

Conservation Treatment and the Custodian/Conservator Relationship

-by Barbara Appelbaum

Introduction

Conservation treatment is a mystery to most non-conservators: What does “inpainting” really mean? Why do treatments take so long? How can I make sure that a treatment turns out the way I want?

Non-conservators’ lack of knowledge about conservation treatment can lead to difficulty in communication between conservators and custodians, and both groups may feel that a lack of communication is inevitable. The result is that few custodians are involved in the planning of a conservation treatment.

How can custodians assure that a treatment turns out the way they want if conservators do not talk with them? In fact, it is only technical knowledge that custodians do not have, and technical issues are only part of the input required for decision-making. If we look at all the information required to plan a conservation treatment, we can separate the technical information that conservators have from the non-technical information that, often, comes from the custodian.

- 1 The ideas in this article are discussed in more detail in the author’s book, *Conservation Treatment Methodology, 2007*.

This article explains why custodians’ understanding of conservation decision-making is important; why custodian input should be part of the process; what the impediments are to collaboration; and what can be done to improve the situation¹.

Questions requiring input from custodians

Historically, much of the field of conservation was art-museum-based. Since the values of a work are established by the mission of the owning institution, there was little need to analyze questions about values and treatment goals, since the art museum model was universally applicable.

For example, one of the main corollaries of treating works of art per the art museum model is that “damage” – rips, holes, and breaks - are to be “fixed” so that they do not interfere with the viewer’s appreciation of the work’s aesthetic qualities.

However, once conservators started working with collections not necessarily considered as art - ethnography, natural history, and others - discussions about the “non-material” aspects of collections, including about how work is valued by the owner, began in earnest.

For many anthropological or ethnographic objects, changes due to use or to the passage of time may give the works value rather than detracting from it, and should not be obliterated by treatment.

Given the variety of physical changes in objects during their lifetime and the different roles that those changes play in the meaning of the object, it is not always clear which changes – in any kind of object - are

“damage” and which have value in themselves. To add to the complications, the same type of object may be considered fine art in one setting, and decorative art or an historical object in others.

Questions about values and about the meaning of physical changes to those values are examples of non-technical information that can, and should, be discussed with custodians.

Many of the decisions that need to be made in planning a treatment are, of course, technical. For example, some adhesives are better than others because they are more permanent and do not discolor over time. Certain treatment techniques are considered superior because they are easier to control and are therefore less likely to produce undesirable side effects. Conservators discuss these matters at length among themselves, and a large part of their literature deals with them.

Custodians are generally content to leave decisions about how treatments are carried out to conservators. However, before conservators decide how to carry out a treatment, they must decide what treatment should be carried out. This is largely not a technical question, and, because it is based on context, is a decision that requires input from a custodian.

An Example

Suppose someone brings a conservator a painted chair with an upholstered seat. The paint is starting to flake, and there are other paint losses on the back rail and the risers due to use. Some scratches are attributable to a period of neglect after the original period of use was over. The joints are loose. Upholstery on the seat and the padding beneath exhibit damage due both to use and to light exposure and/or natural deterioration.

In this case, the only treatment that most conservators would consider to be required for ethical reasons is stabilizing the areas of flaking paint in order to prevent further loss. Treatment of the other losses of paint due to use or accident is optional. Fixing the loose joints is also optional, required only if the chair is to be used. Unless the chair is literally falling apart, loose joints in a museum chair used for exhibition do not have to be treated. In fact, since the materials and techniques of the existing joints may have some research or historical value, leaving them as is may be preferable.

The conservator knows which aspects of the chair could be treated, but without information from the custodian, does not know which ones should be treated for this particular chair in its particular context. So the conservator needs to explain the options to the custodian. The conservator may also have to explain the likely causes of the various “damages” in order to create a treatment plan that makes overall sense.

Part of the usefulness of such a discussion is that it familiarizes the custodian with the language that the conservator uses to describe the parts of the chair and the physical changes it has undergone. This will help the custodian to understand the conservator’s written proposal so that he or she can meaningfully approve the treatment. Too many custodians seem to approve treatment proposals they barely read, risking future dissatisfaction with the work carried out.

What are the problems? - The “Seeing” Problem

Clearly, then conservators and custodians should be working together. One of the reasons that they don’t however is that conservators and custodians look at things in such different ways. Conservators are trained to first determine the materials of a work, and then look for “what’s wrong,” which roughly translates into those aspects or parts of a work or object that have changed in an undesirable way since its creation.

In addition, conservators examining an object perceive it in ways that non-conservators are only vaguely aware of – a work of art at a random point in time, caught between its past and its future. (The text uses the

term “work of art,” but the discussion is just as applicable to all types of cultural property.) Conservators take away from an examination information about what the piece looked like when it was first made, what changes occurred through its history, and what changes it will likely undergo in the future. This is an area of conservators’ expertise that they take for granted and seldom discuss.

