This is the accepted version, and not the latest version of this text. The text was corrected. For the version of record, consult the e-print of the Dictionary of Museology.

Conservation (remedial) (fr. *Conservation curative*; sp. *Conservación curativa*)

Definition: Remedial conservation is a specialised term under the umbrella of 'conservation' and is closely related to 'restoration' (see '*Conservation'* and '*Restoration'* for detailed elaborations). It entails a set of activities that focus on the preservation or restoration of the material fabric of objects and their intangible features and discourses. The term encompasses various types of actions that tend to be performed directly on the material fabric of objects, often referred to as 'treatments'. Its use may be context-specific and is usually employed by specialists.

Remedial conservation requires decisions about the many possible outcomes an intervention may have, and usually happens as a result of decision-making processes that consider both tangible and intangible features of the object under conservation. These are also influenced by the overall objectives of the holding institution or individual collector, resources available, and some important tenets underlying all conservation actions, such as respect for artist's intent, integrity, re-treatability, among others.

Beyond physical integrity

Much of the care provided to cultural heritage and its manifestations can be divided into preventive or remedial approaches. While preventive conservation usually aims to stabilise or manage the factors that can lead to decay without direct intervention on material fabric, remedial conservation (etymologically implying the idea of 'remedy', 'cure', or 'medicine') is seen as a set of procedures that aim to stabilise or improve either its aesthetics or (present or future) usability, which can include stabilisation (cf. *Conservation (Preventive)*).

In practical terms, remedial conservation may entail, for example, the stabilisation of tears or cracks on a painting, the reintegration of a ceramic fragment to its former place in a vessel, or even total reassembly of a fragmented object. It may also aim to manage chemical degradation of different components of an artwork, such as corrosion in metals, salt efflorescence on stone or acidity of cellulose-based materials. All these actions could simply be classified as 'conservation' but, as already suggested, so could preventive conservation actions, which are not associated with direct interventions on objects.

Both approaches, to use the words of conservator and theorist Salvador Muñoz Viñas, 'seek to preserve and recover the integrity of the object of conservation' (Muñoz Viñas 2005, 67). In this sense, remedial conservation can be understood as a corrective action carried out directly on the material fabric of objects, underpinning, at the same time, a strict and delimited understanding of what the ideal, healthy, status of an object—or its *integrity*—should be. Remedial conservation, therefore, implies an active intervention to render stable, to settle, to control that which may otherwise fall into an undesired state of flux, volatility or entropy. It implies a judgment, recognising the object to be in a state that ought to be remedied, or the presence of a risk or threat that may undermine its perceived (and desired) stasis.

The notion of integrity is embedded into the fabric of our awareness of the nature, status and value of a cultural heritage item. However, even if we go back to the writings of key conservation theorists, there is no consensus on what that integrity means. On the one hand, circumscribing the notion of integrity to a physical characteristic assumes the pre-existing, healthy and consensual wholeness of a given artefact—what Cesare Brandi has called *unita potenziale* (Brandi 2005 [1963]). Such wholeness, however, cannot be assumed for the large majority of cultural objects, which are characterised by fragmentary material manifestations of intangible values that are situated both historically and culturally. On the other hand, opening up the term to include all forms of the so-called 'conceptual integrity' of objects (cf. Clavir 1994) acknowledges a manifold of values and understandings about those artistic practices that are hard to convey and even harder to document and conserve. Probably, also in this case, the virtue is in the middle, as recent advancements in the field of conservation have systematically asserted (cf. *Conservation*). The adoption of an objective idea of what integrity means, very much propelled by the advent of scientific conservation, however, led to the development of axioms and ethical guidelines that, although well-intentioned, generate practical complications.

Revisiting conservation axioms in three acts

Definitions and axioms used in the profession of conservation exist in a grey area. Although lacking a common or agreed understanding, they tend to be posited as fixed general principles that aim to attend to today's understanding of authenticity and how it is applied in conservation (cf. *Authenticity*). As paradoxical as it may seem, these general principles or axioms have been both refuted and consolidated in the last decades, with most efforts being dedicated to the notion of artist's intention, reversibility, and minimum intervention.

Artist's intention, a term that has gained particular relevance in the conservation of contemporary art, is seen as something to be retrieved and used in the decision-making process. The object's original condition or its original materials are regarded as vehicles for assessing this artistic intentionality or, when the object's image is not represented by its

materials—such as in the case of some contemporary artworks—an artist's thought processes are recovered by performing interviews with living artists, and reviewing past interviews as well as published and unpublished texts, all in the hope of understanding the artist's original intentions. This understanding, however, is biased and fragmentary to say the least, not only because the material condition in which an artwork arrived with us today is not necessarily a vehicle of a conscious decision and intention by the artist, but also because the artist's intention towards the conservation and materialisation of their works also changes during their lifetime or, as stated by Rebecca Gordon and Erma Hermens, is in *flux* (2013). Evidently, we could go back to studies in literary criticism and to the idea of the Death of the Author (Barthes and Foucault) and even refute the idea that the artist's intentions should have any sort of primacy over the many interpretations that an artwork and its materiality can propel. Indeed, if the material significance of artworks is not necessarily defined by the artist, but is a product of the interaction between the social and the object, should artists' intentions even play a role in conservation decision making? If, of course, this question seems no more than a provocation when we consider the synthesis of the idea of artwork and that of the artist in the end of the 19th century (as seen, for example, in Soussloff 1997), it certainly raises fewer eyebrows when we look at archaeological objects, built heritage, the decorative arts, or almost any object created before the notion of absolute artist gained such traction in our society (cf. Soussloff 1997). If, on the one hand, the absence of a named artist precludes the emergence of values that are strictly associated with the artist's identity, on the other hand, it moves the ideas of original material, wholeness, and integrity, back to the centre of the inquiry about the conservation of artworks and their authenticity. But how can this stance on integrity and wholeness be reconciled with the understanding of authenticity as a plurality of meanings, which are constructed and construed, through practices (cf. *Authenticity*).

