

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE CONSERVATOR IN PRIVATE PRACTICE

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What sets the conservator apart from the average handyman and restorer is that he or she abides by a code of ethics which regulates the professional behavior.

To belong to the AIC the conservator must subscribe to the organization's rules and regulations. A code of ethics is a set of moral principles. In this, the AIC's code does not differ from that of any other professional organization's code of ethics.

Stepping over the introduction and plunging right into it, we read:

“A: RESPECT FOR INTEGRITY OF OBJECT. ALL PROFESSIONAL ACTIONS OF THE CONSERVATOR ARE GOVERNED BY UNSWERVING RESPECT FOR THE AESTHETIC, HISTORIC AND PHYSICAL INTEGRITY OF THE OBJECT.”

This seems to be perfectly clear and I could end this presentation right here. Unfortunately this main objective of the code, from which all other rules and regulations are derived, only seems perfectly clear. The reality is more complex. The terms *historic, aesthetic and physical* can and often will be in conflict during the course of a treatment. In cases that appear to be similar different conservators will come up with different solutions for conservation problems. Each of those solutions might be valid in terms of ethical behavior. If the first rule of the code is so difficult to interpret maybe we should get rid of it altogether. Of course this would turn the code of ethics into a hollow and worthless document. Without its point of departure, in which the respect for the object is called for, it does not make any sense to adhere to the rules of reversibility, or documentation. This leaves us with only one other option and that is a continuous discussion in which **conservators will have to justify certain decisions by analysis of the moral principles involved and/or by demonstrating that the ultimate outcome of a treatment overrules the disregard of a particular ethical consideration.** As an example of the latter we could think of the impregnation of a deteriorating object with epoxy-resins. This treatment is irreversible but it might be the only way to preserve the object.

So, by disregarding the rule that a treatment in principle should be reversible we follow the more important rule of saving the object. Of course the conservator has to have pretty conclusive reasons to follow a treatment like this. He or she better document everything very thoroughly, especially the motivations that led to this treatment.

This paper is not about the exceptional cases where the course of treatment disregards ethical considerations in order to save the object. It rather deals with the discussion on the code of ethics from my perspective as a private conservator.

The Code of Ethics at the moment is mainly enforced through the referral systems of the AIC and the cultural institutions. The conservation staffs of museums and other institutions are primarily composed of graduates from the conservation training programs, often with little or no experience in the private field.

Although museums as educational and cultural institutes are uniquely suited as conservation advice and referral centers, they are rarely aware of the reality that the conservator in private practice (CIPP) has to deal with as part of the daily routine. The economic realism that guides the CIPP's estimates is often

looked upon in total amazement by clients and Museums alike. The price tag of a conservation treatment performed by a CIPP will often give the (false) impression that “these guys are in for the big money”. This fact might even tempt the institutional conservator (IC) to take on private work at highly inflated prices since the IC’s overhead does not include things like health and disability insurance, pension, workman’s compensation, unemployment insurance, rent, fine art insurance, materials, equipment and other odds and ends that are included in the CIPP’s estimate. Although very important, the cost of a treatment is but one of the limiting aspects that the CIPP will have to consider in his proposal for treatment. Clients poorly educated in terms of conservation, disastrous environmental conditions or demanding use and abuse of the piece to be conserved (as is the case with furniture), are factors that have to be taken in account. Because of this the “ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE CONSERVATOR IN PRIVATE PRACTICE” can result in completely different treatments from those of the IC. In talking about the problem of how I as a private conservator think of my treatments I will have to be fairly general in my examples. For the sake of argument I will skip details and the finer points of conservation treatments that make case studies of particular interest.

Interpreting what RESPECT FOR THE INTEGRITY OF THE OBJECT means is the individual responsibility of the conservator. In making this decision a major role is reserved for factors like the perspective and the skills of the conservator, financial and environmental restrictions and the function of the object in the past, present and future. The final outcome of the treatment can result in totally different but equally justifiable solutions depending on the emphasis that the conservator puts on the parameters of the treatment.

I like to regard the parameters of a treatment as a circle with the object in the center. Pieces of the circle are:

- history of the object (previous damage and or treatment)
- objective of the treatment (owner’s requirements)
- function of the object (past, present, future)
- environmental concerns
- financial restrictions
- ability and skill of the conservator

The following examples are chosen because the problems might be more indicative for the private practice.

I was asked to make an estimate for the conservation treatment of an important chest of drawers. The historic house that owned the piece had already been surveyed by an institutional conservator. One of the recommendations was to remove a square patch in the top of the piece and replace it with a better matching section of wood, thus making the repair less visible and more aesthetically pleasing.

Close examination showed black marks on the edge of the patch. Obviously the patch was a repair of a burn mark. During a previous restoration a square section was chiseled out and a poorly matching section of wood was inserted where a candle or a lamp had scorched the surface. The chest of drawers had been in the house from the date it was made. The repair was directly linked to the original owners and as such an integral part of the history of the piece. For a conservator coming from an institution where the objects take on a new life detached from their history, the patch was obtrusive and was considered a blemish on an otherwise perfect piece. To me however the patch was part of the history of the piece and a contribution to the history of the house. It showed the way the owners lived, accidents happening, and the care that was taken to maintain and repair damage to the pieces in the house.

