

# Conservation

## Preventive conservation – Curative conservation

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## Introduction

On the whole, conservation is rather simple to define: preserving cultural property from the ravages of time or human interference.

In order to preserve cultural property that is the fruit of creation, labour, history, memory and human belief systems in this way, authorities first sought to determine whether it would be enough simply to protect this property from the hazards encountered in daily life (accidents, use, destruction, theft, etc.).

Understandably, an initial response was to create specific places that would serve to carry out this mission – archives, libraries and museums – and to house these cultural objects within them, some of which would be stored for safe-keeping in warehouses or other types of storerooms, while others would be exhibited or shared with the public although all would be protected by some appropriate means.

At the same time, and as a complement to this approach, another response was to place these objects "outside time" through the enactment of legal or regulatory frameworks ensuring that these cultural objects could not possibly be involved in daily life by declaring them to be public property, both inalienable and indefeasible, and for those which were to retain their initial purpose – chiefly built cultural heritage – by establishing surveillance procedures inspired by the principles penned by Victor Hugo in 1825: "Any historic building has two dimensions: its use and its beauty. Its use is a matter for its owner to decide, but its beauty belongs to everyone. An owner therefore goes beyond his rights in knocking it down."

## An institutional and passive practice in its early days

In its early days, the conservation of cultural property in France was an institutional practice considering this property as a "semiophore", an object having lost its original function and existing only in relation to its meaning, in the definition of K. Pomian.

The conservation of cultural property therefore corresponds to a political choice in the Greek sense of the term "polis": it confers upon the cultural object or building, through the expression of a collective consciousness, a purpose different from that for which it was created or renowned during its existence prior to being considered as part of a national heritage, since this property, due to its history, must be passed on to future generations so as to inspire them or else to bear witness to a lost world.

Conservation, from this perspective, also aims to preserve the object from major hazards, including fire and theft, that might lead to its impairment or loss. It also involves the mechanical or human, but also regulatory, mechanisms designed to ensure safety and security: inventory listing, photographs of the property, which are specified or at the very least recommended in the institutional approach mentioned above.

Approaches to the conservation of cultural property were primarily motivated by these concerns for more than two centuries and, even today, this conception is reflected in the received notion of the "museological process" which can evoke rescue as much as prohibition.

Conservation was therefore perceived as a passive practice whose main action was this physical and legal "protective custody", which was intended to guarantee the longevity of the cultural property.

## **Increasingly complex and dynamic missions**

The concept of conservation changed to a great extent during the second half of the 20th century and has been significantly transformed in recent decades.

Conservation is now seen as an active practice in opposition to the notion of protective management, which has come to be perceived as inadequate. This change was initially the result of the awareness of the material nature of the object and its interactions with its environment. Hence attention was focused on the effects of light, climate and especially humidity on various materials, to be further compounded by other factors, notably pollution, but also biological infestations and contaminants, which although recognised were dealt with less in the past than they are now. Preserving cultural property from alteration has gradually taken shape as a more complex mission, involving the study of the chemistry and physics of materials, the knowledge and understanding of the environment from a scientific perspective.

Conservation has also changed its focus: in the past concentrated uniquely on the property itself, due to the lack of awareness of environmental impacts, today it always considers the property within its environment, drawing the same connection between conservation and cultural heritage as that traced between ecology and humankind.

The second rationale for active conservation is found in the very different approach to the management of cultural property developed in the last fifty years or so, with the rise of policies for exhibition and loans, cultural tourism and the desire to provide public access to these objects and buildings. Here they are ascribed a cultural purpose, closer in essence to the risks of their earlier use than to their heritage status. While today conservation aims to serve this ambition, it must also specify its limitations.

Approaches to conservation have become more intricate, more complex. Increasingly, theoretical work has been devoted to this area in order to establish assessment procedures, to anticipate risks and potential alterations to cultural property in specific situations. These approaches have been reinterpreted as principles integrated within a global conception of situations and potential interactions. In response to yesterday's passiveness, anticipation is now the byword.

In order to signal these new directions, a more dynamic referent was needed to describe the notion of conservation. Accordingly, the 1990s saw the appearance of the distinct concepts of "preventive conservation" and "curative conservation". If this distinction is founded upon differing conceptual approaches, encompassing on the one hand the analysis of risk factors and the development of a policy of prevention to mitigate or avoid them, and the recognition of deteriorations requiring curative treatments on the other, it is evident that these two situations are often combined in reality.

They thus involve a variety of components:

- climate: temperature and humidity
- light
- pollutants: dust, gases, vapours
- biological contaminants
- human interference: theft, handling, storage
- natural risks

They are integrated within a new methodological approach founded on the anticipation and synthesis of issues (Gaël de Guichen):

Where one saw short-term expenditure, one should now see long-term investment

Where previously one had in mind the professional, one must now think of the public

Yesterday's secret becomes today's communication

The question is no longer "How?" but instead "Why?"

Where yesterday one saw objects, today one should see collections

Where one saw galleries, one should see buildings

Whereas yesterday the focus was on the individual, today it is on the team

Since being recast as "preventive conservation", conservation has become a key issue in debates surrounding cultural property and has sparked a genuine raising of consciousness among professionals active in conservation as well as decision makers, some by way of greater awareness of cultural heritage, others due to economic imperatives, in support of the preservation of cultural property and its contribution to society.

Like Monsieur Jourdain's prose, conservation has been rediscovered but also enriched, the focus of theoretical reflection but also of constant improvement in practice and methods, and is now defined as any direct or indirect intervention on a work (or collection of works) to guarantee its (or their) longevity.