

Indigenous claims and heritage conservation: an opportunity for critical dialogue

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous claims of ownership and access to material culture challenge the field of heritage conservation. This article illustrates how indigenous concerns conflict with basic constructs of Western conservation, and how conservators respond to these claims. Despite efforts of inclusion, relatively few conservation projects integrate indigenous knowledge with scientific research. Redistribution of conservation authority is rarely put into practice. The article concludes by pointing to conservation as a meeting ground where collaborative decisions can be made about material culture on display. Conflict negotiation in conservation presents a potential forum for cultural representation and contested meaning of objects on display.

INTRODUCTION

In their routine work, conservators physically alter artefacts and cultural sites in the name of preservation. Their choice of what to conserve and how to conserve it affects our perceptions of exhibited material culture. Through their interventions, they inevitably perpetuate their own assumptions about the world. Conservators from dominant cultures are often unaware of this power to shape the way objects and cultures are understood, and of cultural lenses that filter their own perceptions and decisions.

Western conservation focuses attention on objects rather than the cultures that create and continue to use them. This orientation derives from a principle belief in scientific conservation (Clavir, 1998; Pye, 2001; Gilberg and Vivian, 2001). It also comes from the conception of museums and archaeological excavations as storehouses of data, where *finds* are removed from their social context and given new meaning as display objects and sources of information.

Indigenous responses to conservation include opposition to cleaning, reconstruction and routine

care of artefacts and cultural sites. These reactions derive from cultural practices that conflict with static representations and display of material culture, but they are not necessarily presented in a single voice, and vary from one culture to another.

There is not a single item in Zuni culture which is used for religious or ceremonial purposes which is meant to be preserved in perpetuity. All are gifts to the Gods which are meant to disintegrate back into the earth to do their work. (Ed Ladd, quoted in Clavir, 1997: 177)

A different perspective is provided by a Maori conservator:

It is ... patronizing to assume that indigenous people necessarily believe that all their works should complete a natural cycle and be allowed to degrade and eventually return to the soil. Like other people, Maori wish to keep records of their achievements and history. (Heikell *et al.*, 1995: 15)

Some conservators integrate these conflicting criteria into their practice. Odegaard (1996: 122) reports from her work with Native American

collections at the University of Arizona, ‘while the dolls of the Zuni and Hopi may receive conservation treatment, the Kachina dolls of the other pueblos should not’.

Although surface cleaning is inappropriate for some artefacts, leaving ‘ethnographic dirt’ as evidence of use is patronizing to others – particularly when the same institution exhibits pristine materials from dominant cultures. The act of physical preservation conflicts with some cultural practices, including ritual destruction of Northwest American dance masks, and gradual deterioration of sacred Apache objects (Moses, 1992: 3). Other challenges to institutionalized conservation include traditional indigenous systems of care, such as ceremonial maintenance of Plains Indian sacred bundles and care of Iroquois false face masks and wampum belts (ibid.: 3).

CHALLENGING MODERN CONSERVATION

In this short paper, I address two fundamental constructs in conservation that come into conflict with indigenous claims. The first is the underlying *ethos* of ‘physical preservation’, in which material longevity is an assumed goal. This driving force leads to an emphasis on material analysis over cultural analysis in order to resolve problems of deterioration. The aim of most conservation analysis is to develop methods of intervention and environmental stabilization to maximize physical preservation.

The second construct is the presumed authentic, original value embodied in material culture. Conservation literature and guidelines for practice frequently refer to the preservation of ‘artist’s intent’, the ‘intrinsic nature’ or the ‘essence’ of the object (Clavir, 1998). As Keene points out, ‘At the foundation of the conservation ethic lies the precept “thou shalt not change the nature of the object”’ (Keene, 1994:19).

This essentializing of the object, and search for authenticity in either its origin or a fixed moment in its history, is challenged by recent material culture scholarship on the dynamic and contested nature of things. Based on this literature, it is helpful to think of objects as ‘slow events’ rather than static manifestations.¹ Authenticity is found not only in some original or genuine state, but in

every stage of an object’s life, including its representations and facsimiles, and the relationships it has with its surrounding community.

