

# Everything Judged on Its Own Merit? Object Conservation and the Secular Museum

Titika Malkogeorgou\*

---

This anthropological study on conservation and museum practice interrogates the negotiative value of conservation. It raises the questions of who should be consulted when preserving complex objects, when a source community is a legitimate contributor to object conservation, and what are the ethical considerations posed for conservators in such cases. Conservation brings several disciplines in the care of objects and creates a process of re-evaluation through technical analysis and treatment. I will discuss this process and what it may mean for the secular museum through the case study of a Tibetan Buddha sculpture at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The debate around the extent of the intervention to the object ultimately involved conservators, curators, heads of departments, local Buddhist representatives, the director, and the museum trustees.

This case study challenges the character of the object, reveals its affective value and the ways the object's meaning may change according to context and people. It questions the role of the conservator, the relevance of source communities and the ways host institutions influence conservation as they follow changes in the conceptualisation of and approach to museum objects.

---

## Introduction

This paper examines the negotiative value of conservation through the case of the conservation of a copper alloy Tibetan Buddha sculpture (IM.121–1910) at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In a discussion of who should be consulted, and when a source community is a legitimate contributor to object interpretation, the paper raises the wider questions of whether objects should be judged on their own merit or on the context in which they are being cared for and of the implications of the conservation approach for the way we see and make ourselves in the world.

Based on an anthropological approach to museum practice, the paper deals with the ethical considerations conservators are faced with and their role in preserving cultural material within a national institution. The paper is based on ethnographic research at the Victoria and Albert Museum's Conservation Department in an effort to unpick some of the intellectual problems encountered by conservators in a London national museum, with the aim to illustrate greater theoretical issues that arise from our relationship with objects.

### *The Buddha Shakyamuni*

The Buddha sculpture (**figure 1**) originally came to the V&A's metals conservation studio for a condition report and a routine clean in order to go on a loan to the Sheffield Museum. It was thought of as a straightforward treatment and was assigned to Annie Hall, then a student

from the RCA/V&A Conservation Course<sup>1</sup> to carry out. The sculpture had been displayed in a glass case in Gallery 47A since the late 1980s (**figure 2**), prior to which it had been in several off site stores after the collection of the Indian Museum was integrated with the V&A in 1955. According to Graham Parlett, curator in the Asia department, the sculpture was probably at the Perivale store prior to 1984 and then at the Battersea store (Hall 2001). When Hall realised that the sculpture was hollow and that it contained more objects inside she started investigating it in more detail, and questioning the ethical and moral considerations relating to the extent it could be intervened with. The character of the object too came into question and the role of the host institution in identifying an object as a piece of design or as an ethnographic object, and what the outcome would mean for conservation.

Annie Hall explains that investigations initially focused on

... the physical aspects requiring attention. However, as the more complex meaning of the object was revealed, the research required expansion to include the spiritual nature of the sculpture and its contents (Hall 2001: 58).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Hall's description of the conservation project indicates that conservation practice can add value to an object and connect its physical and technical aspect with a more complex intellectual element in museum collections. Other conservators in the department drew my attention to this case and the role of the conservator who worked on it, when I interviewed them on conservation ethics:

---

\* University College London, UK  
titika@atom.net



**Fig. 1:** Buddha Shakyamuni. Museum no. IM 121–1910  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

We had a Buddhist bronze sculpture ... some holy scriptures had been taken out of that object at some point... When it came to metals conservation it was given to a student to work on purely as a work of art to go to an exhibition. She formed a whole project on dealing with the ethics of sacred objects around it, because during routine treatment they noticed some more scrolls were inside. And there was a huge, quite painful debate about the rights and wrongs of removing these texts or not to remove (Interview with V&A senior metals conservator, 29 May 2003).

In discussions I had with conservators in the V&A's Conservation Department, they argued that the reality of conservation practice is not often represented in conservation literature and that they regularly find themselves in conflicting situations between an ideal case scenario and real life in the conservation studio:

We used to say that every object is the same from a conservator's point of view and that we should give it the same amount of attention. Of course, we know, we do not do this because we know that some objects are more important than others... (Interview with V&A conservator, 9 March 2004).

