**43** Conservation and Restoration

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Conservation comprises a range of activities aimed at preserving or restoring objects, including paintings and sculptures. Conceptually, preservation and restoration are easy to distinguish: to preserve is to keep an object in its present condition—more realistically, to slow down its deterioration—whereas to restore is to return an object to a condition it used to be in (Muñoz-Viñas 2005, 15–23). However, it is not always easy to distinguish preservation and restoration in practice, since one and the same activity (for example, cleaning or relining a painting) may have both a preservative and a restorative aim.

An object can be preserved by controlling the humidity, light, and temperature in its environment, but restoration always requires changing the object itself. Therefore, restorations are more likely to give rise to controversy. Among the most well-known controversies is the National Gallery’s cleaning of paintings, including Velázquez’ *Philip IV of Spain in Brown and Silver*, between 1936 and 1946. The cleaning was heavily criticized by prominent art historians such as Cesare Brandi (Brandi 1949) and Ernst H. Gombrich (Gombrich 1962; see also Gombrich 1960, 49–52). In a similar vein, art historian James Beck and artist Michael Daley have taken aim at the more recent cleaning of masterpieces such as Jacopo della Quercia’s *Ilaria del Carretto* and Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes and his *David* (Beck and Daley 1994)*.* Interestingly, they open their book on the subject by noting that restoration is not a purely technical matter that can be left to the “faceless specialist in the favored white coat”, because “we are really dealing with a field that has divergent *philosophical* positions and approaches” (Ibid., ix; my italics).

The word “philosophical” is well-chosen. Underlying the controversies are often philosophical disagreements, for example, regarding the aim(s) and permissible means of restoration. More specifically, the disagreements may concern such questions as the following: Should restoration return the original appearance of the object, that is, roughly speaking, the appearance around the time of completion of the work? If not, then which appearance is to be returned? And can the restorer recreate this appearance by any means necessary? In what follows, these questions will be addressed in terms of the ethical (Section 1) and the metaphysical (Section 2) issues they raise.

1 Ethical Issues

1.1 Should the Intentions of the Artist Be Respected?

It seems obvious that we should take into account the intentions of the artist whose work is being considered for conservation; for example, his or her preferences regarding varnishes, patina, and so on. The intentions of the artist plausibly determine which alterations are permitted during restoration, and even which alterations can count as restorative. But should the intentions of the artist always be respected? That is, should they outweigh other important considerations such as the historical value, use value, and even aesthetic value of the work, when these other considerations suggest a course of action that is different from the one desired by the artist? At least one reputed expert on restoration, Ernst van de Wetering, has denied that they should, on the reasonable ground that artists sometimes have wishes or hopes for their work that “nobody in his right mind”—no one who cares about conservation—would want to fulfill (van de Wetering 1989, 195). For example, van Gogh preferred some very aggressive procedures for flattening the surface of his paintings, including the use of a razor blade and, possibly, a hot iron. Apparently, he never managed to apply these procedures to some of his paintings, which left them with a crisp impasto. Should the conscientious conservator then carry out the aggressive procedures on van Gogh’s behalf? It seems not.

In a similar vein, one may not want to remove old repaints just because they do not correspond to the original artist’s intentions. After all, their removal may result in a seriously incomplete image (Bomford et al. 2009, 48). But if the intentions of the artist are not guaranteed to be of utmost importance, then it seems that we should not state the aim of restoration in terms of these intentions. For example, the following statements about the aim of restoration must seem to be misguided:

Restoration implies returning the appearance of a painting to a state as close as possible to that which the artist originally *intended.*

(Bomford 2003; my italics)

[R]estoration is to make as few alterations as possible while aiming to return those properties that the artist *intended* the work to have, and which at some point after completion it actually had.