CONSERVATION RESPONSE

The challenge posed by these differing perspectives on conservation is not as large as it may seem. Considering complex sets of conflicting values is not new to Western conservation. Arguments for honouring physical change and recognizing historical palimpsest of the built environment continue since the late 19th century (Ruskin, [1883] 1989; Riegl, [1903] 1996; Jokilehto, 1999). The practice of actively using museum artefacts is also argued in the context of functional objects such as trains, clocks and musical instruments (Mapes, 1991; Barclay, 2004).

The principles and practice of conservation are far from immutable. In fact, over the past decade the field has begun responding to claims from indigenous representatives and relativist notions of material culture. The growing body of conservation literature reflects these responses. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully analyse changes in conservation theory and practice. Instead, I provide several examples within three different arenas: revisions to charters and guidelines for practice, collaboration in the conservation process and the transfer of conservation decision-making to indigenous groups.

REVISIONS TO CHARTERS AND GUIDELINES

Conservation charters and guidelines produced throughout the 1990s incorporated an increased recognition of social values embedded in material culture (Sease, 1998; Clavir, 2001; Federspiel, 2001). The Australian *Burra Charter* broadened the scope of conservation for cultural sites to include ‘all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance’ (Marquis-Kyle and Walker, 1992; Truscott and Young, 2000). The implication of this change is that the significance of material culture may be found in its uses, associations and meanings, as well as its physical fabric. The charter encourages the co-existence of cultural values, especially where they are in conflict (Truscott and Young, 2000: Article 13).

Global heritage agencies – ICOMOS, ICCROM, ICOM and the World Heritage Organization – similarly expanded their criteria for site conservation during the 1990s to include the concerns of living traditions and active use of cultural sites (Bell, 1997; Federspiel, 1999; Cleere, 2001). The ‘test for authenticity’ in the World Heritage Convention guidelines was challenged for its inattention to cultural values when a Shinto shrine in Japan was rejected because it is traditionally dismantled and renovated every twenty years (Larsen, 1995). The resulting *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994) widens the scope of authenticity to include cultural traditions, and helps shift the focus from ‘universal value’ towards ‘local interpretation’ (Larsen, 1995).

Charters and guidelines for conserving movable objects were redrafted in recent years. Reference to conserving ‘intangible values’ and the ‘conceptual integrity’ of objects are now in national codes of ethics for museum and archaeological conservators (Sease, 1998). Yet these changes scarcely reach the level of the practicing conservator. There are few examples in the literature of sharing conservation authority by placing indigenous knowledge on a par with scientific research. As advocated by a Delaware/Mohawk conservator, ‘Euro-North American museum workers should look upon Native elders and recognized spiritual leaders as a professional resource in their efforts to obtain a more complete understanding of the Native materials they come in contact with’ (Moses, 1992: 8[AQ1]).

COLLABORATION IN THE CONSERVATION PROCESS

Some conservators call for an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach to conservation decision-making (Odegaard, 1995). Odegaard outlines a ‘matrix’ model for conservation analysis, which integrates tangible and intangible information into conservation planning (Odegaard, 1996). In addition to material criteria for her model, she adds such elements as cultural context, current indigenous issues and perspectives, and use of objects by indigenous people in ceremony and celebration.

One of the few institutional models for meaningful collaboration in conservation exists at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American

Indian (NMAI).² Conservators at the NMAI work with spiritual leaders and artists to develop jointly conservation procedures (Drumheller and Kaminitz, 1994; Johnson *et al.*, 2003). One such project at the NMAI was the conservation of a 19th century Tuscarora beaded textile, in which a Tuscarora curator considered it an affront to exhibit their material culture with signs of deterioration and loss.³ Using some beads from the textile and other beads of similar age, beadworkers on the Tuscarora Reservation rewove missing and damaged areas (Heald, 1997). The use of historic beads and indigenous skills in restoring museum artefacts contradicts fundamental conservation ethics of minimal intervention and re-use of ‘original’ materials. This collaborative project produced dialogue on conflicts between museum and Tuscarora values such as reversibility of conservation procedures, re-use of historic materials and extensive restoration. The project cultivated wider public interest through local media coverage and participation of Tuscarora school children.

The recent conservation of the bomb-damaged Temple of the Tooth in Sri Lanka similarly engaged professional conservators, government representatives, high priests and the lay guardian in dialogue over questions of minimal intervention and aggressive restoration (Wijesuriya, 2000). Underlying the complex negotiations were conflicts between the interests of religious pilgrims who preferred rendering the site as if no damage had occurred and those who argued for leaving the repairs visible. Some argued that visible cracks and repairs serve as testimony to the politically motivated damage to the temple.⁴ The process of discussion and decision-making provided a platform for negotiating different opinions. Some damaged elements were completely replaced, such as carved stone elephants, whereas certain wall paintings were conserved following Western methods, which visually distinguished restorations from original painted images.

