

. . . the shuffle of things:  
property, properties, and propriety

ABSTRACT

This paper explored the historical context in which our Western concept of cultural heritage has developed and reviewed some ideas concerning the language of conservation; it is suggested that consideration of the historical and cultural bases of conservation practices and ethics might lead to a better understanding of questions of preservation and use.

INTRODUCTION

The 2006 AIC General Session theme “Using Artifacts: Is Conservation Compromised?” recalls a similar theme proposed at a 2003 AIC General Session “Can/Should Cultural Use Override Preservation As A Goal of Treatment?” Both these questions involve our definition of conservation and how we define its role; they also involve ideas of identity and ethical action. In a 2003 General Session presentation, *Dissemination and Loss: A Modest Proposal for Preventing Cultural Materials From Being a Burden and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public (With an Apology to Jonathan Swift)*, I proposed that an exploration of the language we use in speaking of our work might help us arrive at a better understanding of the historical, philosophical, and ethical context(s) in which such questions might arise, and so, reasonable answers. This paper, presented at a 2006 Book and Paper Group session, explored the historical context in which our Western concept of cultural heritage has developed and reviewed some ideas concerning the language of conservation; it is suggested that consideration of the historical and cultural bases of conservation practices and ethics might lead to a better understanding of questions of preservation and use.

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In 1595, Francis Bacon presented *A Device for the Gray's Inn Revels*. The revels were celebratory diversions planned by the collegiate organizations of students studying for the legal professions at the four London Inns of Court; they were presented and attended by leading figures of English society. The conceit of Bacon's device was a prince giving warrant to his counselors to “set before us to what port, as it were, the ship of government be bounden.” A counselor advising the study of philosophy suggests “so that you may have in small compass a model of universal nature made private . . . a goodly huge cabinet, wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine hath made rare in stuff, form, or motion; whatsoever singularity chance and the shuffle of things hath produced.” Bacon's statement articulates, and is articulated by, specific ideas about the efficacy of viewing selected materials. The statement also implies certain ideas about art and science which developed in early modern European culture. Involved in these ideas are also ideas of property, properties, and propriety that continue to influence what may be called museological practice (in which conservation may be included). It is hoped that consideration of some of these ideas, and their historical expressions, might contribute to understanding the criteria influencing our decisions about preservation and use of cultural materials.

My proof-text is taken from Plutarch's *Lives*, specifically that of Solon who set up some very interesting laws modifying those, said to be written in blood, by Draco. The laws were on wooden rollers, or *cyrbes*, and Plutarch quotes the comedian Cratinus as saying, “By Solon, and by Draco, if you please / Whose Cyrbes make the fires that parch our peas” (Plutarch 2005, 35). So much for preserving the law—although Plutarch claims to have seen relics of the *cyrbes*; we will get back to parched peas and preservation. Anyway, after Solon set up the laws he left town for ten years. That would be Athens, to which we like to trace our cultural inheritance. And so to our text.

Solon is reported to have said

It is not affection, it is weakness, that brings men, unarmed against fortune by reason, into these endless pains and terrors; and they indeed have not even the present enjoyment of what they dote upon, the possibility of the future loss causing them continual pangs, tremors, and distresses” (Plutarch 2005, 23).

Which I think is apropos.

Now, let us skip ahead a bit in the shuffle of things—and we will get back to that later—to a letter of Cicero’s in which he writes:

. . . you have taken these four or five pieces at a price I should consider excessive for all the statuary in creation. You compare these Bacchantes with Metellus’s Muses. Where’s the likeness? To begin with, I should never had reckoned the Muses themselves worth such a sum—and all Nine would have approved my judgment! Still that would have made a suitable acquisition for a library, and one appropriate to my interests. But where am I going to put the Bacchantes? (Pearce 1995, 87).

Now this is a copious text for our purposes because it introduces property, properties, and propriety at an intersection of religion and commerce. It discusses cultural materials in terms of value and significance as relative attributions. It raises questions of materials and representation and of proper usage. And because, as may be recalled, the Muses are the daughters of Mnemosyne, we also have here notions of materials and memory. There is a lot put into play. And I would suggest that taking a closer look at the relation of religion and commerce to collecting might be useful to a better understanding of what comprises conservation and thus what might compromise it.