(De Clercq 2013, 274; my italics)

Art historian and conservator David Scott has argued that we should reject such principles on the ground that we are free to let our own cultural preferences regarding the appearance of an artwork prevail over the artist’s intentions (Scott 2017, 89–90). However, note that the quoted principles apply only once a decision has been made to *restore* the work. In other words, the principles do not apply where the decided aim is mere preservation, as may be the case with some of van Gogh’s paintings, or with ancient Chinese bronze vessels whose patina and corrosion we may have come to value over their intended appearance (Scott’s example in Ibid., 90). Moreover, even where the principles apply, they do not prescribe, for example, getting rid of the crisp impasto on behalf of the artist. After all, the principles state explicitly that the aim of restoration is to *return* properties to a work. Obviously, the only properties that can be returned are properties that the work once had. But some of van Gogh’s paintings never had a smooth surface after they were completed. Hence, the principles do not imply that there is an obligation on the part of the restorer to return this smoothness to the painting. In other words, restoring a work is not the same as finishing a work.

1.2 Can Integral Restoration Be Justified?

The restoration of Michelangelo’s *Pietà* sculpture, which was severely damaged in 1972 as a result of vandalism, involved the replacement of parts carved by Michelangelo with parts cast by a restoration team. Crucially, the naked eye cannot tell the new parts from the old parts. Some find such ‘integral’ restorations objectionable (for example, Sagoff 1978). They favor a different, ‘purist’ approach, one that highlights the changes that have been made by the restorer. The difference between the two approaches has been usefully summarized by Mark Sagoff:

An integral restoration puts new pieces in the place of original fragments which have been lost; a purist restoration limits itself to cleaning works of art and to reattaching original pieces that may have fallen. Purists contend that nothing inauthentic—nothing not produced by the original artist—may be shown. If damage obscures the style of the original, a purist may allow a few substitutions, but only in outline or in another color, to avoid any pretense of authenticity.

(Sagoff 1978, 457)

Integral restorations have long been regarded as unproblematic. However, from the 19th century onward, a preference for purist restoration has been gaining ground. One consequence has been the undoing of previous integral restorations out of a concern for authenticity. For example, both the famous *Laocoön and his Sons* and the Lansdowne *Herakles* sculpture have been subjected to de-restorations in the 20th century (the latter, however, was eventually de-de-restored; for a philosophically informed recounting of its restoration history, see Scott (forthcoming)). Moreover, many contemporary guidelines for the conservation of artworks and, more generally, cultural heritage explicitly require that what is added during restoration be marked as such, so that even ordinary viewers can tell what is by the hand of the original artist and what is not. To give just a few examples:

If compensation is so extensive that it forms a substantial portion of the cultural property, then the compensation should be *visually apparent to all viewers* (American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Work; my italics).

Source: <https://www.culturalheritage.org/docs/default-source/administration/governance/commentaries-to-the-guidelines.pdf?sfvrsn=15> accessed 27 June 2019

All conservation procedures should be documented and as reversible as possible, and all alterations should be *clearly distinguishable* from the original object or specimen (International Council of Museums [ICOM] Code of Ethics for Museums; my italics).

Source: <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf> accessed 27 June 2019

Similar guidelines have been issued for the conservation of buildings.

Now the question is why purist restoration might be preferred. Perhaps it is found to be more honest, because it requires one to highlight the changes that have been made during restoration. In this way, restoration can be prevented from turning into “hyper-restoration”: the kind of creative and deceitful restoration—if “restoration” is the appropriate word—that the Flemish restorer Jef Van der Veken (1872–1964) has become well-known for. However, integral restoration is compatible with textual and photographic documentation of the changes that were made. As long as the documentation is made publicly available, it seems that no dishonesty is involved.

Purist restoration might also be preferred because it is less likely to cause permanent damage. However, integral restoration is compatible with reversible changes (or “re-treatability”). In sum, as long as one follows commonly adopted guidelines, recommending documentation of changes and reversible interventions, it seems that there is no reason to prefer purist restoration to integral restoration.

