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CONSERVATION AND THE MARKET

Preservation, conservation, and restoration all play crucial roles in terms of how a work of art is maintained today, and ultimately how it will be viewed and valued in the future. For the owner and custodian of a work of art, there are several measures one can implement to ensure its safekeeping. Keeping a work of art in good condition relies upon a stable environment, appropriate handling, storage and display, and being able to assess when restorative measures are necessary. A trained, professional conservator can provide guidance and undertake treatments to slow deterioration, stabilise conditions and repair a work of art.

The term conservation has often been used in the art market as an umbrella concept to capture efforts to prevent, impede or repair the loss or deterioration of works of art. The contemporary viewpoint sees conservation and restoration as part of the same professional activity. As such, this discipline encompasses varied treatments that can be defined as preventative conservation, remedial conservation and restoration. Within the broadest context of contemporary practice, the term conservation has moved beyond preventative and interventive conservation practices to include information preservation, collections management, conservation science and research. Today the field has been broadened to deal with the challenges raised by modern and contemporary art practices. Advances in traditional materials, new media and technology within fine art require innovative treatment and technical study. The following will define the parameters of conservation practices, before exploring their relationship to contemporary art and the market.

Preventative conservation refers to any actions taken to stabilise the environment and minimise future loss of a work of art. While it is axiomatic that works of art, like all things, will age and deteriorate over time, preventative conservation is intended to slow deterioration; its objective is to mitigate the

effects of deteriorative agents such as heat, light and moisture. Preventative conservation can include storage and display techniques that control the environment. These include climate conditions (control of relative humidity, temperature, light and atmospheric pollutants) and the use of acid-free storage materials that do not degrade or react with the art work. Proper framing, storage and handling of works of art will all help to prevent mechanical and chemical deterioration of materials. Creating safe conditions reduces the need for future invasive conservation or restoration campaigns. Beyond this, preventative conservation can be viewed as part of collection management, including the appropriate documentation and archiving of relevant data on the work of art.

Remedial conservation is best understood as the maintenance of a work of art, and can include any act impeding current damage or stabilising the structure of the object. In practice, conservators carry out practical interventions that are both aesthetic and preventative. For example, if the original linen of a canvas is degraded, relining the painting with new fabric may be necessary to enable it to be placed onto a stretcher for display, while also protecting the original canvas from environmental fluctuations, thus preventing future deterioration. Beyond remedial conservation, restoration is aimed at facilitating our ability to read a work of art. While these interventions may alter the current appearance of the object, the objective is to bring the object closer to its documented past condition. Examples of restoration may include reassembling a broken object. In another example, from 2012 to 2014 Tate restored the painting *Black on Maroon* by Mark Rothko, following an incident when a visitor to the museum graffitied the work of art with black spray-paint. Tate conservator Rachel Barker restored the work, carefully researching before cleaning and retouching the surface, thus returning the painting to a displayable condition.

Returning an object to an original or perfect state has long been abandoned in conservation as a Sisyphean ideal. Indeed, 'original' is a problematic term. It is never possible to reproduce exactly the original materials or condition, nor is that necessarily desirable in all art market sectors. For example, it is becoming increasingly commonplace in the market for contemporary art to replace defunct components such as a burned-out bulb in a fluorescent light work by Dan Flavin (1933–96). These measures allow these

works of art to function, albeit at the expense of original components. Instead of endeavouring to return an object to an original state, contemporary approaches to conservation typically aim to facilitate reading of the artefact and simultaneously stabilise the material integrity of the object.

To answer what is the current best practice in conservation, it is useful to look at the work carried out in leading museums together with codes of practice published by international professional organisations. However, codes of practice that inform museum decisions about conservation and display may not always be followed in the treatment of privately owned works of art. Principles of reversibility and minimal intervention are important considerations for conservation decision-making. These principles have been reassessed in recent years, and it has been largely agreed within the conservation profession that achieving complete reversibility is often unachievable in practice. While historically the concept of reversibility (the application of restoration or conservation techniques which may be fully reversed) has been held up within museums as best practice, there has been a collective shift toward retreatable or sustainable treatments that can be safely removed in future. For example, although cleaning is irreversible, it ensures the safety of the object today, and provides future conservators with choices as to how they treat the object in future.

Within museums, best practice for preventative conservation begins with the assessment of works of art at the acquisition stage and continues through the implementation of policies on environmental conditions and the handling and storage of objects. This provides an ideal model for private collectors but ultimately the decision to maintain an art work is at their discretion. Not unlike museum practice, private conservators must also consider the demands on the works they conserve, and assess the condition of the work of art and its environment, as well as appreciate the requirements of the client. For private collectors, assessing the condition of an object at the point of acquisition mitigates the deterioration of works of art, and indirectly ensures that the object will not depreciate due to damage. Private conservators will endeavour to incorporate best practice as much as possible, but the market's expectations of conservation can often differ from best-practice standards developed by museums. While private conservators can advise on treatment informed by conservation ethics, a

private collector's demand on the work may differ from that of museum collection. Guided by the input of multiple stakeholders and experts within the market, adaptive ethics refers to the negotiation that takes place among key decision makers.

