

Conservation in the 21st Century: Will a 20th Century Code of Ethics Suffice?

by Barbara Appelbaum

This paper is supposed to answer a question posed by the planners of this meeting: Can our twentieth-century code of ethics serve the challenges of the twenty-first century? My answer is yes.

But before we go into more detail, let's look at exactly what we mean by the code. AIC has three levels of documents that are intended to define optimal professional behavior.

At the highest level is the Code itself. Like all of codes of ethics, the AIC Code is aspirational. It describes how we SHOULD behave, in general terms. The topics include honesty, respect and open communication.

The second level is the Guidelines for Practice, which used to be called the Standards. The Guidelines describe specific behaviors that promote the goals written in the Code. The guidelines we probably refer to most often are the ones related to documentation which is, of course, a key distinguishing characteristic of our profession.

The third level is the Commentaries on the guidelines, drafted in the early 1990's. The Commentaries provide a section-by-section analysis and interpretation of each section of the Guidelines. They explain the rationale for each Guideline and describe both minimum and recommended practice.

The question about whether the Code of Ethics needs to be updated is a really a question about the Code itself, because changes to the Commentaries can certainly be expected. Our growing reliance on electronic documentation probably means changes in the Guidelines as well.

Now let's go back to the Code and its sufficiency for our twenty-first century needs.

First of all, all codes of ethics are designed to be permanent documents. The Ten Commandments are still relevant, despite a couple thousand years of social change. Lying, cheating, and stealing remain the basic measures of bad behavior in all parts of our lives including our work.

Conservation ethics do not have to change in response to new treatment methods or new media. As conservation has moved into new areas, it has become clear that our longstanding core values are not out-dated. Strong central principles are what enables us to deal confidently with change.

Another indication that what we have is just fine is that the Ethics and Standards Committee has not been bombarded by requests for change. The brave conservators who work with videos and plastics and food and other odd stuff seem to find what they need to move ahead. Questions over the years about what exactly is required of us to adhere to the aspirational pronouncements of the Code itself have been answered, first by the Guidelines, and, more recently, by the Commentaries.

Conservators tend to be nit-pickers. We habitually look hard for the smallest thing that

has even the remotest chance of going wrong.

The question from the program committee that led to my topic today is one example. Part of the idea that we SHOULD be searching the code for imperfections IS the implication that, if we searched, we would find some.

I will not do that, but if any of you want to, good luck. Have a good time and let me know how it comes out.

I'm going to break with conservation tradition, give up my role as nit-picker, and fight the tide of negativity. I am going to say some positive things.

Let's go back for a minute. For those who are not familiar with the history of these documents, the first version of the code was drafted by a committee of the IIC-American Group. The parent organization, IIC, refused to ratify it, and never did. There were serious reservations at the time even among Americans – I have been told that several well-known conservators were so incensed by the idea of a written code that they walked out of the meeting room right before the vote was taken.

We Americans, however, started something important that ultimately inspired other groups around the world to draft their own guiding documents. I have to say, as an aside, that none of those other documents are as explicit as ours or, I think, as useful. Ours are unique in providing practical guidance in the details of our everyday work and practical guidelines in our relations with our clients and colleagues. They also serve to define conservators to the outside world as a distinct group of highly-trained and highly-skilled professionals. Over the years they have been a cornerstone of AIC and an important part of the professional identity of every one of us.

And I think it is fair to say that trained conservators have a better record in following their own codes than mankind has in following the Ten Commandments.

So I thank all of the people who fussed so hard for so many years over both the meaning and the wording of our three documents, and I congratulate the large numbers of AIC members who really care about what is in them and regulate their practice accordingly.

A couple of weeks ago, I read in the program for this meeting that I would discuss the assumptions behind the code, so I guess I will do that. Actually, my discussion about those assumptions relates not only to the Code, but also the Guidelines and the Commentaries.

The single assumption on which our whole profession is based is defined by the term used in AIC documents for the things we take care of. That term is “cultural property.”

We believe that among all the things in the world are some that are particularly precious to human beings. Values of many different kinds lead us to the conclusion that they deserve to be preserved forever – no matter who owns them. In a moral sense, we believe that these things are the property of the whole human race.

The details of both our ethics and everyday practice derive directly from this principle.

