

# Contemporary theory of conservation

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## Abstract

*Classical conservation theories (from Ruskin to Brandi) are characterized by their close adherence to Truth. These theories are currently dominant, but criticism and new alternatives are developing and gaining momentum. Three crucial notions in classical theories have been criticised: reversibility, universality and objectivity (including objective determination of damage and the notion of scientific conservation). As a result of these criticisms, emerging contemporary theory of conservation has substituted the notion of function, use or value of the conservation object for that of Truth. A representative list of sources is discussed.*

## Introduction

This review deals with contemporary theory of conservation – the theory that relates to metaphysical aspects of conservation which has been produced in the last two decades or so. Contemporary theory exists in fragmentary form, with very few exceptions, within a number of recent publications. *Values and Heritage Conservation* [1] is the brilliant result of Getty Conservation Institute funded research, which deserves credit as being a most comprehensive source on contemporary conservation ethics. *Rational Decision-Making in the Preservation of Cultural Property* is a collection of short texts addressing some of the key topics in this subject from uncommon points of view [2]. *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* [3], which was also produced by the GCI, is an anthology that combines interesting contemporary texts with classical ones, with valuable editor's comments; *Durability and Change* [4] is a collection of short texts that deal with both theoretical and technical matters, many of which are of very great interest. Lowenthal's works, especially *The Past is a Foreign Country* [5] and *Possessed by the Past* [6], show great coherence in demonstrating how heritage is approached and modified from current views. *Museums, Objects and Collections* [7] and *Interpreting Objects and Collections* [8], edited by Susan Pearce, show the conventional nature of the notion of heritage, and how meanings are produced and assigned. The British Museum has also published some volumes devoted to specific issues – reversibility [9], compensation for loss and restoration [10], and science in conservation [11] – which are mandatory references for their respective topics. Quite recently, this author has compiled and adapted many of the ideas in contemporary conservation theory, to create a more coherent view [12].

However, aside from these volumes, the ideas that reflect contemporary thinking are dispersed in articles, in book chapters, in sentences inside those chapters or articles, in private conversations, on the Internet, in lectures – and

even in the practice of conservation itself. They are also scattered in many different fields of knowledge, such as philosophy, history, sociology, museology, and economics. Thus, the literature reviewed here is not a comprehensive list of sources, but rather a representative one. The review is divided into two parts: the first describes criticism to key notions in classical conservation theories; the second reviews the production of new concepts that this criticism has led to.

## Dubious principle: reversibility

Reversibility, once seen as the tenet of modern conservation theory, is now considered a 'chimera' [13, p.141], a 'Utopian' idea [14, p.43], a 'cualidad inalcanzable' [15, p.21], a 'ghost' [16], a 'myth' [17, p.207], or a kind of 'Holy Grail' [18, p.141]. One of the first consequential criticisms to reversibility appeared in 1987, when Appelbaum published an article in which the notion of 'retreatability' was proposed as being more applicable than reversibility, though it is only really applicable to processes involving porous material impregnation [19]. The following year, Smith's piece on this same subject appeared in *Restaurator* [20]. Based upon the definitions in the Murray Pease Report and the AIC code of ethics<sup>1</sup>, he distinguished three increasingly relaxed meanings of reversibility:

1. Return objects to the condition existing just prior to treatment.
2. Avoid the use of materials that may become so intractable that their future removal will endanger the object.
3. Select treatments whose benefits far outweigh the losses they cause [20, p.205].

This relaxation is necessary if the concept is to be of any use – a point of view widely agreed by most authors in *Reversibility – Does It Exist?* [9], in which the unattainability of perfect reversibility is criticised both from theoretical and technical points of view. The bottom line could be expressed in Schinzel's words:

...the belief in reversibility may show, and even be, a fashionable naivety due to unhistorical thinking; the illusion is that something can be undone, which may lead to a lack of responsibility. Paradoxically it is exactly because nothing can be undone that we have to work according to the rules of reversibility, while not forgetting the fact that reversibility is Utopian [14, p.45].