Each treatment should start with an examination of the object to assess its materiality, condition, stability and the cause of its deterioration. This technical examination should be fully documented and archived. Such methodology encourages an interdisciplinary approach that invites collaboration with artists, scientists and art world and market professionals. At the heart of this exploration is the need to identify the function of the artefact in terms of the artist's practice and the owner's collection. The status of the work can also be understood in terms of its use or function as a documentary object providing insight into its cultural significance. Once conservators have considered these factors, the goals for treatment are determined based on technical and material constraints. It is critical to research both a work of art's context and its physical and material history. This involves delving into the history of an artist's working process and providing insight into their practices, materials and methods. For example, removing surface dirt from an unvarnished painting with water requires consideration to ensure that the paint is not water-soluble. The use of unorthodox mixed media in contemporary art, such as the use of fat by Joseph Beuys (1921–86), requires an understanding both of the materials and of their application by artists. Let us not forget, there is not always a logical reason why an artist has selected certain materials or made a work in a certain way, but understanding how a work of art is constructed may inform approaches to conservation.

Contemporary art offers an opportunity to seek the perspective and ratification of living artists in the conservation of their works of art. Working with an artist offers invaluable first-hand information about their methods and original materials, which may be vital information to document if materiality is considered to be of importance. But inviting artists to revisit a work of art can be unpredictable, and may introduce further challenges for conservation. While a conservator may strive for minimum intervention, an artist might initiate a more complex intervention, such as significantly reworking or retouching. Artists can and do change their minds. It may be

the case that an artist's contribution will result in a larger intervention than a conservator would undertake independently.

The sheer variety of processes employed by artists today requires conservation expertise in identifying a multitude of techniques. With the rapid development of new artistic materials such as acrylic paint and adhesive tapes in the twentieth century, there has been a consistent trend amongst contemporary artists to experiment and exploit their properties to new ends. The post-war period represents a key moment of change not only in international contemporary art but also in the development and expansion of the field of conservation. The role of the contemporary art conservator has had to adapt in order to accommodate the variety of new media. The obsolescence of technology and the complications involved in documenting and installing time-based media have resulted in increasingly inventive and technical conservation strategies, ranging from replacing elements and creating multiples, to replicating entire works. Museums have adopted strategies for acquiring digital hard drives for new media works and stockpiling materials to facilitate the systematic replacement of short-lived elements in the future. For example, the conservation of *Untitled (Piano)* by Nam June Paik (1932–2006) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, included replacing the cathode ray tubes in the original monitor to allow for its continued use, while upgrading the obsolete floppy-disc player with a wireless MP3 player.

In the tradition of twentieth-century art movements, a parallel development can be traced of artists who share interests in process and materiality (and indeed immateriality), and above all, call into question the autonomy and relevance of the art object itself. Such practices have changed the physical nature of the art object, and have introduced new material concerns. For instance, how does one conserve a Dieter Roth (1930–88) sculpture made of chocolate, sugar or mould? Conservators must strike a balance between respecting the intended impermanence of the work of art and managing the inherent volatility of materials. While the intention of preventative conservation aims at retarding deterioration or decay, the field has developed to accommodate ephemeral works of art and the need to mediate material change. In cases of this kind, the conservator and other invested decision makers will need to interpret what is authentic for the work of art. While

condition has a significant influence on the price of conventional works of art such as oil paintings or prints, the prospect of duration is arguably no longer an indicator of value for some examples of ephemeral contemporary art. This is especially the case for works in which the aesthetic of decay is meant to convey meaning. This can be demonstrated acutely in the practice of Gustav Metzger (b.1926) or Anya Gallaccio (b.1923), where the experience of an ephemeral work of art is based in part on witnessing its decay and acknowledging its relatively short lifespan. While embracing innovative new conservation techniques, the ethical principles and scientific concepts underpinning the practice do not change when approaching even the most volatile of contemporary art works.

The question remains, how does the market view conservation? Condition issues and conservation have a significant impact on both the aesthetic and economic value of pieces in the art market. Generally insurance and auction appraisals will assess the condition of a work of art, including any damage and restoration, in its valuation since these factors have a direct impact on the valuation of a work. For instance, condition is an essential pricing factor for the prints market, and a print with fresh colour will generally garner a high estimate compared to duller versions. Significantly, once a print has faded, it is not possible to restore the work to its former vibrancy. The same is true of many other media. In this way, generally speaking, the state of preservation and condition will influence the value of a work. In theory its value should not diminish due to conservation or restoration. Indeed, if anything the value should be enhanced by such interventions.