You might also get an object coming in which is not particularly of any interest to anybody and after conservation suddenly people become interested in it, because of the work that you've done (Part of a group discussion with V&A conservators, 8 August 2004).<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, conservators asserted the power of conservation practice to alter not just the object's condition but also our perception of it, and that objects are containers of meaning and meaning making in a way which intrinsically relates to conservation decisions taken in the studio. These points are explicitly made and will be examined through the Buddha case study for a more in depth account of the conservation process.



**Fig. 2:** Buddha Shakyamuni. Museum no. IM 121–1910 in Gallery 47A. Photo by T. Malkogeorgou.

### The 'Precious Exhibition'

The sculpture was conserved for the exhibition: 'A Grand Design – The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum' (4 October 1999 – 16 January 2000), as 'treasures focused on the great and wonderful objects of the V&A' (Anthony Burton, Research Department, interview with Annie Hall 2001). It was set up with the idea of explaining the long history of these objects before they came to the museum, during which, their significance changed, as much as how their meaning might have been altered by the museum practice itself.

Mostly intended as a museum history and promotion exercise, the exhibition addressed the way objects in the V&A collections had been interpreted<sup>4</sup> and their meaning had come to focus on treasure.

According to the museum curators' value assessment, the physical characteristics of the Buddha sculpture and what these represent are among the reasons it is so highly valued in the V&A collection. The age, size and quality of work of the sculpture are features that make it central to the V&A's Himalayan collection. The sculpture was also chosen on the basis of its iconographic style; because its characteristic pose enriched the display. Neither the collection history nor its acquisition was deemed especially important for the exhibition. For Hall, the sculpture's interpretation on aesthetic grounds in order to meet the narrow confines of a design museum compromised the object's more complex historical, sacred and spiritual character and favoured a constructed representation. Conservation decision-making and practice necessarily observed the museum's criteria.

### "The museum is not a Temple": Investigation and Condition of the Sculpture

The Buddha Shakyamuni (IM.121–1910, **figures 1 and 3**) is a 14th century gilded and pigmented copper alloy Tibetan Buddhist sculpture. It consists of two parts, which would have been cast separately: the figure of the Buddha, and the base. A large crack at the rear of the sculpture necessitated its condition assessment through X-radiography in order not to risk its physical stability

(figure 4). The sculpture was revealed to be hollow; something already known by the curators, and indicated by the object's comparatively light-weight. Spectroscopy was used to analyse the coating and provide further information about the object's history and manufacture, but also on its potential use in the museum. For example, if toxic material was detected on the object, this would not go on open display because toxic material can cause health and safety issues. Therefore, there were various considerations, beyond aesthetic and structural ones, in examining the sculpture.

However, only after Hall started researching the object did the curator from the Asian Department responsible for the object inform her that items had been removed from the sculpture in the past.<sup>5</sup> This disconnection in communication is not extraordinary in a museum context, as technical examination and intellectual assessment are normally perceived as separate domains. There is a clear division within museum practice between intellectual and technical domains. Conservation is involved in gallery and exhibition projects early on but only on a technical basis, and often conservators are not involved in the more intellectual and interpretative decisions about the choice of objects, themes and gallery spaces. While conservators participate in museum projects, they rarely are part of the curatorial team.

In the discussions that followed the discovery of the material, the curators pointed out that the museum is not a temple.

As the world's leading museum of art and design the V&A enriches people's lives by promoting the practice of design and increasing knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the design world (V&A Museum 2012: 2).

The curators also said that the V&A is not an ethnographic museum. The first two V&A Key Strategic Objectives are:

To provide optimum access to collections and services for diverse audiences, now and in the future. To be acknowledged and respected as the world's leading museum of art and design (V&A Museum 2012: 2).

Considering that the character of the museum itself is fundamental in deciding how to conserve objects, the curators' statements had implications for the object's treatment as well as its perceived significance.