In contrast, custodians – particularly curators - focus automatically on object type, style, subject matter, and quality. They think about similar things they have seen and compare aesthetic value and iconography. Private owners may focus more on personal aesthetic appeal and on issues that affect market value, like rarity.

Custodians and conservators literally see different things. When a custodian first brings something to a conservator, the conservator soon begins to see phenomena that the custodian simply has not seen. “Normal” viewers look at a work as a whole, while conservators focus in on the surface details, looking more closely than normal viewers do. Examinations are conducted under raking or reflected light, which bring out aspects of objects that cannot be seen during normal viewing. The two kinds of examination cannot be done at the same time, leading some conservators to joke that they don’t notice what a painting is a picture of until their regular examination is finished and they step back.

Given these radically different ways of looking at, and assessing, works of art, we need some way that would allow a discussion to bring the two sides together. What is needed is shared non-technical language that provides concrete guidance for technical decisions to be made by the conservator alone.

The Terminology Problem

The burden is on conservators to explain treatments to custodians without seeming condescending. Custodians, on their part, need to ask questions and insist that their questions be answered in a language they understand, rather than tuning out when things get confusing. For the process to work, however, conservators have to give up using scientific jargon and communicate more straightforwardly.

This is not easy for us. The modern conservation profession is historically defined by the application of scientific knowledge, and, in modern society, we get validation and status from being scientific. As in all professions, technical language enables precise and unambiguous communication among those who are trained to understand it. On the other hand, technical language hinders clear communication with those outside the profession.

Even the crafts aspects of conservation involve a lot of specialized language that conservators don’t consider to be technical. For example, many non-conservators call the “stretchers” that support paintings on canvas “frames.” There is nothing terrible about that, but it means that when a conservator mentions a stretcher, a non-conservator may not be sure what it means.

The best time for conservators and custodians to talk is when they and the work of art are in a room together. If the communication is only in writing, the process is more difficult. Written treatment proposals are ordinarily technical documents, with little, if any, normal-sounding descriptive text. Particularly in cases where there is no direct personal contact, more explanation is needed of a kind that non-conservators can understand.

Many conservators are considering including a glossary with their reports. A glossary explains terminology without implying that the custodian is necessarily ignorant of its meaning. Many custodians are vaguely aware, for example, that inpainting involves adding new paint to a work to make a hole or other damage “disappear.” But many may not be aware that it means that the new paint is confined to the actual area of loss and does not cover any original paint.

The Context Problem

Custodians' insistence that conservators use less technical language will help custodians understand what is to be done, but it will not help the two parties deal with the abstract issues that make a treatment suitable for the custodian's purposes. There is no easy way to define for the custodian exactly what information is necessary, and, on the conservator's side, it is not obvious how information from the custodian translates directly into treatment decisions.

The kinds of information that determine the appropriateness of a treatment can be described by the term "values," used in a non-monetary sense. Value covers any and all of the reasons that people preserve things, including physical use and a variety of intellectual uses. For example, artworks can have decorative use, research use, or can be "used" to illustrate a particular point in an exhibition. Portraits can be "used" in an exhibition about the sitter, the artist, or the history of costume – about history, aesthetics, or even painting technique.

Art exhibited in art museums has primarily aesthetic value, although many works of art also have historical value. Many museum storerooms also hold works that are seldom, if ever, exhibited, but hold research value for art historians. Privately owned art may have sentimental, decorative, or associative value.

Together, conservators and custodians should be able to understand and discuss questions of value. That discussion will help to define a treatment appropriate to context, which is important because there is no single correct conservation treatment for any one particular object. Treatments have to be appropriate to a work of art's context as well as to its scientific aspects. Unfortunately, custodians' lack of understanding about such fundamental principles of conservation is related in part to the fact that conservators take them for granted, and therefore do not discuss them unless prompted.

As an example of the importance of context to the conservation decision-making process, consider an ancient Greek vase. The vase can be exhibited in an art museum as an example of the painter's or the ceramicist's art. In this case the work's aesthetic value is paramount and therefore the appropriate treatment may necessitate substantial restoration so that the vase will look as good and as complete as possible. In an archaeological museum, however, the vase may be valued as an object of research. In this case, separate shards may be preferable, or the desired research information might come from reconstructing the vase only to the point of establishing its profile or outside measurements. In some settings, it may be so important to the vase's research or historical value that we be clear about the extent of the remaining original that no restoration should be carried out other than to reattach the broken fragments. Maintaining the vase's research value may necessitate a treatment in which no foreign materials be added to the object, at least until after testing is done or samples are taken.

