
ON PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVITY

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ABSTRACT: The character of conservation has changed since the idea of preserving the physical remnants of history became important. Principles derived from this beginning and later on form the basis of what conservation ethics intend today. These principles were never rigid though - yet when it comes to conflict they should be transparent and precise in order to avoid the impression of arbitrariness. Developments continue, and the question where the power of decision should lie is more and more being discussed.

KEYWORDS: Principles, objectivity, democratization

1. Principles

Principles are something fixed. The term can be found in numerous contexts; there are basically two types of principles, that is technical and ethical principles. Technical principles can be found in technical standards and regulations, whereas ethical principles appear in the context of societal interactions. Apart from ethical principles relating to human interaction in general like in religion there are also ethical principles relating to specific groups or professions in terms of codices of ethics. There is for example a generally accepted code of ethics within the scientific community banning plagiarism. Other examples may relate to groups like hunter associations, the fire brigade or the boy scouts. Previously also guilds or other craft associations had principles in terms of codices of ethics.

For conservation medicine may serve as an example for a code of ethics where the two types of principles – ethical and technical - are closely linked. When a so-called gold standard treatment for a certain disease is performed then scientific-technical as well as ethical principles are relevant.

The case of conservation is in many ways similar to medicine. Irrespectively whether the conservation of a small item, a single work of art, a whole collection or of a monument is in discussion, principles come into effect. They may differ slightly, depending on the cultural context, but they are – at least in the western world – usually very similar. Even the difference between

traditional and contemporary art will not fundamentally change the common principles of approach.

Taking as a starting point that common principles of conservation exist we can now ask where our principles come from, and what they are based on.

2. The idea of conservation

It is important to remember briefly the history of conservation in order to understand where we are.

As we all know, the idea of conservation has its roots in the end of the 18th century. It was further developed in the course of the 19th century, involving names like Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and John Ruskin, coinciding with the development of a new understanding of the discipline of historiography.

Historiography was always very much focused on the praising of the rulers, their deeds and their families, giving increased legitimization to those who were in political power. With the period of enlightenment a trend towards a more modern understanding of history set in, starting to describe important events rather from the point of view of an “objective” neutral observer instead of producing a biased or even invented narrative.

It is meanwhile common knowledge that there is no absolute truth in history, as historiography is necessarily full of interpretations. Nevertheless, in the 19th century the nature of history changed towards a more democratic understanding, much in the sense of a scientific approach, committed to objectivity and including and dealing with aspects of the whole society. When at the same time a strong trend towards nationalism set in and the European national states emerged, history in terms of legitimization of nations became even more important.

In this era of development also the understanding of art changed. With the romantic period of the 19th century the character of the artist was perceived differently, in a notion which is still very prominent in our minds and which forms the character of art as we understand it today.

The emerging and development of the new fields of archaeology and art history indeed shows this new understanding of arts and the artist as well as the increased interest in historic periods and events.

Archaeology adopted by and by a scientific approach, looking for truth when excavating antique buildings and items which would open a window into the past. Art history on the other hand was also committed to a scientific approach, when distinguishing between styles and in particular when submitting works of art to an “objective” ranking in value. The categorizing of artworks took place in analogism to the trend of the emerging scientific approach of other disciplines.

So there were two essential reasons for the evolving interest in conservation: the new importance of history and the new perception of art. As a consequence it became important to preserve the physical witnesses, which is why conservation started to become so an important topic – the quest for objective historical truth began.

3. Approaches to conservation

At this time accordingly the care for monuments under the direction of the state set in. Also Austria introduced a state office for the preservation of monuments – the “K.k. Zentralkommission für Denkmalpflege”, in 1853. It was then Alois Riegl, Conservator General of the Zentralkommission, who at the turn of the century for the first time defined conservation principles, based on the monument values which he had developed - these values are still most relevant today for conservation (Bacher, 1995).

Whereas Riegl related his values to both history and art in contrast to him in Italy Cesare Brandi, one of the most influential persons in conservation ethics, put stronger emphasis on the art aspect (Brandi, 1963; Brandi, 1977).

Already Riegl had demanded that additions to wall paintings should be clearly distinguishable, but it was Brandi and those with him who came up with and developed the *tratteggio* retouching technique. This system was then advanced further in a philosophical and in parts rather theoretical approach by Umberto Baldini (Baldini, 1978; Baldini, 1981) and Ornella Casazza (Casazza, 1981) in the 1970ies.

