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**COLLECTIONS MOBILITY PERSPECTIVES****ON CONSERVATION:****EMPHASIS ON THE ORIGINAL OBJECT**

The present paper is about the ways in which conservation and the care of objects affect the mobility of museum objects, and whether objects are or are not lent to other institutions. It discusses the status and fascination of original objects; the role of condition in assessing the feasibility of loans and in monitoring the welfare of objects during loans; the conservation risks involved and the ways of working with them. Finally, it explores the possible future developments that may enhance collections mobility in Europe while preserving collections.

**THE DESIRE TO BORROW (AND TO VIEW) ORIGINAL OBJECTS**

Objects are lent by one institution to another because they have value as original objects; indeed most visitors go to museums expecting to see 'real things'. We may value objects in many different ways because we each bring our own knowledge and expectations to an encounter with an object. For me, a shocking and thrilling experience was to enter a gallery in the Musée de l'Armée at Les Invalides in Paris and to face, quite unexpectedly and set among military splendour, Napoleon's severely plain greatcoat and hat, so familiar from portraits (and presumably resonant with meaning for many Europeans) (Les Invalides 2010).

Most people expect museum objects to not just be real but also to portray some of the values that we look for, or expect. Therefore, we may expect an object to look old, or beautiful, or to demonstrate technical ingenuity (or possibly all of these). Objects are often described as having lives, and the biography may be written in visible traces that indicate the events that have affected the object (wear, damage, repair, re-painting, and so on) (Silverstone 1994; Pearce 1994; Peers 1999; Pye 2001). Therefore, a well-thumbed

## **THE ADVANTAGES OF AGREED CONSERVATION STANDARDS**

### **Assessment of condition and condition reports**

The use of agreed checklists or proformas, and agreed terminologies, would make information more readily accessible to the lender and host. It would help to ensure that when examining an object the same features and factors would be checked and considered; and information would be recorded using standardised, understandable terms.

### **Packaging and transport of objects**

The agreed standards would go some way to ensure that art handlers use the appropriate types of packaging materials and methods, handling practices, and methods of transport (e.g. type of vehicle). There should also be agreement about the type and frequency of monitoring during lengthy periods of transit.

Note: It might be appropriate to set up some form of training for carriers that want to enter this market.

### **Installation of exhibits**

Adherence to guidelines would ensure that an appropriate period of acclimatisation would be agreed on and applied before the installation of an exhibition. It would also reassure the lender about the standard of unpacking and handling during installation.

### **Monitoring and maintaining the environment**

The use of guidelines would support the lender in stipulating reasonable environmental conditions, and would facilitate agreement on the equipment to be used as well as the frequency and detail of monitoring.

### **Monitoring of condition during a loan**

As with the environment, adherence to guidelines would reassure the lender and host about the frequency and detail of the monitoring of the objects, the use of existing condition reports as benchmarks, and the detail required when recording any changes.

### **Protocols for communication between the lender and host about conservation issues**

Guidelines would prompt the lender and host to agree on when and how to communicate and on who the responsible person is at each institution.

book, or a battered suit of armour may have greater significance left in that state than if they were rejuvenated through restoration. Such traces may link the object to people or events and thus enliven the object for the viewer.

That life [of an object] gains its meaning through the various social, economic, political and cultural environments through which it passes, and its passage can in turn illuminate those environments in the way that a flare or a tracer can illuminate the night sky (Silverstone 1994).

Unfortunately, these life-traces are vulnerable to deterioration and damage. Many traces are carried in, or on, the surface of objects, and may be quite subtle. Surfaces are vulnerable to physical damage from handling, moving, transporting, or to stresses caused by fluctuating humidity, or to chemical damage through exposure to high levels of light or pollutants. All of these problems may occur during a loan: the possibilities of physical damage are obvious, changes in relative humidity are a hazard of moving objects from one environment to another, light levels in an exhibition may not be sufficiently accommodated for the most vulnerable objects, and pollutants may be exuded from new display cases, fresh paint, and untested textile backings (Lee and Thickett 1996; Ashley-Smith 1999).

Conservation may be needed to prepare an object for loan. The aim of conservation is to modify the environment, or to remove or add materials in order to reduce damage or enhance stability (or both). Therefore, conservation may involve providing an improved storage mount for a fragile textile, or stipulating only a short-term display in low light levels to minimise fading on a watercolour painting; it may involve extracting salts from a ceramic dish because their crystals are damaging to the decorative glaze; or it may involve the local application of adhesive to reattach paint flakes on a panel painting. Thus, every conservation process has some effect on the object, and adds an event to the life of that respective object. Ill-judged conservation processes, however, may alter the traces that give life to an object. By cleaning a metal object, it is possible to eradicate all indications of age, by restoring a polychrome sculpture it is possible to mask all signs of successive repaints through the life of the object (Pye 2001).