#### COLLECTING

Collecting, as we know it, can be said to begin in early modern Europe. It is useful to distinguish between the terms “Renaissance” and “early modern”; they indicate not a distinction between periods of time but rather a difference of perspective. “Renaissance” is used to identify cultural productions with the earlier, privileged, site of classical culture whereas “early modern” identifies them with the beginnings of modern Western culture. It is these beginnings that interest me here and, for my purposes, we can do no better than quote Francis Bacon who suggests:

so that you may have in small compass a model of universal nature made private . . . a goodly huge cabinet, wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine hath made rare in stuff, form, or motion; whatsoever singularity chance and the shuffle of things hath produced (Bacon 2002, 55).

These ideas about assembling and viewing materials continue to influence museological practice.

Whether it is Gabriel Kaltemarckt seeking to introduce fine arts collecting at the iconoclastically ambiguous sixteenth-century court of Christian I of Saxony (Gutfleisch 1989) or our contemporary Bruno Latour seeking to save mediatory images from the “sordid pawnshop” (Latour 2005) of iconoclasts Abraham, Moses, and Jacques (Derrida), argument continues over the place of representational materials in our culture. “Thing” and “keep” are among the oldest words in the English language. In some senses, both conflate matter with concern: the physical with the metaphysical, the tangible with the intangible, materials with memory.

In theory the *wunderkammeren* were encyclopedic representations of Creation; in fact these collections functioned as treasuries of financial resources and representations of political power. They displayed man’s place in the universe and placed sovereigns center stage in the theater of the world. And this is the stage on which conservation struts its stuff. But how do we find ourselves here?

#### CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL INFLUENCES ON CONSERVATION ETHICS

Surely our attitude towards preservation and use, what we term “conservation ethics,” is based in our culture and history. Perhaps there is something familiar in this twelfth-century account of St. Cuthbert’s translation:

. . . the day appointed for the solemn removal, being at hand, the brethren entered into a resolution, that as no one was alive who could give them first-hand information, they themselves, as far as they should be allowed by the permission of God, should examine into the manner in which each individual thing was placed and arranged about the holy body, and without loss of time should furnish it with things fit and becoming for its removal on the day approaching lest, when the hour of festive procession had arrived, any difficulty proceeding from want of foresight should cause delay, and from that delay, disappointing to the numerous assemblage which had come together, any mishap should befall their solemn obsequies. The brethren, therefore appointed for the purpose, nine in number, with Turgot their Prior, having qualified themselves for the task by fasting and prayer, on the 24th of August, as soon as it was dark, prostrated themselves before the venerable coffin, and amid tears and prayers they laid their hands upon it, not without fear and trembling, to open it (Anonymous 1956, 100).

Or in Benvenuto Cellini’s sixteenth-century *Life*:

About this time certain antiquities were found in the neighborhood of Arezzo . . . there were also found a number of little bronze statuettes, covered with earth and rust, and each of them wanting something, head or hands or feet. The Duke took great pleasure in cleaning them himself with the goldsmiths' chisels. Now, one day I had occasion to speak to his Excellency; and while we were talking together he handed me a little hammer, with which I struck the chisel the Duke was holding; and it was so we cleared off the earth and rust from the little figures. Several evenings we spent like this, after which he ordered me to supply the missing portions of the statuettes (Cellini 1968, 310).

Or again, in John Worlidge's seventeenth-century treatise on husbandry:

The preservation of corn . . . is of very great advantage to the husbandman and the kingdom in general. . . . The way of making it up in reeks, on reek-stavals, set on stones that the mice may not come at it, is usual and common. . . . Also it is advised to mix beans with the corn, and that will preserve it from heating and mustiness. It is probable that if the beans be well dried on a kiln it may succeed, for then will they attract all superfluous moisture unto them, which is the only cause of the injury to the corn (Worlidge 1972, 169).

These few examples should serve as reminders that our approach to treating objects has precedent in earlier approaches to the preservation of materials.

This year's theme "Using Artifacts: Is Conservation Compromised?" recalls the 2003 theme, "Can/Should Cultural Use Override Preservation as a Goal of Treatment?" Both these questions involve our definition of conservation, apparatus of cultural heritage, and criteria for ethical action. In 2003, I suggested that an exploration of the language we use in speaking of our work might help us arrive at a better understanding of the context in which such questions might arise. Here I will expand that exploration to collecting: specifically of relics.

#### PROPERTY AND PROPERTIES

Collecting, in the form of collections of relics, occurs at the intersection of Christianity and capitalism—practices which invest tangible materials with intangible attributes in the service of speculation in future returns. In both, ritual control of consumption—perhaps let's say of wheat—transforms a material into a medium of exchange. Elucidation of the mechanisms by which such materials are invested with intangible attributes may shed some light on our perception of cultural materials and conception of conservation.

