

CONTEMPORARY THEORY OF CONSERVATION, BY SALVADOR MUÑOZ VIÑAS

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Theoretical studies on conserving cultural assets to which a given community attaches value date back to more than two centuries ago. Various thinkers on Restoration matters have set out their approaches and reflections on how to conserve buildings and areas of interest for posterity, which have influenced interventions in them by means of tackling the subject in a dialectic between the theory and practice of conserving the heritage.

In his book, "Contemporary Theory of Conservation", Salvador Muñoz Viñas asserts that there currently exists a Contemporary Theory of Conservation which is to be set against the Classical Theories known to the community of restoration specialists. He recognizes that this contemporary theory is articulated by diverse, as often as fragmented, sources who go beyond the universe of restoration. This is why the book engages on a profound and coherent analysis of the ideas upon which contemporary thinking on the conservation of cultural assets is founded. In addition to which, it revisits the tenets of classical theories ranging from the mid-18th to the late 20th century.

The book is a broad and rich investigation of the universe in question, and endeavours to organize the ideas into a coherent theory. The end result is the patching together of the fragments that reveal patterns and meanings which, at first, might seem disperse or even contradictory. Muñoz Viñas manages to be wide-ranging without losing focus or depth of analysis, and weaves concepts, elements and paradigms into a clear and direct approach.

His reasoned argument is laid out in nine chapters which can be grouped into three categories. The first two chapters explain the underlying principles of conservation and its specific identity, as well as the problems that arise from the application of classical theories. The following three chapters deal with the classical core notions of objectivity and truth in conservation. The final four chapters put forward new ethical paradigms, such as sustainability or adaptability, which give shape to the arguments for the Contemporary Theory of Conservation. And lastly, they indicate the care taken over the contemporary tenets previously analysed.

With regard to chapter 1 specifically, its content deals with the definition of conservation by means of a brief historical look at the conservation of cultural assets. It teases out the difference between preservation and restoration. It then concludes that conservation is the compilation of practices of preservation and restoration.

The author understands that Preservation is defined by the non-deliberate action of perceptible changes to heritage items, while Restoration deals with the deliberate action of

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perceptible changes to them. He also divides Preservation into (1) actions of direct preservation and (2) actions of environmental preservation; the reviewer's understanding is that the former refer to changes in the object and time-limited actions; while the latter refer to changes in the environment in which the object is set and to actions with no time limitation.

In Chapter 2, the author tackles the objects for conservation, identifies problems in the traditional categories and proposes how symbols and meanings should be understood. He observes that the definition of the object to be conserved arises from its symbolic power, with the following exceptions: Riegl's deliberate monuments, and contemporary masterpieces.

He emphasizes that the meanings of the objects of conservation are interrelated in a tridimensional space called "the conservation space" (Michalski apud Muñoz Viñas, 2005, p. 63), which has three axes that bound the three types of meaning ascribed to an object of conservation: private, social and scientific. This model allows for a better comprehension of the factors that identify the objects of conservation. However, this does not mean quantification or objectivity in their separation from the rest.

Chapter 3 discusses questions related to truth, objectivity and the definition of scientific conservation. Moreover, it observes the specificity of the architectural object as compared to the other objects subject to conservation, with an emphasis on the peculiarity of the conservation of architecture.

It also examines the concept of truth in the Classical Theories of Conservation from the point of view of scientific and aesthetical approaches, placing special emphasis on the physical dimension of the object of conservation and the practice of its scientific conservation. The author argues that the scientific conservation of heritage objects refers to the conservation of the heritage material, in an allusion to a fetish of the material.

On the other hand, in Chapter 4 the author discusses the decline of the truth and objectivity of the material. He understands that the heritage object examined from the point of view of legibility and from what occurs regarding damage to it demonstrates the inadequacy of the argument for objectivity and truth of the material. He then stresses the need for an approach based on the subjectivity and the intangibility of heritage assets.

When discussing the patina, severe damage caused by catastrophes, restoration and vandalism, Muñoz Viñas introduces non-deliberate changes (the first two) and deliberate changes (the last two) to the object of conservation. He argues that the patina and restoration add to the value of the object while the other two reduce it.

