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The Importance of Preferences and Taste in the Conservation of Works of Art

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Die Bedeutung von persönlichen Präferenzen und Geschmack in der Konservierung von Kunstgegenständen – Zusammenfassung

Die Art, wie wir ein Objekt behandeln und präsentieren, beeinflusst unweigerlich seine Erscheinung, Integrität und Werte, und damit die Art, wie der Betrachter es wahrnimmt. Während der Konservierung von Kunstgegenständen werden wir mit einer Fülle von Möglichkeiten und Optionen konfrontiert, ein Problem zu lösen und das Endergebnis zu präsentieren. Es muss eine Reihe von Entscheidungen getroffen werden, welche fraglos sowohl einen Einfluss auf das technische und ästhetische Resultat, als auch auf die Bedeutung und die Werte des Objektes haben.

Der gleiche Kulturgegenstand, potenziell von verschiedenen Restauratoren behandelt, würde auf unterschiedliche Art bearbeitet, ergänzt und präsentiert werden und jede Version könnte akzeptabel und korrekt sein. In der Tat gibt es wahrscheinlich kein richtig und falsch, wenn es um ästhetische Entscheidungen geht. Glücklicherweise arbeiten wir im allgemeinen nicht alleine und diese Entscheidungen werden idealerweise zusammen mit Kollegen, Experten und sonstigen Beteiligten verglichen, besprochen und vereinbart. Das gilt besonders für die technischen Aspekte unserer Tätigkeit. Wenn es jedoch um Entscheidungen ästhetischer Natur geht, so sind wir oft weniger geneigt, eine Zweitmeinung einzuholen,

The Importance of Preferences and Taste in the Conservation of Works of Art – Abstract

The way we treat and present any object will inevitably affect its appearance, integrity and values, and therefore the way the public will perceive it. During the process of conserving works of art we are generally confronted with a wide array of possibilities and options, with different ways to resolve a problem or present the finished work. A series of decisions have to be made, and these will unquestionably affect the result, both on a technical and aesthetic level, as well as the object's significance and values.

It is often the case that, the same artefact, treated by different conservators, would potentially be tackled, completed and presented in different ways, and they can each be acceptable and right. In fact, there is probably no right or wrong when it comes to choices of an aesthetic nature. Fortunately we do not generally work alone and these decisions are ideally contrasted, discussed and agreed with other colleagues, experts and stakeholders, especially those regarding the technical aspects of our work. However, we are not always so inclined to go through the same process of asking for second opinions on decisions affecting the aesthetics of

da wir alle unsere eigenen Präferenzen und Vorstellungen von Geschmack haben, welche, wie wir wissen, oft schwieriger konkret auszudrücken sind. Auf dieser Vorstellung von Geschmack gründen fraglos viele Entscheidungen, die wir im Laufe unserer Tätigkeit treffen, ob wir das nun gern zugeben oder nicht. Präferenzen und Geschmack sind unbestreitbar subjektiv und können daher weder gemessen noch wissenschaftlicher Analyse unterzogen werden. Sie basieren auf unseren persönlichen und beruflichen Erfahrungen und sie werden sich für die meisten von uns im Laufe der Jahre verändern.

Aus all diesen Gründen wurde die Frage, welche Rolle Präferenzen und Geschmack in unserer Tätigkeit spielen, in den klassischen wissenschaftlichen Theorien und Konservierungsprinzipien des 20. Jahrhunderts traditionell vermieden, abgewiesen und unterdrückt. Trotzdem haben neuere Theorien und Ansätze in unserem Beruf jetzt begonnen, die subjektive Natur unserer Arbeit und die Bedeutung des persönlichen Geschmacks der Restauratorin/des Restaurators zu akzeptieren und einzubeziehen. Es ist das Ziel dieser Präsentation aufzuzeigen, auf welche Weise Präferenzen und Geschmack bei der Entscheidungsfindung im Feld der Konservierung und Restaurierung von Kunstgegenständen gegenwärtig sind, und es immer schon waren. Ein Besonderer Schwerpunkt wurde dabei auf den Bereich der Buntglasfenster gelegt.

our work, because we all have our own preferences and our notion of taste, which as we know, can be harder to argue in concrete terms. This notion is unquestionably at the bottom of many of the decisions we make during our work, whether we like to admit it or not. Preferences and taste are undeniably subjective and therefore cannot be measured or be subject to scientific analysis. It is based on our own past and present personal and professional experiences and, for most of us, it will keep changing through the years.

It is precisely for all those reasons that the role of preference and taste in our work has traditionally been avoided, rejected or banned in the classical scientific theories and principles of conservation, originating during the 20th century. Despite this, more recent theories and approaches in our profession have come to accept and embrace the subjective nature of our work and the importance of the personal taste of the conservator during her or his work. It is the aim of this presentation to show how preferences and taste are, and have always been, present in the decision-making process in the field of conservation and in the restoration of works of art, with special emphasis in the field of stained glass.

