

## **Collecting Social Memory through Museum Collection Conservation**

Nikolaos Maniatis<sup>1</sup>, Ekaterini Malea<sup>2</sup>, Stavroula Rapti<sup>2</sup>,  
Nikos Androutsopoulos<sup>2</sup>, Georgios Panagiaris<sup>2</sup>

1. MuseoTechniki, Athens, Greece

2. Technological Educational Institute (T.E.I.) of Athens,  
[maniatis@museotechniki.gr](mailto:maniatis@museotechniki.gr), [kmalea@teiath.gr](mailto:kmalea@teiath.gr), [srapti@teiath.gr](mailto:srapti@teiath.gr),  
[and.nikos@gmail.com](mailto:and.nikos@gmail.com), [gpanag@teiath.gr](mailto:gpanag@teiath.gr),

The traditional role of the conservator has been associated with the preservation of the tangible aspect of cultural heritage. Conservation science has been mainly developing along with material science and conservators have focused their efforts on the preservation of the tangible nature of artefacts. In numerous cases this practice has led to the underestimation of the intangible content of objects of cultural heritage in terms of the conservation methodology and practice applied.

The traditional conservation principle of minimal intervention is gaining new meaning, as we have come to realise that an artefact's material and structural integrity interrelates and sometimes comes to conflict with possible evidence of significant historical and social memory content. As social memory is related to the experiences of individual members of the society, conservators must develop approaches of documentation and conservation methodologies in order to identify, document and eventually preserve the memory reflections of the represented societies by preserving the artefact's intangible content. It becomes apparent that in order to safeguard the artefacts' social and historical integrity and contribute towards the perception, appreciation and understanding of the cultural heritage, the conservators have to preserve and document the artefact's intangible content that reflects social memory.

## COLLECTING SOCIAL MEMORY THROUGH MUSEUM COLLECTION CONSERVATION

The professional discipline of conservation has always been directly dependent on the conceptual content of "Cultural Heritage". Term, which for decades described only material cultural property with aesthetic (The SPAB Manifesto, 1877; The Athens Charter, 1931) and / or historical value (The Venice Charter, 1964). As a result, conservation science has been traditionally associated with the protection and conservation of the material substance of cultural heritage and it has evolved along the discipline of material science.

But in recent decades, the term "Cultural Heritage" has undergone a series of alterations and conceptual enlargements, including, at first, the concept of natural heritage (UNESCO, 1972) and more recently, the intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 1989; UNESCO 2003). Result of these alterations and enlargements, is the term of cultural heritage, to refer to all cultural evidence that fall into one of the following three interdependent and complementary subcategories:

1. "Tangible Heritage" that designates monument, group of buildings or site as well as movable artefacts of historical, aesthetic, archaeological, scientific, ethnological or anthropological value.
2. "Intangible Heritage" that designates oral traditions, expressions, language, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, traditional craftsmanship, and knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe.
3. "Natural Heritage" that designates outstanding physical, biological and geological features; habitats of threatened plants or animal species and areas of value on scientific or aesthetic grounds or from a conservation perspective.

Such changes, and primarily the incorporation of intangible cultural heritage, could not leave the conservation practice and the role of conservation professionals (the interdisciplinary group of professionals, such as conservators, archaeologists, chemists, ethnographers etc., who collaborate for the documentation, conservation and preservation of cultural property) unaffected. The role of conservator has evolved from the limited "technical examination, preservation, and conservation-restoration of cultural property" (ICOM-CC, 1984), to the broader professional description assigned by ECCO (2002), where "The Conservator-Restorer contributes to the perception, appreciation and understanding of cultural heritage in respect of its environmental context and its significance and physical properties". It is clear, ECCO (European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations) recognises that evidences of material cultural heritage are (or could be) carriers of intangible content, which is related to the natural and social environment that created them, a content useful for their comprehensive understanding. Consequently, the conservator is gaining responsibility to contribute to the recognition and documentation of the intangible content of material evidence and to safeguard it for future generations equally with the material substance of the evidence, by developing appropriate documentation and conservation methods and practices. The above proposition of course, raises a number of questions and concerns about:

- the nature of the material evidence (martyrs) of intangible cultural content,
- the methodology that the conservator should follow towards their recognition,
- the procedures for the evaluation of their cultural value and
- the methodology to safeguard them over time.

