

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Conservation in Museums and Inclusion of the Non-Professional

Jill Saunders\*

Just as object meanings are defined by people, so too can identities of individuals, groups and communities be implicit in their relationships with particular objects. The transformative quality of the museum environment and display formats, with regard to objects and object relationships, is fundamental to the socio-cultural responsibilities of these institutions and their ability to affect social issues. To understand the potential utility of heritage conservation in this respect, it is necessary to explore the complexity of the relationships that can form between objects and people and so establish some key issues and implications of conservation activities.

This paper first addresses the role of materiality and material interactions in the construction and communication of identity aspects, and considers professional conservation with regard to these relationships. It will be shown that material interactions can have great significance concerning identity and that the subjectivity of object values is a key issue in the conservation of material heritage. It will be seen that though the management of heritage can be problematic, the resonance of heritage status gives museums a unique capacity for addressing both intangible and tangible social needs.

**Keywords:** conservation; materiality; identity; social inclusion; museology; museum; museum object

## Introduction

Heritage objects can represent personal and collective values and affect self-perceptions and ideas about others. For these reasons their management is highly important, especially regarding who exercises ownership through access and control of interpretation. Conservation is a particularly significant process because it necessitates the determination of object values and often involves direct and intervenive object contact. Generally public heritage objects are entrusted to those with official training and professional experience who are considered stewards of this material. They are expected to protect its meanings, uses and material condition both for current generations and for posterity. However, there are cases where professional autonomy over culturally meaningful objects is consciously held in check. This occurs most notably with objects originating from New World countries with surviving indigenous communities. Recognition of the acceptability and social benefits of non-professional involvement is much less frequently applied to objects without a specific ethnic patrimony.

This paper promotes the involvement of non-professionals in conservation within European public museums. Several relevant issues are explored: the significance of material culture to identity; the potential for museum objects and exhibitions to instigate social change; the

relationship between social work, museums and conservation; the professional rewards of embracing this role; and the benefits to non-professional participants. Non-professional involvement in museum conservation, in either decision-making or in the implementation of management plans and treatments, permeates boundaries between heritage professionals and the public and reveals the social utility of the profession.

## 1. Material Identities and Conservation

'It is through materiality that we articulate meaning and thus it is the frame through which people communicate identities' (Sofaer 2007: 1)

Relationships between people and objects play a key role in the performance of identity and the development of socio-cultural behaviours (Hales and Hodos 2010). Object relationships have been nurtured throughout history and craft skills involving upkeep, replication and/or repair of objects make conservation one of man's earliest activities (Bounia 2004). The contemporary profession facilitates immediate or future object relationships with respect to historical significances through an array of different means including aesthetic intervention, material stabilization and investigatory processes.

Conservation is an expression of contemporary values which defines and maintains the perceived significances of material culture. Conservators of public heritage perform a public service and hold a privileged and potentially powerful position through their relationship with objects

\* UCL Qatar, UK  
[jill.saunders.09@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:jill.saunders.09@ucl.ac.uk)

that represent communal property with attested collective value. The finite lifetime of objects is often unappreciated because many items are known or expected to last for hundreds or thousands of years. However, this finality is important when assessing the roles and responsibilities of conservation beyond material preservation. When it is recognized that objects cannot last forever nor be indefinitely maintained in a particular state, there is more room to consider the potential use of this life, i.e. there must be some other purpose beyond survival.

When considering conservation, objects and identity, it is important to note that the identity of a given individual, group or culture is active and mutable. Ethnicity dialogues reveal the complexities of the multiple and changeable aspects of identity. Identity is a communicative and social phenomenon that responds to collective ideas and shares a reciprocally defined relationship with notions of 'other'. Recognition of identity is highly subjective and self-ascribed affiliations may differ from externally perceived categories (Barth 1969; Bhaba 1994; Clark 2005). The fluid, subjective nature of identity lies at the heart of its potential to influence social issues through the management of material culture. If connotations of particular identities are not inherent then there is scope to implement positive changes both concerning self-perception and with regard to others, potentially improving wellbeing and social-cultural relations or situations.

## 2. Cultural Authority, Cultural Utility

Heritage objects hold the capacity to create, maintain and communicate identities. Within museums and exhibitions the selection, interpretation and ongoing management of material can construct authority, signal hierarchies of value, and bring about exclusion or inclusion. Cultural dominance, elitism and representation are pertinent issues in contemporary museology. Examples throughout history show how heritage creation, the narrative power of exhibition and the nature of a person or group's relationship to heritage material can cause a range of outcomes.

### *Hegemonic authority and object meanings*

'The materiality of heritage is itself a brutally physical statement... of the power, universality, objectivity and cultural attainment of the possessors of that heritage.' (Smith 2006: 53)

Heritage creation and interpretation tend to support the identity of the individuals, groups or cultures that participate in these processes. Often it is those already comfortably placed within society, with values in accordance with the dominant culture, who play the greatest roles. Thus the management of collections, museums and exhibitions can perpetuate existing authority, causing a detrimental impact on identity aspects that contravene the status quo, and reinforcing the division between the two.

During the period of Western philosophy known as the Age of Enlightenment, object collection and categorization expressed knowledge celebrated by a Western elite. Institutions resembling the modern public museum began

to form and multiply (Anderson 2003; Simpson 2000; Young Lee 1997). Primarily established to house major private collections belonging to eminent families and individuals, they contained a vast range of material from natural history objects to works of art. Such institutions include the British Museum (1759), Uffizi Gallery (1765), La Louvre (1793) and the Museo del Prado (1819) (dates correspond to their opening as public institutions). The cultural values which these organizations epitomized, championed and maintained, from artistic taste and scientific method to religious belief and ethnic status, were those of the contemporary hegemony. Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753) bequeathed the founding collection of the British Museum 'to the manifestation of the glory of God, the confutation of atheism and its consequences, the use and improvement of physic, and other arts and sciences' (Final Will and Testament of Sir Hans Sloane, in de Beer 1953: 3).