This change in approach characterizes well the development of the concept of the preservation of cultural heritage which took place in the first half of the 20th century. In the Venice Charter from 1964 these concepts are taken up and developed further (ICOMOS, 1964). Article 9 demands “Restoration [...] must stop at the point where conjecture begins, and in this case moreover any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp.” Article 12 explains further “Replacements of missing parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.”

These two statements show that the principles of Riegl and Brandi were more or less mirrored in the Venice Charter. Nevertheless, with architecture things are more complicated because of the frequent necessity to use a building in order to prevent it from decaying. So, we find a number of issues which go further, e. g. in Article 5: “The conservation of monuments is always facilitated by making use of them for some socially useful purpose. Such use is therefore desirable but it must not change the lay-out or decoration of the building. It is within these limits only that modifications demanded by a change of function should be envisaged and may be permitted.”

On the international scale the principles of the Venice Charter are widely acknowledged. Thirty years later the Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS, 1994) advances still further, with a broader understanding of cultural diversity and cultural heritage in relation to conservation. Globalization has started, and the Nara Document takes this into account, pointing to the fact that different cultural contexts need different approaches: “As different cultures have different belief systems [...] it is imperative for them to respect each other, especially when one or more values are in conflict.” It is a fundamental document and it leaves much more open than the Venice Charter, which is also of a general nature, but much more concrete.

There are numerous other documents, but these two seem to form the backbone for all further agreed principles in conservation.

How do these principles translate into today's practice?

4. Conservation principles in today's practice

Conservation of cultural heritage controlled by the state authorities has to follow principles. Justification has to be clear as for listed monuments money has to be raised and often strict decisions have to be taken. Unfortunately, it may be difficult sometimes to make the owner understand principles derived from ethics in the field of conservation, as matters of use or of economics often seem to be more important.

It is therefore necessary for any authority official who has to take decisions to be endowed with solid paragraphs or at least with a substantial technical agenda, in order not to be accused of haphazardness or even arbitrariness. Comparison with other cases of intervention on cultural heritage must be possible, as the owner might even appeal at court if he thinks that the application of these principles does not follow objective rules and are not comparable to similar cases.

The problem is that as a consequence these principles must cover all cases alike. Yet there are certainly issues which cannot be described in a merely technical language, as every decision in conservation is not only based on the safeguarding of material but includes an aesthetic interpretation. It would be much easier if cultural heritage could be standardized, but this is possible only on a very limited scale and certainly not with all objects.

Therefore in legislation technical principles normally prevail, as they are objective and applicable in all similar cases. Ethical principles cannot be described juridically other than in a global way. Their description necessarily has to be more flexible as they must be argued in each specific case, well balanced according to the agreed international documents and value systems of conservation.

In the course of the last years a development of democratization in the decision making process has set in. The process seems to have started with the Nara Document on Authenticity which takes into account the negotiation between stakeholders.

Currently democratization of cultural heritage is a strong issue coming up, being supported widely and also being taken up by the European Union in the planning process for the future agenda for the European cultural heritage. "Silo thinking" is one of the terms which should diminish the influence of specialists, giving way to an inclusion of all the stakeholders in the decision making process, eventually also of the whole community affected (Voices of Culture, 2017).

In fact, as opposed to previous thinking in the last decades, cultural heritage may be perceived differently within the same greater cultural context, as there are diverse points of view, e.g. one from the religious side and another one with a more anthropological point of view.

Some years ago the Association of Critical Heritage Studies was created, an international network with roots in Australia, Sweden and the UK. In 2012 their Manifesto of Critical Heritage Studies was published (Association of Critical Heritage Studies, 2012). It elaborates on the conservation of cultural heritage and makes a strong point in democratization of decision making - it even

speaks about “fetishizing of expert knowledge”. In the given context this may be considered appropriate as being only a provocation. It is certainly clear that we have to involve people in order to raise awareness for cultural heritage. But without expert knowledge cultural heritage would not be understood, it would not survive, so a process of carefully balancing the arguments and needs will be more and more necessary.

5. Final remark

Principles are necessary in order that decisions can be regarded as being taken following objectively applied rules. On the other hand, the more rigid principles are the less they will leave possibilities for the application of other than technical guidelines. As the various values attached to cultural heritage have to be examined in each individual case, leading in the end to an interpretation, legislation which gives explicitly open guidelines is necessary, as well as clear decision making power to heritage officials.

We have come a long way since conservation began about 200 years ago. Although we know technically much more and have infinitely better technical possibilities the essence why we do what we do and how we do it seems to me rather less clear and easy than some decades ago. We live in a more and more globalized world and by and by our heritage values are much less fixed than we thought.

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