TRANSFER OF DECISION-MAKING TO INDIGENOUS GROUPS

The transfer of conservation authority to indigenous representatives rarely takes place on a voluntary basis. In some cases, legal action under legislation

such as the US *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* (NAGPRA, 2002[AQ2]) successfully transfers ownership and care of burial materials to designated indigenous groups. In some instances repatriated objects are reburied and in others they are cared for using traditional or Western methods.

The Cultural Conservation Advisory Council in New Zealand sponsored a programme to train a group of Maori conservators in Western conservation methods (Clavir, 2002). Through her interviews with these conservators, Clavir documents how conflicts such as ‘use versus preservation’ and access to collections are processed within the context of Maori control.⁵ *Kaumātua* (elders knowledgeable in Maori protocols and culture) are consulted, and physical risks to objects are tempered with Maori socio-cultural considerations. ‘Because the conservators believe in the importance of both the tangible and intangible aspects of the object, they have altered the conventional conservation approach to treating the objects to ensure their preservation, in both the western sense of stopping deterioration and in the indigenous sense of continuation of cultural life’ (Clavir, 1997: 409).

Interesting reversals and further conflicts arise when indigenous conservators work on colonial material culture, and when mixed-race individuals confront internal conflicts based on cultural difference. David Yubeta, whose mother is Native American and whose father is Mexican, describes difficulties in training Native Americans and Mexican Americans in caring for historic adobe structures within the US National Park Service.⁶ He finds it hard to attract course participants, reporting a lack of interest, deep ambivalence for entering a ‘blue collar’ profession with low pay, and frustration in preserving colonial structures that symbolize the attempted destruction of Native American culture. He also describes his own internal conflict, as his mother’s culture sees material decay as part of a natural cycle and his father’s culture honours the Spanish/Christian history that adobe structures represent.

CONSERVATION AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR DIALOGUE

Written guidelines alone fail to provide clear direction for practice in cases of profound and

complex conflicts of interest. As Tarlow (2000) argues in the case of archaeology, codes of ethics are inevitably historical and contextual, and ethical dilemmas should be debated and discussed rather than resolved through application of rules. This is emphatically true in the realm of conservation, where actors have the power to alter the way material culture is represented, and how the past is known.

Just as models of public archaeology shift focus from ‘product’ to ‘process’ and from ‘object’ to ‘community’, drawing attention to conflicts in conservation provides stimulus for larger public dialogue. Public archaeology employs the archaeological process to engage discourse on how the past is used (Schadla-Hall, 1999; Ascherson, 2000). It seeks to provide a critical framework for archaeology that includes the political and socio-economic structures in which it operates, and promotes debate on nationalism, ethnicity, legislation and tourism. A similar *participatory conservation* has the potential for critical dialogue on how material culture is preserved, presented and used (Wharton, 2002). As yet, there is little evidence of conservation being purposefully used to stimulate debate on cultural rights and regeneration of indigenous cultures. As conservation increasingly shares and transfers its authority in response to indigenous claims, it may look to models of public archaeology to engender local empowerment and cultural revitalization.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The description of an object as a ‘slow event’ was made in communication with Katharine Young (University of California, Berkeley) 5 November 2001, who reports that it was formulated but never published by Stanley Eveling (University of Edinburgh, now deceased).

- 2 Marian Kaminitz (National Museum of the American Indian), personal communication, 1 June 2001.
- 3 Susan Heald (National Museum of the American Indian), personal communication, 31 October 2001.
- 4 From communications with Gamini Wijesuriya, Siran Deraniyagala and Jagath Weerasinghe (Department of Archaeology of the Government of Sri Lanka), 20–23 May 1999.
- 5 *Preserving What is Valued: Museums, Conservation and First Nations* by Miriam Clavir (2002) was in press during the preparation of this article. It will be a key text for readers interested in conflicting values between museum conservators and indigenous cultures.[AQ3]
- 6 David Yubeta (Tumacacori National Historical Park, Tumacacori, Arizona), personal communication, 21 October 2001.

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AUQUERIES [AQ]

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