹ If we cannot clearly and simply tell/convince society why we do what we do, what right do we have to intervene with society’s most valued and treasured objects? In the following paragraphs I outline a basic series of aims for conservation. Do I accurately describe what conservation is and are these aims sustainable for the foreseeable future?

Maintain and enhance

Societies retain objects because they have value for the members of that society. These include religious values, aesthetic values, roles in ritual or ceremony, association with individuals venerated by that society and the value to educate or inform. Societies that retain objects invariably seek to ‘maintain and enhance’ the value of the object to that society. This may take many forms, such as participation in ceremonies, cleaning, repairing, use and anointing. Examples from cultures past and present include:

- **Objects reassembled.** Roman Samian vessels held together with lead rivets and seventeenth-century wineglasses held together with strips of lead.² No longer functional in the original sense, the objects are reassembled for heirloom value.

- **Objects repainted.** Aboriginal cave paintings,³ the religious statues in French Catholic churches⁴ and Māori buildings and objects⁵ are repainted as a mark of respect to the spirits, saints or ancestors. The act of repainting rejuvenates the power of these objects.
- **Objects restored.** Objects, such as those made of Japanese *urushi*, are restored to their original appearance as a damaged or imperfect object would be considered to be disrespectful. Consequently, no differentiation is made between new and original material. Traditional rituals, tools and materials are used since the act of repair must also be performed in a respectful manner.⁶
- **Object storage and fumigation.** Some Native American peoples require certain objects to be handled by specific individuals and insect attack can only be treated with natural plant extracts that are not harmful to human beings.⁷ These actions maintain the spiritual purity and power of the object, which is considered a 'living' being.

By the nineteenth century European and American societies had begun to appreciate that objects were more than commodities or symbols; they contained important information about the past, as articulated in the 1877 manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.⁸ Consequently, 'maintenance and enhancement' for this society became the recovery, protection, cleaning, re-assembly and housing of objects in museums, art galleries, libraries and archives. Conservation was one of the terms that began to be applied to these activities as exemplified by the RIBA's 1865 booklet entitled *Conservation of Ancient Monuments and Remains*. However, the exact meaning of the term conservation has varied with each user and is related to their geographic and cultural origins and the type of artefacts that they 'conserve.'⁹

The 'aims of conservation' can be understood to refer to the 'purpose' or 'intentions' of conservation, what those who enact conservation seek to achieve. Evidence of purpose or intent comes in two forms; what is said (written) and what is done (conservation work carried out on objects or structures).

Modern society and museums

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Age of Enlightenment) saw the giving of lectures (The Royal Society was established in 1660) and the publication of books that advanced ideas in a logical manner based on observation and classification of the physical (natural) world, such as *Systema Naturae* by Linnaeus (published in 1735). From this point European and American societies have increasingly seen the world in scientific and logical terms; objects provide evidence (physical proof) about past and present-day societies; specimens exemplify the extent and nature of the natural world; devices demonstrate scientific principles, and works of art articulate emotions, ideas, aesthetics and explore symbolism and meaning

in society. Preserved through collection, storage and display, objects, specimens, devices or works of art can be re-examined to reveal more information, and through public display they can potentially inform all members of society. These objects, specimens, devices and works of art constitute our proof, the physical evidence, for almost every facet of the development of humankind and almost every aspect of the forces of nature.

Archaeologists and anthropologists recognise objects as simultaneously existing in three forms: as functional artefacts (created to perform specific tasks), as symbols (culturally contexted meaning) and historic documents (record of the object's own past, its manufacture, use and existence as a functional artefact and symbol).^{10,11} The objects collected by society into museums and archives are normally utilized as historic documents, to provide information (proof) about the past or other cultures.