It is important to note that the condition of an object may be weighted differently across market sectors. Expectations, expertise and taste about conservation will vary across market sectors. While it might at first appear that the extent of restoration is significantly more substantial for Old Master works of art compared to contemporary art, this is not always the case. Collectors often find a small blemish on the smooth surface of household gloss paint to be more visible or distracting than on impasto oil paint. Contemporary paints such as acrylics may take up to thirty years to fully dry, making these surfaces delicate and subject to damage. In the market for contemporary art the aesthetic of the 'new' epitomised in minimalist sculptures or ultra-glossy photographs demands pristine surfaces. Contemporary

works of art such as stainless-steel sculptures by Jeff Koons (b.1955) require careful handling to protect their mirror-polished and transparent colour coatings. For these reasons, from the outset preventative conservation is crucial for maintaining the condition and value of these works.

The taste of decision makers in the private market can often dictate the extent to which a work of art is to be restored. In the Old Master sector, changes in attitude and practice mean that past campaigns may now be seen as aggressive. A painting may have been subjected to numerous conservation campaigns over the years. It is often the case in the Old Master market that restoration is undertaken to undo the damage of previous conservation or restoration treatments, such as removing significant over-painting. As we cannot ask the intention of the Old Master artists, research is required to understand the context and possible meaning of works of art in order to fill in the gaps, metaphorically or literally. Restoration decisions must be undertaken ethically, respecting the history of the object and the integrity of existing original materials. Present-day conservation practice advocates lining canvases to add structural integrity, but many market players still regard this practice with some scepticism. Taste also varies across market sectors. For example, the fragile nature of porcelain means that objects will often suffer damage, and collectors may be more accepting of cracks and repairs than in other sectors. In the Chinese ceramics market, while firing flaws or kiln dust may be considered acceptable for non-Imperial-quality porcelain, the market demands mint-condition Imperial marked ceramics, as the craftsmanship and artistry was generally of a higher standard. In these instances, it is the objects in the best condition with the least conservation or restoration that will garner the highest prices.

Select private collectors in the antiquities or Chinese ceramics market will favour invisible restoration for this reason. Troublingly, invisible repair is often achieved by spraying varnishes extensively over the original surface. Not only do these treatments mislead the eye, but they are also notoriously difficult to remove. Fortunately, there are various tools and technologies to detect damage and invisible repairs. For example, conservation studios are equipped with X-ray and infrared equipment to detect under-paint. For the private collector, a hand-held ultraviolet light is a useful tool to highlight areas that have been overpainted, touched up or previously damaged.

In the ceramics market, various 'tricks of the trade' for identifying restoration can be observed. These include idiosyncratic practices such as dragging a coin along a dish to detect a stutter, or listening for a clear, resonant ring when the edge of a plate is tapped. While a trained connoisseur may detect genuine porcelain by the sheen of a glaze or the weight of an object, it should be noted that even a cracked or broken piece of china might still ring. For this reason, it is advisable for collectors to refer to professional condition reports before buying. These documents, provided at auction and commercial galleries upon request, can also be acquired from trained conservators. Professional condition reports may save collectors significant amounts of money, and enable prospective buyers to understand the actual condition of a work of art. It can be costly to maintain collections in conditions that minimise the risk of deterioration of materials. Thus, these reports and preventative conservation and/or restoration should be considered as part of the incidental expenses beyond the initial cost of a work of art, just as the buyer's commission, taxes, duties, shipping, framing, installation and insurance are all necessary considerations. The allocation of resources to the conservation/restoration process should be factored into the full cost estimate of a work of art and regarded as an important stage in investing in an art collection.

Both condition and value are reassessed when works are prepared for loan, display or sale. For this reason, conservation and restoration work often precedes a work of art being sold at auction or through commercial galleries. In contrast to museums, private conservation studios will often receive works of art that are in the process of being bought or sold. Collectors are not obligated to work with a professional conservator. Dealers and auction house specialists will often suggest to consigners that a work be treated, and regularly cooperate with private conservation studios to oversee this work. To this end, it has become the custom of many large commercial galleries to have conservators on staff to check condition and stabilise works of art as they enter and exit galleries, and also provide advice to clients. While conservation decisions may be financially motivated for the owner of the work of art, in many cases a conservation treatment may not align with the values of the client. For example, high-gloss, chromogenic print photographs are incredibly light-sensitive, and exposure to light will result in fading or disappearing images. The ideal storage of a photograph may require total

darkness; however, this option will not satisfy an owner's desire to appreciate the purchase.

Ultimately, preservation, conservation and restoration are value-led judgements based on technical and contextual information. With multiple decision makers having an emotional and financial stake in works of art, treatments should reflect not only stakeholders' values but also basic conservation principles that advocate that all works are treated with the same high degree of care regardless of the economic interests. A balance must be struck, therefore, between the ethical principles and what is in the best interest of the work of art and its stakeholders. It has been demonstrated that conservation decisions have a direct impact on the appearance and value of works of art. The measures adopted by the present generation of decision makers will dictate how the works look and are to be valued in the future. We are mere custodians of works of art while they are in our possession.

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