The Relationship between Curator and Conservator:

Case studies in Metals Conservation at the Wallace Collection, London.

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HERTFORD HOUSE, MANCHESTER SQUARE, built in the late 1770s by the Earl of Manchester, but radically enlarged, rebuilt & redecorated by Sir Richard Wallace in 1873.
The Wallace Collection… one of the world’s greatest private art bequests
The Laughing Cavalier

by

Frans Hals
Sir Richard Wallace, just prior to his death in 1890.

He and his father, the fourth Marquess of Hertford, were the principal founders of the Collection.
The European Armoury collection of Sir Richard Wallace, as displayed between 1873 and 1897…
The European Armoury as displayed today, mainly behind glass
The Oriental Armoury collection of Sir Richard Wallace, again as displayed between 1873 and 1897…
Most of the collection is now displayed behind glass, for both conservation and security reasons… but what does one do with over fifty Indo-Persian helmets and shields ???
THE NEW RESERVE GALLERY opened in 2000 as part of the Wallace Collection’s Millenium Project.
It is usually the conservator, or conservation technician, who is given the task of physically mounting artifacts for display.

This c.1530 saddle, now used to display our 15th-century ‘Gothic’ German equestrian armour [A21] was cut with a central hole in the 1860s to secure the central support-post of the dummy rider figure…

WE WOULD NOT DO THIS TODAY

… or would we???
This ‘Maximilian’ armour made in the style of the early 16th century… but it was actually assembled in the 19th century to suit the ‘antiquarian collector’ market… the helmet is 16th-century but the cuirass was in fact made one hundred years later, in 1611… while both legs are Victorian replicas…

HOW SHOULD WE TELL ITS STORY?

A job for the curator, perhaps… but perhaps with some input from the conservators tasked with displaying the armour?
The upper central diamond in the middle of the grip is a modern replacement... A CURATOR’S DECISION!

In a collection such as ours, visual appearance can matter to a greater extent, perhaps, than in certain other types of museum collection...

... and THAT is when ‘conservation’ can sometimes become more akin to ‘restoration’...

(left) The Sword of Tipu Sultan southern Indian, c. 1790.

(OA1402)
A GROUP OF EXCAVATED MEDIEVAL SWORDS…

… all ‘as found’ except this one (left), the blade of which was ‘cleaned’ and the grip restored prior to its acquisition by Richard Wallace in 1871…

ETHICAL… ?

OR UNETHICAL ?

(lef) 14th-century sword
TO CLEAN OR NOT TO CLEAN?

WHAT EXACTLY IS OUR DEFINITION OF ‘CLEAN’?

15th century jousting helm

[A186]
… and to COMPLETELY contradict what I’ve just said, the blade of THIS sword was completely re-surfaced and re-polished!

Early 15th-century Japanese blade, with 19th-century hilt and scabbard

(OA1694)
Detail of the blade, as re-ground and re-polished by Kenji Mishina
Cleaning and conservation of such surfaces can often make a really enormous difference to their appearance. Note the pre-conservation photograph of this c.1470 painted-and-gilt wooden jousting shield (left) [cat.no.A309]
The Grand Staircase Balustrade, c.1720

This was the only single work of art specifically mentioned in the 1897 bequest of Lady Wallace.
… treating the hand-rail of the Grand Staircase balustrade…

PAINTED,

POLISHED, or

PATINATED???

and what’s much more to the point…

WHO DECIDES?
A Morion helmet of the Saxon Electoral Guard c.1580-1600

There are FIVE of these rare painted-and gilt morion helmets in the Wallace Collection... ... but in 1897 ONE of those five was unpainted, and subsequently restored in the 20th century.

Ethical? YES... because essentially that paint layer is still completely reversible
An Italian gauntlet [A52] in course of restoration… the two centre fingers are original but the rest were missing… visually somewhat distracting!