Questions and concerns that cannot be easily answered unilaterally by the traditional view, through material science, which leads to problematic practices of devaluation (or non-

identification) of the intangible content of material culture, thus altering tangible (material) evidence of the intangible cultural heritage. Instead, it is necessary to develop new inter/intra-disciplinary methodologies, which will penetrate and bridge sciences and humanities.

Under this perspective, we could conceptualise and describe the intangible cultural content of the material heritage as material evidence (martyrs) of an artefact that could irritate the natural (biological) processes of memory reflections of the members of the society associated. In other words, evidence of material culture is loaded with memories of the social environment that created it and the social group that is represented; load that is carried by particular material evidence (martyrs) and through them the collective social memory is bequeathed from generation to generation. It becomes apparent that in order to safeguard the artefacts' social and historical integrity and contribute towards the perception, appreciation and understanding of the cultural heritage, the conservators have to contribute towards the preservation and documentation of the artefact's intangible content that reflects social memory in relation to the associated experiences of individual members of the society. The following three cases are representative examples of material cultural evidence of intangible heritage and they provide a comprehensive understanding of their nature.



Image 1: leather shoes, Florina Folklore and Tradition Network, Greece

In the first case (image 1), a pair of leather shoes are presented, from one of the collections of the “Florina Folklore and Tradition Network”, Greece, whose material evidence of intangible heritage was hidden in the mud that was present on them. In an attempt to preserve as much as possible the historical integrity of the shoes, it was decided not to detach the piece of mud that had imprints of socks. Apart from the fact that this element was part of the object's

history, it provides useful information about the customs and the artefact technology of costumes (Malea E and Tampaka A., 2010)

In the second case (Image 2), there is a direct conflict between tangible and intangible content as religious (intangible) content, which is the material of the stain, interferes with the preservation and the aesthetic result of the object. An ecclesiastical liturgical covering (from the Kechrovouni Monastery, Tinos island, Greece) used by priests to cover the Chalice containing the Holy Communion, was stained by the Communion, which in Orthodox Christian Church is red wine. Conservators decided not to remove the stain as it was considered to be “sacred”. This is a good example of the interrelation between conservation practice and the nature of cultural evidence, taking into account the social and religious structure that the artefact represents.



Image 2: Chalice cover cloth, Kechrovouni Monastery, Tinos island, Greece

As a third case we could refer to the artefacts that have been retrieved from a number of Greek villages that were burned to the ground by the Nazis, during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. Such artefacts have been collected and preserved by the local communities as evidence of the traumatic experience and in memory of the burnt important community sites, like church and schools. Material evidences of the fire is usually apparent on these artefacts' surface. They are these evidences that preserves memory reflections of the local communities and their historical significance could be evaluated as more important than the artefacts' aesthetic characteristics. Regarding conservation approach, although the preservation state of such artefacts (by technical terms that evaluate the material condition of the artefacts) could be considered poor, conservators could decide to preserve the material evidences of the dramatic historic event (smoke deposits, signs of vandalism, ect.) to their original scale if they are not causing problems to the material integrity of the artefacts (memory carriers) themselves.

From the above, it is readily understood that conservation professionals must develop and practice *dialectical* documentation methodologies that will facilitate the understanding of cultural significance through consideration of material and non-material substance of cultural heritage in relation, contradiction and synthesis of the natural and social environment that represents through time.

Of course, the dialectic approach introduces several problems in cases where the artefact is a material evidence of ancient civilisations, as it requires a holistic<sup>1</sup> understanding of the society that created it, something that it is difficult to be achieved. On the other hand, if the considered material culture is part of living heritage, like in the cases of most ethnographic and folklore collections, conservation professionals along with the traditional systematic scientific documentation, could contact and refer to the members of the relevant society in order to collect and document their memory reflections and safeguard the artefacts' conceptual characteristics towards a comprehensive understanding of artefacts' historical and aesthetic cultural value.

