

# Collections Conservation

## Some Current Issues and Trends

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**T**he Decade of Indigenous People, resolved and proclaimed 1994–2004 by the United Nations, has encouraged historical reflection, provoked controversy, and stimulated respect for cultural diversity in many corners of the world. The concept of indigenous cultural survival (a reference to those with origin and life in a particular region and environment as opposed to those having political colonization in a particular region) has been expressed through increased public awareness on issues of heritage, social problems, and legal rights. More specifically, many special activities, publications, conferences, and indigenously curated museum exhibitions have confirmed the interest and concern on the part of indigenous populations for their material culture.

New partnerships and responsibilities for the preservation of the physical and cultural integrity for collections of indigenous heritage on the part of museum managers, exhibit designers, educators, and conservators have also been supported by an international indigenous heritage movement. As museums of anthropology throughout the country have developed or remodeled their exhibition halls to effect cultural reconciliation, cultural issues have also affected the traditional behind-the-scene activities, including conservation. Thus, the current priority of collection repatriation claims by tribes under various state laws and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990, the obligation to interpret previous alterations or treatments, and the growing development of tribal museums and cultural centers have aspects that significantly involve the conservation and preservation of artifacts. Some of these aspects contradict the basic tenets of conservation. There is a growing recognition of the need for guidelines on the study, treatment, or non-treatment of these collections.

Conservators are concerned with the preservation and management of cultural property. Studies in the field of conservation have tradi-

tionally approached their objective from a primarily material-based perspective. Typically, the conservator starts with the artifact structure assuming that this is all that remains or needs to be studied. After a review of the construction materials and techniques, comparative methods are used to assess the artifacts' response to the environment or the state of deterioration, and the symptoms of deterioration are examined and reported. Finally, treatment techniques are evaluated and new treatments are devised to stabilize the symptoms of deterioration that are visible on the artifact.

Many curators have observed that museum settings often imbue objects with new meanings, but few have recognized the need to record and evaluate the alteration of items of material culture through their entire existence (i.e., from indigenous manufacture to museum storage or display). However, conservators, such as Carolyn Rose of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, who pioneered the sub-discipline of ethnographic/archeological objects conservation, did. Rose suggested three considerations that went beyond the basic conservation approach that assesses the composition, the construction, and the deterioration of objects.<sup>1</sup> She proposed that after establishing the nature of the object, conservators should consider

- the initial use of the object within its culture,
- the subsequent uses of the object by others, and
- its use in museum education and research.

The need to expand this basis of analysis is closely linked to the current issues of aboriginal repatriation which have forced many archeological and ethnological curators in the United States and elsewhere in the world to review the value of collections with reference to the practice of curation and preservation. The care and treatment of indigenous cultural objects by non-indigenous conservators calls for sensitivity, a different point of view, and different background knowledge from the other sub-disciplines in conservation. To achieve this goal, aspects of cultural context



*Conservation of this Plains Indian beaded moccasin from Agate Fossil Beds National Monument involved discussion with the Oglala Lakota Historical Society, which advised the park on its museum exhibits (AGFO 269). Photo courtesy Department of Conservation, Harpers Ferry Center, National Park Service.*

must be considered by the conservator. These include the context of collection or acquisition (intent, research design, method); the context of current conservation methods or trends at the time of collection; and the context of current indigenous issues and priorities including the long-term preservation approaches and techniques used by indigenous peoples.

Conservators charged with the preservation of indigenous collections must gain a knowledge of the legal requirements regarding the repatriation of claimed collections, uphold a moral responsibility to professional ethical standards, and adopt greater sensitivity to ethnic concerns that relate to particular collections. These issues are of such importance that they have begun to change the way we manage and conserve collections. Some examples that illustrate current areas of concern include the following.

