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# Conservation Values and Ethics

### **Ethics and Values: Framework**

Discussions of ethics can be found in the literature of many academic disciplines, especially philosophy. These disciplines examine ethics from theoretical and practical perspectives in both Western and non-Western societies. In addition, various professional fields, ranging from medicine to education, have literatures that are concerned with questions of values and ethical practice. In summarizing the thinking of six basic schools of ethical theory, Winter (1984, 37) says that the theories "range from a total denial of the intelligible meaning of value statements, to a social process view of ethics, to theological, metaphysical, and intuitive theories that refer moral concepts to deities or immutable principles."

Museum ethics have been of concern to most museum professionals and organizations, and the literature includes both broad books such as Edson (1997) and specialized discussions in diverse forums ranging from registrars' publications to law reviews. In archaeology, Wildesen (1984) presents a discussion of ethics and values that shows a certain analogy between that discipline and conservation in that both respect scientific methodology and the contemporary "conservation ethic" pertaining to the preservation of heritage resources. In addition, both disciplines have used the salvage, or "rescue," paradigm. Selections from conservation codes of ethics can be found in Appendix B.

Ethics have been defined as "any and all sets of moral principles and values that govern individual and group behavior" (White 1959, cited in Winter 1984). Abbott (1988, 3) quotes several definitions of "values" from social scientists: "the central organizing principle(s) of any society," "what is regarded as good and desirable," and "conception(s), explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or ... group, of the desirable which influences the selection of available modes, means, and ends to action." Professional values provide a moral framework guiding actions and representing choices.

Winter distinguishes between ethics and values as follows: "At the group level, ethics are the laws, mores, traditions, and other codes that regulate individual actions and maintain group welfare. At the individual level, ethics take the form of value statements (e.g., commands, assertions, conclusions) that involve right, wrong, desirable, undesirable, good, bad, and related behavior" (Winter 1984, 37).

A significant dimension of ethics involves moral authority. While it is outside the scope of this book to discuss ethical philosophies in detail, it is important to underline one practical consequence of the association between ethics and authority: ethics not only provide a framework to guide actions, but they are also intertwined with the social structure, its powerful institutions, and its understanding of "good" and "bad." Later I discuss how First Nations are taking issue not only with how their material heritage is being preserved, but also with who has control over it.

### **Conservation Values, Beliefs, and Practices in Context**

The professional ethics and values with which I am most concerned are those pertaining to how conservators view objects, especially ethnographic objects, and the purpose and the parameters of the work that is done on them. Three major areas have influenced these ethics and values: (1) the context of conservation within museums and the values expressed by these institutions; (2) the scientific outlook that has led to conservation as a field separate from restoration; and (3) the growth of conservation as a profession along with the attributes common to those disciplines that consider themselves "professional." These three areas will be considered in turn.

### **Museum Values**

Much has been written about the cultural values represented by museums. The social history of museums repeatedly shows that value-based choices have been made concerning what to collect, how to collect, what to do with what has been collected, and for whom and for what purposes the collections are kept. The importance of collections is fundamental to conservation. Pearce (1992, x) and others believe that a museum's collections "will always be, and should always be, at the heart of the museum operation." Many of the objects become cultural icons, symbolizing values and providing tangible evidence of them. The museum, as an institution, becomes a signifier as well as a creator of cultural meanings. Museums, therefore, have a vested interest in preserving their collections, and preservation is a primary mandate of most museum policies. At the same time, the cultural value of collections can be the product of a circular and self-fulfilling path in museums. Museums have the power to designate which objects have cultural value by choosing them for their collections. Conservators then assert that these objects must be preserved since, being in a museum's collection, they have cultural value.

At the same time, "knowledge is now well understood as the commodity that museums offer" (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 2). Objects in museums can be used as primary data: "the underlying premise is that objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged" (Prown 1982, 1). From a conservator's perspective, the objects contain knowledge in their very fabric and should be preserved intact so that this knowledge can be gleaned either now or in the future. If the objects are unique and irreplaceable, then not preserving them means a permanent loss of knowledge. As well, according to the ethics of conservation, not preserving objects represents for conservators the loss of the intrinsic authenticity represented by the object as a tangible link with the past. There are, therefore, reasons to preserve the object *per se*. According to MacDonald and Alford, however, "preservation of heritage objects is not an end in itself, but serves to maximise (over time) the access to the information encoded in them" (MacDonald and Alford 1991, cited in Keene 1994). Many conservators, while agreeing on the importance of the information, believe in the immediate value of preserving objects as an end in itself.

MacDonald's arguments are based on a contemporary view of knowledge and what this means for museums. Writing when he directed the Canadian Museum of Civilization, he says: "Information and experience replace commodities as the basis of wealth" (MacDonald 1987, 213). In his opinion the dominant paradigm of the museum as educator is outdated, especially if it focuses on presenting artifacts in static displays. Education today emphasizes learning (i.e., what the participant learns as much as what is taught), and learning can occur in many ways. In the new museum, "the old artifact-centricity is abandoned in favour of the total experience, which (to simplify) comes from recontextualizing artifacts in environmental simulations and then animating the environments to show people and artifacts interacting. Only in this way can the intangibles of culture – ideas, beliefs, values – be expressed. Artifacts thus become only one of several resource bases essential to museums" (MacDonald and Alford 1988, 9).