It is not necessary to consider hegemonic culture as always or absolutely problematic or indeed as opposed to provision of great benefit. For example, the subjectivity of the meanings and values of art can be argued and unknowns omitted from art history may well be lamented, yet there is no great ill in presenting da Vinci or Rembrandt as the masters they certainly were and no denying the myriad positive outcomes of the public display of their work. However, hegemonic dialogues can have explicitly negative connotations.

The Wellcome Historical Medical Museum founded in 1913 by Henry S Wellcome (1853–1936) displayed objects relating to the history and practice of medicine according to an evolutionary understanding of ethnicity. The arrangement associated subaltern contemporary ethnic groups with peoples from a Western past, a message clearly understood by visitors: 'there can be no doubt that in the play of his fancy, early man, like the primitive races of to-day, was a child and had a childish way of reasoning' (Sir Arthur Keith in Fallaize 1927: 102). The management of the displayed objects directly asserted the validity of one people's identity to the detriment of others and strengthened existing prejudices.

Contemporary museums usually attempt to manage cultural differences without bias or strive to approach material with respect to indigenous meanings (Pieterse 2005). However, although there may be beneficial outcomes, when consideration or celebration of a subaltern perspective occurs via the impetus, invitation and chosen format of the dominant culture, its authority remains intact (Sully 2007: 221–239). Though anticipated visitor numbers may be influential, the public rarely chooses which objects museums collect and display or how they are interpreted. These decisions are made by museum professionals and unavoidably depend upon socio-cultural contexts: 'Heritage is, and has always been, an ideological and symbolic construction, submitted to and influenced by the historical, political and social frameworks in which cultural meanings are produced and interpreted' (Anico and Peralta 2009: 63). The selection and management of heritage objects is not a neutral process and this is as useful as it is problematic.

### **Subaltern authority and representation**

In spite of the propensity for heritage to be managed by the hegemonic culture, it can be created or interpreted by those belonging to a minority or subaltern group. Exhibitions can represent a subaltern agenda and communities can be instrumental in the management of heritage material. Two historic and two more contemporary examples illustrate how decolonization of heritage management can be beneficial and that this is not a modern phenomenon.

#### **Hull-House, Illinois, 1889**

In Illinois in the late nineteenth century cultural differences amongst immigrant populations and the dominant American culture fuelled discrimination, ethnic friction and social exclusion. To avoid negative associations and low social standing in the polyethnic community, some immigrants (particularly from younger generations) disassociated themselves with their hereditary identity causing familial discord and internal ethnic tensions. Jane Addams founded Hull-House settlement house in 1889 to meet the needs of immigrant settlers and, like others, incorporated a museum (Silverman 2010: 9). In addition to providing practical assistance Addams addressed complex socio-cultural difficulties: 'it seemed to me that Hull-House ought to be able to devise some educational enterprise, which should build a bridge between European and American experiences in such wise as to give them both more meaning and a sense of relation' (Addams 1910: 235–236).

Living heritage exhibitions were created where local immigrants presented craft skills to younger generations and the broader community. In one case an Italian woman demonstrated a traditional spinning technique and was proclaimed 'the best stick-spindle spinner in America' (Addams 1910: 244). Through the exhibition the woman presented the spindle as a heritage item and this asserted value garnered positive curiosity and appreciation of her skill, which would have been far less likely had she been seen working at home or in the street. Through her intimate and authoritative relationship with this object, she gained communal respect and her daughter altered her previous negative opinion towards traditional homespun clothing.

#### **The Tenement House Exhibition, New York, 1899**

Social reformer Lawrence Veiller instigated drastic housing reforms through The Tenement House Exhibition, raising awareness of the horrors of slum housing (Silverman 2010: 11). The exhibition attracted the public en masse and facilitated understanding on a large scale: 'rich and poor came to see that speaking record of a city's sorry plight, and at last we all understood' (Riis 1902: 143). Veiller was confident of the unique ability of the exhibition to communicate the subaltern agenda, noting he had 'given to many a conception of what the tenement-house problem is that could not have been given in any other way'. (Veiller 1900–1901: 19). The very creation of the exhibition demonstrated that the messages portrayed were significant, upholding the importance of the problems faced by those represented and compelling more privileged sectors of society to act.

#### **The Open Museum, Glasgow, 1990**

The Open Museum began as an outreach service to promote access to heritage for local communities and pioneered the use of culture to foster social inclusion (Dodd *et al.* 2002). As part of an initiative called Project Ability, The Trongate Studios have operated since 1994 with the aim of facilitating the creation and public display of artworks by people experiencing mental health problems. Many participants note a significant impact: 'doing stuff like this makes you more aware you have a place and there is something for your life... people... are just interested in what you have done... before it didn't matter whether you lived or died' (David McCracken in Dodd *et al.* 2002: 22–23). The authority of heritage creation and status of the heritage product facilitates a sense of social relation and self-validation from public display and appreciation of the artwork.

#### **The San Cristóbal de Rapaz khipu, Peru, 2004**

Khipu are rare objects of knotted cotton and wool cordage associated with the recording and communication of information in the Inca Empire. The khipu in San Cristóbal de Rapaz is the only known example still housed in its original location (the local historic building Kaha Wayi) and is used by the Rapacinos in contemporary rituals (Peters and Salomon 2008). In 2004 the community embarked upon a joint project with the University of Wisconsin to provide *in situ* conservation, conduct research and, it was hoped, establish the village as a cultural site to attract tourist trade. Extensive meetings were held to devise a management plan to preserve material with respect to intangible values and ceremonial uses. Techniques which could be considered Western or hegemonic were implemented but only to the extent deemed acceptable by the Rapacinos (e.g. the use of electricity was forbidden and repairs were made with local wool using traditional techniques, Peters and Salomon 2008, 43). The conservation process facilitated a performance of the Rapacinos' identity as collective values were discussed, redefined and expressed through decisions made. The community benefited from the creation of a marketable cultural asset in accordance with their identity by maintaining authority over the meaning of the object.