A JOINT DECISION TO ‘RESTORE’, made by Curator and Conservator, working successfully in harmony with each other
Indian brass-and-iron butted-link mail shirt (probably 19th century)…

MAJOR RESTORATION NECESSARY FOR STRUCTURAL REASONS
A REVERSIBLE REPAIR? ARE ALL INSERTIONS SIGNED & DATED?
A SALUTARY WARNING... DO BEAR IN MIND ISSUES OF REVERSIBILITY!
SOMETIMES ONE HAS TO RE-STRAP AN ARMOUR FOR STRUCTURAL REASONS

Italian ‘parade’ half-armour

[A51]
Visible evidence of clumsy ‘restoration’ work in the past … note the damage (centre) caused by grinding off a rivet, prior to punching it out from the back of the plate.
'PAST RESTORATION'

*TO KEEP OR NOT KEEP?*

Perhaps one of the most iconic helmets in the Collection, this basically genuine late-14th century ‘pig-faced’ bascinet, as we see it now, was virtually ‘created’ in a 19th century restorer’s workshop… the metal of the skull has been thoroughly cleaned of rust-pitting, and the camail is a relatively modern addition pieced together from fragments of original mail. To what extent, then, should we trust in the authenticity of the visor … a case for metallography perhaps?

*SHOULD WE DIS-ASSEMBLE SUCH ‘COMPOSITES’ ???*

*Italian ‘bascinet’ helmet c.1390*
If elements of A69 have been ‘restored, then are we not justified in now restoring the missing visor of A74 (left), a very similar helmet?

Left ... ‘as found’...
[A74]

Right ... restored’...
[A69]
TO RESTORE OR NOT TO RESTORE?

Italian (Venetian?) sallet

A70

Are ‘speculative’ restorations, such as this nasal bar, justified or not?
Each generation of conservator/restorers must assess and accept or reject the work of their predecessors…

Sometimes that work is so good that it will be retained, but surely obvious errors must be corrected… or should they?

e.g. should there be a vertical peg on one shoulder only, or on both shoulders?

Armour for the German joust (Stechzeug) c.1500-20
RUST HOLES CONCEALED
BY THE ADDITION OF
DECORATIVE BRASS
APPLIQUES

19th-century restorers
could sometimes be
quite imaginative when
seeking to ‘improve’
objects by concealing
the ravages of time …
‘imaginative’ but not
perhaps quite ‘ethical’!

German Zischagge
in Polish/Hungarian style
c.1600-30

[A101]
… and some **definitely UNETHICAL** ‘restoration’!

… the etched decoration on a pair of 16th-century legs has been ground off to make them ‘match’ the rest of this plain military 17th-century armour…

German Cuirassier armour c. 1630

[A65 and A298-9]

A65 today (above)

A65 c. 1890 (right)
TO RESTORE or NOT TO RESTORE?

The falchion of Cosimo de Medici [A710]… so should we restore the 19th-century pale grey carved agate grip to its (probable) original wire-bound wood-and-leather appearance?
DECISIONS, DECISIONS, DECISIONS!
DEFINITELY A CURATORIAL DECISION!

Catherine The Great’s Sevres porcelain ice-cream cooler…

… and (on the right) as it appears today, without its 19th century gilt-bronze base…
This is one of our most magnificent and historically-important pieces of furniture… a console table by Andre-Charles Boulle, French, dating to the end of the 17th century
F56 console table as it appeared in 1897…
F56 before and after removal of its clumsy 19th-century base...
Nativity Reliquary panel
(early 14th century)

*reverse-gilded glass, engraved and painted*

IIIG307
After removal of a 19th-century black card backing
The black card was replaced (right) to return the object to its appearance in 1897…

A CURATORIAL DECISION!
Organic materials (wood, leather, textile) often pose more of a problem than metals… some leather is beyond cleaning, its degradation due not to grease, but to…

… ‘RED ROT’…

Vegetable-tanned leather is particularly prone to this form of bacterial attack

The shield is c.1610, but the leather backing is a late 19th century restoration

SO IS IT WORTH KEEPING AT ALL?