Introduction

*“Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others”.*¹

This paper wouldn't have been possible without the considerable influence and input that the writings of Salvador MUÑOZ VIÑAS have had on me over the years. It was only after I first read his seminal, ground breaking '*Teoría Contemporánea de la Restauración*' (2003),² that I began to understand what my profession was really about. With this book, and many other articles by the same author, I was confronted with new, challenging and eye-opening concepts that made me rethink how I perceived the field of conservation-restoration. This article is not intended to be a review of Muñoz Viñas' texts. However, some of his ideas and concepts, mainly those related to the subjectivity of our decisions and the substantial weight that taste and preferences play in some of our actions in the conservation of cultural heritage, will be used as a starting point and a catalyst for debate. This article aims to be an attempt to explain and understand the impact and implications of these concepts on the field of stained glass conservation.

The need to learn to communicate and share information

There is no doubt that during the past decades, the field of stained glass conservation has greatly evolved and grown into a discipline in its own right. The amount of research and literature that has been produced, and the number of meetings, seminars and courses held, is something to celebrate. The very existence of this Corpus Vitrearum 11th Forum held in Barcelona in 2022 is a good example.

Many topics within our field have been studied and analysed over the recent years, most of them by art historians, glaziers, conservators and scientists. We have been lucky to have a large number of experts from all these fields contributing to our knowledge of stained glass and its conservation from many different angles.

This sharing of knowledge and joined efforts have turned the field of stained glass conservation into a grown up discipline. We've come a long way but we must not rest on our laurels. We still need to do more to allow our profession to gain the same recognition and respect as other conservation disciplines. We need to continue broadening our knowledge, encouraging new people into the field while supporting the existing ones, and promoting research, meetings, dissemination and publications. At the same time, we also need to learn to communicate better what we do, both between ourselves and to wider audiences. Sometimes, I feel that we don't share enough of our findings, our advances or our mistakes, to allow us all to learn and benefit from them. And finally, we need to encourage more across-field's exchange of information and debate with our colleagues from other conservation areas.

It was actually by reading papers outside the stained glass field that I came to realize how little thought or debate we have actually carried out on what could be called the philosophical aspects of our profession. By this, I'm not suggesting that the field of stained glass conservation should have a different set of rules or ethics than other disciplines. However, each field, each material, each object, has its own characteristics and problems, and inevitably the solutions applied during their conservation-restoration will sometimes be different. And perhaps, also, our approach to the ethics behind it.

The list of philosophical topics in conservation which has been discussed and debated over the past decades is long and interesting -it can also be controversial. For the purpose of this paper I would like to focus and elaborate only one of these issues and some its possible ramifications: the importance that personal preferences, inclinations, opinions and taste play in many of the decisions we make as conservators. One simple example to get us started is the fact that we have chosen stained glass as a medium, as a profession, over others. We have grown feelings for this particular medium and feel passionate about it. This, without a doubt, is an act of taste that shows our preferences, at least for most of us.

Conservation: a profession in constant evolution

In the same way that the concept and definition of cultural heritage has undergone multiple changes over time, so have our profession, our goals, our methods and our principles. Cultural heritage embraces a vast array of concepts such as customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions, values, etc. Furthermore, all of these concepts within the scope of conservation have often been subdivided into other categories: fine arts;

¹ HUME, 1757 (<https://home.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361r15.html>) [accessed December 2021].

² Translated into English as *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* and published in 2005 (MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2005).

applied, industrial, popular or folk arts; portable or non-portable, made to last or ephemeral, monumental or small format, tangible or intangible, etc.

Thus, conservation-restoration is a field undergoing constant transformation. If we want to adapt to these changes and stay in tune with the developments in our profession, we must embrace this diversity and learn to think outside the box. What we learned a few years or decades ago might not apply today, and therefore the way we care for any given object in the past would, quite possibly, also be different. That is why it is so important that we keep learning and maintaining a high level of knowledge about our profession through continuing professional development.

The ideas or principles used in conservation can also be different depending on which part of the world, country or school of thought someone lives or has been trained in. Similarly, the solutions and approaches applied in one field of conservation might not always follow the same principles applied in others. In this light, it is interesting to highlight how architectural conservation, just to mention one field which is probably easily relatable to most of us, may sometimes seem to follow its own rules.

In the same way, some of the solutions we often apply to stained glass, especially when it comes to reconstructing missing areas, recovering legibility or the aesthetics of protective glazing, sometimes seem to come across as rather daring, striking or even shocking to the eyes of other conservators, as if we were deviating from the norms or taking liberties which would not be allowed to them.

