

ICOM KYOTO 2019
25TH GENERAL CONFERENCE 1-7 SEPTEMBER 2019
“MUSEUMS AS CULTURAL HUBS: THE FUTURE OF TRADITION”

CALL FOR PAPERS

ICOM-CC & ICOMFOM JOINT SESSION

KYOTO, 4 SEPTEMBER 2019 (13.00-18.00)

What is the essence of conservation?

ICOM's general conference in Kyoto in 2019 offers the opportunity for the ICOM-Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) and the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) to jointly reflect on issues at the heart of our professional and scientific interests. This dialogue is essential for ICOM-CC, as the committee aims to promote the conservation of cultural and historical works and to advance the conservation discipline. But it is also central for ICOFOM, whose activities embrace museum theory and critical thinking. The common interests in critical reflection upon the museum motivate the two committees to meet to discuss the essence and aims of conservation in what we hope to be a stimulating and thought-provoking session.

Conservation and the museum

The invention of the modern museum, in the Western Enlightenment, was largely based on the constitution of collections of material things, which needed to be preserved so that they could continue to be available for future generations. The resulting museum model with a focus on preservation, research and communication (through exhibitions, publications and/or mediation) is still prevalent today.

Preservation includes, in its broad sense, acquisition, collection management, and all stages of the conservation process, besides other museum activities. Whilst many museums operate on such principles, the implementation of the conservation process may vary greatly according to context. This is well illustrated by the conservation of historic wood monuments in Kyoto and the periodical replacement of deteriorated parts, which is done with great attention to historical detail and traditional workmanship. From this perspective, the structure of the temple (the idea, in the Platonic sense) plays a more prominent role than the original material fabric, which retains its authentic character despite having parts periodically replaced. This image presents only a very limited understanding of the conservation principles used in Japan, but seems to suggest a striking difference from traditional western practices, in which authenticity is usually associated with original material fabric.

In western cultures, however, contemporary art practices may also challenge normative assumptions about the artistic object and the common correlation between notions of originality and authenticity. Looking back in history, we see similar questions being evoked in Greek mythology and the ship of Theseus paradox, a vessel known to have been entirely made of wood. As the wood deteriorated, it was gradually replaced, until all original material fabric was replaced and discarded. This story has stimulated generations of philosophers to ask questions that are still relevant today. The first is whether, or how deeply, the identity of an object is related to its

constituent materials. Is the ship made with the new wood still the same ship? If not, when did it start losing its identity? And finally, supposing someone built a second ship with the decayed wood that was discarded, would this reconstruction be more authentic than the one with the new material?

Central questions

Such issues are at the heart of the museological process, as well as any activity related to conservation. They significantly impact the way we look at heritage conservation and connect with a key concept in the museum: authenticity. Much of the power of the tangible things presented in museums is related to their authenticity, even though museums have a long history of exhibiting surrogates (e.g. plaster casts, models, replicas, digital reconstructions, etc.). The relationships we hold with reality, through museums, are essentially linked to the material authenticity of objects that were taken from their original context and re-contextualised into the museum space. Most of us do not look at the Mona Lisa the same way we look at a reproduction or a copy of that painting. Nor do we give them the same kind of conservation care. This is largely because of the way we perceive authenticity, which may also suggest that museums are institutions trusted by the public – an especially interesting feature in the age of ‘fake news’.

Giving prominence to the material authenticity of an object whose materiality was degraded by time, however, may undermine, for example, aesthetic or artistic values. It was under this light that much of the conservation discipline developed, which gave ground to different approaches and interpretations. Throughout the nineteenth century, for example, generations of professionals did not hesitate to restore objects or buildings with great flare, by modifying or even adding new attributes to them. In the following century, a sterner attitude was adopted, and professionals sought to minimise their own interventions or make them somehow discernable from the original material. This often also entailed the removal of previous modifications or additions, which was believed to enhance the authenticity of the work - sometimes at the expense of its readability or suggestive power. Today, we see the emergence of new perspectives around materiality and authenticity in processes that go beyond the technical and scientific, and incorporate realms of the social sciences. Values associated with interest groups that were not traditionally involved in decision-making may now be brought to the foreground of discussions, as illustrated by approaches to the conservation of ethnographic or contemporary art collections, for example. Some argue, however, that all conservation is an act of interpretation. Nonetheless, conservation does affect the ways objects are experienced. Therefore, all actions must be strongly justified.

PAPER PROPOSALS

The global setting of the ICOM Kyoto Conference and the close context of the 1994 *Nara Document on Authenticity* and *Nara +20* inspire us to revisit the subtleties involved in the fundamental principles of conservation and examine questions around the essence of the discipline. We invite paper proposals exploring one or more of the four analytical strands below.

- **Conservation and authenticity**
What is conservation today, and how does it relate to different notions of authenticity? How do different perceptions of authenticity affect the conservation decision-making and how does that impact the material fabric of the conservation object? Do we prioritise the conservation of an object because it is perceived as authentic? Conversely, can conservation enhance an object's authenticity? What are the alternatives and implications of different approaches?
- **Form and matter**
What criteria are used throughout the world to determine the authenticity of an object and what are the underlying justifications and implications? Is there a preference for matter over form, or vice-versa? What are the possible compromises in these relationships? How do these notions affect and/or inform the conservation process? What are other central factors that inform/influence the conservation process? And finally, what are the relationships between authenticity, replicas, imitations and reinventions?
- **Conservation practices**
Are there 'regional' or 'continental' conservation practices around the world? Do perceptions of authenticity vary according to regional locations or points in history? Can different perceptions coexist in the same context? What are other important factors influencing these perceptions and how can they be categorised?
- **Conservation decision-making**
How do contexts and/or interest groups affect the conservation decision-making and what are the impacts on authenticity and material fabric? What are the cultural reasons behind these choices? Some methods, for example, may favour a more visual presence of the conservation action. This is illustrated, for example, by 'Kintsugi', the Japanese art of repairing pottery with a mixture of lacquer and gold. Other approaches may allow deteriorations mechanisms to complete their cycles until all material fabric has perished. What are the cultural reasons for the development of different methods and approaches? And finally, how can conservation affect issues relating to 'cultural appropriation'?

TERMS OF SUBMISSION

The session will be split into twenty-minute paper presentations followed by discussion. The papers will be collected in advance, formatted and distributed before the conference so as to encourage discussion.

TIMELINE

1. DECLARATION OF INTENT

Deadline: 15 February 2019.

Content and word limit: title, author's contact details and affiliation, and an abstract of 50-75 words.

Send to: icofomsymposium@gmail.com

Language: only English abstracts and texts will be considered for this session.

Validation of proposals will be given within two weeks.

The proposals need to explore one or more of the four analytical strands proposed. Although the selection process aims to be inclusive, papers that are considered out of the topic or only based on descriptions of practical work will be rejected.

2. PAPERS

Deadline: 1 May 2019.

Word limit: maximum of 3,000 words or 12,000 characters (notes and references included).

Lay out conventions: ICOFOM conventions (APA reference system) will be distributed to authors after their declaration of intent.

Selection: Papers will be formatted, distributed to authors, and available during the Conference. But due to time constraints, a selection will be made for formal presentation.

3. DISTRIBUTION

The formatted texts will be sent to the authors, in an electronic version, during the month of August 2019. A printed version will be available during the Conference.

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