The V&A was established as an applied and decorative arts museum and has constructed a comprehensive canon around applied arts and their makers. This canon has been shaped almost exclusively within its own context and as a source of object-specific knowledge. Influential administrators, curators, and connoisseurship in object acquisition, conservation, installation and strategic publication have contributed to this end (Baker and Richardson 1997). The V&A has marked a turning point in museum policy in Britain in clearly conceiving the modern museum as an instrument of modern education with Henry Cole – the museum's first director, manager of the Great Exhibition of 1851, instrumental agent in the creation and develop-

ment of the V&A, the RCA, and a number of other educational institutions in South Kensington - saying that the museum should be 'a schoolroom for everyone' (figure 5; Bennett 1995; Purbrick 1994).

Yet the sacred aspect of these objects is considered in their presentation, and the V&A is not dismissive of the religious character or association of certain objects in the collections. In general, the argument put forward is that because such religious art is no longer within its true context, other aspects of the object's significance give it special value; mainly its appearance and educational value are its predominant features. The religious nature of the object appears to be intrinsically problematic within museum context and in the specific case antagonistic as well.

For the museum and what comprises museum knowledge the discovery of the texts was a great and unexpected contribution (Hall 2001). Talking about the drawings the senior art curator in charge notes:

They are most important Tibetan drawings, which of course being in paper almost always never survive from this period. It would be true to say that the only survivals from the 14th century would be ones that have survived in this manner by being secreted away inside statues (quoted in Hall 2001: 15).

Respect for other cultures got subsumed by the idea that 'the cultural heritage of each is the heritage for all', as it is understood within the specific national museum context.

According to a senior metals conservator:

They turned out to be of huge historical importance, and likely they may have been lost or damaged, if they had remained in situ. So the outcome was acceptable, I think, to most people, but there was still a conflict there because, until you've removed them, how do you know? (ibid, 29 May 2003).

Secularisation and secular values are at the heart of the national museum. Within the heritage discourse and conservation history, the focus has always been with materials and reality is constructed on empirical evidence. Conservation itself is established as a both ethical and scientific field, with the argument rooted in modernity and its paradoxes: breaking with the past and the love for antiquity; denoting a post-traditional period, marked by progress through the rise of industrialism, the nation state, capitalism and secularisation.

The conservation profession is often traced to the engagement of scientists in museums to deal with the preservation of their collections (Plenderleith and Werner 1971; Price and Brimblecombe 1994). And therefore, developed as part of museum practice, conservation was influenced by other disciplines coming into their own during the 19th century and became significant together with other sciences as a way to analyse reality and uncover truths. Conservation literature indeed points to an antithesis between what was practice with an emphasis on craftsmanship, and characterised by tradition and continuity, and an institutionalised profession adapting and changing according to context (Pye 2001; Sully



**Fig. 3:** Front and back view of the sculpture before treatment © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



**Fig. 4:** X-ray image of the sculpture © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



**Fig. 5:** Henry Cole (1808–1882) and Richard Redgrave (1804–1888) were central to the formation of the V&A © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

2007; Richmond and Bracker 2009). Clavir describes conservation as being unlike restoration:

Conservation unlike restoration is based on the scientific and technical analysis of collections deterioration with a view to stabilising cultural property. Questions of appearance which are of primary importance in restoration, are part of conservation, but the values upon which decisions are based are fundamentally different (Clavir 2002: xxi).

Clavir's comment on conservation is a response to all of the above: love for antiquity and a break with the past.

### 'The Buddha Shakyamuni: Embossed Copper, Gilt and Partly Painted'

The special intimacy between conservator and object is indicated by the conservator's description of the object itself. The art historian's description of the sculpture contrasts to the conservator's one.

