



ETHICS AND PRACTICE OF CONSERVATION

Manual for the conservation of ethnographic and multi-material assets

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INTRODUCTION

The Museum in the contemporary world is demonstrating, thanks to a continual reinterpretation of its collections, that it is able to respond to current social and cultural changes.

Even in the past, precisely in response to the needs of society at the time, the Museum adapted and moulded itself and, through its social action, proposed multiple approaches to understanding reality.

After a long journey, which has led to the continual renegotiation of its own identity and its own functions, the Museum today provides us with a mutable image of itself, sensitive to the needs of a complex society in continual change.

The contemporary Museum now offers a valuable opportunity to cultures, in which it no longer represents a threat to the communities of our planet and has ceased to define itself as a Museum of “objects”, to become instead a Museum “of and for peoples”, bringing to fruition that evolutionary process of art from exclusive and élitist, so as to finally liberate its inclusive potential.

Restorers are part of these current changes and are required to actively participate in them, in synergy with other professional figures involved in the protection of heritage, for the development of a sustainable museology¹ able to mobilise the social responsibility of cultural workers.

Accessibility and the broadest possible participation in the protection of heritage in all its phases, from conservation to the transmission of cultural assets, constitute the prerequisites of the new interpretative paradigms for the social role of the contemporary restorer, as proposed here.

The role of ethnographic museums, and of those occupied in the care and conservation of their collections, is of fundamental importance in this contemporary changeable and dynamic scenario, considering the extraordinary potential of these museum institutions with a strong “social” vocation, as places where space is allocated to the cultures of today's populations with a view to valuing cultural diversity.

Thanks to the valuable contribution of scholars and experts of international standing in the sector, the volume proposes a reflection on ethnographic assets and on the social responsibilities of the restorer, raising questions of an ethical nature in the practice of restoration.

Favouring exchange and synergy between professions and specialisations, encouraging reflection on conservation techniques and materials, it is hoped that shared practice of conser-

vation can be made to emerge, valuing the exchange between cultures and the broadest possible participation in the process of protecting and transmitting heritage.

The proposal to relaunch new and more innovative platforms for the exchange and sharing of conservation practices and approaches that may favour the internationalisation of restorers' careers and the emergence of a shared conservation represents, indeed, another important priority for the working group that conceived this volume.

The mediation work that restorers now carry out from their very first contact with the object, approaching the cultural significance of the ethnographic work, represents a tangible sign of a reconsideration of the “cultural asset” that is currently in process, according to which the restoration is not the main fact or the aim, but instead a valid tool for achieving a better flow of information – of cultural and social relevance – for which a cultural asset may provide the vehicle.

The duty to safeguard the integrity of the symbolic and semantic value the object bears at this time, with the final aim of returning it to the community to which it was destined and to humanity as a whole, represents a fundamental responsibility for the restorer in relation to society.

Restorers, through their work, research and study, set in motion a complex process of relationships of meaning and function, made up of compromises and responsibilities shared among different professions, with respect for the interests of those who are directly or indirectly linked to the protection and transmission of the assets to be conserved.

It is from this perspective that restorers are able to participate in the creation of content and practices of social value, bringing our new narratives of heritage able to construct the concept of beauty beyond Eurocentric and western canons, and to enable the creative work of all humanity to be appreciated in its innumerable expressive forms.

The quality and quantity of time to dedicate to a work are the subject of an informed decision, as a result of which the restorer will be able to intervene in a critical and conscious way for the protection of heritage, without being limited to acting on materials, but rather treating each work individually as a *unicum* among the varieties of forms that human ingenuity, knowledge and creativity can assume.

From these reflections, thanks to the closeness of scholars and colleagues, there emerged the need to communicate the specific nature of the relationship that binds the restorer to the

object to be restored, providing, especially for young restorers, new points of view and innovative tools for processing new complex contemporary realities and promoting an interdisciplinary, intercultural approach to heritage conservation.

The restorers of the Vatican Museums Ethnological Materials Restoration Laboratory, who daily serve the extremely varied and complex heritage of the Vatican Ethnological Collections, are always in search of these new perspectives. Thanks to their synergic work with the curator of the Museum and in collaboration with colleagues and scholars from other countries, they have chosen to compare their experiences in the field of restoration and their approaches to conservation, proposing a debate on the ethics of conservation in the contemporary world. It is hoped that this comparison and exchange will always remain open and alive, so as to be able to contribute to the intercultural formation of the young and new generations of restorers.

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¹ See Irene Campolmi, *What is Sustainable Museology? Sustainability Discourse in the Practice of Arts Museums*, in «ICOM News. The International Council of Museums Magazine», vol. 68, no. 1, May 2015.