## Dubious principle: damage

Damage, in actual or potential form, is a theoretical requisite for any conservation act to be performed and thus, for conservation to exist, no conservation should be

<sup>1</sup> The Murray Pease Report was first published in *Studies in Conservation* in 1964.

performed if damage is not a menace or a reality. For this reason, damage is a most important, though often overlooked, notion. However, the old belief that damage could be clearly and objectively defined is presently seen as an illusion, and, in fact, many conflicts on conservation processes lie in deep disagreements on whether or not a given, or earlier, alteration should be considered damage. Ashley-Smith has written a valuable article on this subject, noting that alteration of an object may or may not be deliberate, and that it may or may not be considered positive. If not deliberate and positive, we call it 'patina'; if deliberate and positive, we call it 'restoration'; if negative, then it is 'damage' [21]. What makes us consider it negative or positive is a result of taste and prejudices that can vary among persons, cultures, and with time [22-25].

### Dubious principle: one culture, one heritage

Universality – the assumption that some heritage is meaningful to all of mankind – is one of the basic assumptions and matters of faith underlying conservation practice [1, p.69]. The Sistine ceiling, for instance, is not merely a Vatican property, nor is it Roman, Tuscan or Italian; it is not even Western: it is universal. And so is the Taj Mahal and the Eiffel Tower – and the Bamiyan Buddhas. Since objects of this kind 'belong to humanity', the fortunate legal owners of culturally significant objects (whether a state, a city, or an individual) have the duty to preserve them. More than simply owners, they are custodians. Resources should be devoted to care for culturally significant objects, and their care should actually be enforced if necessary – as ruled in many national and international charters and laws, or by Beck's 'Bill of Rights for Works of Art' [26].

However, these notions have been criticised. Postmodernism substituted the idea of 'cultures' for that of Culture, suggesting that there are no superior or inferior cultures, but rather different ones [27]. As applied to conservation, the main point of criticism is that the very notion of universal culture is genuinely Western, a sort of cultural globalization. For Cosgrove, it is a 'primary question' . . . 'what, if anything, we are identifying, conserving, and preserving in the "material objects of the European canon", beyond a set of artifacts selected according to values established by an acquisitive bourgeoisie' [27, p.260], and in fact in 1994 a group of experts was commissioned by UNESCO to assess how representative the UNESCO Heritage List actually was. The group concluded that there was a preeminence of European, Christian, elite (in contrast to popular) architecture, and historic (in contrast to prehistoric and twentieth-century) sites [28].

Different cultures may have different cultural needs: some cultures call for destruction rather than preservation (as is the case with many iconoclastic movements), while some others base their cultural values on intangible goods which cannot be the object of trade and possession. These are traditional Western concepts. Thus, even if 'good-willing', these concepts may be seen as a kind of colonialism: not only is the selection of objects done by occidental (or occidentally-trained) experts, but it also imposes duties according to occidental views [5, 6, 29, 30].

### Dubious principle: objective truth

Speaking of contemporary theory has several implications, the most important being the suggestion that one or more non-contemporary theories exist: the classical theories of conservation. This expression encompasses the theories that are not contemporary; in other words they are the theories the shortcomings of which contemporary theory attempts to overcome. Boito, Viollet-Le-Duc and Ruskin are classical theorists, and so are Brandi and Baldini. They, and all other classical theorists, share a very important principle: the pursuit of Truth [12, 31]. Two given classical theories may differ from each other in the factors that define where an object's truth resides, and/or in the relevance given to each one. This in turn defines the way in which that Truth should be implemented once it is known or found. These factors may be:

- History of the object [32-34]. The object's Truth may then be in the traces of its evolution, in the object's original shape, or even in the (presumed) producer's intention [35].
- Artistry [36].
- Material components [37].
- Documentary efficiency [38, 39].
- Material function [40].