Recognition of subaltern authority is especially developed in New World countries because of indigenous populations. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) articulates the right 'to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts...' (UNDRIP 2007: Article 11.1). However, it is noted that the US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia originally voted against UNDRIP and although New Zealand and Australia have since come to support the declaration and Canada and the US are revising their positions, a great deal of debate continues on this topic. The San Cristóbal de Rapaz khipu illustrates that conservation can be a social process determined from multiple value sets of individuals, groups, communities and institutions (Peters *et al.* 2008).

### **Professional authority and object access**

Public physical proximity to heritage objects and information about them is often heavily regulated. This is explicit in museums and though associated with duties of stewardship, the contrast between professional and non-professional access to heritage can create unnecessary exclusivity.

In early museological history, object engagement was limited by the fact that the public could only access museums via guided tours. In 1782 a visitor to the British Museum recounted 'the gentleman who conducted us took little pains to conceal the contempt which he felt for my communications... So rapid a passage through a vast suite of rooms... confuses, stuns and overpowers'. Another visitor in 1785 related the ill reception of questions about the objects: 'I was much too humbled by this reply to utter another word... I went out as much as wise as I went in.' The situation remained similar well into the nineteenth century, 'we had no time allowed to examine anything' (Caygill 1992: 13). The negativity of these accounts is partly due to frustration at a missed learning opportunity, but they also demonstrate a sense of exclusion from something important.

Members of the public may visit museums for educational reasons, but many acknowledge a certain status in museum objects which makes them attractive in a more general sense and can underpin a desire to observe and understand them. In the early instances described above museum officials were not forthcoming with the information they possessed and permitted only brief and superficial interactions with the objects. The guides were responding to the perceived lower socio-cultural status of the public, whilst concurrently creating boundaries to delineate their own professional authority and the visitors left feeling belittled.

Nowadays, the public can usually wander freely through museums and read the information provided at leisure (within opening hours). Resources permitting, gallery staff are available to answer questions and more information can be requested (e.g. by phone, post or email). Many museums now also provide comprehensive online information regarding collections, including items in storage. Cases where information is sought by public request and not obtained must be considered rare. It would be a disservice to the vast majority of staff, from upper management to curators and guides, to suggest that information is withheld for any other reason than that it is not deemed useful. Such judgements are justified through highly considered decision-making processes, which professionals undertake in their role as stewards, and physical access restrictions can also be attributed to this stewardship role. Though difficult to enforce in some cases (e.g. large sculptures on open display), the touching of museum objects is rarely permitted and most items are placed behind barriers, out of reach or in locked cases. These restrictions are an expression of the collective value of objects which the public expects museums to protect. Heritage professionals are themselves similarly subject to limitations (e.g. regarding

interventive research and access to storage areas and the handling of objects is also regulated).

Yet public access restrictions can still create a sense of exclusivity. They are associated by some with an institutional desire to maintain professional authority: 'resistance to touch is as closely connected to the conservation of territory as it is to the preservation of objects' (Candlin 2004: 73). Candlin associates touch with power and an unwillingness to allow public contact with objects is seen as an attempt by curators to retain the superiority of professionalism. Conservators too can gain a reputation for limiting access beyond reasonable precaution. This can apply as much to other museum staff as to the public: 'conservators can feel they're the be all and end all... partly because of the training, we have to go through so much training' (Ganiaris 2010). Conservation education is extensive – if just anyone can come and pick up an object it could be considered to undermine the importance of possessing this knowledge.

Most public access restrictions imposed by museums and conservators are established according to the understanding of stewardship and must be considered reasonable. However, this does not change the fact that such restrictions still create a boundary which can seem exclusive. Therefore their necessity must be regularly scrutinized with self-awareness and professionals must not be obstructive in instances where greater public access, including direct contact, may be feasible.

### **Non-professional object access**

Increasing public interactions with objects or facilitating an object relationship similar to that of a heritage professional permeates established boundaries. There are proven benefits associated with such interactions, from education to improved wellbeing and feelings of inclusion (Brajer 2008; Drago 2011; Pye 2001). Recent examples of British programmes designed to extend and develop non-professional object access include substantial work by the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC).

#### **Archaeology in Action**

In 2012, a ten-week outreach programme 'Archaeology in Action' was organized by LAARC. At the Museum of London objects including medieval and Roman pieces were placed on open display to illustrate conservation processes (among other activities). They were available for handling and conservators were present to discuss the objects and conservation treatments with the public. Most visitors were surprised and delighted to be allowed to touch the objects, often having to be assured several times that they were not replicas. Many asked questions about their historical significance and were keen to have the conservation processes explained. Information about conservation materials and treatments is rarely available in a typical museum environment and access to this specialist field, physical contact with the objects, and the freely available information had an immensely positive impact (Saunders 2012: 2).