French or Dutch iron infantry shield (reverse side) c.1600 [A 68]
DISPLAY POLICIES AND TECHNIQUES ARE AN AREA IN WHICH THE CONSERVATOR’S ROLE IS ABSOLUTELY CRUCIAL

16th-century saddle [A410] as displayed in 1980 (left)

A410 today (right)
NOTE THE POORLY-SUPPORTED BOOTS, causing the textile to collapse and crumple in on itself around the ankles…
THEN AND NOW…
19th-century Mandarin’s robes as displayed in 1890, and as conserved and re-mounted in 2006
OCCASIONALLY, DAMAGE HAS BEEN CAUSED NOT SO MUCH BY THE RAVAGES OF TIME, AS BY THE POOR QUALITY OF SOME OF OUR OLD DISPLAY-MOUNTS…

(eg. *spring-clips*)
FURTHER EVIDENCE OF DAMAGE CAUSED BY DISPLAY BRACKETS

German sporting crossbow c. 1500
Much of a metalwork conservator’s work is relatively routine, involving the re-waxing of armour such as this… the c.1587 Greenwich field harness of Lord Buckhurst, later made First Earl of Dorset [A62]
Italian Comb Morion, discoloured by old hardened grease, during cleaning…  [A123]
DURING CLEANING… Comb Morion c.1590
In the Wallace Collection it is not combating corrosion that preoccupies our time … it is dealing with the effects of past conservation treatments. 100 years of greasing iron and steel has taken its toll, particularly on the leather straps that hold together most of the armour…

Pair of tassets from the armour of Wolf von Raitenau, c.1580 [A60]
Pair of pauldrons (shoulders) from a German armour c.1630, before/after cleaning

[A65]
ARCHER’S BRACER dated 1608… the leather attachment strap is secured on each side by three iron rivets, regularly greased in the past: note resultant staining of the ivory …

[A1062]

**ENTER…**

THE CURSE OF THE GREASE-BRUSH!
(again)
Detail of the Indian Rajput Warrior’s robes, showing the long-term effects of grease

OA1791
ICELANDIC DRINKING HORN

SILVER...
POLISH IT,
LEAVE IT,
OR LACQUER IT?
The sword of Anatole Demidoff, Prince of San Donato (Austrian, mid-19th century)

... actually, this sword was formerly entirely gilded overall...

[SILVER???]
THERE IS NO POINT cleaning silver if you are simply going to allow it to tarnish again…

BUT MANY CURATORS DO NOT LIKE THE ‘AESTHETICS’ OF LACQUERING

SO WHO DECIDES?
YES, IT IS SILVER…

…but there is also niello decoration present…

The conservator has to be able to recognise materials and know how (not) to treat them… *ie.* in this case by AVOIDING any chemical treatments that might be perfectly safe for metallic silver, but which would be disastrous for niello.

Balkan/Caucasian cartridge box c.1800

[OA1894]
… there are many other non-ferrous metals besides silver, of course…

GILT BRONZE especially

Before \((left)\) and after cleaning \((right)\)

The Sphinx Clock  F269
‘BLACK SPOT’ ... and after cleaning with E.D.T.A.
A fine (composite) 16th-century German wheel-lock sporting gun…

… but the barrel is held onto the stock with a length of fishing line…

WHY?
Detail of barrel and stock, showing the hole through which a stag-horn pin would have passed, to hold the two together…

Underside of the barrel, showing the broken barrel-fixing lug…
… and how the problem was solved.
Detail showing the replacement ‘spring-clip’ lug, and restored barrel pin
Another fine 16\textsuperscript{th}-century wheel-lock, with an old repair to the inlaid decoration
Alas, on the other side of the breech, the equivalent area is missing altogether… so *IF* curator and conservator are agreed on restoration, *THEN WHAT KIND OF RESTORATION DO YOU CARRY OUT?*
Eventually, it was decided that we would NOT attempt to ‘restore’ the missing engraved decoration, but infill with a plain piece of stag-horn to match the other side… even though that was in itself a much later (19th-century) restoration.

