

Changes in Western Conservation and the Japanese reflection

Andreas Sampatakos

University of West Attica, Department of Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art
Ag. Spiridonos st., 12243, Aigaleo, Athens, Greece asampatak@gmail.com

Introduction

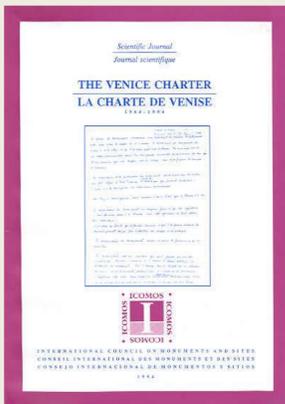
During the last decades, many changes took place in the western world regarding the perception and understanding of cultural heritage and historic objects. The interaction of social and cultural views, resulted in a shift from an object centric, to a more human centric perception. Conservation/preservation philosophy and practice, influenced by these changes, became more open and diverse in many aspects.

This poster aims to correlate aspects of the recent changes in conservation principles and practice, with the interaction between East and West (and specifically with Japan) and the preservation of lacquerware, that has been taking place during the last years.

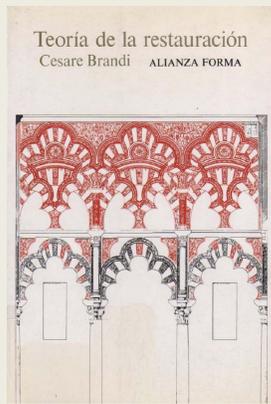
Emphasis is also given to the fact of the decline of practical skills in western conservation. It is argued that Japan operates as a time capsule, where historic craftsmanship and conservation, are still in practice to a superb level.

The context of conservation in the second half of 20th century

After the second half of the 20th century, the profession of conservation of cultural heritage, gradually developed into a **scientific discipline**. Conservation was supported by specific academic studies, trying to incorporate elements of art, science and craftsmanship. During these years, numerous significant theoretical texts and charters (Brandi's Theory of Conservation, the Venice Charter, ICOM's Code of Ethics etc.) formed the basic principles according to which the new born profession should operate. Fundamental concepts like the reversibility or the minimum intervention were enacted, hard sciences played a crucial role in conservation planning and decision making, and in general, there was a tension for **scientific objectivism**. Towards the end of the 20th century, the conservator had acquired a broader set of skills and a significant status, playing a crucial role in the **interdisciplinary** world of heritage preservation.



<https://aicm.org.au/about/special-interest-groups/conservation-science>



The cooperation between East and West and the broadening of westerners' ethical considerations and practices

The Japanese culture has had a strong influence on the West in terms of design, aesthetics, taste, literature, philosophy and crafts, from the 16th century until today. The co-operative program that was established in 1997 by the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties had its goal to restore Japanese lacquerware overseas and educate westerners according to the **cultural beliefs and traditional restoration techniques** of Japan. This program offered to the westerners an inside view of the embodied cultural and social values of lacquer objects and their traditional conservation materials and methods. The program influenced more European conservators to become involved with lacquer and to receive training via the co-operative program (118 conservators during the second period 2007-2017). From the first years of the program, it became more and more clear, that dominant western conservation approaches of the time, were in contrast with the Japanese approach. This contrast and the broader questions raised, are described in a sharp way by S. Rivers (2005) as she underlines the need **"to understand what is valued about an object in order to conserve its meaning"**. The Mazarine Chest Project reflected all these dilemmas and concerns. It was a pioneer project, in which a Japanese and a European expert collaborated in a western museum. In this project, holistic and alternative conservation approaches were developed and cross-cultural interventions were applied.

Despite the great complexity of incorporating Japanese approaches in conserving lacquer in the West, there are projects that, via collaboration with Japanese experts, have succeeded on that. The remarkable value of the project of the present conference: "The Collaborative Project of Conservation of the Nanban Table from the Collection of Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów" has to be highlighted.



V&A, Yoshihiko Yamashita and Shayne Rivers working on the Mazarine Chest, 2005
http://www.vam.ac.uk/_data/assets/image/0019/230707/62818



Cooperation between East and West. Tokyo, NRICT, 2017. Contributors of the Evaluation seminar of the 10 year workshops on conservation of Japanese lacquerware

Skills and historic techniques in the West and the Eastern remembrance

Another characteristic of today's conservation, pointed out also by various scholars (Ashley-Smith (2016), Sampatakos, Chatzigiannis 2018), is a **decline in conservator's hand skills**. A situation derived, among others, from socio-economic reasons. In the conservation sector, conservation educational programs minimize practical courses, while conservators in museums are overwhelmed with various other duties, spending less and less time for actual conservation. On the other hand, Japan performs a strong tradition on preserving and practicing historic crafts and conservation techniques. The Japanese model operates as a time capsule that preserves the context, the materials and the everyday performance of workshops. **It is a living treasure**. Western conservators via the co-operation program, had the opportunity to meet the Japanese craftsmanship and its practice as a result of many centuries' concentrated experience. Training on manipulation of natural materials and operation of hands in the 'old style' practice and mentality, provide participants with various abilities and potential opportunities. Talking from experience, most of the participants have developed their skills and have incorporated aspects of this practice in their work.