### Volunteer Inclusion Programmes (VIP)

The VIP programmes run by LAARC since 2008 developed from a pilot initiative, the Archive Volunteer Learning Programme (2006–2007), which was specifically designed to address the needs of people at risk of social exclusion such as the unemployed and those with disabilities. The VIP offers greater inclusivity because participants come from all backgrounds so that those who might be considered vulnerable are integrated into diverse groups (Ganiaris and Lang 2013: 216–218). Preventive conservation activities provide physical interaction with museum objects, while lectures and seminars create opportunities to discuss their different values. The importance of this level of access was reflected in participant feedback concerning the best aspects of the programmes (Corsini and Davis 2009a, 2009b: 9). The positive impact of these initiatives partly derives from the educational benefit of the seminars. However, the value of participation in archival work also relates to the underlying collective significance of the items and behind-the-scenes access: ‘they felt part of something bigger... that even at their, what they might feel is a lowly status, [they were] permitted to do this kind of thing’ (Ganiaris 2010).

### Sittingbourne: Conservation Science Investigation (CSI)

A separate programme is that of the Conservation Science Investigation (CSI), Sittingbourne. In 2008, a large Anglo-Saxon cemetery was discovered in Sittingbourne, Kent, by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust during commercial development of the area. Excavations produced a vast number of artefacts, including weapons and jewellery. Dana Goodburn-Brown, director of the local archaeological conservation cooperative Ancient Materials, Technologies and Conservation (AMTeC), founded CSI in 2009 to manage their conservation. Work at CSI depends largely on volunteers who are provided with training to conduct interventive conservation work on finds (often requiring interpretation of artefacts) and to help with public outreach. The project is located in the main shopping centre of Sittingbourne and the public are free to enter the laboratory, observe activities and find out more about the objects being treated. Special events were also held to raise the profile of CSI and archaeological conservation science. The opportunity to engage with the initiative is highly valued and social research conducted by University College London postgraduate student Natalie Mitchell found an ‘overwhelming appreciation for the accessibility to the conservation work’ among both volunteer participants and visitors (Ternisien 2009; English Heritage 2011).

### 3. Objections and Responses

In spite of the clear benefits surrounding non-professional involvement in museum conservation and heritage management, there are valid objections that must be addressed.

#### *Culture and social needs*

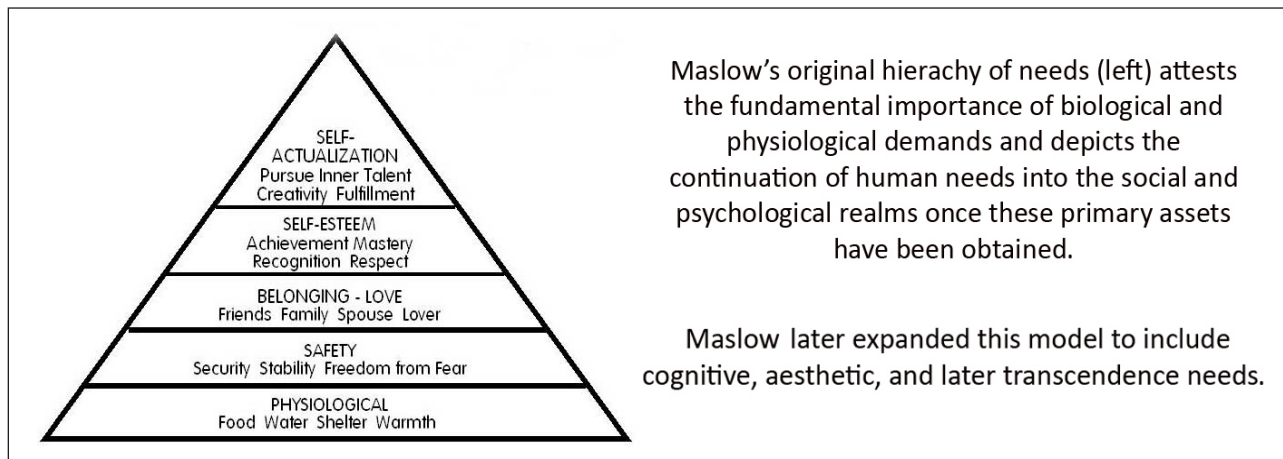
Using culture to tackle social issues has been criticized for its tendency to address qualities like self-esteem and social skills rather than tangible assets, such as housing and

employment (Barr 2005; Furedi 2004). Confronting exclusion from a psychological angle is considered inadequate and inappropriate: ‘art and culture become substitute forms of cohesion, participation and self-esteem in a deeply divided society: rather than tackle the underlying social and economic causes of these divisions, culture is used (by government and the ‘cultural elite’) to make us feel good about ourselves. In this way, social exclusion is made to appear to be a psychological matter’ (Barr 2005: 100).

Culture should not be used to placate the disadvantaged as a means of avoiding reform, welfare provision or other professional assistance. Yet psychological outcomes can be a hugely beneficial and valid product of cultural inclusion, not least due to the interrelation of different areas of human need, and cultural inclusion can produce tangible outcomes in conjunction with other services. For example, the Trongate Studios do not replace primary or secondary medical care but provide an intermediary space for those ready to reduce their level of professional help: ‘there are many people needing something between treatment and life in the community. It is therapeutic work but is run by artists who do not analyse or institutionalise’ (Dodd *et al.* 2002: 22).

Human needs are multiple and varied, extending from the physiological to the psycho-social and though the hierarchy may be problematic, this is well illustrated in Maslow’s pyramid (**Figure 1**). Culturally inclusive programmes cannot replace fundamental services but may complement them to fulfil different but equally important aspects of need. Whatever the primary cause, social exclusion is characterized and often perpetuated by need in multiple areas which frequently become interrelated. Indeed, social services today support the maintenance of positive relationships and social behaviours through facilities like family counselling and addiction support, in addition to addressing practical matters such as housing and employment. Once both practical and intangible areas of need exist, both must be addressed to bring about positive change. It is not necessary for the management of psycho-social aspects to come at the cost of addressing more practical demands, yet these aspects are important and cultural formats have proven efficacy at addressing them.