We can all agree that each conservator would probably have a different opinion or approach on what may be the best way to conserve any particular object, especially if we add the restrictions of a given budget and time frame to the equation. Furthermore, the same conservator would probably do things in a different way under different circumstances and in different moments in time. This lack of fixed instructions, this flexibility of criteria that defeats scientific objectivity, reveals the human factor of our profession, and it is this that makes it so interesting and fascinating.

We all know that our profession doesn't really abide by 'one-size-fits-all' solutions. So perhaps we just need to be more open minded and flexible and give up on the notion of fixed rules, embracing the fact that different objects may demand different approaches, or that the same object can be dealt in different ways. Each conservator is different to the next and we may adopt different solutions to the same problem. Clearly, we must take our individual roles seriously, but not so seriously that we forget that, *Conservation should not be regretted, suffered or merely 'tolerated' by the affected people, but instead admired, enjoyed and respected by as many people as possible. Conservation should not be imposed, but agreed upon.*³

Are codes of ethics truly guiding our work?

Many professions, like Medicine, Law or Journalism, just to mention those which are the most well-known, are bound to a code of ethics or conduct, designed to provide positive support to those seeking to act ethically. These codes offer guidance for ethical conduct, but deviation from them may result in legal consequences. Conservation is no exception since various codes of ethics have been drafted in different charters over the years. These charts, however, haven't turned out to be as effective in helping and guiding us in our work as it would have been expected. *Some associations dealing with conservation have drafted codes of ethics, but in fact they don't have the power of enforcement or prosecution for the actions of their members. They are not subject to legal liability, understood as the potential responsibility for payment of damages or other court-enforcement in a lawsuit.*⁴

The reality is that these charters are not mandatory, and decision makers are not legally bound to them. Indeed, in most countries, anyone can carry out restorations since the profession is not legally recognised. In other words, a conservator would hardly be accountable for an alleged act of malpractice, since this concept is clearly subjective and open to interpretation.

It is interesting to note that we all seem to know the basic rules of our profession, or at least we like to believe that we follow, or are guided by, some ethical principles. But is it really so? Is there actually such thing as a code of ethics guiding us all, in the same way, during our work? The existence of occasional, or not so occasional, controversies or disputes between peers shows that our principles and ethics, or the way we interpret them, might not necessarily be the same as those of our colleagues. We can be very critical and

³ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2005, p. 194.

⁴ CORTES PIZANO 2013, pp. 5-20.

judgemental about the work of others. Quite often, if we think about it, it's all just a matter of taste and preferences, or of us not liking the end result because we would have done it differently. But, if we are honest with ourselves, these behaviours may sometimes be rooted in professional jealousy, fear or insecurity on our part.

The words of Bernard Berenson sum up all of this in a very clear way: *Few problems are more controversial than the problem of how to restore a painting. I have never encountered a practitioner of the craft who approved of the work of another.*⁵ Though this may come across as a pessimistic view of our profession, I'm actually of the opinion that these differences are positive, and that we need to learn to embrace the human factor behind the decision-making and accept that each of us would do things differently.

Value judgments, cognitive biases and common sense

We have touched on the decision-making processes in conservation, but how does this work from a psychological point of view? The reality is that we are constantly making value judgments; we form opinions or make statements about how good or bad some things are. These judgments are often based on our principles and beliefs and not on facts which can be checked or proved. Similarly, we are often led by cognitive or psychological biases, which are systematic errors in thinking. These biases will influence our decisions and judgments and may lead to perceptual distortion, inaccurate judgment and illogical interpretation. In this sense a cognitive bias would be the opposite of common sense and clear, measured judgment.

Is it therefore possible to say that the decision-making processes in conservation are subject to or guided by 'common sense', understood as *the ability to think about things in a practical way and make sensible decisions*⁶ or as *the ability to use good judgment in making decisions and to live in a reasonable and safe way?*⁷ Since 'sensible decisions' and 'good judgment' can be arbitrary and subjective notions, I would be inclined to say that each conservator would probably have her or his own notion of common sense in each particular situation. However, there are many situations where, for the safety of the conservator and the object we are dealing with, it would be advisable to have the same notion of common sense, like for instance when we are removing a window, transporting, handling or cleaning stained glass panels, etc.

It is in that sense that I believe common sense should have a place in our profession, and we should try and listen to this inner judgment and allow it to guide us through some of our decisions. I guess this might be in line with the *revolution of common sense* that Muñoz Viñas calls for: *...no theory, no book, no catechism can substitute good old common sense. Contemporary theory of conservation, in any form, is perhaps nothing less than a revolution of common sense.*⁸

Classical versus contemporary theories of conservation

Classical theories of conservation, whether scientific or aestheticist, which developed during the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century, have often been challenged and refuted. Consequently, some of the concepts traditionally regarded as almost unchallengeable and immutable in conservation, like *minimal intervention, reversibility, discernibility, objectivity, authenticity, 'original' state, truth*, etc., have also been called into question by a number of authors. As a result, these concepts can no longer be taken for granted as guiding principles in our work. We cannot shelter behind them anymore, or at least not without keeping a critical attitude and acknowledging their flaws.