MacDonald represents a point of view that distances itself from traditional museology, the context within which conservation developed. MacDonald (1987, 213) states: "Collections have suddenly become something of a burden to museums. Most museum directors now feel like directors of geriatric hospitals whose budgets are devastated by patients whose survival for another day depends on expensive, high technology support systems. Conservators in museums are like a host of relatives who guard the wall plug of the life-support machines." Later, in 1992, he appears to moderate his perspective on the preservation of objects: "[While] all museums are, at the most fundamental level, concerned with information ... [the]

museum's principal resource – their collections of material remnants of the past – are of value, and are worth preserving, primarily for the information embodied in them. The information may be intellectual, aesthetic, sensory, or emotional in nature (or more likely some combination), depending on the object and its associations" (MacDonald 1992, 160).

However, MacDonald goes on to state that the same value applies to the newer collections museums are developing (e.g., oral histories, audio-visual materials, replicas, and re-enacted processes). Again, most conservators and some museologists would part company with MacDonald because they would make a distinction between (1) items that have been catalogued into the museum's collection and are preserved according to conservation guidelines and (2) items that need not appear as originals (i.e., replicas or copies serve as well). In summary, most museums include preservation of collections as a fundamental mandate of their institution; however, in contemporary museology, especially in North America, this view is being challenged by the idea that the museum should be a "presenter of culture, not of objects" (MacDonald 1993). The following sections summarize other values and attributes represented by museums, and these will later be discussed in relation to values and principles expressed by various Aboriginal peoples.

## **Museum Values**

### **Secular, Scientific, and European**

The "museum" under consideration in this book is a European institution that represents Enlightenment-based beliefs and Western cultural values. Some of these are: (1) the belief in the separation of the religious and the secular; (2) the belief that science can provide objective knowledge about the nature of the universe; (3) a belief in the value of knowledge gained from enquiry; and (4) the belief that one has a right to gain this knowledge and to use it to educate others.

### **Works of Art**

In Western cultural values, the fine arts enjoy a pre-eminent position among other expressions of material creativity. For the most part, the field of conservation reflects, in both principles and practices, Western values regarding fine arts and archaeological "treasures" rather than the values of the non-Western creators of some of these collections. I discuss this in more detail in subsequent sections dealing with individual conservation values.

### **Authenticity**

The traditional museum, in addition to subscribing to the above values, places a high value on objects considered to be "authentic." These represent "the real objects, the actual evidence, the true data as we would say, upon which



in the last analysis the materialistic meta-narratives [of European culture] depended for their verification" (Pearce 1992, 4). Authenticity bestows a numinous quality on the object, which, by virtue of its survival, maintains a direct and unique relationship to past events. Conservators are important to the museum in that they ensure the continued survival of the object.

### **Ownership**

One of the meta-narratives in Western culture concerns the importance of ownership. This subject is too vast to be adequately explored here, but a few points will underline its importance to the relationship between museums and First Nations. Ownership of ethnographic and other collections is currently being disputed on several fronts: repatriation claims challenge a museum's right to cultural property obtained in various ways; the current context of the assertion of Aboriginal rights challenges the Western concept and legality of "ownership" itself; and moral or "extralegal" claims regarding objects in museums are being recognized as having increasing validity (Ames et al. 1987). That is, following the copyright model, the creator of the object is considered to have certain rights even after the object is sold.

Owning culturally valued material bestows power and prestige on the museum, its directors, and its curators. Herle (1993) has characterized curators and museums as "intrinsically possessive." It is to be expected that, in this high-stakes atmosphere, different and often contestatory concepts of ownership exist between museums and indigenous peoples and that decisions about collections, and who has the authority to make those decisions, is a key issue. Indeed, there is a continual undercurrent of conflict in the contemporary relationship between museums and First Nations. Ethnographic conservators and conservation in general have been firmly enmeshed in Western values; however, recently they have been challenged on many fronts to acknowledge the perspectives of Aboriginal communities and creators of objects found in museums. I discuss below parallels between this situation and the treatment of contemporary art and artists. The conversations with First Nations people that are reported in this book explore several questions concerning ownership; the focus is on who they believe has the authority to make decisions regarding objects housed in museums and their ideas about resolving conflicts between museum practice and First Nations wishes.

### **The Decontextualized Physical Object**

Objects generally have been more valuable to collections when they have been in excellent condition and if they have had an accurate provenance or attribution. Museum objects have been referred to as "treasures" because they were associated with, or created by, people deemed important in Western

tradition, or because of their uniqueness, their history, or the materials from which they were made. The value-rich appellation “treasure” can apply, and often was applied, to objects far removed from their original context. Objects could have value, both monetary and cultural, in and of themselves because of what they represented, apart from any utilitarian purpose or cultural context, beyond the accompanying written documentation.