… and after restoration (left & above)
(the upper section visible in the picture above is the new restored piece)
AN EXAMPLE OF RECENT ‘ETHICAL’ RESTORATION AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION

c.1610 German wheel-lock sporting gun [A1085]
Equestrian armour of Otto Heinrich, Count Palatine of the Rhine, Nuremburg c.1532-6

New clothes for old horses!

... in the 1980s (left), and in 1908 (above)
More major projects… the ‘Gothic’ 15th-century equestrian armour

[cat.no.A21]

BEFORE & AFTER … in 1908 (above), & again in 2002 (right)
THE MANY AND VARIED MANIFESTATIONS OF A21

…before 1870 (below)

…before 1908 (as Sir Richard Wallace knew it) (left)

…after 1908, much as it appears today (right)
The A21 Restoration Project

...with thanks to the Esmée Fairburn Charitable Trust

All work was carried out during 2001-2
CONSERVATORS ARE EXPERIENCED OBJECT-HANDLERS… aren’t they?

Who is the more experienced in actually handling and moving objects, Curators or Conservators?

This silk pom-pom became detached during handling, after the crossbow had been photographed for cataloguing.

Late-16th century crossbow  [A1040]
In many institutions, the role of the conservator goes far beyond conservation… in the absence of technicians or a professional object-handling department, guess who frequently gets called upon to move works of art… *ANY AND ALL* works of art!
The newly-redecorated and refurbished Oval Drawing Room
Copper corrosion (*verdigris*) on the gilt-bronze horizontal upper border of the fireplace.
ACTIVE RUST
on the burnished steel side panels!
There is increasing pressure upon museums today to seek ever greater levels of ‘self-generated’ income. This can put enormous pressure on curators and conservators alike…

Left…

An 18th-century corner cupboard in the newly redecorated and redisplayed Study, a prime venue for lucrative Corporate Entertaining…
THE USE OF MUSEUM GALLERIES FOR CORPORATE EVENTS CAN HAVE SERIOUS CONSERVATION IMPLICATIONS…
PERHAPS ONE OF THE GREAT ADVANTAGES OF HAVING AN ‘IN-HOUSE’ PERMANENT CONSERVATOR OR CONSERVATION TEAM IS THAT THEY OFTEN NOTICE THINGS THAT A CURATOR MIGHT OCCASIONALLY MISS…

…sometimes including more ‘curatorial’ points of interest

…for example, this fine and rare ‘Gothic’ German back-plate bears a mark in the middle of its central plate…
This mark on 15th-century German ‘Gothic’ back-plate [A208] was catalogued by Sir James Mann in 1962 as resembling ‘that of an assessor of gold or silver, rather than an armourer’… ... it is in fact the mark caused by a 19th-century drill-bit slipping across the surface of the plate!
17th century Mughul Indian crystal dagger, bearing the signature of Claud Martin
JOYS OF THE JOB, continued!

“What the Conservator Saw”… a hitherto unrecorded mark revealed during cleaning
Thanks largely to generous donations of equipment, we are able to operate basic analytical facilities within the Conservation Department. An optical metallurgical microscope can add hugely to one’s knowledge…

IT’S STEEL!

Mid-15th century Italian (Milanese) ‘barbuta’ helmet
… and you DON’T necessarily have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to equip yourself with the means to carry out such analyses…
Italian gorget (collar) c.1600

[493x79] IT'S IRON!

[A235]
POMMEL: a standard late-medieval alloy (a copper-rich bronze), which is unquestionably genuine
[X.R.F. analysis]

TANG: a feeble round-section steel rod, whereas the hole in the pommel is shaped to receive a flat tang… the tang and horn grip are both probably 19th century
[Xray photography]

CROSS-GUARD: 99.9% pure copper, a very soft metal, certainly not what one would expect to be found on a sword-hilt … probably therefore a 19th century ‘restoration’
[X.R.F. analysis]

BLADE: probably genuine, but not yet analysed… optical microscopy would help to establish its authenticity
The Ritblatt Conservation Gallery, opened in the year 2000
An Exhibition on the Conservation of the Rajput Warrior, being installed in the Conservation Gallery