Before any form of conservation, it is important to understand what is significant (what is valued) about an object so that, as far as possible, this is respected and preserved. Thus, the naval uniform coat that Admiral Nelson was wearing when he was killed at the battle of Trafalgar in 1805 (now in the National Maritime Museum in London) has been conserved so that the musket ball damage and blood stains are still evident (National Maritime Museum 2010).

## **COLLECTIONS MOBILITY AND RISK**

Why is conservation involved in making decisions about loans? There is undoubted risk in moving objects either within the institution or over the distances involved in loans and touring exhibitions. The conservator's role is to assess the current state of the object, assess the way it will be transported and used during the loan, and to evaluate the likely risk to the object itself.

Lending is usually linked to temporary exhibitions. Exhibitions are increasingly travelling from one venue to another, so that the objects may be away from their home institution for many months. Some objects are frequently requested for loan and, therefore, considerable stress may be put on a limited range of objects. Risks are involved in many of the stages of a loan: the increased handling involved in the assessment, preparatory conservation, photography, packaging, transport, unpacking, and installation. In general, the risks are reasonably well understood, which is why some objects will not be lent. The awareness of risks has prompted research into the effects of vibration and changing climate during transport as well as the development of improved methods and materials for packaging such as climate controlled packing cases (Mecklenburg 1991). Understanding risks has also led to the development of protocols relating to conservation, which have been adopted by many institutions as a part of their loans policies and procedures (Edson and Dean 1994; Horniman 2002; British Museum 2006). The Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) has developed a Standard Loan Agreement format that embodies these (NEMO 2010).

## **ACCEPTING RISK IN ORDER TO FACILITATE ACCESS TO REAL OBJECTS**

Conservation should be a means for facilitating (and even increasing) the use of objects. It should not be used as an excuse to limit access to them – refusing to lend an object on weak conservation grounds should be considered poor practice. Conservators have become much more aware of their responsibilities to make objects accessible; indeed, in 2008 there was a large international congress on this very topic (Saunders *et al* 2008). However, conservators also have the professional responsibility to protect and care for objects (collections are often regarded as cultural capital), so there remain tensions between the need to provide access and the need to conserve.

In the 1960s, an unnamed Swedish official caused consternation when (as reported by Jan Hjorth) he said that:

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He regarded collections as consumer goods, they existed for the general public, and if they stayed in storerooms they would, of course, be preserved for the next generation, and the next, and the next – but, in the end, no generation would ever see them. Better then to show them, tour them and risk them (Hjorth 1994: 106).

Half a century later, we know much more about the risks of touring and have researched and improved packaging and transport methods, so surely this attitude is the only sensible one to have towards the objects that are held in trust for us all? Surely we should adopt this attitude when we know that many museums have large parts of their collections in more or less permanent storage, representing many millions of invisible and unused objects across Europe (Keene 2005). Museum storage is expensive to maintain, objects are regularly added to collections and, in some museums, the storage of the archive is considered to be reaching a crisis point (Merriman and Swain 1999). The same Swedish official went on to express the view that:

If a few objects disappeared, or were damaged, there would still be objects enough left to satisfy everybody in the future (Hjorth 1994: 106).

Some people view heritage as a renewable resource, constantly being added to (Holtdorf 2001). This supports the argument that using collections, even if we risk losing some items, is not irresponsible, but it should be judiciously encouraged as it makes objects accessible. Although much debated, this also strengthens the argument for making more objects accessible through handling. Many groups benefit from being able to handle objects, particularly those who are blind or have some visual impairment, but the old 'do not touch' rule lingers on both in perception and in actuality (Pye 2007; Khayami 2007). This deters many people from visiting museums. For them, 'do not touch' equates to 'not welcome here'. More research is needed into the risks and benefits of handling but it is already possible to assess whether objects are in a condition that would allow supervised touch and handling (Munday 2002; Lamb 2007). Unused objects could be said to be effectively dead; being in active use extends their life.

### **CONSERVATION, CONDITION, AND VALUE**

Conservation is involved in assessing risk; it is also involved in assessing whether an object can withstand the risks to which it may be exposed. Whether or not an institution is ready to lend an object will depend to a large extent on the condition of the object and the risks inherent in a particular loan.