Although there have been debates concerning ethnology collections and how much of any culture could be represented by objects alone, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, objects continued to be collected because it was believed that they represented ways of life that were disappearing or that had already disappeared. For this reason, preserving objects in museums, although often a great distance from their cultures of origin, was considered a worthy endeavour.

### **The Past**

Museums also represent the value of knowing about and preserving the past. Age is often considered a positive value in relation to an object and one of the museum’s primary mandates, as an important institution of Western society, has been to “preserve the past.” Until recently, ethnographic collections were considered primarily as witnesses to the past rather than as part of the cultures of people living in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. That they could be both, and that they could catalyze a dynamic two-way relationship benefiting the people who created them as well as the museums who house them, is a principle many museums are now embracing. As recently as the mid-1980s, however, two conservation publications – “Ethnographic and Archaeological Conservation in the United States” (National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property 1984) and “Ethical and Practical Considerations in Conserving Ethnographic Museum Objects” (Rose 1988) – placed the parameters of conservation almost exclusively within the object’s value to the museum and the scholar. Between them, these lengthy documents made only one reference to the relationship between museum objects and contemporary First Nations perspectives. Again, I must emphasize that it is the norm in all the subdisciplines of conservation to focus on the objects and the professionals who curate, analyze, and conserve them; however, it is precisely this worldview that is currently being challenged by First Nations and by the contemporary museum context within which ethnographic conservation is taking place.

### **European Superiority**

In many museums’ histories, the preservation of historical artifacts supported meta-narratives of European nationalism, pinnacle achievements, alleged European superiority to other cultures, and European roots in



the Classical world. Indigenous collections were systematized within this perspective.

### **Static Moments in Linear Time**

The value placed on preserving objects from the past as discrete pieces of evidence also involves a belief in the “authentic moment” in a culture’s history. Freezing a culture’s history at one moment in time in museum displays, the “ethnographic present” (as it has been termed in anthropology) creates an understanding of indigenous cultures’ history as being important only within a constructed, fixed period in the past. This lent support to the view that museums promoted static representations and that they themselves were static.

### **Democracy**

Modern museums, especially those that are public, non-profit institutions, place a high value on democracy in that they believe they must serve a large public. In many countries, taxpayer-supported museums have either charged no entrance fees or low entrance fees, and in many cases accessibility is written into their original charters. A fundamental museum mandate is that of education, and museums evolved from institutions that educated passively through displays to institutions that educate actively through public programming. Museums, especially in the United States, are supporting the principle of accessibility through equal opportunity employment practices and through modifications that extend access (e.g., wheelchair-accessible buildings or displays developed for visually-impaired visitors). First Nations, however, may request restricted access to certain collections based on gender (e.g., women should not see or handle certain men’s regalia) or other “undemocratic” criteria. Michael Ames, former director of the UBC Museum of Anthropology, has written on the democratic aspect of museums and how this relates to the representation of diverse groups (see, for example, Ames 1992a, 1992b, 1993).

### **Uniqueness**

“Uniqueness,” in this discussion, refers to a quality of the objects housed in museums rather than to a quality of the museum itself. Within the museum perspective, “uniqueness” and “irreplaceability” have a value that goes beyond the laws of scarcity. Uniqueness derives from the fact that an object is hand-made, and it is added to by the particular history of that object; the latter makes even machine-made objects unique. Uniqueness is also a valued paradigm in Western aesthetics and is applied to artists, their visions, and their works.

### **Conservation as Part of the Museum Enterprise**

In general, conservators believe in the norms and values presented above. A more detailed discussion of the values of conservation, as demonstrated by its practitioners, is presented below.

### **Importance to the Curatorial Mandate**

Conservators play an important role in supporting the values of authenticity and objects as historical evidence. The technical examinations conducted by conservators provide what is considered to be objective support or refutation of curatorial theories regarding provenance and authenticity of components of the object as well as of the whole. New discoveries – such as hidden signatures, underlying images, or materials previously not recognized as being present – are made during conservation examinations and treatments. At the same time, conservation includes restoration procedures, and the skills of conservator-restorers are used to ensure that objects are presented as curators believe they should be seen.

Conservation is expected to clarify the meaning of the object. Equally, by preserving the integrity of the object, conservation is supposed to guarantee that important information is not destroyed. One curator defines the curatorial role as being responsible for the intellectual care of collections (Hill 1990, 19), and many conservators agree with this definition, emphasizing that they, as conservators, are responsible only for the physical care of objects. Significantly, this means that some conservators would say that the decisions concerning what kind of cultural parameters and cultural significance apply to an object should be made by the curatorial department and do not concern the conservation department (e.g., Barclay 1989). Conservators and curators alike recognize the role of conservation in supporting curatorial and institutional mandates (e.g., Hill 1990).

### **Importance to the Object: Objects Having a “Museum Appearance”**

The question of appearance is riddled with value judgments. Within museums, ethnographic objects have usually been allowed to keep a “dirtier” appearance than other categories of objects (e.g., those belonging to the decorative arts). Appelbaum (1991, 219) has said that “the practice of ethnographic conservation includes the idea of preserving objects in their ‘as-used’ rather than their ‘as-created’ state.” The National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property (1984, 4) in the United States elaborated on this principle: “Whereas art conservation often seeks to return a work of art to its original condition, ethnographic and archaeological conservation should seek to preserve the object’s life history at the time of collection.”