Still, there is a more philosophical worry that integral restoration gives rise to. The worry is based on the plausible assumption that works of art cannot acquire parts after having been completed (Ruskin 1989[1880], Sagoff 1978, Elgin 1997, De Clercq 2013, De Clercq 2020). In other words, anything added after completion inevitably remains extraneous or alien, especially if it has been added by someone other than the original artist. As a consequence, it might be argued that integral restoration creates a *hybrid* object: a combination of an original work of art—by an artist—and a replica—by a restorer—of lost or damaged parts. (Think again of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*.) But now the question arises of how we can experience such a hybrid object in an appropriate way, if we do not perceive the boundary between the original and the replicated part. As Sagoff formulates the problem:

An integral restoration confronts the viewer with a juxtaposition at cross-purposes with itself—an art object, created at a particular place and time for artistic purposes, and a replica created to resemble it, which is a practical purpose, with no line between.

(Sagoff 2017, 329; see also Sagoff 1978, 460–461)

A proponent of integral restoration might want to challenge the assumption on which the worry is based, namely, that a restorer cannot, for metaphysical reasons, add parts to a finished work. However, it is not clear whether rejecting the assumption is enough to put the worry to rest. After all, even if an artwork can acquire new parts, it remains the case that parts produced by a restorer will have a different origin. In particular, as Sagoff points out, they will have been made with different intentions; first and foremost, with the intention of replacing the old parts. In addition, the new parts may have been produced using different materials and techniques; for example, casting instead of carving. As a result, it seems that they should not be experienced in the same way as the old parts (*pace* Wreen 1985).

Perhaps a more successful response to the worry raised by Sagoff is the following: an integrally restored work of art such as Michelangelo’s *Pietà* can still be experienced in an appropriate way, even if its new parts are not visibly different from its old parts. After all, we are not supposed to experience a work of art in a fragmented way, by focusing exclusively on the aesthetic character of its parts (say, the nose of the Madonna). Instead, we are supposed to experience it as a whole. And the perceptible—stylistic, representational, and aesthetic—properties of the whole can be revealed to us in experience even if we cannot precisely locate the boundary between what is old and what is new. For example, after it was restored, we can still perceive Michelangelo’s *Pietà* to be a magnificent Renaissance sculpture representing the Madonna with Christ, even if this characterization does not apply (any longer) to some of its parts. (This response can be reformulated easily to avoid the assumption that new parts are parts: just replace “new part” with “pseudo-part”.)

In sum, an integral restoration may make an appropriate experience of *parts* of a work more difficult, but it need not prevent us from having an appropriate experience of the work as a *whole*, that is, an experience revealing its stylistic, representational, and aesthetic properties.

What is more, an integral restoration is more likely than a purist restoration to enable an experience that approximates the experience intended by the artist. In other words, an integral restoration is more likely to return the intended perceptual and aesthetic properties of the work, for the simple reason that it allows us to replace lost or damaged parts with indistinguishable new parts (if you like, pseudo-parts). As Catherine Elgin put it, these new parts are “artificial substitutes designed to reenable damaged works to perform their aesthetic functions” (Elgin 1997, 101). In the case of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, these substitutes have returned harmony, splendor, and wholeness—in short, classical beauty—to the sculpture, something that would have been very hard to achieve if a purist approach had been adopted.

Considerations of this sort have made a number of philosophers conclude that integral restoration is permissible, and even preferable, in some cases (for example, Wreen 1985, Janowski 2006, De Clercq 2013, Hulatt 2016, Lamarque 2016). The cases where purist restoration is considered preferable typically are cases where one is not confident enough to have the knowledge, skills, or techniques required for a proper integral restoration, or where the dominant concern is preservation rather than restoration. For example, preservation is naturally the dominant concern in the case of archeological or pre-historical objects that are valued primarily for what they can reveal about a past that is very distant from us (for more on the restoration of such objects, see Hulatt 2016).

2 Metaphysical Issues

2.1 Are Paintings and Sculptures Incorruptible?

Conservation efforts would not be called for if paintings and sculptures were not subject to deterioration. But they are, because they—at least paintings and carved sculptures—are concrete objects constituted by matter that makes them vulnerable to all sorts of destructive forces. Still, some philosophers have argued that paintings and sculptures have perceptual and aesthetic qualities that do not change as a result of deterioration or restoration. For example, Richard Wollheim has stated that “asked the color of Bacchus’ cloak in Titian’s *Bacchus and Ariadne* we should answer ‘Crimson’, and this would be the correct answer to give alike when the painting was freshly painted, when discolored varnish and dirt had turned the relevant part of the canvas brown, and now that it has been cleaned” (Wollheim 1980, 182–183). As a consequence, Wollheim calls works of art, including paintings, “incorruptible” (Ibid.). Of course, this goes against our impression that deterioration and restoration bring about perceptible changes. However, according to Wollheim and others (Savile 1993, Budd 2002, and Lamarque 2010), these changes merely concern perceptual and aesthetic properties that the work *appears* to have *at a given time*. In other words, it does not concern the work’s true or timeless properties.