He warns that objective theories are questioned by both classical theorists of an aesthetic orientation and contemporary theorists. The former argue for the importance of aesthetic value and the latter for symbolic values and communicative functions when decisions are to be made on heritage objects.

In Chapter 5, Muñoz Viñaz goes on a brief excursion into the real world by bringing conservation and science face to face. He demonstrates that there is a hiatus in how they communicate with each other, and draws attention to the complexity of the phenomenon in which cultural assets are found: a host of objects, a diversity of subjects, multiple ways of looking at them and various points of view.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the arguments on the shift in the conservation viewpoint: from objects to subjects. Conservation starts to be understood in a permanent relationship between objects and subjects, whether affected or involved.

Nevertheless, the theory is not a radical relativism, but rather about observing the importance of inter-subjectivity in the conservation process. Objects change into being capable of being objects of interest to conservation due to their relevance to a considerable number of people within a community and among communities. Their importance arises from the meanings attributed to the objects by the subjects and not from something inherent to the asset or material.

Obviously, this approach goes against the authority of the heritage experts, but it does not exclude them. Rather it understands that instead of being about experts and non-experts, the relevant issue is the sum total of stakeholders, or interested parties. It recognizes that in this universe there will be meanings in confrontation, and that the syntheses that will take place in this relationship will be a result of decisions within a culture and among cultures and will depend on prioritizing the values identified by the interested parties.

Based on the foregoing, the author asserts that conservation is no longer an action of conserving truths, but rather of the meanings of cultural assets. That is to say, there may be “many truths” in one object; therefore, deciding which truth and which goal must prevail in each case is essential and is also a preliminary stage in the decision-making process for conservation. The function and use of the cultural asset are stressed as being relevant in this process of establishing meaning.

In Chapter 8, Muñoz Viñas deals with a crucial element of contemporary conservation: the heirs of the conservation objects. The author claims that, if the Contemporary Theory of Conservation gives relevance only to the subjects throughout the process and to their decisions, problems regarding different “tastes” that might influence such decisions will occur.

Muñoz Viñas examines the controversies regarding the valuation of objects of conservation by the subjects within the same generation and between generations. The author then discusses two fundamental questions: the reversibility of the intervention and minimum intervention in the objects of conservation. *A priori* these have opposite meanings, but both aim at the efficient preservation of cultural assets.

The author argues that reversibility is an impossible goal, as opposed to minimum intervention. That is why the author argues that conservation should aim at minimum intervention and maximum benefit, keeping in mind an important contemporary conceptual tool: the principle of Sustainability. Muñoz Viñas builds on the traditional application regarding the economic and ecological notion of the term, and thus shows that contemporary theory argues for the importance of applying the concept to the significance of the object from one generation to another.

This is the challenge of the Contemporary Theory of Conservation, which presumes the stakeholders are skilled at negotiating with each other based on all the conservationists having a wide range of knowledge and competencies. Muñoz Viñas observes that the most difficult matter in this negotiation process is the position adopted by the conservationists in the light of the plurality of the people involved: they should be wise enough to understand when they should not make their opinions prevail, but should indeed give the highest value to the opinions of the community involved with the object of conservation.

In the last chapter, Muñoz Viñas stresses the flexibility of the criteria for identifying and acting on the object of conservation, which should be adapted to the inter-subjective, synchronic and diachronic needs, in order to take account of ethical abuses with regard to demagogical or ideological positions. This is a revolution of common sense arising out of

the Contemporary Theory of Conservation, which does not presuppose a lack of rules and contingencies in general; on the contrary, ethics at its highest level is a condition *sine qua non* for this process.

There is no doubt that Post-Modernity has raised challenges just as complex or more so in the universe of conservation of cultural assets of interest that should be remembered and remain permanent for future generations. Salvador Muñoz Viñaz urges us to reflect on the specificities of restoring heritage assets, and constructs an understanding of this universe according to other areas of knowledge, such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology and history.

Taking as a starting point the traditional and consolidated vision of Classical Theories of Conservation, Muñoz Viñaz shows the contradictions and presents the elements that form the new Contemporary Theory of Conservation, using clear and concise arguments. It is, undoubtedly, one of the most important ground-breaking texts of the last few years in the discipline of the conservation of heritage assets.