Watkins (1989, 41) presents the following example:



The newly opened National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., for example, offered the following explanation in a label attached [to an object in] the exhibition *The Royal Treasures of Benin*: "The red earth of Benin still adheres to this plaque. Unlike many copper-alloy objects, it is undamaged by Western chemical polishes and tinted waxes." Such an object more accurately represents the visual context in which the Benin people understood it, but nevertheless, in comparison with similar but restored pieces, it appears dirty. By attaching the label, the museum carefully validates an appearance that the general public would consider to represent neglect.

The origin of keeping "ethnographic dirt" on objects, and the symbolic value of doing so, is not clear; however, it could follow from two benign conservation principles:

- 1 Intervention with regard to an object should go no further than is indicated from the evidence pertaining to it.
- 2 Removal of anything that comes with the object, including from its surface, constitutes irremediable alteration if it is subsequently shown that the removed feature was part of the object's integrity.

The origins of leaving "ethnographic dirt" on objects might also follow from Western twentieth-century values about cleanliness and proper appearance – values that are applied to "our" objects but not to "theirs."

With regard to how objects look, Lowenthal (1994) succinctly documents some of the values expressed by Western society's changing tastes concerning the appearance of age. Signs of wear on objects have marked the status of families as old and established, fuelled Victorian romanticism, and signified authenticity. For example, decay could signify "real life" in unrestored or "ungentrified" buildings. Some marks of wear are deliberately left unchanged in order to preserve the historic integrity of the piece (e.g., keeping the bloodstains on the shirt Abraham Lincoln was wearing when he was shot). Oddy (1994) analyzes these and other examples in his discussion of the implications of cleaning objects.

Pearce (1990) discusses the complex relationship between (1) the appearance of archaeological objects before and after treatment and (2) archaeological information. She says that "the object as it emerges from the ground is an encapsulation of its history up to that moment; but the unravelling of that history by the modern investigative techniques of the conservator inevitably involves the destruction of evidence as much as the preservation of a version of the artefact" (Pearce 1990, 106). Conservators may believe that they are revealing the "true nature" of the object; however, Pearce believes that what they are actually revealing is a version of the object – one in which the irreversible processes inherent in the excavation, cleaning, and

consolidation of archaeological materials preclude the possibility of verifying information that may have been present pre-excavation or pre-treatment.

If we examine the relationship between conservation and appearance from another angle, that of the individual object in a museum, then conservation treatment can be seen to validate its worth as an important object – one worthy of this kind of attention and expense (Watkins 1989; Pearce 1992).

Within Western culture, when value lies in a new object appearing old, great care is taken so that the signs of wear appear natural and not contrived. This is one of the hallmarks, for example, of reproductions made for the antique trade. An example from popular culture in the late 1980s and 1990s is blue jeans that have been “stone washed” to appear worn and faded, and the many articles of clothing deliberately ripped to make a statement about the wearer’s unconventionality and economic sympathies, if not her/his status. One of the major decisions made with regard to the conservation of collections involves determining the final appearance of the object. The very fact that this is so carefully considered shows the importance given to achieving the “right” look.

#### **Differences between Conservators and Curators**

Although conservation values are embedded in museum values, conservators consider themselves to be different from other museum professionals, and this belief is returned (e.g., by museum curators and directors). Conservators regularly attend different conferences than do other museum personnel, they have a background that is technical/scientific, and often arts-related, and they view objects differently than do other museum professionals. In addition, in England, as Ashley-Smith (1995, 89) points out: “After the Second World War there was a notable class gulf between the curator/owner and the craftsman/conservator. Only in the field of paintings and sculpture was there sufficient intellectual interest in the outcome of treatment to allow a dialogue that bridged this class barrier.”

Disagreements between conservators and curators have been recognized. In some museum circles, conservators have gained a reputation as naysayers, too often coming into conflict with museum curators and directors (Ward 1986; Canadian Museums Association 1991; Clavir 1995). This has occurred, in part, for the following reasons. Curators have viewed conservators as imposing impossible standards, thus making mandates other than preservation difficult to realize (as well as excellence in the area of preservation too costly to achieve). Conservators have, on occasion, questioned initiatives from senior staff or fundraisers if they have felt the safety of the collections was being compromised. In addition, some conservators have expressed a loyalty to the collections that, at times, supersedes their loyalty to the policies of the institution (see the following section on professional values).



The specific values over which these conflicts have developed are (1) the conservator's belief that the integrity of the object should not be compromised by museum activity and (2) the curator's traditional belief that knowledge is what is most important, that objects are sources of knowledge, and that their use or representation for the purposes of disseminating knowledge is fundamental.

The conflict between curators and conservators can also be seen as a power struggle within an organizational structure. Conflicts over how a museum directs its priorities and resources are becoming more prevalent as museum budgets shrink and museum philosophy changes (Clavir 1993).