Thus, the ways to judge Truth may be different, but the fact remains that, for classical thinkers, conservation is a Truth-based operation. In classical theories, the value and quality of an act of conservation is defined by its adherence to Truth<sup>2</sup>: it is reprehensible if it hides the Truth or lies, and deserves praise if the Truth is preserved or revealed. It is the restorer's duty to preserve or reveal authenticity. For instance, the authentic state of a painting by Rembrandt that was retouched in the nineteenth century by an unknown painter would seem to be the state that it had before the retouching, and thus the elimination of the work of the other painter would seem appropriate, as it would be an act of 'Truth-enforcement'. However, assuming that the retouched Rembrandt is the work of a single painter is a very subjective choice: the truth, the undisputable truth, is that the painting is the work of two painters. We do not appreciate one of them very much, and so we make the choice of eradicating his work. It is a choice based on taste and personal preferences, on 'a state of mind: a personal matrix of training, technical, aesthetic, cultural, political and metaphysical ... choices' [41, p.13], but not on truth, because the only authentic state of an object is tautologically the one that it has now [12]. Any attempt to take the object back to another presumed and favoured state is first and foremost a matter of choice, as Stovel has shown with the example of the Place Royale [42] or Podany with the example of a classical sculpture [43]. The choice is influenced by many factors, cultural background being the most important –

<sup>2</sup> Is it *Truth* or *truth*?

In the text, several references are made to *truth* and to *Truth*. *Truth* has been used to describe the notion of truth as seen by those who consider it the key value in conservation and a goal in itself; and *truth* to describe the usual meaning of the word, that is, agreement of ideas and beliefs with perceived or accepted facts.

but not the only factor. Politics [1, 44], gender or race [45, 46] may also play a relevant role. (The curious reader may find other brilliant examples in *Restoration: Is It Acceptable?* [47-49], and other similarly interesting works [5, 6, 16, 26, 50-53].)

Some thinkers have gone further, suggesting that objectivity is unattainable or even undesirable. With erudite and passionate language, Lowenthal suggests that authenticity is not something that can be recovered, because 'the past is a foreign country' [5]. In *Possessed by the Past*, Lowenthal distinguishes between heritage and history, the latter being historical, academic knowledge, while the former is the past as understood by a society – digested, socially useful history. 'Active involvement' is what distinguishes heritage from history [6, p.125], and upon this distinction he goes a step further by suggesting that falsehood is actually necessary for something to work efficiently as heritage.

In this same sense, Cosgrove has talked about the 'manufacture of real heritage artifacts by even more technically sophisticated modes of philological authentication and conservation' [27, p.262], proposing that in conservation reality is not revealed but constructed or created [5, 6, 54]. In a restoration, the determination of the preferred state of an object cannot be made on objective grounds. Ultimately, this determination always draws on subjective reasons, that is, on reasons which are derived from the subject's views and preferences.

## Scientific conservation

A consequence of classical theorists' appetite for Truth has been the ever-increasing influence of science in conservation. This is not surprising, considering that science is presently an indisputable way for establishing truths. However, a basic imprecision exists in published literature as to what scientific conservation means. It has been suggested [12] that, in practice, science performs three basic tasks:

1. Science establishes how the restored object should be, by determining precisely how it was at a given moment.
2. It determines which conservation techniques and materials are most efficient.
3. It monitors the development of a given conservation process.

While lacking a canonical text, scientific conservation, as it is commonly understood, is based on strong assumptions which are taken for granted: it is assumed that Truth must prevail, and that Truth must be determined by scientific methods – the kind of approach provided by hard sciences.<sup>3</sup> These assumptions have been strongly criticised by several authors, who believe that conservation deals mainly and foremost with immaterial matters, such as art, meanings, or feelings [1, 5, 6, 12, 15, 19, 24, 27, 46, 54, 56-59] – a criticism that underlies the

<sup>3</sup> There are many different kinds of science, but presently, the sciences that are commonly referred to when speaking of conservation science are material, 'hard' sciences of chemistry, physics and biology. These three form a tri-axis space in which research develops more or less co-operatively [55].