This assessment of condition requires experience since it is subjective – we may all have slightly different views of the condition of an object. Condition is also relative and, therefore, it is a slippery concept; it means little on its own and needs qualification. However, what do we mean by 'good condition' or 'poor condition'? To determine this we also need a context 'good condition considering it has been buried for thousands of years'; 'good enough condition to be put on display' (Keene 1996; Caple 2000; Pye 2001). When considering museum objects and particularly considering loans, the definition of condition must relate to the way the object is to be transported and used during the loan, so an object may be pronounced to be in a condition suitable to be lent to a short-term exhibition in a single venue, but not to an exhibition that will travel to three different venues over the following year. Thus, the condition assessment focuses on the object's fitness for purpose. Also to be considered is how condition relates to value: one person's damage (which implies poor condition) may be another person's valued evidence (for example, worn and crudely darned clothing may say much about the poverty and limited skills of the original wearer).

Highly valued objects may simply not be lent, for fear of the risks involved, but also because they are key features of a museum's collection that their own visitors will expect to see (British Museum 2006). During a loan, apart from total loss (through theft or disaster), the main risk is damage to an object, and damage can be defined as the loss of some aspect of value (Ashley-Smith 1999). Damage also needs qualification to be understandable, thus catastrophic damage would be considered to imply an irretrievable loss of value. It is also relative: a tiny amount of damage on a highly valued object may be considered far more serious than much greater damage on a lesser object.

It is impossible to eliminate all risks associated with loans because some are outside our control (road crash, earthquake) and this is generally accepted, for example the British Museum Loans Policy speaks of lending if the risks 'are considered reasonable' (British Museum 2006 Para 2.4). To deal with the risks that are considered more controllable, a range of processes is involved in assessing and maintaining the condition of a lent object. An important tool used during the loan process is the condition report (Caple 2000; Pye 2001). This acts as a benchmark against which to measure any damage during the loan. Reports must detail all the pre-existing blemishes or damage so that it is possible to identify any new changes. The condition will be monitored at each stage in a travelling exhibition and then compared to the most recent report. These reports are also important when agreeing on, or disputing, the extent of damage and levels of compensation.

To prepare an object for loan, conservators may need to undertake remedial work on the object itself. This may be necessary to strengthen parts in order to ensure it can withstand the potential effects of travel, or the work may be cosmetic because the object needs to be presentable for display. This exhibition-led work may be seen as unethical (particularly if it involves restoration), but if it makes it possible to exhibit an object this accords with the aim to make objects accessible, and it may also represent an improvement in the condition of that object (Ashley-Smith 1999).

## **THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE LENDER AND BORROWER**

Conditions required for the object during display will be stipulated by the lender and agreed by the borrower (Wilson 1992; Edson and Dean 1994). These cover both security measures, and preventive conservation requirements such as specific light and humidity levels and the quality of the materials used in display cases. It is obviously important that these conditions are maintained and not allowed to slip.

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The staff of the lending institution is often heavily involved in ensuring that objects are not put to unnecessary risk. This is time-consuming, particularly as it often involves specialist staff acting as couriers. They are involved because the lending institution has a moral (and normally also legal) responsibility to ensure the preservation of the objects it holds. Staff of the lending institution familiar with the objects (conservators or curators) normally accompany any major loan during travel, check the condition on arrival (using the condition report as a benchmark), and supervise the acclimatisation, unpacking and installation in the new context. Installation is a particularly risky stage in the whole process of creating an exhibition. Particularly when dealing with large, heavy or awkward-shaped objects it is crucial that the borrowing institution uses a team of experienced handlers – serious damage (to object and to personnel) can result from inexperienced and poorly controlled manoeuvring of such objects. It is also important that if any problem arises during the loan, such as accidental physical damage, or failure of climate control, the lending institution is informed immediately. It is unethical for the borrowing institution to attempt to deal with the problem without enabling the lender to send a specialist to inspect and rectify the damage, or at the very least to provide advice. This is because the borrower may not



know enough about the object (e.g. its significance and previous conservation history) nor about the conservation policies of the lender. On the other hand, unless previously agreed, it is not acceptable to lend an object in such condition that it requires conservation by the borrowing institution.