The following is the former curator's description of the Buddha Shakyamuni:

Description of object: The Buddha Shakyamuni. Embossed copper, gilt and partly painted. Probably 14th century. It could be said that ... its merit must rest almost entirely upon its aesthetic appeal. While this must remain a question of personal taste there can be no doubt that ... it is its vitality which is the main characteristic of the national style of Tibetan art and which makes it truly Tibetan but also ensures that it can be safely judged against the best of Asian art (Lowry 1973 quoted in Hall 2001: 14).<sup>6</sup>

This straightforward description, appears impersonal and detached, but is indeed deeply embedded in what is the very particular tradition of the V&A. The comparative aesthetic approach and the concept of personal taste and notions of truth are fundamental constructs in the museum's own identity, and its use and understanding of its collections.

The following is the description given by the conservation student dealing with the Buddha sculpture and gives a rather different picture of the same object. For conservation it is a very typical sort of description:

It is comparatively large ... gilded with pigment on the face and hair and remains of pigment on the finger and toenails. The gilding is probably fire gilding, which is evident on observation ... is traditional method used for such sculpture originating in the Himalayan region. This method involves the application of gold in a mercury amalgam, after which the object is heated and the mercury is evaporated off. ... The gilding is worn in places to reveal a copper alloy substrate. The sculpture is cast in a copper alloy. ... The pigment over the face is made up of fine particles of gold held together in an unknown medium ... the remains on the toe and fingernails are red. The different layers evident in the hair indicate some degree of repainting (Hall 2001: 9).

This too, although highly analytical, is a highly interpretative description, very specific to what is deemed interesting, or important, for conservation purposes. What is said to be 'evident on observation' is only the case because at the heart of observation there is some degree of an embodied knowledge of traditional methods of casting and gilding of similar sculptures, and a physical understanding of the materials used in the process.

The two descriptions are indeed complementary, but there is an underlying conflict between the abstracted

knowledge and scholarly interest which is concerned with looking at what objects represent, and the knowledge which relates to doing and making things, and is oriented towards specific materials and experiences; each one creating a completely different object out of the same thing.

The quality of the sculpture makes it central to the V&A's Himalayan collection. Its value lies in the physical characteristics such as age, size, and technology of manufacture; qualities important for conservators and curators alike.

But conservator and curator expect the object to 'act' in some way, and base their observations on this expectation. While the criteria for the object's preservation are those set by curators, and it is often these criteria that are carried through to the treatment of the object, physical connection with the object as it is experienced through conservation practice demonstrates that much more is possible. Through the act of conservation there's room for discovery, chance, and learning about objects and practices that seemingly come directly from the objects themselves.

Therefore, interaction with museum objects starts much before objects go on display in the museum gallery.

The objects are made, and therefore are evidence of the processes of their making, using many senses but particularly those of manipulation. They are their own evidence and the conservator learns from them. So they have the capacity to teach as well as to provoke admiration, contemplation, imagination ... (S. Feuchtwang, *pers. comm.*).

This physical engagement with the object during conservation varies and can be rather lengthy and time consuming. Macroscopic, microscopic and chemical analysis, were made through samples examined at the science section and metals section. Because of the art historical and historical nature of these drawings, the suggestion of replacing them inside the sculpture once they had been studied and documented has been reconsidered. It was finally deemed unacceptable to curators at the V&A to re-enter the relics, though it was suggested by a Tibetan representative interviewed by Hall. In any case, the violence done to the sculpture and damage to the object's intangible value would not be reversed purely by returning the material back into the sculpture and this was part of the museum's argument.

From the point of view of conservation, the concern regarding any intervention is twofold: conservators in the department are not just engaged in an effort to preserve material in the best possible way for the future in terms of technical competency, they also take special care in the ways to approach such material. Conservators' care for objects deals with decisions that are made, with respect to original meaning, while being able to satisfy their current function: to be seen and to be admired for themselves and as an integral part of their current context.

