Conservation as a 'Later Addition'

Renata Peters
Institute of Archaeology, UCL

This paper contends that conservation is not a neutral process and plays a part in the history of the object under treatment. As such, conservation always involves changes in the physical fabric of the object and/or in its cultural significance. These changes are referred to here as 'later additions', and discussed within the framework of some issues related to conservation practice and theory. It is argued that conservators should be reflexive in their analysis and treatment of 'later additions', by working out a balance between the cultural significance of the object, its physical fabric, interests of owners or users, any originating peoples, and museum professionals.

Introduction

One of the most important principles of conservation is that it should be sensitive to the cultural significance of objects being treated. Conservation should be based on a respect for the existing 'fabric' (all the physical material) of the object, and should involve the least possible physical intervention. Moreover, an appropriate conservation policy should be determined by an understanding of the 'cultural significance' (aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations) (ICOMOS 1996) and physical condition of what is being treated, and aim to avoid changing these characteristics.

However, little familiarity with the subject is needed to realise that conservation is not a neutral process. The changes that it brings about may differ in nature and degree, depending on the kind of object treated and on the kind of intervention carried out, but they will always occur. Additionally, such changes are not always easy to detect or control. That is to say, in the very principles of conservation there is an inherent paradox to be dealt with, and even the simplest intervention will carry its burden.

Any changes to an object, including the changes caused by the acts of conservation, will be referred to here as 'later additions'. In order to understand the nuances of what is meant by 'later additions' and how to deal with them, I will briefly discuss the life histories of objects, their contexts and some conservation treatments. Finally, a case study will be presented, and issues posed by the treatment undergone by this particular object will be examined.

The Life of the Object

> On the day when a statue is finished, its life, in a certain sense, begins. The first phase, in which it has been brought, by means of the sculptor's efforts, out of the block of stone into human shape, is over; a second phase, stretching across the course of centuries, through alterations of adoration, admiration, joy, and indifference, and successive degrees of erosion and attrition, will bit by bit return it to the state of unformed mineral mass out of which its sculptor had taken it.
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> Yourcenar (1992: 57)

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An object, whether or not it is a work of art, goes through numerous events after its creation until the day it collapses, loses its shape and function and can no longer be recognised as an object. These events add to or change its fabric, appearance, use and cultural significance. The way these changes are perceived by users or viewers influences the way an object is going to be regarded and treated. This perception varies according to the general condition and cultural significance of the object. However, concepts relating to condition, values and significance change all the time; they can be seen as events that ultimately configure what we will call here 'the life of the object'.

Igor Kopytoff (1986: 66) speaks of "the life of the object" as a "biography of things". According to him one has to ask questions about objects like one does about people. Its origin, originator, status, uses and roles in different times, cultural markers, changes caused by age and end of usefulness have to be considered. Michael Shanks approaches the theme in a slightly different way:

> Both people and artefacts have life-cycles. Decay and fragmentation are a token of our symmetry with the physical world... The signs of wear upon something that I have just acquired show that it existed before me, but has a particular history of its own… So the marks upon an old pot are often also a form of writing, attesting to the history the pot has witnessed, its own historicity.
>
> (Shanks 1998: 18)

What is 'Later Addition'?

'Later addition' is to be understood as any kind of change an object has undergone since its creation. These changes are related to the events the object goes through during its life, they can be of an obvious or of a subtle nature. There are many reasons why people may change an object. The need to keep it in use, like some kind of repair, is a very common alteration. However, the changes an object undergoes are not always so evident. According to David Lowenthal (1985: 263) "Every act of recognition alters survivals from the past. Simply to appreciate or protect a relic, let alone to embellish or imitate it, affects its form or our impressions". Paul Phillipot (1996: 272), when elaborating on the same idea, argues that the different ways we perceive these changes can be understood as another change yet. Most famous works of art have undergone changes throughout their history, and the concept of 'later addition' is quite commonly used in art and architecture. Everything that is done to an object affects its history. Consequently, everything that comes from the past has been through some degree of transformation or change, even memories; that is, the past as it is seen from the present is constantly re-evaluated.

The *Laocoön*, a Hellenistic group of stone sculptures, is a good example of 'later additions' in art. In 1532 some pieces of the group were conserved by Montorsoli. Part of this treatment consisted in recreating one arm of *Laocoön*. However, the way Montorsoli recreated this arm was proved inaccurate when the original arm of *Laocoön* was found in Rome in 1905. Even though Montorsoli's intervention was known to be inaccurate, it was not immediately replaced because it was thought of as part of the history of the statues, and already sanctioned by tradition. Finally, after

much controversy, in the 1960s Montorsoli's arm, along with other interventions, was removed and the original one put back in place (Pinelli 1996: 290).