Not everyone shares the linguistic intuitions invoked by Wollheim to support the view that works of art are incorruptible (for example, Rohrbaugh 2003 and Zangwill 2007 do not). Moreover, it seems that some of our less contentious intuitions about the permanent properties of works of art can be accounted for without postulating invisible or timeless perceptual and aesthetic properties over and above the visible and time-bound ones. For example, the intuition that the artistic value of a work of art does not change over time—what was once a masterpiece will always be a masterpiece—can be accounted for by equating the artistic value of a work with its aesthetic value around the time of completion (De Clercq 2013).

2.2 Do Paintings and Sculptures Survive Deterioration and Restoration?

Another metaphysical question raised by cases of deterioration and restoration does not concern qualitative change—change of properties—but substantial change: do paintings and sculptures *survive* the changes brought about by deterioration and restoration? The answer to this question depends on what one takes paintings and sculptures to be. As said, they are generally taken to be concrete objects, occupying a particular place at any given time. More specifically, paintings and carved sculptures are generally taken to be concrete artifacts. However, they may not be like ordinary concrete artifacts such as (token) cars and (token) coffee machines. First of all, paintings and carved sculptures are not able to survive a complete replacement of their parts, while at least some philosophers believe that ordinary artifacts can survive such a replacement (De Clercq 2013, 271–272). Second, paintings and carved sculptures may not be able to undergo the replacement of even a single part, but surely a (token) car or a (token) coffee machine can have at least one of its parts replaced. The second hypothesis, if true, could explain why the first hypothesis is true. However, the first hypothesis could easily be true while the second hypothesis is false.

As we have seen, several philosophers (Elgin and Sagoff, among others) believe that the second hypothesis is true; that is, they believe that a work of art cannot undergo part replacement, at least once the artist responsible for the work has passed away. If they are right, then the question immediately arises why works of art are different from ordinary artifacts in this respect. One possible answer is that works of art are parts arranged in a certain way, for example, painting-wise or sculpture-wise. Strange as this answer may seem, it is possible to explain it as bound up with one of the most common ideas regarding the function of art: the idea that art has an aesthetic function (De Clercq 2020). Moreover, the answer can be found in works by contemporary philosophers. According to Jerrold Levinson, for example, a sculpture is “is a hunk of material configured in a certain way and governed or structured by a certain intention in the making, namely, the intention that it be regarded-as-a-work-of-art” (Levinson 1988, 720; see Levinson 1996, 134, for a generalization of this view).

The answer that artworks are parts arranged in a certain way implies that artworks do not survive deterioration and restoration, at least not if these result in changes of parts. This may strike one as an absurd consequence. Artworks, it seems, do not stop existing as soon as they lose one part. If they did, then how could we ever appreciate them for the marks that time has left on them, that is, for their age value? As Carolyn Korsmeyer observes, “[t]o have age value an object has to be old” (2019, 84; see also Ibid., 197). However, when an artwork loses one of its parts, the remaining parts obviously still have the same age value, and a proponent of the artworks-as-parts view could say that it is *these* parts that we should now identify the artwork with. In other words, he or she could say that a painting or sculpture is different parts at different times, somewhat like the President of the United States is a distinct person at different times. Note that such a response would identify a sculpture such as Michelangelo’s *Pietà* with the material *occupants* of a role rather than with the role itself (in contrast with Oddie 2016, who regards at least non-art museum objects as roles). In any case, as long as there is sufficient overlap between the original parts and the current parts, it seems that there is sufficient reason to attribute age value to the work that is now on display.