whole set of ideas that we could label as 'contemporary conservation theory', and that have been summarized in the *Nara Document*:

It is thus not possible to base judgements of values and authenticity within fixed criteria...authenticity judgements may be linked to the worth of a great variety of sources of information. Aspects of the sources may include form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors. [60]

Thus, a material, objective, scientific approach may not be adequate when the conservation process is bound to change the way in which the object is perceived, understood or valued by the observer – the above-mentioned task 1 for science in conservation. This happens mainly, but not exclusively, in restoration processes. While the idea of scientific conservation is perfectly feasible, scientific restoration is an oxymoron because no scientific, objective reason to substitute a presumed, preferred past state of an object for the present one (which is necessarily, undoubtedly authentic) exists [12]. Scientific processes may be used when scientific information is required, but the main decisions and criteria will always be the product of subjective will:

[Conservation or preservation] simply become further interventions in the life process of artefacts. Any decision to deploy specific technical skills to restore an object to its 'original' state, to an intermediate state, or simply to keep from future change is by definition arbitrary and should be recognized to be so [27, p.263].

Scientific conservation is also grounded on the assumption that it actually improves conservation practice from a technical point of view, especially regarding tasks 2 and 3. This legitimization is not based on theoretical, but on practical considerations, but the curious reader should not ignore that the controversy exists: the lack of communication between conservators and scientists [61-69], the irrelevance of much scientific conservation research to actual conservation practice [66, 67, 70-73] and the inability of science to cope with complex material problems such as those posed by conservation objects [12, 65, 67-69, 71, 74] have been noted.

## What makes a 'conservation object'

While these concepts have been questioned, a new kind of substitute thinking has been spreading rather quietly, slowly permeating the field. The nature of 'conservation objects' (the objects which are worthy of conservation, and not only repair, maintenance, cleaning, or care) is a key matter, because it is very important for defining what features are most important for the conservator while performing his/her work [1]. Several authors have pointed out the expansive evolution of this concept [1, 12, 57, 75, 76]. First, conservation dealt with artworks, or antiquities, or archaeological goods. Then, it came to deal with historical objects, and finally with cultural objects (Figure 1). The changes in the name of the IIC itself – from 'International Institute for the Conservation of Museum Objects' to 'International Institute for Conservation of

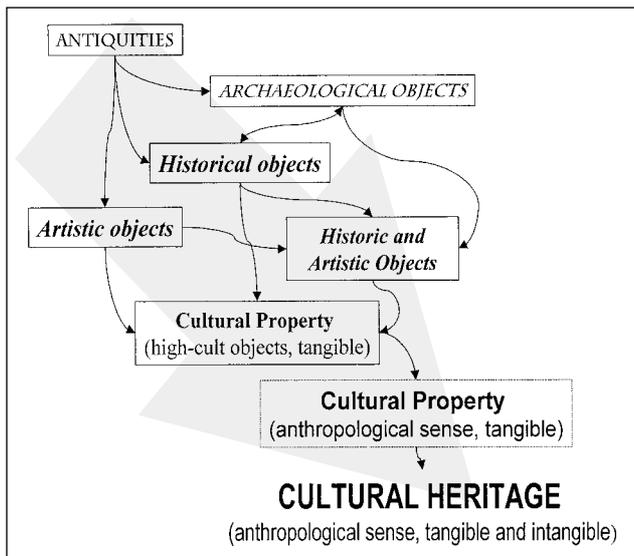


Fig. 1 The evolution of conservation objects from "Antiquities" to "Cultural Heritage".

Historic and Artistic Works' – is a good indicator of this situation [77].

The IIC, however, has not joined the current trend of using the cultural criterion as the yardstick to discriminate what objects are 'restored' from those which are 'repaired', or 'serviced', or simply 'cared for'. This may not be a bad choice. Morente has made a clear analysis of the concept of culture as a basis for the concept of heritage concluding that it is useless, because it is either too narrow (when 'culture' is understood as 'high culture') or too wide (if 'culture' is understood in an anthropological sense) [57].