The inconsistencies of these theories have been exposed by Muñoz Viñas: *...scientific conservation, as it is commonly understood, is based on strong assumptions which are taken for granted: it is assumed that Truth must prevail, and that Truth must be determined by scientific methods...[...].for classical thinkers, conservation is a Truth-based operation. In classical theories, the value and quality of an act of conservation is defined by its adherence to Truth: it is reprehensible if it hides the Truth or lies, and deserves praise if the Truth is preserved or revealed. It is the restorer's duty to preserve or reveal authenticity.*⁹

In the same way that contemporary theories of conservation have challenged the concept of 'truth', the same can be said about the concept of 'authenticity'. *Basically, when we speak about an 'authentic' object, or*

⁵ Cit. in BECK & DALEY 1993, p. 152.

⁶ Oxford Learners Dictionary online (<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/commonsense?q=common+sense>) [accessed December 2021].

⁷ Cambridge Dictionary online (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/common-sense>) [accessed December 2021].

⁸ Salvador MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2005, p. 199.

⁹ Salvador MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2002, pp. 26-27.

about the 'authentic' state of an object, we are actually referring to an expected or preferred state of the object. Conservators often alter or delete the authentic imprints of history for the sake of 'authenticity'; the problem with those imprints (a marred surface, a missing fragment, a darkened varnish, you name it) is not that they are not authentic, but that we do not like them. We prefer the object to exist in a different state. Conservators thus modify reality (which is undoubtedly authentic) to suit our expectations, needs or preferences. So authenticity is useful because it helps us to believe that we are acting for some higher reasons (truth, science, objectivity, etc.) and not that we are simply implementing our own expectations or preferences.¹⁰

It is clear therefore, that the contemporary theories of conservation have acknowledged the importance of personal, subjective views and embraced the role that taste, inclinations and preferences play in our work. Furthermore, even feelings need to be accounted for. *Feelings or sentiments are not easy to quantify furthermore, they can be easily faked. Perhaps for this reason, they are seldom recognized as a valid factor when making decisions about anything heritage-related. [...] Feelings are neither measurable nor communicable, and for that very reason, some people just tend to ignore them. And yet, reckoning with them as a reality might have an impact on how heritage is viewed.*¹¹

The non-neutral nature of conservation

*...Restoration is generally regarded as an activity in which people's tastes or other equally subjective criteria are undesirable and must remain absent from the decision-making process.*¹²

This perfectly sums up the idea that many people still hold onto, that *Conservation is a purely neutral activity, an activity that lies outside the history of the object. [...]...the non-neutral nature of heritage conservation needs to be acknowledged. And it should be acknowledged that conservation is not neutral for a good reason: it changes heritage for the better. It makes heritage objects more valuable, more engaging, longer-lasting, more efficient. Conservation alters because conservation improves.*¹³ Some authors like van de Vall take this statement even further, considering *...the conservator to be a manager of change, whose main responsible lies in deciding the amount and quality of change that is acceptable.*¹⁴

This idea of conservation being a neutral activity is generally so ingrained in us that it can be difficult sometimes to realise what an important role subjectivity, personal preferences and taste play in our profession. Decisions are made based upon our judgment, practical knowledge and skills. However, my experience will inevitably be different to someone else's experience and therefore my preferences, expectations and taste, will play a big role in the methods or solutions I will chose for each particular case.

Every decision we make involves a selection process of different options and possibilities, of which only one will be carried out and many other will be disregarded. One of the consequences of this selection is that some of the values and meanings of the object will be altered, maintained or highlighted, while some others may diminish, or even disappear. *This kind of dilemma (the choice about which meaning should prevail and which ones should be sacrificed) lies at the heart of nearly every conservation controversy.*¹⁵ *And quantifying the values that have been gained and lost, however is not simple. In fact, some may consider it simply impossible. This is so because many of the values that conservation increases or reduces are immeasurable.*¹⁶

Another interesting way of looking at this is seeing any intervention as a deal or a negotiation, where there will be both gains and losses. *A conservation treatment is akin to a transaction: there are costs and there are benefits. These cannot be objectively or precisely assessed, since very diverse types of factors (aesthetic, symbolic, emotional, political, economic, technical) need to be compared and evaluated.*¹⁷

Cosgrove takes this even further when he considers conservation to be a creative activity. *Any decision to deploy specific technical skills to restore an object to its 'original' state, to an intermediate state, or simply to keep it from further change is by definition arbitrary and should be recognized to be so. Conservation may thus*

¹⁰ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2008, p. 22.

¹¹ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2003, p.50.

¹² MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2014(a), p. 75-88. Translation into English from the original Spanish text by Fernando CORTÉS PIZANO.