Further steps- conclusions

In the West, there is a need for **developing the level of in house efficiency** on restoring lacquer via collaboration with Japanese experts. This task lies mostly with the people that have been offered this training experience in the past years and have the potential to extend it further. This objective can serve as a dynamic path for **keeping the West-Japan cooperation** and also to provide new perspectives concerning lacquer preservation and even to influence the wider conservation field.

The necessity for the conservation discipline in the West to **become more open and socially concerned** is evident. In a broader sense, the cooperation between East and West proved that conservation can operate as a tool for communication and **interaction between cultures** or even between controversial parties. This fact can be verified by the context and the participants of the present conference. It is our duty, within a globalized and consumeristic world, to create **new opportunities and dynamic perspectives**.

References

- J. Ashley-Smith, Losing the edge: The Risk of a Decline in Practical Conservation Skills, *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, 2016, Vol.39, No 2, 119-132.
- J. Ashley-Smith, A role for bespoke codes of ethics, *ICOM-CC 18th Triennial Conference*, 2017, Copenhagen.
- S. Muñoz-Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, 2004, Butterworth-Heinemann.
- S. Rivers, Conservation of Japanese lacquer in Western Collections: conserving meaning and substance. *14th Triennial meeting of ICOM-CC*, vol.2, 2005, Hague.
- A. Sampatakos, D. Chatzigiannis, Technical skills in conservation education and practice: (why) Do we care? , *Stichting Ebenist*, 2018, Amsterdam (to be published).
- F. Mairesse, R. F. Peters (eds), What is the essence of conservation? Materials for a discussion, *Papers from the ICOM-CC and ICOFOM session at the 25th General Conference*, 2019, Kyoto, 4 September.
- U. Schädler-Saub, B. Szymgin, *Conservation ethics today. Are our conservation-restoration theories and practice ready for the 21st century?* International Scientific Committee for Theory and Philosophy of Conservation and Restoration ICOMOS Lublin University of Technology Florence - Lublin 2019.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties and the museum of Asian Art for providing me the opportunity for education on lacquer conservation. I am deeply indebted to my tutors Yamashita Y., Matsumoto T., Kitamura S., Toma S., Dr Lencz, Dr Kitano and Dr. Shono. I owe many thanks to my colleague and friend D. Chatzigiannis. Finally I will not stop thanking my wife who has been supporting me patiently in this exploration of arts, crafts and conservation for so many years. She is a brave woman!

Changes in conservation views in the turn of the 20th century

At the turn of the century, new ideas regarding the perception of cultural heritage took place. A broader understanding of material and immaterial values of historic objects and artifacts, resulted in a **broadening of the perception of conservation**. Gradually, with the incorporation of these new cultural, social and ethical ways of thinking, aspects of the cultural heritage perception shifted from object-centric viewpoints towards more human-centric ones.

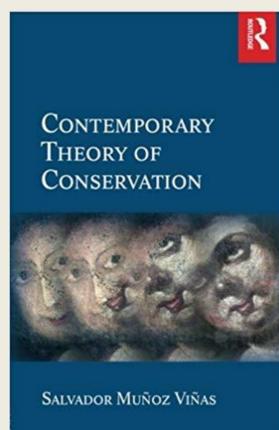
Through this new approach, passionate discussions were raised, abandoning the material-focused issues of the past and touching on thematics such as authenticity, social values of objects and of conservation, audience's participation etc. Basic principles of the 20th century's conservation such as reversibility and minimum intervention were challenged and revisited. The conservator seemed to act more as a mediator who had to listen to and discuss with the various stakeholders, regarding the role of heritage pieces in the social network and to adapt conservation treatments, rather than the old-fashioned expert, who is insulated in a conservation studio, making decisions alone. As J. Ashley-Smith (2017) mentions, guidelines and codes of ethics of the past **"emphasized in unity rather than in diversity"**. During the two last decades, the change is obvious. The certainties of the object-centric conservation approaches of the past, gave place to the **value-based and human-centric approaches**, that favor openness, diversity and multivocality.

These ideas inspired many theoretical documents and papers. The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) and the Contemporary Theory of Conservation by S. Muñoz Viñas (2005) are some representative examples.

Today, these ideological concerns still determine contemporary conservation objectives and operation. This is clearly demonstrated in the very recent ICOM-CC and ICOMOS publications with the emblematic titles: "What is the essence of conservation" and "Conservation ethics today. Are our conservation-restoration theories and practice ready for the 21st century?"



<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/features/penn-museum-s-artifact-lab-gives-close-up-view-of-ancient-objects>



International Conference "Nanban. Far East. Close Art", 4-5 October 2019.
Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów, Warsaw, Poland