In a pilot implementation of the proposed methodology, during the documentation and conservation project of the fourteen collections that form the “Network of Folklore and Tradition of Florina” (Greece), undertaken by the Department of Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art of the Technological Educational Institute (T.E.I.) of Athens (2008), the conservation team had the opportunity to collect some interesting data (results). Due to a vast amount of undocumented artefacts that were collected by the Network's members and the short time given for the implementation of the project, the conservation crew decided to invite members of the local communities represented by the collections in order to assist the documentation research. Participating local residences were asked to tour conservators between the artefacts of their villages' collections and tell them what they could remember about them. The “tours” took place in five (5) most characteristic collections and they were all video recorded for further study and to be used in the documentation procedures of the project. The result was more than five hours of video recording with significant information. Collected data was related to the use of the artefacts, their typology and dating but, in a number of cases unexpected and interesting associated information was collected through the residences personal memories. Among the most characteristic were:

- Some recipes and traditional cooking practices.
- A historic folklore song.
- A number of traditions and festivities (some of them are not practised today).
- Traditional crafts and the local practitioners.
- And the historic events that were associated with some of the artefacts.

The question, however, on the evaluation of cultural significance remains; such an approach has the risk of endless theoretical searches and “historisation” of everything. At this point, we should not oversee that it is significant to preserve all forms of heritage on equal terms so as to maintain and promote cultural diversity which is as necessary as biodiversity and is the common heritage of humanity (UNESCO, 2001), and as cultural “evolution” is as dynamic process for societies as dynamic is the biological evolution for biodiversity, we could suggest that despite the preservation efforts of conservation professionals, society evaluates and chooses what it is worth to be preserved for future generations; rejecting (forgetting) what has no cultural significance and preserving (remembering) what has, in a deterministic evolution process of cultural diversity.

In addition to the above, it can also be said that the traditional conservation principles, such as minimal intervention is gaining new meaning, as we have come to realise that an artefact's material and structural integrity interrelates and sometimes comes in conflict with possible evidence of significant historical and social memory content carried by the artefact.

---

<sup>1</sup> The holistic understanding of a civilisation (or a social group) refers to the comprehensive understanding of social systemic taking under consideration both the physical and spiritual nature and practices of society.



In conclusion, we have to realise that as society we have to pass on to future generations our cultural heritage and as conservation professionals we have the responsibility to preserve the tangible – evidence of remembering (memory) and safeguard the intangible from being forgotten by inter/intra discipline scientific approach and collaboration beyond the traditional material science methodologies.

## REFERENCES

- E.C.C.O., (2002). *The ECCO (European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations) Professional Guidelines*. [online] E.C.C.O., Brussels. Available at: <http://www.ecco-eu.org/about-e.c.c.o./professional-guidelines.html>. Accessed at: 15 august 2011.
- ICOM Committee for Conservation, (1984). *The Code of Ethics, The Conservator-Restorer: a Definition of the Profession*, [online] ICOM-CC, Copenhagen. Available at: <http://www.icom-cc.org/47/about-icom-cc/definition-of-profession/>. Accessed at: 10 August 2011.
- Malea E. & Tampaka A., (2010) “*Technology study and Conservation of thirteen traditional rural shoes of 19<sup>th</sup> century from Florina region, northern Greece*”, at the Conference on “Parchment and Leather–Research, conservation–restoration, craft”, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Dept. of Paper and Leather Conservation, Torún, Poland, 21-23 October 2010, postprints *in press*.
- Morris, William, (1877). *Manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (the SPAB Manifesto)*. [online] London, SPAB. Available at: <http://www.spab.org.uk/what-is-spab/the-manifesto/>. [Accessed 25 August 2011]
- UNESCO, (1972). *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (the World Heritage Convention)*. [online] UNESCO, Paris. Available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext>. [Accessed 28 August 2011].
- UNESCO, (1989). *The UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore*, [online] UNESCO, Paris. Available at: [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13141&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13141&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html). Accessed at: 30 August 2011.
- UNESCO, (2001). *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. [online] UNESCO, Paris. Available at: [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13179&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html). Accessed at: 31 August 2011.
- UNESCO, (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. [online] UNESCO, Paris. Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention> . [accessed 28 August 2011]
- (1931). *The Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments (the Athens Charter)*. Adopted at the First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, Athens (1931). [online] ICOMOS (Updated 12 January 1996. Available at: [http://www.icomos.org/docs/athens\\_charter.html](http://www.icomos.org/docs/athens_charter.html). [Accessed at: 25 August 2011].
- (1964). *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (the Venice Charter)*. Adopted at the Second International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, Venice (1964).[online] ICOMOS. Available at: [http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/venice\\_e.htm](http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.htm) [Accessed 31 August 2011].