¹³ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2018, p. 65.

¹⁴ MACEDO et al. 2012, p. 7.

¹⁵ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2009, p. 54.

¹⁶ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2018, p. 44.

¹⁷ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2018, p. 63.

*be regarded as itself a creative intervention, subject to the same individual and social negotiations and struggles over meaning and representation as any other action.*¹⁸

González Tirado makes another interesting and thought-provoking analogy when she claims that restorers are some sort of ‘artists-interpreters’. She compares *the work of the restorer with that of certain types of artists called performers. [...]...defining the performing arts as those that present to the public the creations of other artists; therefore, we will include in this group the actors of theatre and cinema, the dancers, the musicians playing some instrument and the singers.*¹⁹

Fallibility, risks and compromises in conservation

When confronted with a new object, we can choose only one route for that particular object at that particular moment in time. The path we choose will surely affect the ways in which the public will view or perceive that object. Interestingly enough, even if different conservators would take the same route, the result would probably be also different. The resulting differences between each conservator can be due to either *the manual skill of each of them, their technical and scientific knowledge, their critical judgment, their interpretation of the deteriorated work or their idea of how it should look once restored.*²⁰

However, in our profession, we generally don’t act unilaterally, and therefore we might not always have the final saying on how to best conserve any given object. Also, the available options may not always be the ones we would have chosen ourselves; the ones we might consider the best for that particular situation. But, nonetheless, we may find ourselves in charge of a project and will have to make the final decisions, and no matter which path we chose, how much thought we put into it, how many people we consult, or how neutral we try to be, the final result will never please everyone. There will always be advocates and detractors. We must be prepared to take criticism on board, whether this might be based on scientific facts or on someone’s personal taste. As we must also be able to put ourselves in someone else’s place, making an effort to know all the facts, before we judge. In the words of the British Philosopher David Hume: *“We are apt to call barbarous whatever departs widely from our own taste and apprehension: But soon find the epithet of reproach retorted on us.”*²¹

Sometimes mistakes and errors do happen. Of course they do! And, on the occasion that the perceived errors are not due to personal preference and taste, all we can do is but accept our fallibility and humbly learn from the experience. Marincola and Maisey very wisely state that *Mistakes and errors, whilst unfortunate, are almost universally recognised to be invaluable tools for learning and development. Indeed, successful practice in many professions, including conservation, benefits greatly from the lessons learned through the attempted – and failed – approaches in the past. In recent decades, conservation has achieved a far greater degree of specialisation and recognition than ever before. Paradoxically, the culture of infallibility and risk aversion that has developed out of this directly hampers our collective acknowledgement and sharing of mistakes.*²²

Thankfully, in most cases, there is no doubt that the decisions we make in conservation are taken in good faith and with the best intentions. This doesn’t mean that there are no risks involved. There will always be risks and consequences to our actions and we can only try to contain and minimise them. These risks are part of the nature of our profession and they should not scare us or leave us paralysed and afraid of making decisions. Otherwise we might end up falling into what Ashley-Smith has very cleverly called *the ethics of doing nothing.*²³ According to Muñoz Viñas *...taking risks is a core trait of our profession. Sure, we take as little risk as possible, but we do take risks. As is the case for many other professions, conservators are rarely 100% sure that a given treatment will be absolutely safe. In this regard, we compromise.*²⁴

This brings us to the need to acknowledge that, in our profession, we do not always carry out the best treatment for the object. Allow me to explain. The fact is that the best treatment can be a debatable and subjective notion. The reality is that we often have to make a sensible compromise for a greater good, and negotiate an acceptable or ‘best possible’ result. To better understand the extension of this statement, I will quote Muñoz Viñas once more: *In fact, we often know that our treatment of choice is not the best possible*

¹⁸ COSGROVE 1994, p. 263.

¹⁹ GONZÁLEZ TIRADO 2010, p 7.

²⁰ GONZÁLEZ TIRADO 2010, p. 8.

²¹ HUME 1757.

²² MARINCOLA & MAISEY 2011, p. 1.

²³ ASHLEY-SMITH 2018.

²⁴ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2014 (b), p. 5.

