

ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates that conservation can change objects and sites, both in their material form and in their social significance. It introduces four case studies to show how these changes arise from conservation decisions informed by views of authenticity.

Introduction

The following paper summarizes the PowerPoint presentation I made at the Sharing Conservation Decisions Seminar in Rome on 7 July 2011 on the theme of decision-making. The title of my presentation, “Changing Decisions”, was chosen to highlight ‘change’ and ‘decisions’ because I wanted to explore how we “change our views and decisions, and how we make changes to cultural heritage” through the decisions we make.

The presentation was based on the chapter I contributed to *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics. Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum*, edited by Janet Marstine (2011).¹ I argued in my chapter, “Conservation as enacted ethics”, that conservation interventions can change the material form of objects and sites, and the uses of objects and sites, and what they mean to us and others (Eastop, 2011). The strategy I adopted for my chapter was to select four published accounts of interventive treatments, illustrating a wide range of approaches, and to analyze how conservation ethics were applied² and to what effect. I selected case studies that covered a range of object types and settings, which were undertaken by respected teams and where the interventions were well documented. The case studies are listed below, under headings which highlight key conservation decisions. I hope the following very short statements about the case studies will encourage you to read the conservators’ detailed, illustrated accounts listed in the references.

Deciding on re-establishing presumed original form

Upholstered, wooden chairs with silk top covers, displayed in the matching silk-lined room, for which they were commissioned in c. 1765 as part of the decorative scheme for a historic house in Britain (Gill, 2010).

Deciding on reconstruction

A bodice and skirt of nineteenth century cut, made of seventeenth-century silk embroidered with gold and silver, acquired for a museum’s costume collection in the United States (Knutson, 1991).

Deciding on repainting

A monumental metal sculpture of the first king of Hawai’i, made in Europe in 1880 for Hawai’i, where it is an important local landmark in a regional town far from heritage professionals in the state capital, Honolulu (Wharton, 2008).