Differing traditions within conservation

- Architects primarily focus on buildings; their aim is to maintain and enhance (preserve and restore) them, primarily as whole structures. They are aware that the costs of maintaining buildings (weatherproof and watertight) are high; thus, for a building to be maintained it must be used. Consequently, minor alterations damaging the building fabric to enable the provision of modern services (electrical and communication cables, water and sewerage pipes) are often perceived as necessary to ensure that the aim of preserving the building is achieved.
- For works of art, from oil paintings to sculpture, the primary focus is on the image providing visual stimulation, communicating or creating an emotion or feeling in the viewer. Conservators working on works of art primarily aim to maintain and enhance (restore) the original nature and quality of the image. Controversies in cleaning art, whether yellowing varnish on oil paintings or the grime on wall paintings, such as the Sistine Chapel, focus on the authenticity of the image and the aesthetic response of the viewers to it.¹²
- Archaeological and ethnographic conservators focus on maintaining (preserving) the existing artefact and enhance it through cleaning away dirt and corrosion to reveal further information about the object and its past. However, what constitutes evidence of the past has changed. The impressions of the organic materials, preserved in the minerals formed from the corrosion of an iron Viking sword from Sanday, provide evidence of the structure and composition of a tenth-century scabbard,¹³ information that would have been cleaned away a generation before. This expanded understanding of what constitutes evidence of the past and the need to identify, record and preserve it has also become an increasing focus of the conservation of textiles.¹⁴

Thus what and how we seek to ‘maintain and enhance’ varies between objects – especially those in different traditions of conservation. It also changes with time. So although rooted in the wider requirements that society has for retaining objects, the ‘aims of conservation’ must be of a conceptual nature in order to allow for a number of differing conservation traditions and to avoid being made redundant by developing technology and increasing knowledge.

RIP triangle

Building on the 1984 ICOM-CC definition of a conservator-restorer, ‘the activity of the conservator-restorer (conservation) consists of examination, preservation and conservation–restoration of cultural property,’ I have previously suggested that conservation can be considered to have three competing aims, which together seek to maintain and enhance objects as historic documents (Figure 3.1):¹⁵

- **Revelation.** Cleaning and exposing the object, to reveal ‘its original,’ ‘an earlier’ or ‘more meaningful’ appearance. This appearance can be restored to give the observer, typically a museum visitor, a clearer visual impression of the object.
- **Investigation.** Researching, investigating and analysing the object to recover information about it. This may include visual observation, typological analysis, X-radiography, elemental or molecular analysis, even destructive analysis such as removing a metallographic section.
- **Preservation.** Maintaining the object in its present physical and chemical form, preventing any further deterioration, utilizing the stabilization processes of remedial (interventive) conservation and/or preventive conservation practices.

The balance of these aims forms a triangle, which defines the area in which activities can be described as conservation, and within which professional conservators work (Figure 3.1). Cleaning an object may aid its preservation, reveal the form of the object and uncover information about it.

If RIP accurately describes the aims of conservation, then even if you are simply repackaging objects in a store as a preservative action, the conscious act of ensuring the correct labelling of objects and boxes relates the object to its museum record (the accumulated information about the object) and enables it to be recovered for display, and is thus an act of conservation. Consciously performing such balanced actions means you do not need to be a qualified conservator to engage with the aims of conservation. Such an approach does not require substantial resources, only a clear understanding of why we, as a society, ‘maintain and enhance’ objects.