*treatment. In most conservation treatments, things could have been done in a better way. Not because the conservator did anything wrong, but rather because he or she consciously chose a given course of action, fully aware that better technical options existed: a more comprehensive set of analysis, a slower and more gentle cleaning technique, a better and costlier reinforcing material, etc. However, I would argue that, in a vast majority of cases, conservators make sensible and perfectly correct decisions when opting for the less-than-ideal option.*²⁵

In the light of this, it seems an impossible task to try and pin down what defines a good or bad conservation-restoration, or how we measure the success of any intervention. Personally I would say that a good conservation is probably the one that will reach, please and benefit the largest amount of users for the longest period of time. However, I would also agree with Muñoz Viñas when he says that *If the conservation treatment is considered successful, it is not because the object has been preserved as it was before the treatment, but because the gains are greater than the losses, so its value is now greater than it was.*²⁶ And also that [...] *the degree of success of a conservation treatment can only be checked as time passes.*²⁷

There is no accounting for taste

*Conservation is about bringing the object to a preferred state. We adapt objects to our preferences and that's it.*²⁸

When we speak about preferences and taste we have to consider, first of all, our personal taste as conservators, since we are the ones who perform or implement the actions that will affect any work of art. But we also have to take into consideration the preferences and taste of all other stakeholders and people involved in the conservation process, as well as the prevailing taste or fashion of our time, both within our profession, school of thought or milieu, and also within our society, country or culture. The combination of all these factors, to a greater or lesser extent, and whether we are aware of it or not, will have an impact on the final result of our intervention.

Before we go any further, and since this presentation revolves mainly around the concepts of preferences and taste, let's see what we generally understand by them. By and large, 'preference' is what you prefer and 'taste' is what you like or dislike. By 'taste' we generally understand either *what a person likes or prefers, or a person's ability to choose things that people recognize as being of good quality or appropriate.*²⁹ Similarly, 'preference', is *the fact that you like something or someone more than another thing or person*³⁰ or *a greater liking for one alternative over another or others.*³¹

We are all very familiar with these terms and there is probably nothing new here, except perhaps for the fact that we might not always realise the important role they play in the decision-making processes in conservation. Painting conservator Mark Leonard has a very interesting take on this when he claims that *... a lot of conservation in the past was done in the name of scientific objectivity, when in fact, what we were really doing was absolving ourselves of any responsibility.*³²

All in all, since preferences and taste are an intrinsic part of our human nature, and conservation is carried out by people, then we cannot expect these biases not to show in our profession. After all, *Science has little to do with decisions regarding tastes, beliefs, preferences and expectations, except for the authority it may exert upon offended users, making it easier for them to accept the 'offense' as being scientifically based.*³³

Another way of looking at this is realizing that we all grow strong attachments to a great variety of objects and actions, from the tools we use to the way we just prefer to carry certain actions or just do many things in our job. And these preferences and attachments condition our judgments and perceptions of how to best do things, and can easily lead to considering there is a "best" way, a "proper" way of doing them. There is plenty of scientific evidence that we tend to attach positive and negative associations to just about everything there is. And in this respect, an interesting example is the concept of "perfection" which only exists in our minds.

²⁵ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2014 (b), p. 5.

²⁶ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2018, p.59.

²⁷ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2018, p.50.

²⁸ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2008, p. 23.

²⁹ Oxford Learner's Dictionary online (https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/taste_1) [accessed December 2021].

³⁰ Cambridge Dictionary online (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/preference>) [accessed December 2021].

³¹ Lexico Dictionary online (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/preference>) [accessed December 2021].

³² CONSIDINE 2000, p. 156.

³³ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2005, p. 184.

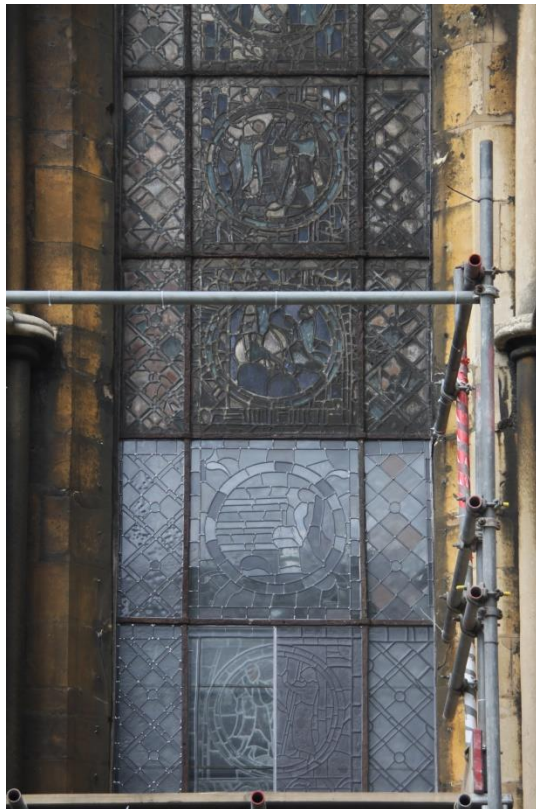
Perfection is an illusion which depends on our perception, cannot be measured and can therefore be considered as a subjective notion.