#### ***Legal Issues: Documenting the Use of Chemical Pesticides on Collections***

With the passage of NAGPRA, American Indian tribes have begun to receive cultural objects previously held in museum collections. Many of these objects have been treated with chemical poisons to aid in preservation. The need for information that is specific to objects in order to reduce the potential human health risks involved in handling these returned objects is a serious concern. The NAGPRA regulations (43 CFR 10.10(e)) indicate that

The museum official or Federal agency official must inform the recipients of repatriations of any presently known treatment of human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony with pesticides,

preservatives, or other substances that represent a potential hazard to the objects or to persons handling objects.<sup>2</sup>

While modern conservation is a relatively new profession for museum collections, it is usually the conservator that can best determine the motives, materials, and methods used in previous preservation activities. The same skills that are honed by the conservator to execute stabilizing or restorative treatments are now needed to accurately study and interpret the evidence of any previous action received by the artifact. These might include chemical preservatives or pesticides, mounts or alterations made for exhibition, or restorative treatments.

In the case of potential chemical contamination by pesticides, conservators striving to meet the requirements of NAGPRA must obtain and provide an introductory understanding of the rationale for the use of chemical poisons in the context of their institution's collection history. They must physically examine, screen by spot testing, or instrumentally analyze the artifacts. They must learn the potential health risks in re-introducing a functional object back into the community through preservation, handling, restoration, or use. They must be prepared to coordinate, interpret, and disseminate information on medical referral and/or health care professionals including chemical hygienists and medical toxicologists.

#### ***Ethical Standards: Changing Perspectives in Conservation***

The goal of conservation is to preserve cultural property. Professional ethics promote honest and responsible behavior, provide guidelines for practice, and assist in the solution of moral dilemmas. Historically, for most conservators, there is an ethical responsibility to the historic and aesthetic integrity of the object. However, due to their size, diversity, history of neglect, and potentially changing legal status most conservators of ethnographic and archeological collections believe that different approaches, treatments, and ethics are required for the preservation of these collections. For example, preservation efforts that merely focus on single issues like cleaning, coating, aesthetic integration of damaged areas, or complete restoration, often exacerbate original problems and create new ones. Comprehensive and professional conservation reports are most useful when they are combined with reports from other disciplines to form part of the necessary information for long-range strategic planning,

repatriation consultations and transfers, and ongoing collection care.

Some of the most important issues that complicate the ethical process of determining appropriate conservation care and treatment for objects of ethnographic and archeological origin are the growing size of research-based collections, the intrinsic research potential of an entire complex of diverse materials that accompany systematic collections, the larger concerns of ownership, and the associated but non-tangible attributes, such as music made by an instrument or the religious power of an object. The preservation of archeological collections includes a wide range of artifacts as well as environmental samples (pollen, soil, flotation, faunal), chronometric samples (archeomagnetism, dendrochronology, radiocarbon), human remains (cremations or inhumations), and archeological archives (photographs, field and laboratory records, maps, computerized data, reports and publications, and legal and budgetary materials).

In addition to the physical needs of the material, the conservation needs of research collections are characterized by the dynamics of their volume, the rate of their growth, the new developments in the disciplines that use them for research, and requirements of preservation laws and regulations. The conservator must be aware that all the characteristics that make these collections appropriate for research use must be preserved. When these collections are cataloged in lots and organized in like groups, the conservation concerns for environmental controls and specialized supports or housings are more easily addressed, but concerns for contextual information are more difficult to resolve.

Conservators are attempting to institute professional practices, to recognize professional standards, and to identify minimal educational requirements. For example, The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works is exploring the benefits and responsibilities of certification within conservation.<sup>3</sup> The organization has already worked with the U.S. Secretary of the Interior to formulate minimum professional standards for conservators since conservation is now listed as one of the recognized professions in the National Historic Preservation Act. With the creation and enforcement of laws to protect illegally obtained cultural property, conservators must now understand the ethical implications of working with such materials.

### ***Ethnic Sensitivity: Special Approaches to Indigenous Collections***

Developments in both new legal regulations and changing professional attitudes have begun to influence the approach conservators take in the care and treatment of cultural property. New methodologies must include serious consideration of both tangible and non-tangible information. Non-tangible information may be defined as that information that provides the contextual meaning or sympathetic understanding of objects. It may or may not reflect the original artist's or maker's intent but may reveal equally significant information regarding the cultural purpose or function of an artifact. For example, a deformed basket may reflect normal use, or it may represent poor care. This information, combined with data concerning the entire life of the object, will help to clarify the approach needed for preservation activities.