Discussion with the curator of the house resulted in the decision to leave the repair in place, saving a substantial amount of the conservation budget that could be directed to other more urgent projects.

Undoubtedly one could think of similar scenarios in cases where pieces were refinished in the past as part of their maintenance. Should an original finish be restored or reapplied just because a conservator is confident he/she can do the job, or because the piece would look better, or should the case be made under certain circumstances to leave the present finish intact as a historic document? The advice the CIPP gives might very well cheat him/her out of a lucrative treatment.

The required and necessary documentation of a treatment also is an important issue. In almost all cases the budget for treatment is limited and a client only rarely is willing to spend a large percentage of the total conservation costs for documentation. Often the CIPP has to devise creative solutions for the documentation, that if not ideal, at least fulfill the requirement of documentation of a treatment.

My partner Olaf Unsoeld had to consolidate and touch-up on a large number of painting frames for a collection in the Delaware Valley. Full documentation on the treatments would, under normal circumstances, consume up to one third of the time of the actual treatment. As an alternative to full documentation he marked on a simple preprinted diagram in different colors the old repairs, the consolidated areas and the retouches. An attached preprinted page details the materials used and procedures followed. Any deviations from the treatment description on the second sheet are marked on the sheet with the diagram. While not an ideal treatment record, the low cost and the minimal amount of time involved allowed, within the available budget, for the treatment of more frames than would have been the case with more extensive documentation.

I will not pretend that the CIPP is a saint who necessarily does the right thing. The following is a treatment I performed in 1982. The huge Moroccan palace doors were acquired from a dealer in London. Their original provenance could not be determined since they had been traveling through several countries after having been stolen by legionnaires of the French Foreign Legion. The doors were completely covered with a pitch black varnish and the outline of the bright colored decoration was only vaguely visible underneath. I was hired as a private conservator by the museum in the Netherlands to reveal the original decoration. The treatment paid my bills for months. It resulted in the removal of what proved to be an original varnish layer composed of a mixture of linseed oil and sandarac that had blackened due to the exposure to the elements. The original coating was replaced with a clear synthetic varnish. The bright colored glue paint was again visible and the curator was ecstatic over the results. But my eagerness to perform this treatment and the lack of curatorial input combined with my dire financial situation ended in a treatment that I think could have taken a different course had more research been done or alternatives been considered.

The examples given indicate clearly some of the pitfalls for the CIPP. Abiding by the code of ethics often is in conflict with running a profitable business. The lack of research facilities, financial limitations and the functional requirements of the treated object are all considerations that have to be taken into account. In contrast to the field of private conservators, many museums are a showcase for objects that are often bereft of their historical settings and functions. This requires a different approach. The objects are more often than not used as educational tools to show the glory and artistry of earlier times rather than the history of the object. The conditions under which they are exhibited are, if not ideal, normally far better than the environment in which objects in the private sector live. Documentation and research are normally

seen as requirements rather than, from the private clients' perspective, ways to squeeze some extra money out of their pockets for an unnecessary service. This puts the IC in a rather different position. The CIPP has to educate his clients and convince them that what is euphemistically called "The Museum way" in the end is the better way. This "Museum way" is for a number of reasons the way conservation is regarded within the AIC.

The unique position of the CIPP within the field of conservation is often not fully appreciated nor fully respected. The CIPPs are in part to the blame for this. The rare papers given by the CIPPs on treatments compete in flashiness with those given by ICs. This paints a lopsided picture of the field. Even less frequently we see papers that describe mistakes or discuss treatments that were less successful due to circumstances. This is a criticism that can be made of the CIPP and the IC alike.

Papers on less smooth treatments are educational to the whole membership. The stigma of being judged by other conservators should be lifted. Rather than judging the presenting conservator, he or she should be commended for courage and honesty.

This is not a call for papers on conservation bloopers and blunders but a call for more papers on realistic treatments. The field of private practice excels in finding creative solutions to overcome the handicaps I have described. There are jewels of exemplary ethical behavior under very difficult circumstances that, if publication were to be encouraged, would be beneficial to all conservators. Especially in times where conservation budgets of institutions are getting tight the economic realism of the CIPP might produce refreshing solutions. It is important that the conservators in private practice overcome the feeling that they have to compete with their fellow conservators in institutions or have the code of ethics interpreted for them.

ADDENDUM:

The above paper is the original paper as I gave it in 1991 during the WAG session of the annual AIC meeting. Some minor editing was done to correct spelling mistakes and clarify some sentences. The general tenor is unchanged.

When I was asked for permission to publish this article on the WAG website I was honored but felt that since the original publication things had changed considerably, moreover I have changed. To begin with I am not a member of the AIC anymore. And the code of ethics has been rewritten and is no more. The reasons for my membership cancellation are many, but the most important reason is the change in the code of ethics. As we read it now it starts with:

I. The conservation professional shall strive to attain the highest possible standards in all aspects of conservation. Included but not limited to... etc. etc.

What was wrong with the original:

A: respect for the integrity of object. All professional actions of the conservator are governed by unswerving respect for the aesthetic, historic and physical integrity of the object.

The new code needs over 50 pages of clarification under the guise of guidelines for practice regulating anything short of personal hygiene of the conservator. Somehow by writing a book of law the original idea has been lost.

The object to be treated is our ultimate client.