Our responsibility to the far-distant future drives a major portion of our decision-making and gives our profession a virtually unique mandate. The goal we set for ourselves - to preserve things forever -resonates with museums, which are bound by their charters to preserve their collections into the indefinite future.

Let's look more closely at the definition of cultural property and its relation to the details of the code. According to the AIC definition, cultural property is objects, collections,

specimens, structures, or sites that have artistic, historic, scientific, religious, or social significance. Much personal property has none of these values, and much of it never will.

So we have two problems. The easier one - whether the ethics of conservation might shift when dealing with personal property that has no cultural value – I will talk about in a minute.

The harder one is finding a more neutral term for all the things conservators deal with. Anyone who writes about conservation runs into this nasty problem – in speaking it is easier to fudge. In my last book, *Conservation Treatment Methodology*, I stated at the beginning that I was going to use the word “object” to serve this function, but one reviewer of the first few chapters actually said that he wished I would talk about paintings as well. Objects, pieces, items, stuff, collection material.... I don’t think there is a good word or phrase to replace “cultural property.” This then brings up the possibility that its usage in the three documents does not mean to imply that everything we treat IS really cultural property.

So maybe the assumption that everything conservators deal with is in fact cultural property made sense at the time of its drafting but no longer does. Or maybe not it wasn’t intended at all.

In any case, the philosophy underlying our profession does stem from our belief in the importance of cultural value.

What are the ramifications of dealing with personal property with no chance at achieving cultural property status?

Certainly there is no clear break-off point between the two categories, but there are certain clear cases. The most obvious is when conservators treat household possessions damaged by fire or flood. I take these jobs very seriously. Whether the material in question is a child’s drawing, a framed reproduction, or an ashtray, it is my responsibility to give the owners back anything that is recoverable from their pre-disaster lives. The primary goal of treatment is not long-term preservation but a return to usability.

Whatever I have to do to make that happen is what I feel bound to do, although I can’t think of anything ethically abhorrent that resulted. Maybe cleaning a glazed ceramic surface with steel wool is a bit unusual...

We conservators sometimes automatically resist doing what client ask for, perhaps based on lingering resentments about “getting no respect.” It is likely that many clients’ instructions come primarily from their ignorance of how we do things, not from a lack of respect for our abilities. Fulfilling what clients say they want as the final result of treatment is not the same as doing what they tell us to do. It is up to us to provide the desired result without necessarily following their instructions.

Let me give you an example.

I was in Amsterdam a couple of months ago doing a workshop on the methodology described in my book. I had requested that the participants send me case studies of treatment dilemmas ahead of time. One conservator described a case where the client was an elderly businessman who had obtained a large portrait of himself that had been displayed in the corporate offices of his previous employer. He wanted his children and grandchildren to hang the painting in their home after his death. The children protested, saying that they had no place for it because of its size. The owner had therefore asked the conservator to cut it down.

The artist was of no repute whatsoever. The painting was never intended as art but had

public relations value for the company. For the owner and his family it was valued for representational value only. Naturally, the conservator was not happy about doing what the owner had asked, and expressed the idea that doing so would be equivalent to throwing away his ethics.

The obvious solution is, of course, not to cut the painting down, but fold it around a smaller support, with facings on the folded surfaces if that seems prudent. For the owner's purposes, the practical result is the same.

Doing what the client wants in a case like this is hardly tantamount to throwing ethics out the window. Just think of what is likely to happen if the conservator refused to take on the job and a family friend offered to do it. Certainly a conservator would give the family photographs of the painting before its size-reduction, provide a report about how to un-do it, and would inflict the absolute minimum of damage. So what would be gained by saying no and sending the owner on his way?

It may go against some longstanding habits to say this, but we need to be responsive to the legitimate preferences of custodians, particularly when the objects in question have only personal value. There are occasions where "non-standard" treatments that might look unethical at a quick glance will be the best thing under the circumstances. In my experience, it turns out that there is no need to fear that this notion is a slippery slope.

The adjustments to our usual practice are very minor.

So the potential limitation on the usefulness of the code for things with only personal value is small.