Furthermore, far from providing false comfort, cultural formats can tackle social issues through challenging and sometimes uncomfortable means. The Tenement House Exhibition is a good historical example of the communication of difficult truths in order to improve awareness and instigate positive change. Contemporary programmes have been designed to transmit similarly difficult messages, including the travelling exhibitions organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization which address ‘sanitation, economy and welfare’ (Silverman 2010: 11) and Sexwise, launched by the Health Action Zone to tackle unwanted pregnancies in Nottingham (Dodd *et al.* 2002: 186; GLLAM 2000: 34–35). This is an important feature of the social utility of culture: ‘Culture is about stirring the emotions as much as soothing them’ (CLMG 2006: 1).



**Figure 1:** Maslow's original hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943).

### ***Institutional and disciplinary identity***

Initiatives which are designed to encourage inclusion and improve wellbeing (often termed 'new museology') are seen by some as an unwelcome deviation from traditional museum roles of 'collecting, studying and presenting artefacts' (Appleton 2001; Cuno 1997). Appleton argues that such initiatives 'distort the very basis of the institution' and are a misguided consequence of political pressure on an industry facing an identity crisis. These perspectives can be held by museum directors, but similarly by those outside of the heritage sector including social services organizations. Inclusive initiatives may also seem unsuitable to those working within given disciplines, for example, conservation programmes geared towards social benefits might appear inappropriate if the preservation of museum objects is to be considered the main purpose of the profession. The traditional museum roles envisioned by Appleton are important and warrant protection; the provision of social benefit is stipulated by some funding pathways, which could be seen as misplaced pressure. However, the notion of a static historic museum identity is misguided and it is not entirely true that museum endeavours aiming to promote inclusion and wellbeing represent a break from historic roles.

Public museums have always adapted to socio-political environments and have been associated with the provision of social benefits for generations. The impact of the industrial revolution on the living conditions of the poor instigated a crisis of social conscience amongst many members of more privileged classes and public spending faced increased scrutiny (Morgan 2004; Wallins 1975). Museums receiving public money expanded access to incorporate unsupervised visitation (as of 1810) and holiday opening hours (as of 1837) (Caygill 1992: 25). William Rossiter, who taught at the first Working Men's College (founded 1854), established the South London Fine Art Gallery for the local community, which he considered in need of 'refreshment' and living 'with so little beauty' (Waterfield and Smith 1994: 55). Sir Henry Cole, founder of the South Kensington Art Museum, also envisaged the museum visit in terms of social benefit, 'let the working man get his refreshment there in company with his wife and children, rather than

to leave him to booze away from them in the Public-house and Gin Palace' (Cole *et al.* 1884: 368). His characterization of the 'working man' is derogatory and causes of excessive drinking are likely to be more complex than absence of alternative leisure activities. Nonetheless these statements attest a historic awareness of the social capacity and role of museums. Initiatives such as PlaySpace (created 1975) at the Boston Children's Museum, the Please Touch Museum (established 1976) in Philadelphia, or the Providence Children's Museum in Rhode Island (founded 1977), which offer safe and stimulating environments for families, have evolved from these ideas. Historical phenomena (e.g. major wars of the twentieth century, globalization) continue to generate socio-cultural, political and economic changes to which museums naturally adapt through drives of democratization, inclusion, outreach and representation. Even without such influences, every museum has a unique history and performs different functions at different times according to particular contexts and the individuals involved with their management.

Material preservation is clearly a primary responsibility of conservation; indeed, the discipline is often perceived by museum management, curators and conservators as a scientific process conducted objectively for an unknown posterity (Caple 2000: 152). However, contemporary access is an equally and increasingly important professional concept, especially within public museums. Conservation as 'invisible stewardship' may inhibit the potential of non-professional involvement but might be negotiated to the benefit of the profession as much as the participants by communicating its multifaceted role.

Non-professional participation may contribute to object longevity but could also pose a threat to material, for example, through lack of volunteer experience. However, within conservation all interactions are understood to increase the risk to objects and, together with interventions like consolidation which causes material changes, have long been justified by benefits of access. Through enabling display, handling, academic research and investigative analysis conservators accept that material may be compromised. Their role as stewards is to minimize loss or change within these contexts.

However, although accepted as unrealistic, absolute preservation is often still considered the ideal scenario and though problematized in theoretical discourse (Caple 2000: 65; Villers 2004), the principle of 'minimum intervention' remains centrally important to professional identity (AICCM 2002, ECCO 2002: II.8, English Heritage 2008: 4.1). This is partly because all interventions which change objects can be construed as damage and conservators feel a responsibility to pass objects to posterity as close to their present condition as possible. It can also be underpinned by a consciousness of the subjectivity of all contemporary value perceptions and the limitations of current materials and techniques. However, to fully exploit the capacity of conservation for identity performance, conservators must not be inflexible in their understanding. Thoughtless dismissal of known values over others should not be condoned, but material legacies representing changing contemporary ideals can themselves be significant. For example, continual cycles of restoration of church interiors reveal changing materials and techniques as well as political and artistic sensitivities of countless generations from the Reformation to the present day. The reversibility and excellent ageing properties of many modern materials, in addition to high standards of documentation now expected should also lessen concern. Heritage objects will facilitate identity performances for posterity in unknown ways. Though their needs and rights to material should always be considered, there is nothing necessarily wrong with a permissible attitude towards current interventive conservation processes with known and immediate benefits.

