



Conservation

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The past as well as specific ancient sites and objects have been replaced and are renewed all the time.

Cornelius J. Holtorf, 2010, p. 130

When writing the word conservation, a frequent typographical error transforms it into conversation. This error is oddly providential, as it encapsulates my central claim: conservation cannot take place without dialogue.

I encountered conservation and restoration in higher education after training in art history, curating, and historical and critical writing on modern and contemporary art, as well as through professional experience in museums and heritage institutions. Entering conservation from this trajectory, I was struck by the epistemological configuration of the field. My approach here is therefore explicitly situated: it reflects a position shaped by movement across disciplinary, professional, and institutional contexts.

Because conservation is anchored in material processes, standardized procedures, and the exercise of a highly regulated profession, it initially appeared to me as fundamentally distinct from art history as I had encountered it within the Humanities. Erwin Panofsky's description of the Humanities was formative in this regard:

"[...] the humanist rejects authority. But he respects tradition [...]
By looking as they do at frozen and stationary records, [...] the humanities attempt to grasp the processes during which these records were produced and became what they are."
(Panofsky, 1989, pp. 16–25)

From this perspective, I understood art history as a critical practice, heritage as a field structured by responsibility and duty, and conservation as a domain governed by procedural rigour and protocol.

This initial perception, however, proved insufficient. Despite their distinct research traditions – one need only recall the long-standing collaboration between conservation, biology, and chemistry – art history, heritage studies, and conservation are bound by structural and epistemological interdependencies. Knowledge of art and heritage is grounded in the results produced by both historical inquiry and conservation practice. Conservation, in particular, provides art history and heritage studies with unique forms of evidence that enhance the reliability of processes such as attribution, dating, and the reconstruction of contexts of production. At the same time, conservation itself has been destabilized by the conceptual and methodological expansion of art history and heritage studies.

As art history, under the influence of visual culture studies, expanded to include photography, cinema, comics, performance, street art, and time-based practices, and as heritage became increasingly ubiquitous – encompassing everyday objects, vernacular architecture, contemporary buildings, cultural landscapes, and intangible manifestations – conservation embraced this expansion as a challenge of its own. It responded with unprecedented plasticity, interdisciplinary crossings, and methodological imports. As Hanna Hölling observes:

“As a complex sum of approaches, attitudes and cultures, conservation rejects any uniformity. Rather, it constantly seeks to define itself at the crossroads of theory and practice, at the point where custody, stewardship, presentation and creativity meet. This is why the question of ‘what conservation is’ seems only at first sight simplistic. In the bigger picture, in balancing between the sciences and the humanities, and artisanal and artistic approaches, conservation both generates and sources distinct types of knowledge to form its identity as a discipline.”
(Hölling, 2017, p. 8)

These fields do not relate hierarchically but dialogically. In conversation, art history, heritage studies, and conservation function in solidarity, each contributing to an understanding of the regimes through which art and heritage are constituted, made legible, and endowed with value. Whether

through material and technical processes, cultural and social mechanisms, institutions of legitimation, or modes of representation, I see these disciplines converging around shared problems and methodological affinities. They also share a critical orientation: an attentiveness to plural voices, a diversification of perspectives, and a resistance to unifying narratives. Panofsky's emphasis on reconstruction and re-creation in art historical work (1989, p. 23), Silverman, Waterton, and Watson's definition of heritage as the activation of the past in the present (2017, p. 8), and Kühl's argument that restoration constitutes a critical act (2016, p. 242) all resonate strongly with my experience of the field.

What has become increasingly clear is that these disciplines have collectively shifted their focus. Rather than seeking ontological definitions – what art is, what heritage is, what conservation is – they now interrogate the effects of their interventions. This is not a pragmatic retreat from theory, nor a capitulation to instrumental rationality. Instead, it marks an explicit recognition of the societal embeddedness of knowledge. This recognition parallels cultural and discursive turns toward agency, participation, expanded value systems, and the continuous construction and revision of meaning. Sørensen and Carman's formulation of the field's objects as things, people, and texts (2009) captured this expanded horizon.

From this perspective, heritage, art, authenticity, identity, and originality appear not as fixed entities but as cultural processes. Consequently, conservation and heritage studies cannot privilege origins or singular historical moments. Conservation practice necessarily involves choice – choices informed by collective interests rather than exclusive visions, and by social considerations as much as technical ones. Such decisions must account for the thickness of time, cultural plurality, nuance, and the inevitability of change. Holtorf's position, cited in the epigraph to this essay, articulates this challenge with clarity.

Yet, translating this epistemological stance into practice remains deeply problematic. In my observation, institutions, heritage administrations, policy frameworks, and everyday conservation workflows often struggle to accommodate the demands of participatory, socially embedded practice. Whose voices are to be heard, and by what means? How can participation be enabled without becoming tokenistic? How are communities of use and heterogeneous stakeholders to be integrated into decision-making? How can funding imperatives be reconciled with

the time required for social engagement? How can public procurement rules be fulfilled while still allowing for sustained research and reflection? Ultimately, what forms of conversation are necessary in order to conserve? The epistemological field of heritage and conservation studies thus informs a committed and critical practice and intersects with an expanded ethics: one that cares for cultural assets, attends to social relations, affirms a culture–nature continuum, and considers the conditions of a sustainable future. In this context, the role of the conservator – and the frameworks guiding conservation decision-making – necessarily shifts. As Henderson and Ashley argue:

“Like any other heritage professional, the conservator may be ignorant of the social impact of their decisions. A narrow framing of the task and outputs, especially a technical framing, allows a reductionist assessment of conservation practice that fails to recognise that any ‘care’ given to the heritage is only a good outcome if there is a consequent care for the people for whom that heritage matters.

Understanding the past and working toward the future are both active, evolving processes rooted in the present. [...] While existing decision-making models in conservation have value, we must do more to address dynamic complexity and move beyond the illusion of a fixed past or a predictable future. Systems thinking helps us embrace this complexity.”

(Henderson & Ashley, 2025, p. 324)

From this perspective, the slippage between *conservation* and *conversation* is more than a typographical accident. It marks a methodological and ethical reorientation: from fixing the past to negotiating futures; from authoritative intervention to shared decision-making; from an ideal of permanence to an acceptance of transformation as intrinsic to care. The typo, in this sense, becomes diagnostic – revealing both the depth of ongoing change and the challenges that this change continues to pose.

References

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