Indeed, considering that subjectivity is an essential variable in any interpretation-based activity, authenticity can then be considered subjective, as its meaning is dependent on one's perception of the 'real' (Muñoz Viñas 2005). If, according to Brandi, the material should 'never take precedent over the image' (Brandi 2005 [1963], 378), and the 'image' is considered to be multiple and variable, are axioms that are based on the idea of 'original material', such as reversibility or minimum intervention, still relevant? What we see when we look at recent theoretical developments in the field of conservation is that, although *reversibility* or *minimum intervention* were once considered ultimate goals in conservation practice, it is quite questionable if they have ever made theoretical and practical sense.

The origins of the need for reversibility is somewhat self-evident. It emerged as a critical conscience in conservation decision making that recognised the impact of conservation

decisions (mostly remedial) in the materiality of artworks. Indeed, one just needs to look back at the *Cleaning Controversy*, which was exposed in the pages of *The Burlington Magazine* in February 1962 by E.H. Gombrich and Otto Kurz, to find an example of how the material history of artworks can be impacted by conservation intervention. But inasmuch as reversibility as a principle retains an ethical value that cannot be disregarded (cf. Appelbaum 2010), its unattainability has been demonstrated in practice. Consolidation treatments for porous carbonated stone, for example, are essential to maintain the integrity of the shape of existing material, and yet, they simply cannot be reversed. Would we rather see an object lose the form that makes it recognisable just because, so far, most consolidation treatments are irremediably irreversible? And if we look at treatments that directly interact with the surface of objects, such as removing a varnish from a painting, could we say in absolute terms that the solvents that we used did not cause any irreversible change in the object's substrate?

Given that material interactions make it impossible to reverse any treatment, and that every treatment inevitably causes an alteration to the material's integrity, conservation has since adopted retreatability instead of reversibility (cf. Appelbaum 2010). Retreatability, or re-treat-ability, as denoted by the word itself, implies the ability to re-treat a given artwork. To be able to re-treat an object guarantees the sustainability of remedial conservation, and such ability is often related to another conservation axiom: *minimum intervention*.

Minimum intervention is one of the most important concepts when we talk about remedial conservation. We can go as far as the 19th century to see examples where conservation arguably went too far – that is the case, for example, of the additions made by Viollet-le-Duc in French monuments that led to their transformation, or the aforementioned *Cleaning Controversy*. Minimum intervention, however, also lacks theoretical and practical consistency, and Caroline Villers discussed its applicability in conservation practice in a seminal essay, *Post-minimum intervention*. She concluded that the understanding of the term 'minimum intervention' is subjective and the choice of what to do (or not to do) is political and will always alter the object (Villers 2004). And if this is true for objects in which their material manifestation is more contained (and thus their integrity is easier to fix), such as Renaissance paintings, it becomes clearly visible when we are conserving objects that have multiple authentic material manifestations that may change according to context, such as complex installation or performance artworks. Many contemporary artworks require significant intervention by conservators to keep these works accessible to audiences and to maintain other values or aspects of their integrity. This begs the question as to whether minimum intervention should be regarded as a universal tenet of ethical conservation practice.

Muñoz Viñas dissects the term further, noting that while the minimum is not only a relative term in itself, it also constitutes the extremity of a range of options that are not made clear: indeed, for the author, the only purely minimum intervention consists of doing nothing. Hoping to challenge the hegemony of the idea of an absolute minimum intervention (an oxymoron in itself), Muñoz Viñas proposes instead the principle of 'balanced meaning loss' (Muñoz Viñas 2009, 50). Balanced meaning loss uses a notion from economics, which determines that the best decision is one that guarantees the least loss and the biggest gain. Somehow mirroring cost-benefit analysis, the perceived results of conservation options would be analysed regarding their effects on the loss of meaning. This evaluation—as the judgement about what the object is and what it can be—is always subjective and contingent.

The many ways in which conservation interventions impact the materiality of artworks have been front and centre in the development of these ethical frameworks for remedial conservation. Principles of respecting the artists' intentions, guaranteeing the reversibility of treatments, and making sure that intervention is kept to a minimum have been posed as general ethical guidelines that aim to sustain not only the preservation of the material fabric of objects as we see them, but also the invisibility of conservation practice—maintaining the idea that the objects come to us as truthful and singular material manifestations. If the etymology of the word 'remedial' does point to cure or medicine—something that is hoped to fix the object—the first two letters in 'remedial' (re-) can also denote a temporal reframing, going back in time as an instrument of remediation. As with any conservation operation, this too has ethical ramifications.

Conclusion: Re-mediating the present

Change does not simply happen to objects; rather, it is a product of the relations of many agents that impact objects in various ways and at different moments in their lifecycle. Remedial conservation is one of the ways in which the role of the conservator as an agent of change is determinant and, in many ways, visible. Theories of conservation have recognised conservation as a practice in a constant and recursive state of unfolding. In this sense, conservation can be considered a relational practice (Marçal 2021): museums provide spaces in which objects and subjects are created through practice, while conservation practices consolidate or refute our understanding of the objects conservators aim to preserve by changing their materiality.

The recognition of the role of the conservator in changing the materiality of objects does imply that remedial conservation is a political act of remediation of objects in the present. In this sense, identifying the exclusions and inclusions inherent to those processes is paramount both

to moving from dialectical views of objects and their care and to transcending disciplinary and political boundaries in conservation practice and ethics.

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See Integrity (of the work of art), Restoration, Preservation, Retreatability