Conscious engagement with contemporary and culturally-specific object values and interventions affecting object properties or meanings in significant or enduring capacities are often accommodated for items of ethnic patrimony and the philosophies which justify this can be understood in a broader sense (Anyon *et al.* 2000; Clavir 2002). Preservation is an important aspect of the profession's public profile and has a social value of its own, but it is not neutral and leaves its own legacy. It defines objects according to physical and/or chemical properties through a scientific approach and is a culturally-specific process. Even preventive measures are a biased maintenance of a specific material state and, as it is often impossible to preserve all physical and chemical properties, choices must still be made. Conservation unavoidably has a voice and there is perhaps room for greater levels of acceptance and utility of this fact than is currently common.

Contemporary interactions have a valid place in history and the lifetime of an object does not need to be halted at the time of acquisition. Invisible stewardship can perpetuate the public invisibility of the profession which a fuller engagement with material may rectify. It is already customary to understand preservation in the context of ensuring access, and likewise stewardship can permit a degree of interpretative intervention. Such an approach needs the support of museum management and curators and may not be permitted for many items. Nonetheless there is no reason why some material should

not be engaged with in this way. This flexibility is essential for the high-access demands of public engagement, outreach and inclusion, which are increasingly common. Many departments do now run conservation-focused or led initiatives which support the museum's social function and improve their profile within the organisation: 'the rest of the museum...were engaging the community... we thought well let's show that conservation can do this as well, to raise our status and to show that...we can offer that' (Ganiaris 2010).

There are undoubtedly conservators willing to do more such work who are overlooked because this is not their generally understood role and museums should be careful not to pigeonhole conservators and miss opportunities for inclusion. Museums are valued by the public for their acquisition and stewardship of material and these processes benefit society in their own way. More focused provisions of social utility need not replace these roles but may help develop the positive public profile on which museums depend. Further, if the sector is facing a crisis of identity then far from compounding this, social work may present an opportunity to cement a clear role.

### **Sectoral change**

The establishment of inclusive programmes can represent new territory for heritage workers and there are issues to consider regarding the negotiation of sectoral change (Sandell 2004). New initiatives which lack strong associations with existing activities and ideas may prove impracticable, struggle to find support from within the sector, and are particularly open to high-level criticism such as that from James Cuno, director of the Art Institute of Chicago (Cuno 1997: 7). Additionally, heritage workers both at managerial and frontline levels should not feel that their areas of expertise are redundant or that they are at risk of replacement by those trained in social work. Some conservators will not be inclined to work directly with non-professionals or may feel unsuitable or unqualified for this role.

Involvement of non-professionals in conservation navigates some issues of sectoral change because inclusion is achieved through an existing heritage process and usually maintains the value of professional knowledge. Even in instances when non-professional understandings of objects become authoritative (e.g. in community led projects), this will rarely lead to a complete disregard of professional expertise, but is more likely to result in partnerships. Public participation in conservation may require conservators to have certain social or managerial skills which their practical training does not provide. However, many cases will not require specialist training. Where external skills are needed (e.g. for vulnerable individuals or groups), responsibilities can be met through collaboration and need rather than direct project design. For example, VIP coordinators work with other relevant organisations, such as Action for Employment (Corsini and Davis 2009b: 3), to ensure that participants have the necessary support. However, programme content remains determined by existing archival procedure. Isolation of

staff may arise if conservators feel pressured to work in ways that differ from their original job description and such instances require careful management. Nonetheless it is not unusual for the activities or focuses of public institutions to change over time and it may be that museum conservators come to expect work with the public to be an aspect of their position. This is reflected in growing recognition of public outreach and communication of conservation in conservation education programmes. Therefore, future professionals may well be equipped in these areas.

### ***Retaining standards and false inclusion***

Some argue that initiatives designed to be inclusive dilute standards and perpetuate non-professional distance from elite spheres: 'the policy of social inclusion belittles the capacities of the very people it claims to serve, implying that excellence and popular participation are bound to be opposites, thereby slighting people's capacity for self-transformation' (Terry Eagleton in Barr 2005: 100).

For those without specific training important material principles may be difficult to understand and treatment processes too technically challenging for some. Institutions may be unwilling for pieces of fragility, rarity or high monetary value to be managed by anyone but a qualified conservator. When explaining treatments to the public during Archaeology in Action, materials science information often had to be simplified (Saunders 2012). The practical work conducted by VIP participants is simple and usually involves relatively low-value archaeological material. For these reasons, conservation based inclusive initiatives will differ in many respects from the work conducted by conservators, which could be perceived as false inclusion. Performing simple tasks on low-value objects might be seen as patronizing and with little capacity for development – it could be argued that decolonization is superficial in community-led initiatives if those with expert knowledge retain the greatest influence at decision-making levels.

However, it is not the case that limitations regarding non-professional involvement are always pre-assumed, rather, work can be delegated to suit the existing abilities and learning capacity of each participant. For example, at CSI picture sorting, database work, display management and preventive conservation were often entrusted to those for whom scalpel work was unsuitable (Ternisien 2009). In the VIP programmes inclusion is not hampered by condescension because the work contributes to pre-existing institutional objectives, and similarly at CSI the Anglo Saxon objects would have deteriorated to a far greater extent without the volunteers. Those that were able gained the type of interventive skills taught at university level courses, and one of the VIP volunteers went on to a university course because of the project (Corsini and Davis 2010: 14). Far from slighting people's abilities to develop these programmes have enabled development.