'Later additions' can assume different characteristics in different objects. A work of art made by a famous artist carries the weight of her/his name, genius and fame. This weight or significance can be used in a number of different ways. The image of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, for example, has been mass produced, entered popular culture, and even used in commercialised forms (Kemp 1989: 6). Its multiplication and subsequent popularisation adds on to the significance of the painting and changes our perception of it, which could also be interpreted as a 'later addition'.

Conservation can also generate different kinds of changes which may be considered, in terms of the history of the object, as 'later additions'. These changes may be more or less visible, and be caused by direct or indirect interventions. Direct intervention is to be understood here as any kind of change made to the object itself. Indirect intervention refers to changes made to the environment of the object, the way it is displayed, its accessibility and so on.

When examining the roots of conservation Andrew Oddy (1989: 2) argues that "examination, for instance, of any collection of pre-historic bronze buckets and cauldrons is likely to reveal at least one which was repaired in antiquity by riveting a sheet metal patch over a hole". This example not only illustrates 'tangible changes', i.e. physical changes, caused by direct intervention on the object but also says something about its history and the history of conservation itself; when trying to keep objects in use people would repair them (as we still do). In doing so they would leave traces of themselves, the history of the object and records for the history of the procedure. In this case, when trying to repair the bucket a metal sheet was riveted to it. This metal sheet kept the bucket in use longer, and is today the evidence of the tangible changes imposed on it.

However, physical changes are not always that obvious. By cleaning an object one certainly changes it. Although the purpose of this action may simply be to remove superficial accretions, it is a new event in the history of the object and will change its current state, besides eliminating traces of its recent, and possibly even remote history. The kind of change environmental control provokes is even subtler. When the environment in a museum is controlled, it is intended to slow down the rate of deterioration of objects. The conservator is, in this case, trying to prevent things from happening, she/he is manipulating the range of possible changes an object may undergo without this intervention, and thus adding to its history. Nevertheless, physical changes caused to objects, even when they are not obvious, are not so difficult to identify. A side-effect of conservation is that it not only generates tangible changes, but it also generates changes of a very subtle nature, which will be referred to here as 'intangible changes'. Merely working on an object, regardless of what kind of work is being done, is enough to change its significance, even if only slightly. That is, by spending time working on an object the conservator is already adding to its value, she/he is certifying that this object is at least worthy of attention. However, the picture can get more complicated than this.

Conservation plays a very active role in determining how objects or historic sites can be used or seen. An object is displayed and viewed in a museum environment as determined by museum professionals. In an ideal situation, these professionals try to equate the interests of conservation, the institution housing the object, the public and, in special cases, the originators of the object. Unfortunately, conflicts between the interests of these groups are very common. A typical example of conflict between the interests of viewers and conservators would be that of the light levels in which objects are exhibited; they may not be satisfactory to all. Another example is when the public cannot get close to an object, or has to see it through protective glass. Sometimes, because of conservation concerns, it is even necessary to restrict the number of visitors to a site or viewers of an object.

When a sacred object reaches a museum, there is an immediate shift in its function and use, it is removed from its original context and placed in a new context and thus changed. In addition, it may be handled by those who may not be familiar with the ritualistic care one should take when handling it. It may be treated with materials that are considered profane, and displayed in accordance with the standards of the museum rather than those of its originating culture. All these factors will add something to the history of this object and change its cultural significance. The degree of this change will depend on the gap between the producer's intent, and the way the object is treated and displayed in the museum. This can vary from a slight discrepancy to a drastic breach between its current use and that of its original context.

Another kind of intangible 'later addition' can arise when an object is treated by a famous conservator. The Portland vase, for example, was smashed in 1845, and subsequently restored by John Doubleday, a key figure in the field of conservation, who thus became associated with the history of the vase. However, the 'intangible additions' do not end there. The vase was restored again in 1948, and then again in 1988. The restoration in 1988 was regarded with such importance by the public that it was filmed and broadcast on TV; another addition to its significance and value (Smith 1992: 45). The physical fabric of the vase became so intricately tied to its eventful life history and the fame of its first conservator that its conservation treatment became a matter of public interest. It is worthy of note that public interest and involvement are some of the most important issues which conservation is starting to deal with and should be considered in all conservation treatments. The implications of this are considered below.