According to Gregory of Tours, when a pilgrim wishes to bring back a relic from the tomb "he carefully weighs a piece of cloth which he then hangs inside the tomb. Then he prays ardently and, if his faith is sufficient, the cloth, once removed from the tomb, will be found to be so full of divine grace that it will be much heavier than before" (Sumption 1975, 24). However, for the most part, relics were invested through a tradition of attribution similar to that used to verify the authenticity of revealed texts through testimonials, illustrated hagiographies, cathedral lists, and certification (Belting 1994, 4); that is, through the play of text and gesture, speculation and spectacle. In this context, we may recall that "the sacraments too consist of *things* (bread, wine, oil) transformed by priestly consecration" (Belting 1994, 7) and that this transformation is a function of language (Greenblatt 1996).

The religious status of relics, whether bodily remains or mementoes, is upheld by church authority. The Second Council of Nicea states:

Therefore all those who dare to think or teach anything different, or who follow the accursed heretics in rejecting ecclesiastical traditions, or who devise innovations, or who spurn anything entrusted to the church (whether it be the gospel or the figure of the cross or any example of representational art or any martyr's holy relic) . . . we order suspended . . . or . . . excommunicated. . . . We salute the venerable images. . . . Anathema to those who do not (Belting 1994, 506-7).

The function of relics recalls imperial cults as well as Christian theology in that representative materials are viewed as extensions of an absent presence. And in fact, the historical role of attentiveness in Christian religious practice and art hearkens back to the decorous restraint and deferential deportment of court protocol (Gaston 2001, 140-2) as much as it heralds museological decorum.

The use of relics speaks to the development of museological practice: ". . . as early as 385 armed deacons surrounded the True Cross at Jerusalem in order to prevent pilgrims from kissing it and taking a splinter away in their teeth" (Sumption 1975, 32); thieving by religious and secular "kleptocratic oligarchies" was justified "as demands by saints to be removed to sites where they would be properly venerated" (Abou El Haj 1994, 12); and "The Lateran Council of 1215 instructed that relics were not to be exposed except in a reliquary" (Sumption 1975, 35). The reliquary of martyrs Protus, Hyacinth, and Nemesius, commissioned by Cosimo and Lorenzo di Giovanni de Medici and made by Lorenzo Ghiberti, exemplifies the involvement of religion, commerce, and political power in the creation and preservation of cultural materials (Cornelison 2005). Surely these early examples call to

mind continuing practices and contemporary controversies.

Although Western collecting, early influenced by relics, routes of pilgrimage, and religious ceremony, gradually became defined by market economies, trade routes, and museological display, attitudes towards materials ritually invested with immaterial attributes persists. In the West, preservation of materials is coordinated by the great cultural machinations of religion, politics, and commerce. Ideological sleight of hand, obscured by cultural patter, makes such cultural constructs disappear into the realm of natural order.

Preservation keeps things in order; that this seems natural, or imperative, is itself a cultural artifact and evidence of the durability of attitudes which conflate tangible characteristics and intangible attributes. When a curator of contemporary art writes, "I preferred . . . to see a piece of the true cross . . . we are in the business of preserving not only the works of art, but also their legends" (Schimmel 1999, 135-6), and a contemporary sociologist writes about "beginning the indefinite cult of conserving, protecting, repairing . . . we want visitors and readers to become 'friends of interpretable objects'" (Latour 2002, 15), are we really so far from Thomas Aquinas writing that "by means of their relics we retain a personal friendship with the saints"? (Sumption 1975, 23).

#### PROPRIETIES

Our language reverberates with "remembrances of things past." Linguistic relics affect how we see, and treat, things. Religious, political, and market usages, have transformed value (a term of equivalency), significance (a term of difference), meaning (a term of interpretation), and authenticity (a term of relation) into properties with implications of legal, ethical, and social proprieties.

How we use materials involves interpretative strategies, figures of speech, and narrative forms. Interpretation functions to overcome space (cultural strangeness) and time (historical difference) (Ricoeur 1976). Metaphor creates a convergence of meaning where there is palpable difference; it generates new meanings and new information. Narrative, in forming a unified linguistic trajectory, implies an authoritative reading of fragmented perceptions. Collections are always as much a product of invention as of inventory.

Assembling things serves to make time visible through rhetorical semiotic activities necessarily influenced by subjective and local practices. We arrange things in space to visualize stories that make sense to us. However, our assemblages may be, and unavoidably so, a simulacrum of what has been: "a false claimant to being which calls into question the ability to distinguish between what is real and

what is represented" (Camille 2003, 44). This calls a great many things into question.