The matter is quite complex. Some participants in the 1992 Dahlem conference declared that it was 'virtually impossible' to achieve any definition [78, p.269] and in 1997, Bonsanti proposed what might be called the 'Brustolon paradox', based on the fact that two similar actions can be understood as conservation or as repair depending on the object which they are performed upon: 'Se una sedia si rompe, viene riparata. Se la sedia è del Brustolon, viene restaurata' [79, p.109]. The Brustolon paradox comes to prove that conservation cannot be defined on technical grounds alone, because the same activity performed on different objects may be considered either conservation or repair. The so-called 'Mustang paradox' [12] goes one step further: it shows that the same action may be understood both as conservation or repair even if it is performed upon the very same object (in this case a World War II combat airplane now restored and used by private owners), and proves that the object itself is not enough for distinguishing conservation from other related activities, such as repair, maintenance, cleaning, servicing or care.

### A 'Copernican revolution': meaningful objects

Because of this, Bonsanti has proposed what he has called a 'Copernican revolution': conservation should not be characterized as such because of its objects or techniques, but because of the attitude of the worker:

Il restauro allo è tale, non in quanto si applichi alla categoria delle opere d'arte, ma allorché le operazioni relative alla sua attuazione corrispondano fin dall'origine a quell'attitudine complessa ... fatta di quelle componenti tecniche, metodologiche, scientifiche, professionali, sospese fra tradizione e innovazione, che noi nel mondo del restauro ... riconosciamo come nostre [79, p.111].

This proposal is not devoid of reason, but it still leaves an essential question unanswered: what objects deserve such a special attitude from us, and why? The most successful answer offered by contemporary conservation theorists can be summarized in two words: meaningful objects.

Ian Hodder, a member the Cambridge school of material culture, proposed that meaning in objects is three-fold. One meaning is utilitarian. The second is the one given to the object as part of a structure, which depends upon its place within the code system and within the structure of meanings: the symbolic meaning. The third meaning is its historical meaning, which is the meaning it provides through its associations with past events and circumstances [80]. The notion of structure is strongly reminiscent of the structuralist philosophical school, and of semiology. It could be argued that these ideas have come of age by now, but the fact is that they are still useful for defining conservation objects, and in general, 'doubly relevant to the conservator ... as a means for us to understand any response to artifacts' [24, p.242].

The meaning of conservation objects is also a key defining factor in contemporary museological studies. Very clear and lucid examples of these studies are some of the books edited by Pearce [7, 8]. In most cases the ideas applicable to museum objects are perfectly fit for conservation objects [27] and in fact communicative functions of conservation objects are a defining factor in contemporary conservation theory. References to mechanisms of this kind have been increasingly frequent since the revision of the Burra Charter in 1981 (initially published in 1979), in which the concept of 'cultural significance' played a primary role [81]. For instance, the American Institute for Conservation defines 'cultural property' as those objects having 'artistic, historic, scientific, religious, or social significance' [82] and the 1989 Code of Ethics of the Canadian Conservation Institute included the notion of 'conceptual integrity', which included metaphysical properties such as 'cultural or religious significance' [83]. Under different forms, the communicative functions of conservation objects have been widely recognized [1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 24, 30, 38, 39, 47, 57, 78, 84], and several authors have talked about 'heritage function' to refer to functions of this kind [30, 57].

However, every object in our society has its very own meaning, so how can this be a criterion? Actually, only some kinds of meaning qualify an object as a conservation object. Michalski [24] expressed this view in a tri-axial space in which each axis represents a 'narrative value'. There are three types: scientific, impersonal, and personal (Figure 2). Scientific values are those which are determined by experts: historians, archaeologists, anthropologists etc. These objects are conserved by their