It should be noted that disagreements also exist within the conservation profession, not just between the larger categories of conservators and curators. *Preserving What Is Valued* concerns itself with ethics and values, and it is to be expected that conservators will have differences of opinion based on their different personal philosophies and experiences as well as on the differences among the subdisciplines within which they work (Ashley-Smith 1986, 1995) and the cultures of their particular museums or other work situations. It is for this reason that I focus on those professional concepts and values that have general acceptance within the profession (e.g., the conservation codes of ethics).

### **The Public Mandate: Importance of People, Importance of Objects**

In the conservation literature there are continual references to conservators being part of a team – a team that includes curators, scientists, and other professionals (e.g., Coremans 1969; Stolow 1972; Ward 1986; Ramsay-Jolicoeur 1993; Lawrence 1994; Ashley-Smith 1995). Conservation treatments and final appearance are determined through input from several parties. Conservators do not work in a vacuum; their work is circumscribed by institutional viewpoints. The work conservators do, however, is not usually held up directly for public scrutiny as part of the museum enterprise (except for work on well-known pieces, exhibitions specifically dealing with conservation, or treatment controversies [e.g., the Sistine Chapel]). Conservators work behind the scenes and, indeed, good conservation work is “hidden”; the object, not the conservation work, is brought to the forefront.

Requests from First Nations usually go first to the museum's director, or to a curatorial department, or to collections management; conservators are brought in secondarily and usually only if they would have been consulted in any case. This not only reinforces a traditional image of what is and what is not the appropriate work of conservators, but it may also serve to reinforce the conservators' view that their work concerns objects rather than people.

### **Importance to the Museum Institution**

Conservation plays a significant role in constructing meanings. It not only

makes the objects in a collection look good, it makes the institution look good. Recognition for excellent work in conservation can take several forms. In Canada, for example, federal grants to museums from the Museums Assistance Program were recommended, in part, on the basis of whether the museum was seeking or able to provide "proper" care for its objects or objects on loan. Museum meanings are influenced by conservation, which takes a portion of the museum budget and spends it to reinforce the museum values previously noted. Conservation, by virtue of its impact on the preservation or restoration of certain objects and their appearance, can influence what constitutes evidence (Freed 1981; Pearce 1990; Mann 1994). Conservation can influence the construction of what is deemed to look good and why it is so deemed. In art galleries, conservation has been acknowledged as being instrumental in presenting a good image to the public. As Watkins (1989, 39) observes: "The impression of clear coatings and vividly painted surfaces, all in flat plane within their frames, clearly expresses to the public an image not only of great beauty, but also of an organization exercising proper stewardship over its objects."

Watkins has also pointed out that conservation represents a value that is increasingly evident in European-based twentieth-century mores: the desire to always appear young and to live a long life. The museum embodies the denial of death insofar as it is an institution that both preserves and presents "right before your eyes" objects from the distant past and, through periodic conservation, keeps them in good appearance (Watkins 1989). In addition, the museum keeps the conceptions people have of the past alive through its interpretations and through preserving "time frame settings" (e.g., for period furniture) or freezing First Nations objects in an "ethnographic present."

### **Science**

The importance of scientific methodology to the field of conservation has already been noted. Discussions about the history of conservation outline how a scientific outlook became one of the principal features of conservation as it emerged as a field distinct from restoration. According to Ward (1986, 29): "The contribution of science to conservation has been pivotal. In bringing together materials research and the ancient craft of restoration, it precipitated the development of modern conservation." The preponderance of scientific analyses and related technical information in the conservation literature, and in what is accepted as thesis work in graduate level conservation training programs in North America, also supports the importance of an objective, scientific approach to problem solving. The importance of science as a meta-narrative of post-Enlightenment European thought has also been discussed, and this meta-narrative is summarized in the following comment: "In all of this there is a paramount belief in the essential



and absolute power of reason and in the physical evidence with which, as a matter of necessity, reason is informed" (Pearce 1995, 405). Scientific thought underlay, and profoundly influenced, the purpose of museums, especially museums of natural history and ethnography, and the way in which collections were made, organized, and displayed.

To situate conservation ethics, it is important to understand the relationship between ethical beliefs and scientific assertions. Scientific assertions can be tested using scientific methodology, whereas ethical beliefs cannot be so tested. Science is concerned with understanding what are seen to be laws governing the nature of the physical world. Ethics is concerned with understanding how people view the nature of "reality" and the underlying principles of value statements.

The beliefs listed below have a positive value in the scientific world. They are summarized here because they will be appearing in discussions later in this chapter.

- 1 There is a real world "out there" that operates according to natural laws that can be examined and understood. (Empiricism)
- 2 A causative agent produces a repeatable effect. (Determinism)
- 3 Problems have real causes and real solutions.
- 4 Solutions must be confirmed before being accepted: control groups, repeated experiments, and other methods are used to eliminate the possibility of results being caused by other factors.
- 5 Assumptions must be acknowledged and tested.
- 6 Vague statements are not acceptable. However, absolute precision is tempered by an acceptance of levels ranging above or below an average point.
- 7 The world should be explained according to scientific knowledge (i.e., one should rely on other scientists rather than relying on religious/spiritual ideas or what people say they know but cannot prove scientifically).
- 8 One should respect broad areas of knowledge that are already scientifically established. (Paradigms)
- 9 Theory must be proved to work in practice.
- 10 It is professionally acceptable to change one's opinion if a better model is discovered.
- 11 It is important to continually search for new knowledge, to fit the pieces of the puzzle together.
- 12 It is important to respect quantification and mathematical expression, including statistical probability, as the language of science.
- 13 It is important to have empathy for the value of human life and for humans as subjective beings.