Of particular importance is the role of tribal people in the process of preservation. With advice, conservators and collection managers may need to consider special requirements in the conservation process such as: separation of certain objects from other objects; separation of objects from differing cultures; use of housings and barriers that do not seal completely; placement that is specific to direction, or height that is relational to the ground level, and position or proximity to other cultural objects; care that includes scheduled access for offerings or blessings; or access for activities that go beyond viewing, such as use.

There is a greater need for "two-way" exchanges between conservators and indigenous peoples regarding the care and conservation of collections. The opportunity to share and disseminate modern technologies, while providing an effective experience in "real" conservation issues, problems, and practices, poses a new challenge for conservators. Examples of indigenous involvement have enabled the inclusion of important cultural perspectives to the conservation plan for a collection or a particular piece. A greater awareness of the lifeways and value systems of indigenous groups whose work is being conserved has offered significant advantages to the conservation process. For example, indigenous opinion regarding appropriate conditions for storage, interpretation while on exhibit, the level of cleaning or shininess for pieces of jewelry, or the determination of appropriate levels of loss compensation

for damaged painted surfaces, lost feathers, or missing beads can be extremely useful.

### Conclusions

The application of these new areas of concern to conservation have begun to clarify and expand the traditional basic considerations by requiring a greater interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and historic understanding than has previously been practiced. The Collections Assessment Program (CAP) and the Save our Sculptures (SOS) campaigns that are administered by Heritage Preservation have been tremendously successful in raising public awareness of conservation and providing outreach efforts to many small museums, historical sites and communities throughout the nation.<sup>4</sup> Creative application of these programs has begun to help tribal museums and cultural centers, archeological sites, and other cultural resource institutions to participate and benefit. As conservators of ethnographic and archeological collections grapple with the task of explaining the goals of conservation and how to choose a competent conservator, they must continue to consider a wider range of issues related to indigenous collections. A greater awareness of

relevant legal issues, the inclusion of revised ethical standards, and a willingness to learn and include new cultural perspectives have become major components to the practice of conservation in 2000.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Carolyn Rose, "Ethical and Practical Considerations in Conserving Ethnographic Museum Objects." In *The Museum Conservation of Ethnographic Objects*, edited by T. Morita and C. Pearson. *Senri Ethnological Series 23*. (Osaka, Japan: National Museum of Ethnology, 1988), 5-43.
- <sup>2</sup> A full text of NAGPRA, the rules, and minutes of the Review Committee meetings may be found at <<http://www.cr.nps.gov/aad/nagpra.htm> > and <<http://www.cast.uark.edu/products/NAGPRA/nagpra.dat/tgm005.html> >.
- <sup>3</sup> Information about the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works may be found at <<http://aic.stanford.edu> >.
- <sup>4</sup> Information about the programs of Heritage Preservation may be found at <<http://www.heritagepreservation.org> >.

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## Florissant Fossil Beds Creates Database of Non-NPS Collections

Paleontological collections of 34-million-year-old plant and insect fossils from the area around Florissant, Colorado, were made for about a century before the creation of Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument. These collections include the type specimens for about 1,500 new species that have been described in numerous publications. Some of the early publications did not illustrate these specimens, nor did they indicate the museums where they were to be kept. In some cases, entire museum collections were transferred to other museums, which then assigned new catalog numbers. Currently, the type and published collections of Florissant fossils are housed in at least 14 different museums throughout North America and Europe. Some of these museums do not maintain computerized databases. As a consequence of these factors, information pertaining to Florissant type and published specimens has become complexly scattered throughout the literature and among different museums.

I have been engaged in a project since 1995 to integrate all of the museum collection and publication data into a new database. More than a dozen museums from Berkeley to London have been visited to examine collections and acquire data on site. New photographs are being taken for all of these specimens, some of which have not been illustrated previously or were illustrated only by drawings. The equivalent of about one year has been spent on-site at these museums.

The illustrated database includes about 5,000 specimens. It will be made available as a web site—a virtual museum of the important fossils from Florissant. This will help lead researchers directly to the museums where these important fossils are housed.

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