Some examples of the presence of preferences and taste in stained glass conservation

*Every treatment represents an attempt to bring an object to a specific previous state, but the choice of that state is not a foregoing conclusion. Ergo, any treatment is an interpretation.*³⁴

Over the centuries, many works of art were destroyed, removed, relocated or drastically altered due to new preferences and changes in the taste of the time. Buildings are a perfect example of this, and with them all their movable and immovable works, like stained glass, altar pieces, painting, metal and wood works, floors, etc. Buildings are alive and in permanent change. Elements have often been removed or transformed and new ones added. Stained glass windows, for several reasons, have traditionally been easy targets, and have been frequently removed, replaced or altered to conform to the preferences of the new times. Similarly, new stained glass windows have always coexisted next to the older ones, often showing considerable differences in style.

During the second half of the 19th century, a new sensibility was developed, and with it the concept of scientific conservation that was going to prevail for the most part of the 20th century. However, as we have seen, most of these ideas have proven to be obsolete and out of touch with the present demands of conservation, leading to embracing subjectivity and taste back into our profession. The way taste works in conservation has been clearly summarised by Muñoz Viñas as follows: *Taste has an influence on the conservation criteria used in each treatment in three different ways: In prioritizing the conservation of some objects; In making a 'true condition' of the object prevail over other possible ones; In re-creating that condition in a given way.*³⁵



*Fig. 1. 13th-century stained glass window in Lincoln Cathedral (UK), where seven different types of protective glazing were temporarily installed to test their aesthetic impact.
© Fernando Cortés Pizano.*

In the field of stained glass conservation, the examples of operations or decisions where taste and preferences are involved are numerous and varied. The most obvious ones are probably those related to the insertion of new glass infills and the aesthetics of protective glazing. These two areas can easily trigger criticism and heated debate among us, let alone among conservators from other disciplines. So, let's look into them with more detail.

As for the new infills, whether they are just one small piece of glass, a big section of a panel or half a window, the choices ahead of us can be many, and so can the possibilities for judgment and criticism. From the selection of the type of glass or paints used, the painting style and technique, the degree of imitation or recreation of the original pieces, etc., the variants can be almost endless, to the point where no two painters would be able to have the same result, no matter how hard they might try.

With regard to protective glazing, once we have agreed on the technicalities of its construction (external or internal ventilation, types of metals and other materials used, etc.), then the remaining decisions will be of an aesthetic nature, mainly concerned with how to minimise its impact on the

legibility of the building and of the window itself. The fact that different countries clearly seem to prefer one method over another, based on aesthetic grounds, shows once again how much these decisions and choices can be based on preferences and taste. Although, to be totally fair, let's not forget that some of the decisions we sometimes have to make can be influenced by budgetary restrictions too (fig. 1).

³⁴ Barbara APPELBAUM 2010, p. 6.

³⁵ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2005, p. 108.



Fig. 2. Reuse of 16th-century fragments of glass in one the windows in San Marcos Church, León (Spain). © Stained glass firm 'Grisallas'®, León (Spain).



Fig. 3. Stained glass window from 1992-1998 by Johannes Schreiter in Marktkirche, Goslar (Germany), incorporating a 12th-century panel. © Fernando Cortés Pizano.

These two examples are easily recognisable by all of us, but there are many other actions or decisions clearly based on taste. Among these we could surely mention the removal (or keeping) of previous infills, stop gaps, mending leads, strap leads, etc.; patination or darkening of leads, solder, perimeter lead bands or panel frames; dying or blackening of cement or putty; the level of retouching with cold paints; even the degree of acceptable cleaning of a panel can be different from one conservator to another, or between different studios (fig. 2).

Other interesting examples of this situation are the rearranging or relocating of glass within one or different panels; the rearranging or relocating of panels within the same window or within a building; selecting panels for musealization and/or exhibition.

Sometimes, as previously pointed out, we might be in the situation where we need to decide, due to budgetary or time restrictions for instance, which windows (or panels) are to be conserved and which ones are not, or which are a higher priority. We might have to make judgements based on which ones we consider more important, valuable or even beautiful. These difficult decisions can be based, to a certain extent, on the age, prestige or values of the object, but they may also be based on our preferences and taste.

In this sense, we could also say that many of the stained glass windows that have made it to the present day are the result of a succession of decisions and choices made by different people over the years. To illustrate this, during the Second World War, many windows from different buildings across Europe were removed and stored for safeguarding until the end of the conflict. Thanks to these decisions, based primarily on the extended belief that the oldest ones were more important, many stained glass windows were saved.

Many other examples could be added to this list but there is one that I personally find very appealing and illustrative and I would like to share it. I am referring in particular to new stained glass windows made out of either a collection of old panels, fragments of old glass, or a combination of old and new glass in a clearly artistic fashion. This way of working is certainly not a new trend and it can be traced back over many centuries. In these particular type of windows, glaziers and conservators seem to enjoy a higher degree of creative freedom and artistic licence, and therefore their taste and preferences come to light more evidently. This I consider to be some sort of hallmark of the stained glass field, since I cannot think of similar examples of the 'creative', 'artistic' reuse of fragments of old works of art in other conservation disciplines at present (fig. 3).