Such variations in use, meaning, and values may be easy enough to understand for a Greek vase. But there are other situations where the implication of the values related to use are not so obvious. For example, consider an oil painting that has a shiny layer of discolored varnish that obscures original colors and surface texture. Isn't it clear that treating this painting in preparation for exhibition would involve removing the varnish so that the work can be viewed as the artist intended? The answer, as in so much of conservation, is: "It depends."

Removal of the discolored varnish would be a routine recommendation for a painting on exhibition in an art museum. But if the painting were to go into a Victorian period room or house museum, its value would rest in its contribution to a recreation of the original decorating scheme, in the shiny darkened condition so beloved by the Victorians.

In the case of the chair discussed above, treatment decisions must be made on a whole laundry list of individual changes in various parts and aspects of the chair since it was made. Yet it is not a good idea to go through the list one thing at a time to decide which troublesome aspects should be dealt with and which left as is. Doing so would involve individual personal preferences and a lack of coherence in terms of what each aspect contributes to the meaning of the treated object.

So we need some intermediate decision-making criterion that can provide concrete guidance for technical decisions to be made by the conservator. We need a methodological approach that makes use of the information that the two parties can bring to the table. Neither conservators nor custodians are equipped to make treatment decisions on their own, but together they have what they need to come to agreement.

The concept of ideal state

A concept that will help to focus discussion and lead directly to treatment decisions is that of the “ideal state.” The ideal state is the past state of a work that best preserves or enhances its current value(s)— the value(s) that are the most important for the current custodian. The two primary choices are often the states of the work at the moment of creation and during the period of original use. For archaeological objects, the state at the time of discovery is another possibility, while for some things, the ideal state is how they look at present.

Possible choices for the ideal state come from the results of the conservator’s examination, because the ideal state must be an actual past state, not a made-up one. The conservator therefore has to construct a history of the work, focusing on its physical changes over time, but with awareness that the visual impact of an object may depend partly on the context - lighting, positioning, and other circumstances of viewing.

Typically, the conservator’s observations and conclusions will produce two likely choices for ideal state, both of which are technically feasible. Each has clear implications for the treatment goal based on the value(s) that the work holds for the current custodian. The custodian can then be presented with a clear choice. There is no need to ask difficult questions like “What do you want it to look like at the end of treatment?” The choices are described in terms that the custodian can understand, and the conservator is free to apply technical expertise that will determine whether a particular condition “problem” existed at the date chosen.

Because the ideal state is based on historical fact – the state of the work at one point in its past - the choice of ideal state leads directly to treatment choices. The chair could be returned as much as possible to its original state if aesthetics is the most important value. Or it could be put into its as-used state for a setting in which historical or educational value is paramount.

Choice of the as-used state would lead to questions about the likely state of the chair during use in order to guide specific treatment choices. For example, if the chair belonged in a wealthy household, it would not likely have been used with noticeable signs of wear, so such losses could be inpainted to match the surrounding color. Treatment of the upholstery would depend on whether it would be possible to restore the fabric to a close-enough approximation of its original appearance, or whether reproduction upholstery would be more appropriate to the restoration policy of the institution.

The concept of the ideal state provides custodians and conservators with a rational and efficient decision-making tool that can help to assure that current values and use have been fully considered and appropriately applied to the treatment goal. It can answer questions about how to deal with a broad array of “problems,” as in the chair example. It can help to answer sometimes controversial questions related to cleaning and the removal of old restorations, without relying solely on the custodian’s personal preferences.

Use of the concept of the ideal state as informed by the way(s) in which a work is valued clarifies the roles played by both partners in treatment decision-making. The conservator provides information about the past

states of the work and the results that treatment can accomplish within the limits of conservation ethics. The custodian decides which past state of the work is the most appropriate based on how the work is valued. This allows decision-making to be based on facts, which means that unrealistic or unethical options are already eliminated from discussion.

Once the ideal state is decided upon, the next step is based on technical knowledge, specifically the conservator's projection of what a treatment can plausibly accomplish: the "realistic goal of treatment." Custodians should be made aware of the differences between the ideal state and the realistic goal so that they can be satisfied with the treated object.

A systematic methodology grounded in the idea of the ideal state provides a concrete framework for treatment decision-making. That framework benefits conservators, who sometimes lack confidence in the soundness of their decisions and may have trouble explaining the thought processes that lead to those decisions. It also facilitates the creation of useful documentation by providing clear and non-technical language. This, in turn, benefits the next conservator who examines or treats the work. All parties benefit – the owning person or institution, potential viewers, and, of course, the artwork itself.

Conclusion

Once conservators and custodians recognize the advantages of a collaborative approach to conservation treatment decisions, they should be able to make it happen. Both can learn a great deal from going through the decision-making process together, using data derived from the conservator's examination and information supplied by the custodian.

Notes

¹ *The ideas in this article are discussed in more detail in the author's book, Conservation Treatment Methodology Elsevier, 2007.*

Online Reference

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