At decision-making levels non-professionals can be instrumental and have an equal if not greater role to play than trained conservators. CSI volunteers include retired specialists such as historians and surgeons who are highly

valued: 'these all amount to much more than 'willing hands' – they bring their own (and partners'/friends') skills and knowledge to all parts of our project' (CSI 2010). The National Tramway Museum in Derbyshire depends upon retired engineers to restore and maintain the vehicles, and the ongoing conservation volunteer programme for the *HMS Belfast* is continually recruiting for people with previous engineering experience to help restore the ship (Crich Tramway Village Blog 2014; Millar 1991: 82). Non-professional knowledge can also be crucial regarding subjective or intangible object values. Final conservation decisions for the San Cristóbal de Rapaz khipu did not reflect the preferred strategy of the conservation professionals. Far from an insincere or patronizing gesture of inclusion, it could be argued that the conservation could not have been performed according to contemporary international ethical principles without the involvement of the source community (AIC 1994: II; ECCO 2002: II.5 and 6; NZCCM 2006: 5.1). It may be useful to consider including the heritage interpretations and values of a more general public for making conservation decisions to objects besides those relating to indigenous groups from New World countries.

Though at CSI non-professionals conserve valuable items, public participation in museum conservation may be most feasible regarding material not highly valued by the institution. However, the subjectivity of object value can facilitate inclusion without forcing the heritage sector to sacrifice material they feel it is their duty to preserve. Just as objects can hold different significances, the general value attributed to material by museum professionals does not necessarily accord with the perception of others and this can be especially true when professional valuation is low. This duality is already used within the sector: 'it might be much more important to them... we've seen it when children go on these excavations down in their communities... they're bringing in their families to see the piece of pot that they've washed and they maybe value it, but for us ... we more or less record it and that would be it... but it means a lot to them' (Barnard 2010). If an object is highly valued by a non-professional (or, indeed, a professional from a different field) then this value should be acknowledged and the significance of their interaction recognized. Envisioning such a situation as patronizing is belittling because it undermines the value defined by the participant. Furthermore, this mind-set may miss the potential to unlock unrealized value from heritage material: 'you're creating a value almost...within something that wasn't that valuable before' (ibid). Barnard speaks here of potential therapeutic use of archaeological ceramic fragments, which would never normally receive conservation attention from the museum, go on display or be used in research.

### ***Resources***

With increasingly limited resources within the sector there are justifiable anxieties that volunteers may replace trained paid conservators (Steele 2011). Resource restrictions may also inhibit organizations' abilities to run



inclusive initiatives. Museums may not be able to afford to remove conservators from existing duties to supervise volunteers and the costs of managing increased object risk or ensuring participant safety (e.g. training on specialist equipment) may be prohibitive. Additional training for conservators (e.g. regarding volunteer management) may also be an expense many departments cannot afford (Blackadder 2011: 4–5). There are also arguments that unpaid volunteers and interns are themselves exploited in these roles.

It is not always the case that volunteers displace professionals. At CSI, available funding could not cover the cost of employing trained conservators to examine the 2500 archaeological objects recovered, but a far greater proportion are receiving attention through volunteer work. The contribution of VIP participants at LAARC in repackaging the Museum of London's vast archaeological collections is also no threat to paid staff: 'we estimated it would be 25 years to get to the standard of packaging that we wanted...the volunteers [are] shortening that time ... they're not necessarily replacing people but they're reducing the time it would take' (Ganiaris 2010). In both cases qualified conservators are required to train and supervise volunteers – this will be a common need for such work due to the technically specialized nature of the field and risks involved. It should not be denied that some conservation processes can be performed adequately by volunteers and it is better than conservation not being done at all. Though there is an unavoidable element of discomfort in some contexts, the heritage sector relies heavily on a substantial unpaid workforce and it is better for conservators to position themselves at the heart of volunteer management than to shun this inevitable aspect of museum life. Using volunteers also helps to raise the public profile of the discipline which is important for securing funding for different initiatives and protecting the future of the profession, for example by safeguarding the continuation and standards of conservation education programmes (Jones and Holden 2008: 59–68; Pye 2001: 166–199). Indeed, though unpaid work will always be controversial and there are valid objections, when managed well volunteering brings immense benefit to participants and can support those pursuing careers in conservation (Lithgow and Timbrell 2014).

Funding will always be an issue which may prohibit many institutions from participating in inclusive initiatives. Nonetheless it is worth noting that sometimes much can be achieved from very little. Through donations alone Dana Goodburn-Brown managed to acquire microscopes, an X-ray machine, laboratory premises, laboratory and exhibition supplies, and a fume cupboard. Inclusive initiatives may be more likely than others to secure this level of support and/or official funding. For example the 'Your Heritage' Heritage Lottery Fund grant is specifically for projects that engage communities with their local heritage and in order to secure it for the Archive Volunteer Learning Programme at the Museum of London, this 'had to be shown to be... beneficial to the community' (Ganiaris 2010).

#### 4. Conservation Resonances and Social Utilities

Involvement in conservation activities and exposure to the profession's ethical principles may have unique psycho-social utility. Conservation is a positive act of engagement with the external world and establishes the possession of things of value. Involvement in conservation can bring participants within the world of the specialist where real contributions are made, development is uncapped and existing technical skills and/or cultural knowledge can be highly valued. When conducted as a community conservation can solidify common values and nurture a collective sense of responsibility. However, conservation is as much about deconstructing value as attesting it and can also challenge personal principles and expectations and mediate differences.

Whether organizing storage, cleaning, repairing something broken or stabilizing material, conservation aims to improve a situation and its performance or completion can have a positive psychological effect: 'most of us do think it does make us feel better when we've made something whole again' (Barnard 2010). The outcome of conservation usually feels immensely positive and even simple tasks have therapeutic potential through this sense of accomplishment. Conservation is an act of concern which simultaneously confers value to both object and conservator, i.e. this object is worth the expenditure of resources (time, effort, money and materials) and so has value – the person who chooses to spend these resources conducts a positive action by recognising and/or understanding this value and responding to protect it. This can be evidenced on very simple and personal levels, for example, keeping a clean home can help to maintain the commercial value of the property. There is a sense of self-validation in the possession of something worth conserving and in one's own impetus and ability to conserve it. When an individual participates in the conservation of cultural heritage, the sense of personal accomplishment or merit may be enhanced through the knowledge that a contribution has been made to care for something valued by others. A sense of affiliation and belonging may also be nurtured, as conserving an object of heritage can contribute to communal ideals. To be in the position to care for something of cultural value may be especially valuable to those experiencing issues or feelings of exclusion, as seen with the VIP participants.