Case Study and Discussion

Foot Washing is a painting from Igreja Nossa Senhora da Conceição in the city of Sabará – Minas Gerais, in Brazil. A very detailed structural treatment was performed on *Foot Washing* at the Centre for Conservation and Restoration of Movable Cultural Properties (CECOR) at the Federal University of Minas Gerais in 1992. The painting (104.60x115.00cm) was executed in oil on linen and depicts Jesus Christ with a towel in his right hand, preparing to dry one of his disciples' feet. It is part of a series of four paintings based on the life of Jesus, which were placed in the church in the 19th century (Thomé 1992: 11). It is discussed here as an example of issues related to 'artist's intent' (to be understood as the way the object looked when it was declared finished by its creator), 'later additions', public interest, use, and conservation treatments.

An inscription on the back of the canvas indicated that it was restored in 1928 (Thomé 1992:12). It was assumed that this was when the area around the head of Christ was removed and replaced with a cotton patch (Figs. 1 and 2), a profile of Christ was then recreated on the cotton patch (Thomé 1992: 14). The losses in the area of Jesus' face that led to its subsequent repair may have been caused by a severe attack of termites (Thomé 1992: 14).

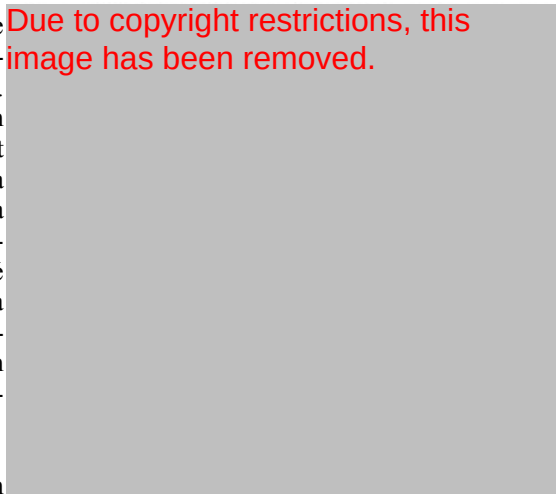

Figure 1. *Foot Washing* before 1992 treatment.

The most difficult conservation decision concerned the patch in the area of Christ's face. Three alternatives were considered: to keep the profile made in 1928; to remove the patch and profile; to replace it with a linen patch and paint another profile on it in similar quality and style to that of the original painting; or finally, to remove the patch and the profile, to replace it with a linen patch but not to paint a profile on it, only adding some colour to that area, without attempting to give it the shape of a face. The last alternative (Figs. 3 and 4) was chosen in an attempt "to merit the original painting" (Thomé 1992: 18). The patch was removed and kept with the records of the conservation treatment performed. Its removal was justified by its "aesthetic and technical inappropriateness" (Thomé 1992: 18), and Cesari Brandi's *Teoria del Restauro'* ([1963]1996: 231) was used to support this decision. It was maintained that the restoration was in discordance with the style and quality of the original, and that it compromised the structure of the work, as it caused distortions and dents in the canvas (Thomé 1992: 17).

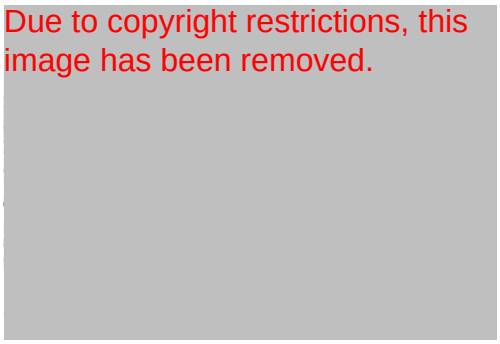

Figure 2. Detail of *Foot Washing* before 1992 treatment.

Although Brandi's *Teoria del Restauro'* ([1963]1996) was used to support the decisions made, it has to be said that the same text can be used to make a case against these decisions. One of the most important points he makes is that from a historical point of view, an addition to a work of art is nothing more than new testimony to human activity and, thus, is part of its history. In this context, an addition is not different from the original stock. On the other hand, according to Brandi, removal, although also the result of human action and thus also part of history, in reality destroys aspects of significance and does not document itself. Therefore, still following Brandi ([1963] 1996: 234), only additive conservation can be considered as legitimate in view of the

life histories of the objects. The removal of 'later additions', in contrast, always needs justification, or should at least be done in a manner that will leave a trace of itself on the work of art.