### Analysis for Conservation

Most of the above beliefs are found in the field of conservation. Conservation publications contain many examples of problem solving based on empiricism, determinism, the acceptance of paradigms, and the use of mathematical language. In a debate in the mid-1990s over environmental guidelines, assumptions were tested and new models emerged (Michalski 1994a; Erhardt et al. 1995; Schultz 1995; Real 1995; Lull 1995). If the positive value of science forms a meta-narrative in conservation, then it should not be surprising to find that conservation professionals have adopted the language and image of scientists. In a museum, the conservation workspace is usually referred to as a laboratory rather than a studio (at least in North America). Even a basic workspace, whether it is in a museum or not, contains such scientific equipment as microscopes as well as safety equipment relating to the use of chemicals. Conservators often choose to wear white lab coats. In other words, science is part of the culture of conservation in its values, in its norms of practice, and in its symbols.

Several of the scientific values summarized above have a particular impact on ethnographic conservation. For example, a belief in scientific rather than spiritual ways of understanding the world is one potential source of conflict between museums and First Nations.

If science is this important to conservation, then it should be expected that it would be referred to in the professional codes of ethics governing the field. Sections of eight codes are reprinted in Appendix B. Science is mentioned directly in three of these: that of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) (1984); that of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) (1995); and in the "Basic Requirements for Education in Conservation/Restoration" section of the *Professional Guidelines* of the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organizations (ECCO) (1993). The latter document includes the ECCO code of ethics in a separate section.

The ICOM code states that "an intervention on an historic or artistic object must follow the sequence common to all *scientific methodology*," which it then proceeds to describe (International Council of Museums 1984, sec. 3.6). It is not surprising that science is mentioned in a code drawn up by those who are concerned with differentiating conservation from the widespread European tradition of restoration. The 1995 AIC code mentions science and the liberal arts as being the components of the field of conservation. It also includes a section on "Examination and Scientific Investigation," which states that examination "forms the basis for all future actions by the conservation professional," and it goes on to state that the conservator should "follow accepted scientific standards and research protocols" in performing analytical investigations (American Institute for Conservation 1995, 26). This wording is also used in the 1999 Australian code of ethics (Australian



Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials 1999, 13). The importance of scientific methodology, both as an approach to problem solving and as part of the subject matter of the field of conservation, is clearly illustrated. The AIC code antecedent to 1995 mentions science as an underpinning of professional competence within the field of conservation (American Institute for Conservation 1993, Part 2).

The eight codes of ethics, whether or not they mention science directly, describe a systematic approach to conservation practice based on deductive reasoning from evidence (in this case the physical object and its surroundings) and deductive and inductive reasoning based on a conservator's professional expertise. In addition, there is the caveat that no conservation professional should act beyond these limits.

As discussed previously, an important dimension of ethics is its moral authority. Kuhn (1962, cited in Winter 1984, 43) proposed "that the ultimate authority of science is not so much its rational methodology and rules, but the consensus of the scientific community." Professional codes of ethics, which will be discussed in the next section, represent the consensus for appropriate rules for the conservation community as defined by that community.

The ICOM document states that the object's significance lies (at least partially) in "our ability to decipher the object's scientific message and thereby contribute new knowledge" (ICOM 1984, sec. 3.6). As has been said, the scientific aspect of conservation is crucial in the support of the curatorial mandate. Science is important in conservation not just as a methodology, but also as a goal. In other words, it is not just the preservation of objects that is a product of conservation, but new scientific knowledge. Although it is not stated explicitly, the ICOM document implies that this new knowledge is both theoretical and applied.

Winter discusses various points of view concerning whether ethical systems are relativist or absolutist and how these relate to scientific theory and methodology. He describes one dilemma in archaeology that pertains equally to conservation: "Although there should be no question about the utility of the scientific method as a means of effectively understanding cultures and human behavior, there is also no question that much of what is called science in archaeology ... is actually composed of value statements" (Winter 1984, 40). Referring to another author, he continues: "This mixing of research imperatives, values, and theory with scientific methodology underlies much of contemporary American archaeology" (43). Winter concludes his review by saying that the different points of view show that "value statements (ethics) pervade all aspects of archaeology, from our rationale for doing it, to the manner in which we survey, excavate, and analyze data, to the goals, methodologies, and research imperatives that govern our research and professional relations. Once we have recognized the presence of value

statements in archaeology, it should be possible to separate them from the scientific approach" (42). He suggests that the only way to distinguish science from value statements is to recognize that our goals and decisions are based on ethics and values and that science provides the means of achieving them. Science itself begins, after all, with "the value statement that it is worthwhile for one reason or another ... to study the meaning of reality" (43).