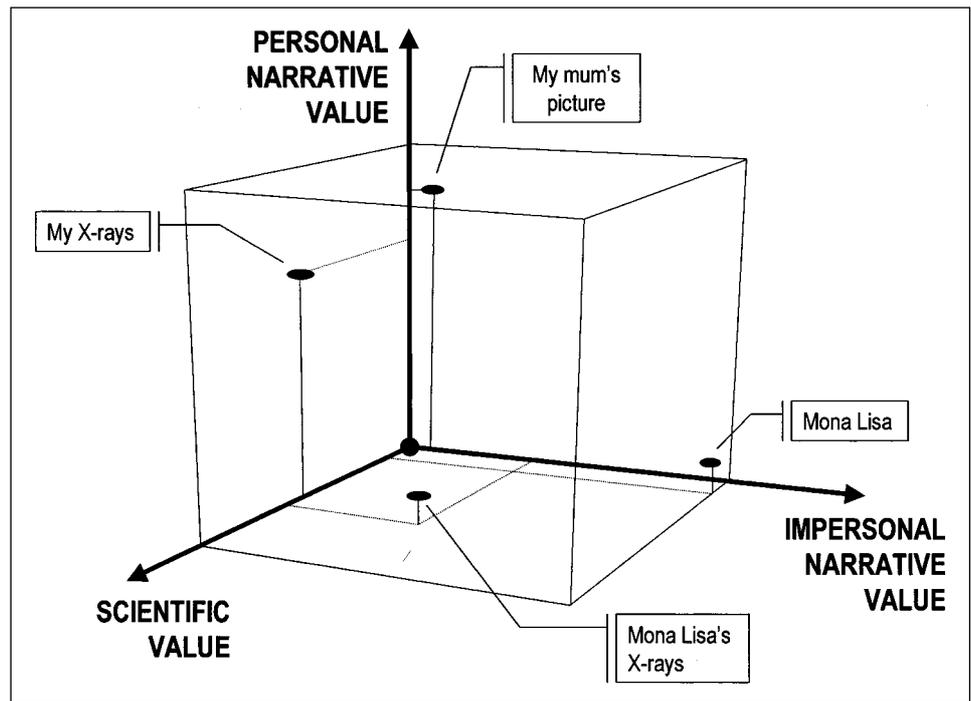


Fig. 2 The values of conservation objects, according to Michalski [24]. These values form a tri-axial space, where objects may be placed. The farther an object is from the axis origin, the more likely it is to be considered a conservation object. Note that the same object may have different values for different persons at different moments.

probatory usefulness and their historiographic meanings derive not from conventions, but because a causal relation exists between the sign and the signified: in this sense they are evidence. Social values are those which are shared by most individuals in a group; they contrive social ideology (of which identity is a most important aspect). They are often a kind of high-culture object: statues, paintings, monuments, historical buildings, codices etc., but not necessarily. Old locomotives, for instance, or concentration camps, may also become social symbols. Religious objects (e.g. sculptures, jewelry and human remains) also fall within this category. Personal values are those which are held by one individual or shared by few – a personal letter or a family tallboy – and bear meanings prevalent in the ‘patrimonio modesto’ [85]. The Mona Lisa, for example, has plenty of social value, little personal value, and little scientific value (it cannot provide much more relevant scientific or historical information than it has already done, and in the present state of knowledge, one presumes that it will in the foreseeable future). In the space shown in Figure 2, the further an object is from the axis origin, the more likely it is to become a conservation object.

Objects can become meaningful through very complex mechanisms, which interact in many ways. Academic, social and sentimental pressures may combine with each other to produce different meanings. The ways in which these meanings are generated have not been widely studied. Thompson has elaborated on his ‘rubbish theory’, describing some of the mechanisms by which heritage values are assigned to new objects in western cultures. He suggests that the social valuation of a given object always moves following a fixed three-step process: from ‘transient’ (value decreases with time) to ‘rubbish’ (zero value) to ‘durable’ (value increases with time). When a transient object reaches a zero-value situation, it may be discarded, but it can also remain in a ‘timeless and valueless limbo’; if that object physically survives that stage, it might eventually become a durable object itself:

this has been the case of bakelite ashtrays, gramophones and vintage cars. There are only a few exceptions to this rule, the most relevant is Art. Works of art are created to be durable from their very inception and some manage to be so [86].