When items of cultural significance are conserved collectively solidarity can be fostered between group members through the expression of commonly held ideals. For example, the khipu conservation strengthened the bonds of the Rapacino community through the performance of traditional values and hopes for the future. The protection of heritage items of national or global importance can maintain a collective sense of humanity in times of war and remains a public concern in times of peace (Jones and Holden 2008: 32). A sense of shared ownership and responsibility towards heritage items can unite different parts of society. CSI involved partnership between professional conservators and volunteers but also brought together a range of organisations under the common goal of conserving the Anglo Saxon artefacts including the

Sittingbourne Heritage Museum, Kent County Council, Marston's Brewery, Tesco, the Museum of London, The Barbara Piasecka Johnson Foundation, Rapiscan Systems and the Institute of Archaeology (University College London). This aspect of conservation is a key value of the VIP programmes: 'different people from different backgrounds working together to do something useful for the museum' (Corsini *et al.* 2010: 16). Museum conservation can develop otherwise unlikely relationships between individuals, groups and communities with trained conservators and other partners. Such networks can be beneficial for individuals in a variety of ways and for the development of social capital, although this concept has its critics (Portes 2000). Political scientist Robert Putnam attests that social capital can be facilitated through 'greater links between levels in society... individual engagement in public affairs and the existence of community voluntarism... informal sociability and levels of social trust' (Crooke 2007: 67). These components are wholly descriptive of participation in conservation.

The theoretical foundation of the discipline gives conservation a unique capacity to manage ideals and needs which differ or conflict. Contemporary best practice asks practitioners to consider all known object values, and determining treatments involves negotiating different demands on an object and thinking carefully about the consequences of different options. Often resource restrictions or the impossibility of protecting two values simultaneously must be managed and compromises accepted. Conservation ethics encourages awareness of the limitations of individual and contemporary perspectives and knowledge and this humility has great social potential, especially regarding relationships with those who have different opinions and identities. In instances where subaltern value systems are encountered such attributes may foster inclusive attitudes. To understand that there is no ideal condition or course of action is to replace perception of imperfection (in the self, others and the world at large) with tolerance, and to avoid dissatisfaction and conflict through the desire for balance and compromise. Non-professional participants may not always be called upon to make difficult decisions, but exposure to conservation principles and opportunities to learn about objects from other cultures and/or with a range of significances, can foster awareness of the limitations of self and respect for aspects of other. This is crucial for wellbeing and social cohesion.

## Conclusions

Resonances of theoretical movements such as socialism, postmodernism and postcolonialism have challenged relationships that previously found definition or justification through the notion of integral authority. The deconstruction of these relationships is significant to the heritage sector because they have determined how culture has been established, performed and redefined throughout Western history. The recognition of collective cultural values as subjective and temporal as opposed to inherent necessitates a degree of humility and liberalism in the management of material culture and has

affected the way in which individuals, groups, communities and nations relate to their past and forge contemporary identities within public institutions. Perhaps most significantly, questions are raised about the boundaries that exist between professionals and non-professionals, which challenge the ability of a select group to define and translate culture on behalf of all others and reassess the privileges enjoyed by professionals through close proximity to collectively valued objects kept away from the general public.

Yet relationships with objects that are collectively valued and communally important can affect how people feel and think about themselves and others in profound ways and it seems unethical and unsound for this dominance to be exercised only by a select group of people. Obviously the group will always be a minority of the populace, but that it should be an exclusive, unvaried minority, say of professionals, is unnecessary. Of course, the authority of the professional cannot be abolished, people are invited to take part and the museum is still the host, but such involvement can nevertheless offer significant benefits.

The act of conserving, when managed and performed solely by professionals, maintains hegemonic and institutional authority over culturally significant material and not only is the practice a potential obstacle to demands of new museology such as democratization, many of the potential therapeutic or social benefits of the activity remain a professional privilege. Through caring for these objects conservators are established as knowledgeable and trustworthy. This is justified as connoisseurship and academic training are invaluable and benefit a myriad of different people. Professional attributes are legitimate and crucial but non-professionals need not be excluded from all areas of professional activity. Such boundaries can and should be permeated so that the responsibility that comes with professional knowledge can be shared. The resonances of conservation are immensely positive and worth sharing. To be self-conscious about one's own needs and perspectives whilst maintaining a sense of their value is a complex juxtaposition specific to conservation.

To diminish hierarchical cultural communications and foster wellbeing and inclusion without losing direction and purpose is a complex, challenging task. Issues are compounded through nostalgia for past identity and fears of repercussions of contemporary heritage use. Nevertheless, the current roles and capacities of museums and the conservation departments within them cannot be taken for granted and are naturally moulded by ever-changing immediate contexts. Change is inevitable – the real challenge is how to proceed with the greatest levels of ethical utility. Within public museums there is an opportunity for conservation work to support institutional aims to make a positive difference in people's lives. By considering the social benefits of object relationships to current generations, museum-based conservation finds a definitive purpose that meets the demands of new museology. Non-professional involvement in conservation is heritage-led, supports collaboration not replacement and is respectful of participant capabilities. It offers a credible solution to

the many challenges facing museums and their conservators today and presents a great opportunity for the social work of such institutions. It is clear that the philosophies which support the involvement of indigenous communities in the conservation of their heritage have value and relevance beyond this context and can inform wider heritage management in public museums.

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