Although science is one of the basic meta-narratives of the field of conservation, it is not the only one. According to David Bomford (1994b, 4):

There have been times in the history of conservation when empirical positivism seemed to be the only intellectual framework on offer, when everything was possible or provable if you had the right equipment, when objective truths were the only interesting ones ... At the very least, all conservators should have a basic appreciation of the historical or aesthetic context they are dealing with and appreciate the range of related questions that scholars, curators, owners and the general public might ask.

As early as 1976 Jędrzejewska (1976, 6) wrote: "The whole work of a conservator is a constant sequence of interpretations, as this is what guides his decisions and procedures." According to Keyser (1990, 378): "Conservation is more than a set of physical preservation techniques, it is also an interpretive activity which involves a complex of artistic, scientific, and historical ideas which influence the approach to treatment whether they are acknowledged or not." Weil (1984, 89) concurs: "Judgement and values are implicit in the practice of every conservator no matter how 'scientific' he may consider himself. In this sense one may indeed say that ultimately, the practice of conservation is interpretive, but one must add, interpretation based on a profound knowledge of objective, scientific fact and aesthetic/historical/experiential (practical) understanding of the task at hand."

Rhyne cites several recent conservation authors and policies, particularly in relation to the preservation of sites and monuments, that have focused on accepting different cultural values, including the importance of the "non-tangible" attributes of material heritage (Rhyne 1995). For example, he quotes Jukka Jokilehto, head of architectural conservation at ICOM in Rome, as stating, at a 1994 workshop in Bergen: "Conservation is not only keeping the material, but also recognizing this spirit, this 'non-physical' essence and authenticity of the heritage, and its relation with society" (5).

Meta-narratives found in the fine arts are also found in conservation. For example, it has already been pointed out that the prestigious position given to the fine arts in Western society has influenced the place accorded ethnographic objects in the museum/gallery hierarchy. As alluded to in Chapter 1, fine arts values the artist as a creative individualist, and art galleries value the created work. With regard to conservation, respect for the artist's intent



is one of its guiding principles, and copyright legislation has ensured respect for the artist.

### **Conservation, Subjectivity, and the Scientific Ideal of Objectivity**

As mentioned, even though the conservation professional bases much of his or her decisions on scientific examination, knowledge of materials, and scientific reasoning, he/she also recognizes the importance of cultural knowledge. For example, the artist's intent and the object's social history are important foundations for making decisions regarding the object. Conservation work often adds to the information regarding both these phenomena. However, the conservator is expected to unearth this new information on the basis of expert observations of the physical object rather than on the basis of the traditional curatorial specializations of art and history. It is important to recognize that cultural information informs both the conservation decision-making process and conservation objectives. If the conservator is not completely conversant with the cultural aspects of the piece, then he or she is expected to consult museum and other professionals. The "shared responsibility" for conservation decisions and the importance of an interdisciplinary approach have been discussed previously.

In addition to cultural information, another area of non-science-based knowledge that enters into conservation decisions comes with the acknowledgment that subjective judgments are indeed present in conservation (see Etherington 1985; Renshaw-Beauchamp 1988; Michalski 1994b; Bomford 1994a; and Odegaard 1995). As science has become more predominant in the field, some have criticized conservation's neglect of the importance of intuition, the "feel" a practitioner develops for what is right, based on years of experience (Orlofsky and Trupin 1993). In paintings conservation this has also been noted and referred to as a "sympathetic attitude" (Talley 1983; Tomkins 1987). Tomkins (1987, 45) quotes the chief of conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, John Brealey, as saying: "More damage has been done to paintings in this century than at any other period in history, simply because so many people are unwilling to make value judgements about complicated questions. They learn all sorts of technical expertise in their training and then they approach paintings as problems to be solved – how to glue down the flakes or clean that spot – when what they really need to do is get into the artist's mind."

It is also being recognized that value judgments play a part in how a culture determines the significance of objects as well as the best way to conserve them. Michalski (1994b, 242) writes about "two irrational judgements ... whose consideration has become taboo in the field of conservation: (a) artifacts vary enormously in value and (b) not all deterioration decreases artifact value, some even increases it." Wilsmore (1993b, 2) writes:

"the Burra Charter<sup>1</sup> avoids a temptation that much conservation has fallen into: to make out that its task is merely a practical one which can look mainly to scientific methodology for its clarification and avoid evaluation."

Within the field of conservation, there are indications of changes in attitude towards science. For example, for some conservators science is no longer the overriding consideration in determining actions; increasingly, social context is being publicly acknowledged. This can be seen in the publication *Durability and Change* (Krumbein, Brimblecombe et al. 1994) and in such publications on ethnographic conservation as *Critical Issues in Ethnographic Conservation* (Moses 1999). Another example of a change in attitude towards science can be found in the following remarks about deterioration.