Some final reflexions of legibility and likability

In case there is still any doubt, any attempt to improve legibility is per se subjective and therefore an act of taste. *When conservators decide to render an object 'legible', they are actually making a choice; they are deciding which legibility should prevail over the many possible ones. [...] It is the conservator who chooses which meaning (which legibility) should prevail, often at the expense of permanently excluding other possibilities.*³⁶

³⁶ MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2005, p. 100.

An interesting example to illustrate this flexible idea of legibility and likability is the Japanese method or art of the *Kintsugi*, also known as “golden joinery” or “golden repair”. The *Kintsugi* is a way of fixing broken fragments of pottery using tree-sap lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver or platinum. “As a philosophy, it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise”³⁷ and the result are a very noticeable fracture lines.

Similarly, whenever we are tempted to make any object more likeable or more pleasing, our decisions are being affected by both our taste and the taste we presume for the potential general public at the time. But can we objectively say that any object looks *better* or *worse* as a result of a restoration? Once again, using words like ‘better’ or ‘worse’ is a subjective judgment which clearly shows our preferences (fig. 4).

And what would happen if we personally don’t like the object we have to restore or conserve, if we think it is ‘ugly’, not very valuable or worthy of conservation? These are situations that do happen. Are we then, perhaps, unconsciously, more likely to lower our standards and make less of an effort to treat that object? Hopefully not, but as with many of the other questions that have been brought up here, we will probably never know the answer. Perhaps because there are many possible answers. Some more food for thought.

Conclusion

Many more examples and case studies could be added to this list, but the main point here is to be aware that many of these routine decisions that we take, whether conscious or unconscious, are subjective and based on our preferences and inclinations. We might like the final result of a given intervention or not, but that does not mean it is right or wrong. What is acceptable for some may be unacceptable for others. Therefore, it is very important to keep an open mind and a humble and constructive attitude, letting go of ego, vanity and prejudices. The truth is that there is nothing wrong with preferences and taste in conservation. They are an intrinsic part of our job and they are, after all, what make us human and what make our profession so interesting and challenging.

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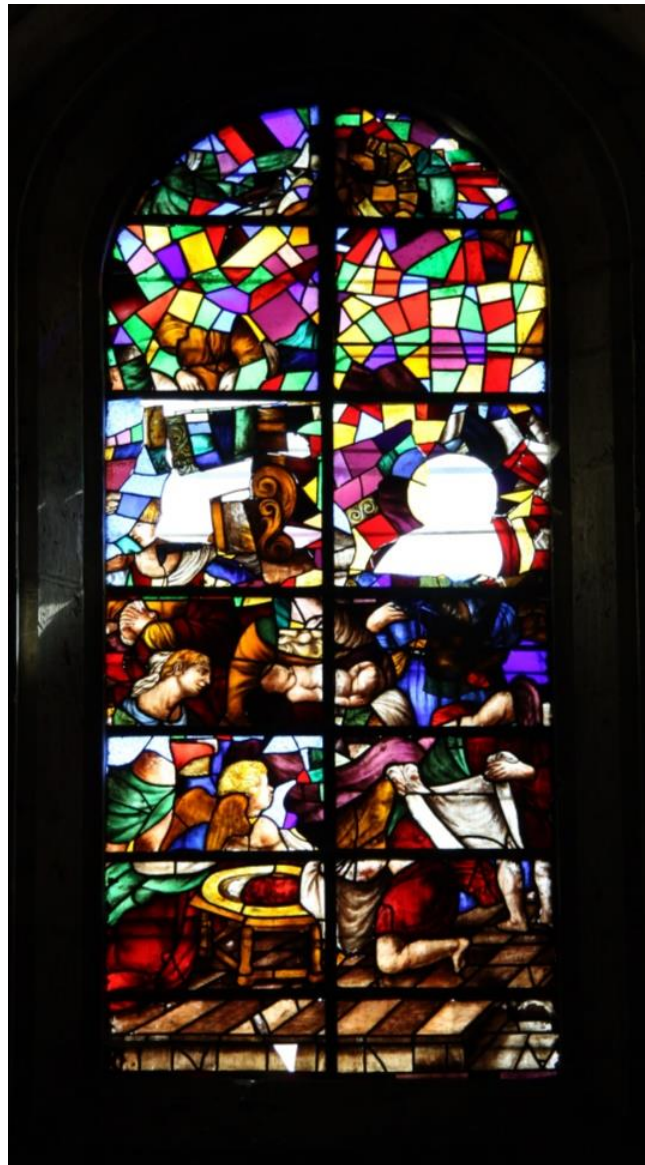


Fig. 4. 16th-century stained glass window from Segovia Cathedral (Spain), reconstructed after significant damage caused by a big storm at the beginning of the 20th century.
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³⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kintsugi> [accessed December 2021].

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