### **Museum context and respect for cultural expression**

Sacred statues have a special meaning for their religious communities, and blessing and inspiration bear for them higher value than artistic beauty. The opinion of Tibetan

Buddhist practitioners was indeed investigated with regard to the opening of consecrated sculpture at the time Hall was researching and conserving the statue; none of the respondents was comfortable with the opening of statues in a museum context. Sculptures of this nature were not intended as works of art but to serve a variety of religious functions, as an object of meditation – and may be seen as a way of energising the visualisation of oneself as an archetype Buddha (Rhie and Thurman 1991). Due to the sense that the sculptures are, by extension, part of the Body of Buddha, Tibetans feel that they transmit a living presence. Respect for this cultural expression in theory should not be hindered by the museum's own perspective to what constitutes art and design, or alter their original significance.<sup>7</sup>

At the V&A the keeper of the collections is the one who bears the responsibility of the collection. The philosophy behind the V&A's own Ethics Checklist is said to be 'consensus' (Richmond 2005). But how does one reach consensus in conservation decisions when everybody's word may not carry the same weight? The debate in the conservation of the Buddha sculpture ultimately involved conservators, curators, heads of departments, local Buddhist representatives, the director and the museum trustees to decide on whether to open the sculpture and remove its contents.

In the end the trustees of the museum were the ones who had to decide how the case would be resolved. The temptation of what could be discovered from what was within the statue and the possibility of gaining more knowledge about the object and its original setting proved too strong to resist and overshadowed all other arguments. The argument was won in the name of the secular character of the museum and its values; the higher purpose of knowledge combined with prioritising aesthetic criteria and the museum's identity as a design museum. In effect, the aim of the museum's conservation department is to look after the museum's own collections.<sup>8</sup>

### **Conclusions**

Conservation brings together more disciplines in the care of objects and creates a process of re-evaluation through technical analysis and treatment. Understanding the object's wider meaning, contradictions, unresolved tensions and the people and practices it relates to are made possible and come about by physically engaging with the object during the process of conservation.

What comes out of the conservation process and debate around conservation decisions here seems to be two points of stress and anxiety: the first one is the type of investigation performed on the object in relation to the impact it may possibly have on it. The actual intervention to conserve the object should not compromise its significance, which is to say, the conservation process itself should not damage the object. The second point comes out of a straightforward preservation perspective: the material contained within the sculpture had survived in a much better condition than the material which had been removed from it in the past.



**Fig. 6:** The current storage location of items removed in the past © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

National museums have a social function and are concerned with the construction and maintenance of identity. They are therefore places of performance and negotiation where action is self-conscious and critical. At the same time museums are founded on secular principles of social justice, access to knowledge through information about cultures and people, and aesthetics of pleasure, comfort and beauty.

Historically and conceptually, conservation itself is linked to these principles. Most importantly, it can only exist in its recognised form as a secular practice, and together with museums, disconnected from any belief system. However, when conservators say that 'every object is unique', or that every object should be 'treated the same', or should be judged on 'its own merit', these are all statements that basically put the focus on the transcendental value of the object. In this redefinition of the object there is the sense of action, power and agency, and therefore it is something vital and alive, not something frozen in material form. The conservation process itself becomes meaningful when it transcends technical competency issues and engages critically with the wider ethical and moral considerations that arise from the conservator's own actions.

#### Notes

- 1 The RCA/V&A Conservation Course was a specialised MA Conservation Course set up between the Royal College of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum's Conservation Department.
- 2 This approach is in accordance with Article 8 of the European Confederation's of Conservators-Restorers Organisations Professional Guidelines 'The Conservator-Restorer should take into account all aspects of preventive conservation before carrying out physical work on the cultural heritage and should limit the treatment to only that which is necessary.' (E.C.C.O. 2003)
- 3 Conservators interviewed wished to remain anonymous and their contribution to the project is in their professional capacity rather than their identity. It is, however, important to clarify that they are all academically trained and professionally experienced conservators employed full time by the V&A Museum.