2.3 Why Do These Metaphysical Questions Matter?

At this point, one may start to wonder why these metaphysical questions concerning qualitative and substantial change are worth addressing at all. They may seem to be unconnected to the practice of conservation. In fact, they are not. First of all, if one believes, as Wollheim and Savile do, that paintings and sculptures have unalterable perceptual and aesthetic properties, then one is likely to take restoration to *reveal* these properties, not to return them (since the properties were never lost). Incidentally, this is also the terminology used in some conservation charters. For example, the Venice Charter for the conservation of monuments and sites says that the aim of restoration “is to preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic value of the monument” (https://www.icomos.org/charters/venice\_e.pdf, accessed on 02/05/2019). However, the difference between “revealing” and “returning” properties is neither purely terminological nor purely theoretical. It may have important practical consequences, because if the aim of restoration is to return properties, then there can be more than one successful restoration. After all, different (i.e., mutually exclusive) sets of properties can be *returned* to a work of art; for example, the set of properties it possessed around completion time, or ten years later, or 20 years later. However, only one set of properties can be *revealed*: the set of properties that the work possesses. (Of course, different subsets of this set could be revealed, but that would not introduce the degree of variation that the alternative view allows for.) In sum, different states of a work can serve as a reference for returning properties; only one state can serve as a reference for revealing properties. Moreover, the latter is likely to be identified with the *original* state of the work. For example, Anthony Savile has suggested that the properties timelessly possessed by a work usually are “fixed” around the time the work is completed (Savile 1993, 471). In a similar vein, Yuriko Saito has argued that the original state of a work has a special status, because it shows the artist’s creative activity in its “integrity” (Saito 1985, 148). Since it has been argued that there are serious risks (for example, excessive cleaning) attached to the assumption that works of art ought to be restored to their original state, the metaphysical question of whether restoration reveals or returns properties obviously is of some practical importance.

Another way in which the metaphysical questions bear on practical issues is by justifying some of the ethical norms that are supposed to guide conservation. For example, if it is true that paintings and carved sculptures cannot undergo part replacement—a metaphysical assumption—then this may help to justify the widely accepted norm of *minimal intervention*. More specifically, if part replacement is impossible, then the removal of any part whatsoever brings the work closer to destruction, which obviously is undesirable from the point of view of conservation. Hence, restorers should take great care not to remove parts unnecessarily, which means that their intervention should be minimal.

It is easy to state the norm of minimal intervention, but, like that other famous principle of parsimony, Occam’s razor, it is less easy to determine what it implies. For example, if the norm prohibits interventions that go beyond what is necessary, then the question immediately arises: necessary for what? One cannot simply answer, “for achieving the goal of restoration”. Although it may be possible to give a very general characterization of that goal (as in Section 1.1), it can be more or less ambitious in a particular case (partial or full restoration?), and also, as we have just seen, involve reference to a variety of former states of the work (that is, if one conceives of restoration as returning rather than revealing properties). Hence, it seems that a more informative statement of the norm of minimal intervention would be this: “the restorer should not make more changes than are necessary to achieve the goal of restoration, where that goal has been specified in terms of *which* properties are to be returned by the intervention”.

The foregoing statement also brings out the limits of a philosophical inquiry into the conservation of paintings, sculptures, and other works of art. Although such an inquiry can prevent us from basing our decisions on logical fallacies and mistaken theoretical assumptions, it cannot tell us exactly how to specify the goal of restoration in a particular case. It cannot even tell us whether restoration is called for at all. Making such decisions about whether, and how, a particular work ought to be restored inevitably involves weighing a variety of considerations. For example, do we value the work primarily for historical reasons or (also) because it represents an exceptional artistic achievement? How certain are we about the artist’s intentions? Would restoration significantly rejuvenate the work, and if so, how much value do we place on the aged appearance—the so-called “age value”—of the work? When was the work in its best condition from a purely aesthetic point of view? What nonaesthetic functions is the work currently expected to perform? And so on. There is no reason to expect a philosophical inquiry to produce a rule for weighing such considerations, given the diversity of the values and the works involved.

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