## **ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES**

What alternative approaches are there that may limit the risks to real objects, but still contribute to sharing knowledge? The stress on objects can be minimised by limiting the number of times that they are lent. A way to limit the exposure of any one type of object to the risks involved in loans is to spread the load across different types of collection and to use minor as well as major works. Fascination may be provided by seemingly ordinary objects such as the domestic equipment of past centuries, or of another culture. 'Social history collections ...are some of those that particularly engage people' (Keene 2005: 7). Blind and partially sighted people gain information and pleasure from exhibitions of objects that can be touched or handled. Some of the strengths and charms of temporary exhibitions are the new experiences provided by placing objects in new contexts, juxtaposed with new companions. More ordinary and robust objects would be easier (and less expensive) to send round as their transport could be handled by trusted professional art shippers, and their unpacking and installation could be dealt with by the staff of the borrowing institution. Drawing on collections across Europe would seem to offer rich possibilities here.

In some cases, models and replicas can be used to provide an understanding of the working objects. Modern imaging techniques have also increased our ability to make objects accessible (MacDonald 2006). Digital imaging has enabled many institutions to put their collections on line thus providing virtual accessibility throughout Europe and beyond. Imaging also allows for the virtual restoration of objects to show what they may once have looked like, showing faded colours as they once were, or reconstructing a damaged object by virtually replacing missing parts (Geary 2004). These processes limit the need to intervene on the object itself. In the case of temporary exhibitions visitors may be interested to know why an object that otherwise may have fitted the theme of the exhibition has had to be excluded for conservation reasons. Here, also, is the opportunity to use digital imaging, not only to display the 'missing' object but also to tell the story of its condition and conservation. Three-dimensional imaging and virtual handling are also being researched but do not yet provide a satisfactory experience (Prytherch and Jefsoutine 2007). However, technologies are developing so fast that these may provide a further aspect of virtual mobility.

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Some mechanical or motorised objects are displayed in motion in order to demonstrate their function; for this reason, many clocks in the British Museum tick, strike and chime (British Museum 2010a). However, these objects are difficult to lend to other institutions because of the specialised skills needed to run and maintain them. Animated images can provide alternative and excellent demonstrations of how objects function, such as ‘how does a mechanical watch work?’ as an animation on the British Museum website (British Museum 2010b).

### **COMMUNICATING ISSUES**

Many visitors are fascinated by the processes that go on behind the scenes at museums. Information about conservation is now frequently included in exhibitions – for example to show what may be learned about an object during the conservation process (such as understanding methods of fabrication, identification of pigments or metals), or to explain why it is necessary to display vulnerable objects in low light levels. Indeed, it could be seen as a deterrent to visitors if the need for low light levels is not explained (people tend to think museums are gloomy places). The addition of information about conservation issues can generate lively interest.

### **CONCLUSIONS: ENHANCING MOBILITY, MINIMISING RISK**

Encouraging the mobility of collections provides opportunities to widen knowledge, and pleasure, and to increase European collaboration. Conservation should not be used as an excuse unreasonably to obstruct loans. However, some measures could be taken to improve the current situation.

Given the risks, varying the range of objects included in touring exhibitions could have the beneficial effect of encouraging the loan of categories of objects that have, perhaps, been less mobile than major art works, thereby preventing the concentration of risks on a relatively small range of objects. Digital imaging and the ability to display virtual collections throughout the Internet can be used to alleviate the pressure on ‘real things’. These techniques can also be used not just to display objects that cannot be lent, but also to augment exhibitions and extend the understanding of individual objects.

The ways in which loans are organised rely to a considerable extent on trust between institutions and colleagues. To involve more institutions in lending or borrowing objects throughout Europe requires the extension of this trust. The NEMO Loan Agreement is a welcome development. Although addi-

tional bureaucracy is not often welcome, it would be useful to develop agreed European standards for assessing and reporting on condition, and for using condition reports. Exhibitions are costly in terms of the involvement of the staff of lending institutions, so it would also be helpful to draw up standards of practice for professional art shippers relating to the care of objects in transit. Agreed standards for installation, monitoring, and maintenance of exhibition conditions, and for checking the condition of displayed objects could also make it more possible for lenders to entrust borrowers with the task of unpacking and installing objects. Fortunately, many institutions have standards that they stipulate and/or comply with, and some relevant European standards are already under development through the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN 2010; see also CEN Conservation 2010 for a list of standards being developed).

Although achieving agreement on broadly applicable standards requires extensive consultation and discussion, agreed conservation standards could facilitate the mobility of many collections (though, of course, major and unique works would still require special treatment).

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