- 4 This excerpt from the webpage dedicated to the exhibition is telling: 'A *Grand Design* reveals the way in which a great museum came into being and has grown over almost one hundred and fifty years. It is a fascinating story, full of extraordinary characters, great works of art, many triumphs, and some disasters. No institution stands still, and the history of the Victoria and Albert Museum reflects the ways in which society, taste, perception, and scholarship have changed over the years' (V&A Microsites 2012).
- 5 The items removed following conservation treatment in 2001 were: seven pieces of folded paper, some with writing evidence; two square bundles of paper wrapped with yellow silk; one small blue roll of paper (mantra scroll) (**figure 6**; Hall 2001).
- 6 John Lowry was former keeper in the Indian and South East Asian Department of the V&A Museum and this sculpture features in his book. Lowry, J. 1973. *Tibetan Art*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London.
- 7 This is after all the contribution of conservation as aspired by the Nara Document on Authenticity: '... the search for cultural identity is sometimes pursued through aggressive nationalism and the suppression of the cultures of minorities, the essential contribution made by the consideration of authenticity in conservation practice is to clarify and illuminate the collective memory of humanity' (Larsen 1994).
- 8 'The conservation department is primarily responsible for the long-term preservation of the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection. The department conserves all the collections held by the V&A and the Museum of Childhood. The core of the conservator's work is the care and understanding of the V&A's collections. This is achieved through surveys, assessments and hands-on treatment of objects, but also through the provision of advice.' (V&A website 2012).

#### References

- Baker, M and Richardson, B** (eds.) 1997 *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum*. London: V&A Publications.
- Bennett, T** 1995 *The Birth of the Museum*. London: Routledge.
- Clavir, M** 2002 *Preserving What is Valued: Museums, Conservation and First Nations*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- E.C.C.O.** 2003 *European Confederation of Conservators-Restorers' Organisations - E.C.C.O. Professional Guidelines II Code of Ethics*. Available at: <http://www.ecco-eu.org/about-e.c.c.o./professional-guidelines.html> [Accessed 8 December 2012]
- Hall, A** 2001 *A Case Study of the Conservation of a 14th Century Tibetan Sculpture, with a Focus on the Ethical Considerations of the Removal of the Sculpture's Contents for Study*. Final Year Research Project Metals Conservation, MA, Spring 2001 (Unpublished dissertation). RCA/V&A Conservation.

- Larsen, K E** (ed.) 1994 *Nara Conference on Authenticity. Proceedings of the Conference in Nara, Japan, 1–6 November 1994*. Trondheim: Tapir, 17–34.
- Lowry, J** 1973 *Tibetan Art*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office.
- Plenderleith, H J** and **Werner, A E** 1971 *The Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art: Treatment, Repair and Restoration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Price, C** and **Brimblecombe, P** 1994 *Preventive Conservation: Practice Theory and Research*. Preprints of the Ottawa Congress, 12–16 September. London: IIC, 90–93.
- Purbrick, L** 1994 South Kensington Museum: The Building of the House of Henry Cole. In: Pointon, M (ed.) *Art Apart: Art Institutions and Ideology across England and North America*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 69–86.
- Pye, E** 2001 *Caring for the Past: Issues in Conservation for Archaeology and Museums*. London: James and James.
- Rhie, M M** and **Thurman, A F** 1991 *Wisdom and Compassion. The Sacred Art of Tibet*. New York: Abrams, 17–37.
- Richmond, A** 2005 The Ethics Checklist – Ten Years on. *V&A Conservation Journal* 50 (Summer 2005). Available at: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/res\\_cons/conservation/journal/number\\_50/ethics/index.html](http://www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/conservation/journal/number_50/ethics/index.html) [Accessed 8 December 2012]
- Richmond, A** and **Bracker, A** (eds.) 2009 *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*. London: Butterworth-Heinemann in association with the V&A Museum.
- Sully, D** 2007 *Decolonising Conservation. Caring for Maori Meeting Houses Outside New Zealand*. London: UCL Institute of Archaeology University College London.
- V&A Microsites** 2012 *A Grand Design. A History of the Victoria & Albert Museum*. Available at: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1159\\_grand\\_design/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1159_grand_design/) [Accessed 8 December 2012]
- V&A Museum** 2012 *Victoria and Albert Museum Annual Report and Accounts 2011–2012*. Available at: <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/> [Accessed 8 December 2012]
- V&A website** 2012 *Victoria and Albert. Conservation*. Available at: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/res\\_cons/conservation/index.html](http://www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/conservation/index.html) [Accessed 8 December 2012]