Whereas the ‘rubbish theory’ describes a general process, Pearce has offered a different view, describing the meanings that can be ascribed to an object through several examples. After the case of a jacket worn at the Battle of Waterloo by an injured officer [87], she has pointed out two kinds of mechanisms (metaphorical and metonymic) by which such an object has become a heritage object. Zanchetti and Jokilehto have also described a similar process in the case of a public monument [84]; Ballart in the case of an old battle drum, now in a museum [38]; and Sörlin in the case of a historical landscape [88].

### A dead end: subjectivism

In fact, conservation itself can no longer be regarded as a neutral activity, especially with regard to symbolic objects. The very act of conserving an object is expressive of our positive attitude towards it. Communicating that the conserved object is appreciated for its symbolic value is also a function of conservation [1, 12, 15, 38].

If the concepts of authenticity and objectivity are not to be taken for granted, if the possibility of scientific or objective conservation is exposed as an illusion or a myth, what can the conservator do? A simple answer is to just stop pursuing an unachievable goal, and assume that subjectivity is the name of the game, thus practising conservation in an even freer way. Lowenthal [5, 6], McLean [41], and above all, Cosgrove [27], have defended this option, demanding the ‘possibility of greater creative freedom on the part of the conservator’ [27, p.265], asking for conservation to be ‘more creative, less deferential to canonical ideology, more open to the radical, the iconoclastic, and the invented’, free from

'slavish subordination to a distorting notion of the authentic' [36, p.265]. While other authors have defended creativity both in technical [59] and managerial [1] senses, as well as in relation to the creation of heritage [86], Cosgrove and McLean talk about artistic or even 'subversive' creativity, escaping from theoretical limitations imposed by historical Truth.

### Exiting a dead end: intersubjectivism

Interestingly enough, both Cosgrove and McLean relate 'creative conservation' to political progressiveness. However, demanding more creative freedom for the conservator reduces the freedom and rights of the users of the objects (be it the public in a museum or the owner of a letter written by a beloved person). The functions of heritage might then be ignored: by converting the conservator into a creator (in a nearly artistic sense) the persons for whom the work is done lose authority. Increasing the conservator's (or any other decision-maker's) ability to alter other people's artefact is not a sign of political progressiveness: in this sense, the concept of creativity and those concepts associated with it (self-expression, beauty, innovation) are no less aristocratic and imposing than that of objective, scientific Truth.

For contemporary theorists, criticising the idea of objectivity in conservation is not necessarily a defence of subjectivism, but rather a defence of inter-subjectivism [12]. Intersubjective criteria are those that are established (in a conscious or unconscious way) by the subjects which are likely to be affected by any change in the object. Intersubjectivity is based upon agreements reached between-the-subjects. The subjects that are affected in any way, whether tangible or intangible, by a conservation process form 'communalities of intersubjectivity' [89] that should have some kind of rights over the decisions taken in the process: they are that heritage object's 'stakeholders' [1, 21, 90]. In most contemporary conservation theory, subjectivity is not synonymous with individualism.

### Contemporary ethics of conservation: functional conservation

Thus, conservation is done for the sake of the subjects: its users. The user of the object is any person for whom the object performs any function, be it tangible or intangible. In spite of Beck's 'Bill of Rights for Works of Art' [26], objects have no rights, nor are they accountable at all [78]. 'Restoration is about people' [41, p.13], and people's needs in conservation decisions are expressed through two concepts, those of value and function. In fact, both are very similar, and in many cases fully interchangeable [84]. It has been argued that conservation is an act that respects Hodder's three meanings, or values 'dans un subtil équilibre de dosage' [91, p.17]. Other authors think that conservation deals with historiographical and symbolic functions of the objects, even though in the process some other functions may be affected as well [12]. Some objects of conservation are symbolic for many people, while others symbolize things for very few people. In any case, it is the people affected by a conservation process (the 'stakeholders') who should be considered when making the decisions:

In earlier times, conservation was a relatively autonomous, closed field composed of specialists and experts. The experts, together with art historians and archaeologists, decided what was significant ... The right of these specialists to make decisions was tacitly recognized by those who funded the work... but new groups have become involved in the creation and care of heritage. These groups of citizens (some are professionals from such fields as tourism and economics, others are advocating the interests of their communities) arrive with their own criteria and opinions [1, p.68].