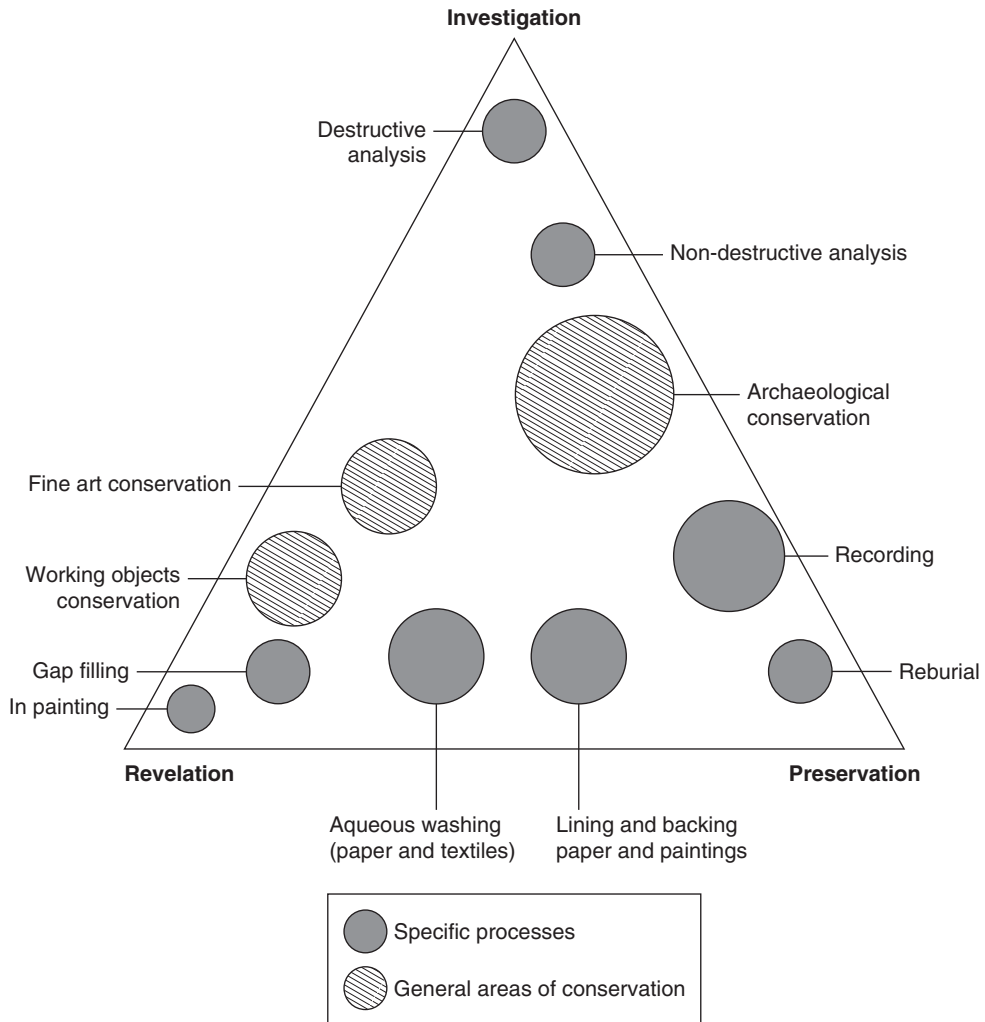


Figure 3.1 *The Conservation RIP Triangle.*

And yet . . .

The future holds a number of developments that cannot easily be reconciled with the aims of conservation outlined above.

- **Repatriation.** Museums, responding to the political and social pressure of ‘native peoples,’ are returning bones and ‘religious’ items from their collections, often for reburial. These objects and the unique information they contain are not being preserved and are permanently lost to the world of factual knowledge and scientific understanding.

- **Continued Collecting.** Logic tells us that we cannot afford to store (preserve) an ever-increasing number of objects. Will objects be sold off or will standards of care be lowered and which of these options should conservators advocate as they seek to meet the aims of conservation? Cheaper options such as written and pictorial records (virtual collections) fail to preserve the physical, re-examinable proof of the development of human kind and the forces of nature. Such records can be erroneous, faked and are limited to what we see and understand now. They are inherently unable to record what we might like to know in the future; how could we have proved Piltdown Man to be a fake if it had only been recorded as a picture?
- **Scientific Developments.** We are able to recover increasing amounts of information from objects, such as organic residues from ceramics or DNA from natural history specimens and archaeological bone. The best storage conditions for objects in order to preserve this information, such as under liquid nitrogen, are expensive and not compatible with display or access for other types of research.
- **Changing Function of Museums.** National Museums, Local Authorities and other organizations that own museum collections are increasingly concerned with short-term social needs to educate and entertain – measured in terms of museum visitor numbers. The *raison d'être* of collections as proof/information about the past is forgotten and resources increasingly moved away from preservation and research (investigation) to display (revelation).

As the ideals of the Age of Enlightenment are lost and social values are increasingly focused on mass entertainment, increasing personal wealth and fundamental religious principles, society will redefine why it keeps the objects of the past. Will conservation need to redefine its aims, or if society wishes to 'maintain and enhance' its objects in a way that no longer reveals, investigates and preserves them, does what we do cease to be conservation?

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