
This remarkable book is one of the products of the FAIC Samuel H. Kress Conservation Publication Fellowship program. Appelbaum clearly made good use of the release time afforded by that fellowship to think deeply about the entire process of conducting a conservation treatment, including not just the technical procedures, but also the underlying philosophy, assumptions, and value judgments inherent in every conservation decision. She presents a systematic methodology for conservation treatments that is designed to address in an explicit manner all of the issues relevant to treatment decision-making. While her primary audience is the conservation profession, many of her ideas would also be valuable and understandable for a wider audience including private owners, historic preservation professionals, and those in the museum field responsible for cultural property. Whereas most conservation publications recognize the relationship between conservation and the physical sciences, art, and/or archaeology, Appelbaum also places the field of conservation firmly within the context of the social sciences. Her book also stands out for the way in which she identifies general principles of conservation treatment methodology, in contrast to the most usual current approach of focusing on specialization-specific details. The many innovative ideas in this book serve to advance the field of conservation as a whole, across all specialties.

While the technical details of exactly how to carry out a particular treatment are certainly important for conservators, Appelbaum thoroughly dispels the idea that a conservator works within a narrow technical area of expertise. Instead, this book stakes out new territory for the field of conservation. This new conception of art conservators is thoroughly intellectual rather than narrowly technical. It identifies art conservation as an integral component of the liberal arts, as well as being science-based. Appelbaum recognizes that many conservators are already carrying out some of the steps in her methodology and considering many of the issues that she raises, but she developed this methodology as a way to ensure that these crucial issues are systematically, regularly, and explicitly considered during the course of treatment.

Appelbaum notes that while conservation training is material-based, the most vexing dilemmas that conservators face have little to do with materials. A well-trained conservator has a large repertoire of treatment skills. But, says Appelbaum, “the most difficult questions are not about what we can do but what we should do” (page xviii). The ethical issues facing conservators, she argues, are best informed by studying the social sciences as “a rich source for insight into human beings’ attachment to objects” (page xviii).

And, she claims, it is precisely these personal connections of owners to objects, and of the different meanings that objects hold for different people, that affect the goals of any conservation treatment. A treatment that is seen as positive and desirable by one person may be seen as detrimental or financially wasteful by someone else with a differing connection to the treated object. According to Appelbaum, “there are no clear lines that define for all time and in all cases the boundaries between proper and improper conservation treatments. Each object and its context must be evaluated individually, and every decision involves value judgments” (page xix).

So what is a conservator, or the owner of an object or building who wants to contract with a conservator, to do? For the conservator, Appelbaum presents an organized path through what she describes as “the morass of conflicting demands and difficult decisions that face conservators every time they take on an object for treatment” (page xix). Her solution is a “systematic methodology for conservation treatments of all kinds that addresses all of the issues relevant to treatment decision-making” (page xix). For the owner or custodian of an object, her best advice is to seek out a conservator with broad enough training to be able to think about the issues Appelbaum raises, and who is willing to discuss them with an owner prior to jumping into an actual treatment.

What is novel about Appelbaum’s methodology is that she urges conservators who typically gather, analyze, and organize information in preparation for treatments to systematically include non-material information along with material data. This means, for example, that while undertaking a standard physical examination of an object, the conservator should also inquire about the values the object holds for the custodian and for any other stakeholders. Reconstructing this full history of the object, she says, leads to the choice of the ideal state for the object. This
ideal state, as defined by Appelbaum, is the past state of the object with the most meaning for its current owners and serves as the foundation for the realistic goal of conservation treatment. Without considering the non-material issues, she says, rushing into treatment carries the risk of arriving at a treatment that may be technically flawless, but which may not be at all appropriate for a particular object or its custodian.

Think, for example, of a building that was added to over time, and has undergone multiple repairs and renovations in its history. An owner initially may ask a conservator to bring the interior walls back to their original configuration, colors, and design elements. The conservator could take samples of the paint layers, examine them in cross-section under a microscope, and identify the first, original paint color. Surface examinations, measured drawings, and a variety of analytical techniques could be used to decipher the original layout and decorative schemes of all walls, doorways, and other interior elements underneath the later changes. But jumping in to undertake a treatment back to the original appearance could leave the owner ultimately dissatisfied or even very unhappy.

Appelbaum’s advice would be for the conservator and owner to first thoroughly explore all of the non-material issues, and then make a decision about how to proceed. Each past owner of the building may have made changes. Perhaps the past owner of most significance to the current one might not be the first owner, so an appearance satisfactory to the current custodian might best reflect a period other than the first. Or, perhaps with more knowledge, the owner will become interested in honoring the entire history of the house, so would prefer that each wing might reflect a different time period. Some changes back to original configurations might not be realistic or desirable, if those changes go against current safety measures or building codes or involve more restoration than conservation.