In his *Museum Clausum, or, Bibliotheca Abscondita: Containing some Remarkable Books, Antiquities, Pictures, and Rarities of Several Kinds, scarce or never seen by any man now living*, Sir Thomas Browne satirizes collectors (as Borges would later twit cataloguers): "A glass of spirits made of aetherial salt, hermetically sealed up, kept continually in quicksilver; of so volatile a nature that it will scarce endure the light, and therefore only to be shown in winter, or by the light of a carbuncle, or bononian stone" (Browne 1852, 277-8). Thus the origins of conservation as we know it: preserving elements of an encyclopedic imaginary.

The persistent and pervasive conflation of tangibles and intangibles "confuses but even more often conceals the central question of relations between 'material' and 'symbolic' production" (Williams 1985, 91): thus conservation's penchant for charts diagramming an endless assortment of "values" and endless diagrams charting the "life-cycles" of inanimate objects. Conservation, rarely subjecting such business to critical analysis, rather, makes its profession relative to notions of science, cultural heritage, and artist's intent.

Reading through conservation literature, one cannot help but notice an emphasis on science as an assertion of objectivity, but we may be overlooking subjective influences on the form and content of what we name science.

The concept of cultural heritage can be traced to a relatively recent gesture: Alexander Lenoir's establishment of the *Musee des Monuments Francais* during the French Revolution. To save fragments of monumental materials—identified with the monarchy, aristocracy, and church—Lenoir reinterpreted them "as historical monuments and works of art, essential to the identity of the nation and of mankind" (Gambioni 2002).

Conservation interventions are critical inquiries; however, decisions are often based on assumptions about identity in the guise of artist's intent: an odd claim of objectivity grounded in a privileged subject. But, perhaps, "the important 'intention' is in the work, as its *res*, a cluster of meanings which are only partially revealed in its original statement" (Carruthers 1990, 191), and that "critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle" (Wimsatt 1954, 10).

We often speak as though the meanings of our words were self-evident, and, curiously, what is left unsaid is often assumed to be most in evidence: that it is imperative to keep things for the future. It seems an anathema to ask why.

#### CONCLUSION

That ceremonies of looking can engender civility is the ethical foundation of conservation. That we still believe

cultural materials can serve moral progress is surely a leap of faith. Preservation for the future is a particular, one is tempted to say peculiar, culturally determined use of things. And although it may prolong the existence of substance and order it cannot guarantee continuity of meaning; indeed, by restricting circulation and limiting contact, it can render things meaningless. Inevitably, the morality of any society is determined as much by what it elides and what it considers expendable as by what it collects and preserves. These days rapid decay may not be the problem.

It has been assumed that perpetual accumulation and eternal preservation of cultural materials serves some good in making sense of and giving meaning to the mortal trajectory: that ceremonial consumption of objects produces better subjects and that materials, rather than memory, hold time. I would suggest that there has been a confusion of subjects and objects—of properties, property, and propriety.

So what does all this have to do with our question: “Using Artifacts: Is Conservation Compromised?” Well, to begin with, it gives us a better understanding why we might think to ask. And then, it might prompt us to explore our assumptions not only about preservation of materials but also about time as past, present, and future. After all, from Saint Augustine who asked, “How, then, can these two kinds of time, the past and the future, be, when the past no longer is and the future as yet does not be?” (Stix 2006, 5) to Albert Einstein who noted that, “The past, present and future are only illusions, even if stubborn ones” (Davies 2006, 7), what the category “future” holds is unclear. And as both Augustine and Einstein might agree, perhaps our work is compromised by the uses to which it is put. Is conservation compromised by preservation?

Although it is unclear what is meant by a “moral imperative” to preserve cultural property for the future, or on what basis such a claim could be made, it is clear that conservation conceives itself to be an ethical undertaking. Ethical actions require critical reflection. I hope that this essay reflects some of the unavoidable limitations and inherent contradictions informing our activities, recognizing, in the words of Raymond Williams, that “what can really be contributed is not resolution but perhaps, at times, just that extra edge of consciousness” (Williams 1985, 24).

In 2003 I suggested that use should override preservation as the goal of treatment on the chance that new interpretative revelations might incite people to do good. By the highest standard of Western culture—democracy—civic life is measured by access to the materials of communal memory; “effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation” (Derrida, 1996, 4). If we believe that cul-

tural materials serve moral progress then the question of use must be “if not now, when?”

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