Progress in knowledge of the deterioration of materials has always been defined as part of the purview of science. For example, Ward (1986, 14) argues that "preventive conservation is only possible because scientific research has given us a better understanding of some of the mechanisms of deterioration." Understanding deterioration is also one of the cornerstones upon which conservation decisions are built. "The conservator's duty is to take all possible precautions to prevent or minimize damage to collections and to oppose any situation, whether active or passive, that may cause or encourage any form of deterioration" (9). In *Durability and Change*, however, deterioration is described according to social and subjective criteria rather than objective criteria. According to Staniforth (1994, 218): "We describe deterioration as those changes that we regard [as] undesirable."

In 1990, Hodkinson (1990, 59) made the point that "not all changes must be regarded as damage, or deterioration, with automatic attempts at reversal or restoration." He goes on to say that the significance of paintings is changed "partly as a result of physical-chemical changes, but ... more by human perceptions ... Paintings are in a continual state of physical and metaphysical flux which changes their significance to the particular society that is interacting with them at any given moment in their history." And a group report on the topic of what constitutes durability in artifacts says: "Many members of the group were concerned to express a more global notion of durability that gave due weight to the cultural constitution of artifacts" (Orna 1992, 52).

On the other hand, one must recognize that a rationalist scientific approach remains a foundation of conservation and continues to be its defining paradigm. For example, in 1997 an editor for *Studies in Conservation*

1 The Burra Charter was written by the Australian group known as the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). It was written in 1979 in order to elaborate upon the Venice Charter of 1966, and it concerns professional work and ethics with regard to conserving monuments and sites.



commented as follows on a submission for publication: "The referee feels that the notion that conservation values are social constructs and subject to the influence of *Zeitgeist* is a minority view [albeit one] that is gaining ground and deserves to be published."

### **Professional Values**

The third general area that informs conservation values is the area of professionalization. Chapter 1 described how conservation developed into a field distinct from restoration and gradually became a profession. Restoration was recognized as a highly skilled craft, while conservation defined itself as a new profession. As Wueste (1994, 17) says: "A Profession is more than a collection of persons with similar expertise and jurisdiction. It is a social institution. Acting within it, a professional has special prerogatives and vital responsibilities in promoting and sustaining certain values that, rightly or wrongly, are thought to be best served by those with the expertise." Features of professionalization exhibited by conservation but not restoration include:

- 1 Training in recognized schools (which are usually associated with universities) rather than through apprenticeship. Increasingly, this is becoming the standard for entry into conservation, although there are variations depending on country and discipline. University-level training signifies three important developments:
  - (a) the establishment of recognized criteria for entry into the field,
  - (b) the association of university-standard theory with the necessary manual craft skills, and
  - (c) the establishment of broadly recognized standards of excellence.
- 2 Development of a code of ethics. This serves the membership by making public the standards of excellence regarding both rules of conduct and parameters of practice. The code of ethics supports and promotes viewing "professionalism" as an ideology (Vollmer and Mills 1966, viii).
- 3 Development of formal, national, occupational organizations that foster a collective group identity and professional culture. In addition, these organizations enforce the professional code of ethics, thus showing that the field is under collective control. Among other duties, the organizations facilitate communication among group members (e.g., through publications and conferences). Keeping "trade secrets," a feature of craft guild practice found in traditional restoration, is frowned upon. Some professional organizations also license members, adjudicate complaints against them, and protect them from unfair/outside accusations. According to Wueste (1994, 14), "professions are the products of the institutionalization of expertise."

Many authors and editors (e.g., Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1966a and 1966b; Flores 1988) have described the development of professions, the debates about what constitutes a professional, and the use of the words “professional” and “profession” to refer to areas outside of the three traditional professions of law, medicine, and the ministry. The following observations about professions apply to the development of the field of conservation:

- Rapid technological change is a factor in promoting professionalization.
- Professionalization is a dynamic process rather than an achieved end-state. The striving to be professional is both internalized by the participants and externalized by the work of the organizations.
- Professionals are dedicated to their work, and their permanent attachment is to their profession; this attachment is kept even if employment is transferred to another institution.
- Professionals organize their own work and make their own decisions, and their independence of judgment and manner is recognized even when they work as part of a team.
- A professional group is self-sufficient (i.e., self-appointed and self-regulated); its sphere of authority must be recognized by society in general and those whom it serves. The profession possesses epistemic authority and is seen as a source of expert advice.
- Professional groups experience a sense of obligation to the larger good of society. For example, while a business considers profit as a primary goal and pursues this with its own benefit in mind, professions purport to serve higher ideals. (This is also true of such institutions as non-profit museums and galleries, and it has been a source of conflict for some as, due to forced budget cuts, they find themselves embracing business values in an attempt to raise revenue.)

O'Neill (1992) discusses the reactions of professional curators to external challenges to their authority. This parallels the reactions of some conservators to First Nations ideas about the conservation of objects in museums. According to O'Neill: “The idea of a profession combines personal motivation and therefore personal satisfaction with contributing something of value to society. Changes in external relations – the contribution required by society – can be traumatic and a threat to curators’ motivation and sense of professional identity and security” (34).

#### **Professional Values: Whom Does Conservation Serve?**

It may appear as a truism to say that professionals direct their work towards providing services to their clients, but this statement has important implications for conservation because its primary client has not been defined.