The author’s refreshing ideas provide a systematic method to ensure that crucial intellectual, historical, cultural, and ethical issues are carefully considered and discussed with the custodian whenever a conservation treatment is undertaken. As she remarks, “We take for granted the conservator’s role in preserving the physical object, but the conservator’s role in interpretation is not so obvious. Yet interpretation is unavoidably embedded in every conservation treatment…” (page 5). Conservators who incorporate her systematic methodology will always see objects fully, ensuring that the owners or custodians of the objects are unlikely to regret the treatment carried out.

Appelbaum presents her systematic methodology in the introduction, and then elaborates on it throughout the book. The methodology includes eight basic steps: (1) characterize the object; (2) reconstruct a history of the object; (3) determine the ideal state for the object; (4) decide on a realistic goal of treatment; (5) choose the treatment methods and materials; (6) prepare pre-treatment documentation; (7) carry out the treatment; and (8) prepare final treatment documentation.

Conservation Treatment Methodology is divided into four overarching sections: (I) characterizing the object, (II) establishing the goal of treatment, (III) choosing a treatment, and (IV) documentation and treatment. Section I begins with a chapter on what Appelbaum calls “the characterization grid.” She emphasizes that a full characterization is more than just a physical description, and instead includes information about both material and non-material (intangible) aspects of an object. This recognition of the importance of documentation and preservation of intangible cultural heritage is in line with current international efforts of organizations such as UNESCO. Appelbaum’s grid is divided into four quadrants, emphasizing the equal importance of information contained in each. Quadrant I contains material-based information specific to the object (describing the object’s current physical state); quadrant II is for material-based information not specific to the object (such as chemical properties and physical behavior of components); quadrant III contains information specific to the object but not materials-based (such as values the object has held throughout its history and those it holds for the current custodians and stakeholders); and quadrant IV contains non-material information not specific to the object (such as that relating to the history of the general type of object under consideration and values typically placed on them by their makers and users, expected signs of use for this type of object, etc.). Chapters 2–5 elaborate on each of these quadrants in detail.

Section II begins with a discussion of the concept of the ideal state of an object in chapter 6, and of values analysis and creating a timeline (material and non-material narrative of the object’s biography) in relation to the ideal state, in chapter 7. She defines the ideal state as the past state of the object with the most
meaning for the current owners. The ideas related to timeline and ideal state are then used to determine the realistic goal of treatment, the subject of chapter 8. Chapter 9 focuses on long-term preservation and the goal of treatment, and section II then ends with a discussion of traditional conservation concepts in relation to her methodology, in chapter 10. Here she clarifies how her innovative approach relates to the way conservators routinely think and talk about their work, and to the AIC Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

Since section II focuses on how a conservator and custodian decide on a realistic treatment goal, section III follows logically with a discussion of the choice of materials and methods used to reach that goal. It begins with an introduction devoted to the role of science in conservation. Two chapters follow this: chapter 11, on the choice of treatment materials, and chapter 12, on choice of treatment methods. The material in these chapters will be the most familiar to practicing conservators. However, rather than focusing on specific tasks or cases, Appelbaum takes a more generalizable approach, to explore questions such as, “What characteristics are important for any conservation application? What ‘rules’ do we apply in order to pick from among the possible alternatives? What criteria can be used to distinguish the ‘better’ candidates?” (pages 309-10).

The final section, IV, contains the last three chapters, and the last three steps in her methodology (pretreatment documentation, the treatment itself, and post-treatment documentation). Chapter 13 focuses on the purposes of treatment documentation, and chapter 14 on creating treatment documentation. These chapters are organized around the documentation recommendations of national codes of ethics. While chapter 13 explores establishing documentation goals, chapter 14 then addresses creating documentation that meets those stated goals. Chapter 15 finishes out section IV and the book as a whole, and is devoted to treating the object. It incorporates ideas about the dynamics of carrying out a conservation treatment with a thoughtful discussion of the experience of life as a conservator.

This insightful and stimulating book is an intellectual pleasure to read, yet it also has much to offer of practical usefulness. The steps in her methodology organize in new ways what many conservators already do; but the idea of regularly employing a systematic decision-making process is an innovation ensuring that all relevant issues are addressed explicitly and fully for each conservation treatment. For those outside the field who think of conservators only in terms of a pair of hands performing tedious benchwork, this book will be a revelation. As a conservation scientist, I appreciate the way in which Barbara Appelbaum is able to take concepts from the scientific method and extend them to many aspects of conservation practice. As someone devoted to the documentation and preservation of intangible cultural heritage, I appreciate the full and systematic inclusion of such data in the treatment methodology. Conservation Treatment Methodology is a breakthrough work that belongs on the bookshelves of all conservation and historic preservation professionals and students, and those who are custodians of cultural property.

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