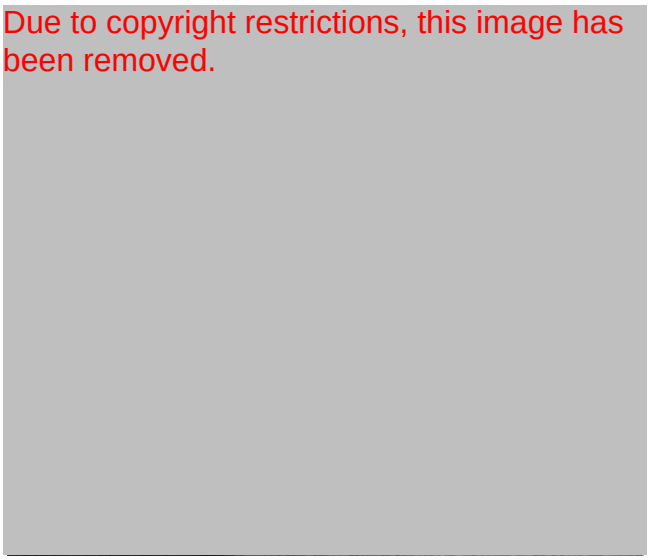

Figure 3. *Foot Washing* after 1992 treatment.

Following Brandi's logic, the addition to *Foot Washing*, even if inappropriate and contradictory to the original artist's intent, was already part of the history of the painting and had been assimilated by the users of the church. Moreover, its removal destroys the evidence of its history; the destruction of the evidence of the 'later addition' is the destruction of part of the history of the painting. However, because the area of the removal was subsequently filled with colour there is some evidence that a loss had occurred, but this is a new piece of evidence and for it to happen another 'later addition' had to be inflicted. Having said all that, it is relevant to remember that a very strong justification for the removal was presented, the fact that the profile made in 1928 is aesthetically and technically inappropriate, different in mood, and consists in a totally different register from that of the painting.

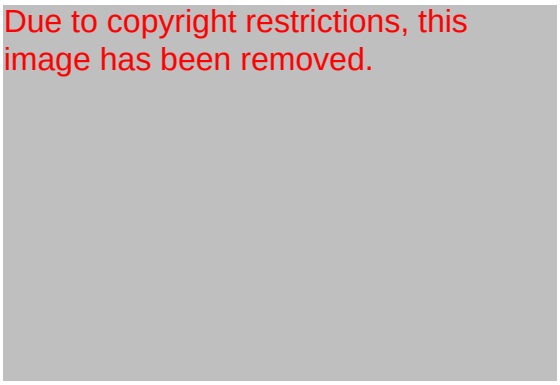

Figure 4. Removal of the 'later addition'.

However, the issue gets more complex if the painting is situated in its context in the church and the life of the parishioners. It belongs to a popular church in a small traditional city in the interior of a Catholic country. It is kept in the sacristy of the church and depicts Jesus Christ. Therefore, it plays an important role in the lives of the parishioners and is part of their life histories. When it is brought back from conservation treatment and it is found that the face of Jesus Christ has been replaced by a blurred area of paint, some estrangement from the public should be expected. One might argue that this is a matter of educating the public and making them aware of what the 'artist's intent'

was and what the 'true nature' of the painting is. However, chances are that these people are not particularly interested in the principles of conservation. This is an object in use, it is part of their memories and plays an active role in their lives.

Although in conservation there are always different solutions to a problem and every solution can be plausibly argued, one of the most important issues should be for whom the object is being conserved and how it will be used. The purpose of a treatment and the reasons why it is being performed should aim especially at keeping objects significant for their users and not to uncritically support the principles of conservation. Naturally, the only way to achieve this aim is by involving the public and other users, and discussing their interests and expectations. In the case of *Foot Washing* the implementation of conservation principles prevailed over such considerations.

Conclusion

Objects under conservation may undergo more changes than those intended or easily perceived. In order not to cause 'later additions' that may drastically or unnecessarily change their cultural significance, the conservator should exercise a self-reflective practice and keep in mind that conservation is not a neutral process, neither practically nor politically.

There are many ways of interpreting situations, and the treatment options are usually more numerous than the problems to be solved. Likewise, an object is always open to new interpretations which vary according to condition, use, time and values attached to it, and the best way to understand these variations is by putting the object in its context. However, the context of an object with a history will never be simple, and its significance will vary depending on who is interpreting it. The differing view points of owners, any originating peoples, users, or public and museum professionals should always play an equally strong part when making decisions in conservation; conservators should make an effort to promote this sort of involvement. It is only through this interaction that the conservator will have a better chance to overcome the limitations imposed by her/his training, cultural background, personal standards and ethics.

The object, in the hands of the conservator, is extremely vulnerable – the transformations it will undergo from that moment on will depend on her/his decisions. Consequently, the true needs of the object in relation to its context have to be identified. Any decisions have to be fully understood and justified because every action will be followed by a reaction in the object itself and in its cultural significance. It may be worth bearing in mind that, Frankenstein, the creature, said to Frankenstein, the creator "I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile my natural lord and king, if thou will also perform thy part, that which thou owest me" (Shelley 1994: 77).

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