There are a couple of limitations on the use of our core documents that come not from the documents themselves but from our desire to use them as our all-purpose guide to being a conservator. Thorough training is required to practice in an ethical manner. Ethics and guidelines for practice require substantial knowledge in order to use them appropriately. Another reason that ethics cannot be the ultimate guide to conservation is that many different solutions to a problem can be equally ethical. As the author of a rather long book on decision-making, I can attest to the fact that treatment choice is not primarily a matter of ethics, but of judging the large number of factors that come under the term "appropriateness."

I want to shift gears here. AIC is at a very interesting point in its history. We have spent a decade or so on internal affairs, specifically the question of certification. It is impossible to tell at this point what will come out of it – whether we will turn our backs on all of the issues that were brought to our attention or learn from them and take alternate paths to pursue the same goals.

Personally, I vote for turning away from internal matters and shifting our view to the outside world. We spend a great deal of effort—perhaps too much effort—on details that only another conservator could appreciate. Our concerns about the preservation of cultural property cannot be addressed by focusing on the kinds of technical details that we can control. We need to take our place in the larger world.

A major change in focus is required. We cannot act effectively if all we do is look for flaws in our own behavior.

Are there any papers at this meeting that reflect on our accomplishments rather than our dilemmas? It is fifty years since the first training program opened in this country. Yet where are the papers?—better yet, where are the press releases?—celebrating the

explosion in the number of museum labs and private practices now in the business of conservation? How many items have been treated? How many acid-free boxes have been purchased for newly-renovated storage rooms? How many ancillary businesses have been created? How much federal money has gone to conservation? We have a story to tell and we should be telling it.

For our younger members in particular I want to stress the many ways in which our profession is grown. The numbers tell the story to some extent, but there is more. When the first round of program-trained conservators graduated, I think that all were art conservators who went to work in art museums. But art museums are a very small percentage of American museums overall, less than 10%. So our presence was not very noticeable. It took a long time for the emergence of conservators specializing in other things: photographs, ethnography, natural history, outdoor sculpture, historical preservation, libraries and archives.

When AIC first applied to the National Endowment for the Arts for fellowships to help conservators write books – what is now the Kress program – the grant review committee turned down the application because the three conservator members didn't believe that conservators were capable of writing books. Luckily, the Kress foundation had more faith.

Our profession has a great deal to be proud of. But we are not sufficiently mindful of the good we can do for people. We need to focus more on the interesting things we have to tell them. We need to make the outside world more aware of the added value we can provide because of our professional expertise. We need to get our heads around the idea that conservation is as much about people as it is about chemistry.

Growth in our profession and growing visibility has helped to bring conservation out of the closet: what museums used to regard as a dirty little secret has become a subject of interest in itself. What we conservators do has the power to bring people in the door of museums. Because of what we know, we can give visitors something they can relate to.

People love this stuff. If you want to wow people, fill a room with sets of before-and-after photographs.

What I would like to see in the next decade is for conservation to become not just a *sometime* presence, but a *routine* presence in the public face of museums. Happily there is no need to fight the tide in this: the trend is already in our favor. Museums worldwide are actively looking for ways to become more visitor-friendly, particularly for people who are not sophisticated museum-goers, and exhibitions about conservation are prime material. Some museum web sites even have pages about their conservation departments.

How about having a permanent gallery with exhibits of pieces that need treatment, pieces that have been treated, during-treatment photos, and interviews with the conservators?

Why not include photographs of storage rooms before and after renovation?

How about offering donors a tour of a museum lab – or a private lab where museum work is done? Or how about museum tours led by a conservator who could talk about the history of objects, how they were made, or what treatment they have had?

I know that some of these things are being done already, but I want to see more – much more.

There are other areas where we can exert influence. How about a major campaign to put

courses about examination in the art history departments of colleges and graduate schools? I am not talking about collections care or conservation as taught in museum studies. I am talking about art history and the tendency, which is, if anything, getting worse, of doing art history from photographs.

And, closer to home, how about writing treatment proposals and reports in language that the custodians can understand?

So here's what I think. Take a deep breath and take pleasure in what you are doing.

Take credit for what this group has done together and then let's broaden our focus on interaction with the world outside our little group.

To answer the original question about the challenges of the 21st century, I think that our core documents are just fine. Our job is to take those challenges and turn them into opportunities.

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