This subjective or social turn is very characteristic of contemporary theory of conservation. Adapting it from the works of the philosopher and linguist Mijail Batjin, Martínez Justicia has proposed the concept of 'horizonte de expectativas' (what the observer expects and can expect) as a guiding criterion in conservation activities [92]. Cosgrove has related heritage value to 'cultural knowledge', claiming that decisions should leave the experts' field and enter a 'broader public domain' [27, p.261]. Chirici talked about 'valore de uso sociale' [75, p.76], and so do many international documents, such as the Paris (1972) [93], Amsterdam (1975) [94] or Burra (1981) [81] documents. The idea is that conservation decisions should bear in mind not truth, but intangible (as well as tangible) efficiency and functionality; that it is the subjects, and not the objects, for whom any conservation process is carried out. These ideas lead to the notion that conservation decisions should not be imposed, but agreed upon between affected subjects. Staniforth calls this 'negotiative conservation' [95], while other authors describe heritage decision-making as a 'pact' [84], a 'discussion' [96], 'consenso' [15], 'equilibrium' [91, 97], or a form of 'trading' [88]. All of these concepts can be seen as 'a step toward cooperation in decision-making in a field that has traditionally been elite-oriented' [98, p.72].

Of course, experts are to be listened to, and their opinions will surely have an effect on laymen. However, their special authority over objects belonging to other persons or to the whole society exists only because the public recognizes it, and this authority is not exclusive. The consensus called for in contemporary theory of conservation includes everyone for whom the object has any meaning. It is not an internal agreement between historians, scientists and conservators – between experts – it is a 'social contract' [84, p.46]. Thus, the notion of 'negotiative conservation' could successfully substitute that of scientific conservation. As with reversibility, this consensus is a goal that should be pursued even if it is not always fully achievable. Negotiative conservation would allow for a relaxation of rigid standards that do not adapt well to the plethora of very different objects that fall in the category of 'conservables' [1, 12].

An interesting parallel concept is that of 'sustainable conservation'. The economic sustainability of conservation has been stressed in several texts [1, 76, 97-99]. The cultural or symbolic sustainability is less evident. It refers to the adaptability of conservation objects for future use: changing an object to present-day expectations may result in a substantial reduction of its future usability. This kind

of sustainability has been stressed by several authors [1, 12, 95, 97]. Baer, for instance, has quoted a comparison between a conservation object and a cake which we can eat completely right now, or keep (entirely or partially) for future eaters [100]. By using the concept of 'cultural capital', which he defines as 'the ability to inspire or to be inspired', Arjo Klamer lets us define conservation sustainability as the ability to render cultural benefits through an extended time-span [99].

Some authors have warned against the excesses of popularism to which the social turn of contemporary theory of conservation could lead: left with the power to choose, the regular public may not want to fund high-culture heritage, which is uninteresting to them. Intangible functions of heritage are nonexistent for most people, and so the need to act somehow unpopularity has been noted [78]. This is a most important issue. In a certain way, contemporary conservation theory attempts to eradicate the excesses committed by too powerful 'experts', but this may bring on new problems. Democratic decision-making and economic sustainability can lead to banalisation, and produce equally regrettable abuses. However, symbolic, intangible sustainability can only lead to prudence and moderation, to which the dialogical relationship between these key notions is central. In the 'negotiation' that modern conservation theory calls for, future users have to play a role, and, most likely, it will be the experts who will have to speak for them. Surely this is not an easy task – but it certainly is a fascinating one.

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