# The End of Conservation

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## (Author's version)

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## Abstract

Conservation has undergone several metamorphoses in its *circa* 200-year history. However, some patterns may be discerned in the cloud of beliefs, ideas, terms, concepts and practices that nowadays make up the field of cultural heritage conservation that suggest that the next metamorphosis could have an unprecedented depth. The increasing perception of conservation as the consequence of an obsession; the passive acceptance of processes of deterioration and aging; the criticism that conservation alters the thing conserved and prevents cultural development; the assumption that conservation could be useless or even detrimental to future generations; the unbridled expansion of the concept of cultural heritage to include a huge variety of cultural expressions, both physical and metaphysical; the "imminent loss" of skills and knowledge that had characterized the conservator's profession: if seen in combination, these symptoms suggest that a extraordinary, radical change could be taking place in the field of cultural heritage conservation.

## Introduction

On 16 September 1792, approximately three years after the beginning of the French Revolution, the French Assembly ruled that the works of art, palaces, sculptures, and monuments of the aristocracy and the Church should not be destroyed but rather preserved. These works were considered to be '*propriété nationale*', this is, works at the service of all citizens, works that could contribute to the formation of individual spirits and the strengthening of society as a whole. What we call 'conservation' is based on this (literally) revolutionary idea: the idea that it is a moral and social duty to care and preserve the most valuable artistic or historic objects. A few decades later, one of the founding fathers of conservation, Eugéne Viollet-le-Duc, stated that conservation had been invented between 1825 and 1850 (Viollet-le-Duc 1866, 14[1]). Almost thirty years later, this view was further confirmed by another prominent conservation thinker, Camilo Boito, who claimed that "the art of conservation ... is recent" (Boito 1893, 12; my translation[2]). It is thus reasonably safe to state that what we understand as 'conservation' was invented in Europe sometime between the end of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. Since then, conservation has evolved into the sophisticated activity we know today. The emergence of a new professional exclusively devoted to this activity (the 'conservator') is a remarkable consequence of this evolution.[3]

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[1] According to Viollet-le-Duc, "Only in the second quarter of our century has it been attempted the restoration of buildings from other times". (My translation. Original quote: "Ce n'est qu'à dater du second quart de notre siècle qu'on a prétendu restaurer des édifices d'un autre âge").

Viollet-le-Duc uses the term 'restoration' in his writings, which may be somewhat misleading: when used in the broader sense (this is, when the word is used to refer to both conservation stricto sensu and repair), "restauration", "restauración", "restauração", "restauro" and other related terms in Latin-based languages are perfect synonyms of the English term "conservation" (again, when used in the broad sense).

[2] "L'arte de restaurare, lo so, è recente".

[3] Note that the profession of conservation is not equivalent to the general activity of conservation. If cultural heritage conservation is understood in a broad sense —this is, not just as the professional activity developed by conservators but as any activity destined to preserve and enhance cultural heritage—, then photographers, firemen, security officers, carpenters, chemists, art historians, computer technicians, plumbers and many other professionals have always played, and will keep playing, an important role in the conservation of cultural heritage. Throughout this paper, I refer to each sense of the term, or to both of them, since they are interchangeable in most cases. When they are not, the context in which the term is used makes its meaning clear

During its development, conservation has experienced several changes in response to socio-cultural needs and new technical possibilities. In the beginning, the discipline was led by what we could call the historical sciences (history, art history, archaeology); however, the material sciences (chemistry, physics, biology, etc.) increasingly gained importance until around the mid-20th century, when they became the primary source of epistemic validity in the field.

Material sciences contributed and continue to contribute in many ways to enhancing conservation, but at the end of the 20th century the limitations of a purely material approach to objects whose function is essentially aesthetic or symbolic began to become apparent. We are now discovering how other sciences (sociology, anthropology, psychology, semiotics, etc.) may contribute to achieve even better results and a deeper understanding of conservation practice. These sciences, together with all the others, are helping conservators to face historical and cultural circumstances in which the crisis of traditional economic and political systems, the climate change, the loss of cultural references and the growing virtualization of social and personal realities are changing the world at an accelerated pace.

Conservation is a cultural construction that has proved its worth and has evolved to adapt to the various challenges of the times and the possibilities offered by technology. However, it might be a mistake to think that what we have understood as 'conservation' until now will remain useful forever. Conservation was invented in response to a set of historical circumstances, and if those circumstances change, it might cease to be useful. In other words, if something has a beginning, it is not unreasonable to expect that it might have an end. In the following pages, I explore this possibility by outlining six trends that I have discerned in the conservation literature, in professional meetings, in formal discussions and casual conversations, and even in the practice of conservation itself. These trends intertwine in convoluted ways, and their boundaries are diffuse at some points. If I am not wrong, this is, in fact, one reason why they could be seen as symptoms of a single, intriguing cultural phenomenon: what could be called 'the end of conservation'.

## First symptom: conservation as an obsession

The first of these symptoms is the fact that an increasingly large number of authors see the conservation of cultural heritage as a form of 'obsession'. This negative perception of conservation is quite widespread among well-established cultural heritage professionals and academics, and it is a striking phenomenon that many of them use this derogatory term to describe conservation. Thus, it is easy find authors claiming that there exists an "obsession with preserving the most important works" (Ferretti 2007, 386), that conservation derives from "a unique obsession with maintaining a supposedly unchanging and 'objective' past" (Holtorf

enough.

and Högberg 2001, 294), or that "the obsession with physical preservation ... became embedded in the mentalities of the twentieth century" (Fairclough 2009, 158). Brian Graham, Greg Ashworth and John Tunbridge (2000, 14) adopt a slightly different approach, suggesting that this obsession only affects "a passionate, educated and generally influential minority". Marilena Vecco (2019, 143) has summed up all these and all other similar views by pointing out that "the current period differs from all previous ones in its sort of 'obsession' with cultural conservation".

The perception of conservation as a kind of mental disorder (an "obsession") is shared by many other authors (see, for example, Jeudy 1990, §9, §14, Alonso González 2019, §2; Cowell 2008; Byrne 2014, 99; Kuutma 2013, 2; Chalcraft 2016, 241; Marchese and Salis 2015, 94), but Tim Winter (2014, 558) has developed this idea a bit further by speaking of "the heritage cult", and thus linking conservation not to a psychological disorder, but to a *religious* belief. This idea is particularly significant, as it directly remits us to one of the masterpieces in the theory of cultural heritage conservation, Alois Riegl's *The Modern Cult of Monuments*. This work was published in 1903, and the term 'cult' did not have any negative connotation. However, over time this cult may have acquired a radical and extremist character, to the point of becoming a "crusade", as posited by David Lowenthal. This has been possible because "only in our time has heritage become a self-conscious creed, whose shrine and icons daily multiply and whose praise suffuses public discourse" (Lowenthal 1998, 1). Neither Riegl nor Lowenthal are alone in this line of thinking: Holtorf, for instance, speaks of the "semi religious cult of heritage" (2012, 159), while Lourdes Arizpe and Cristina Amescua (2013, 129) or Kristin Kuutma (2013, 2) claim that it is a "fundamentalist ideology" what underlies heritage preservation.

An obsession is a psychological problem. For many authors, society, or at least the world of cultural heritage, is developing a pathological relationship with its heritage, which is made explicit through its 'obsessive' conservation and restoration. As a consequence, it is implied that conservators tend to take on unnecessary, excessive, and unreasonable conservation endeavors. One of the consequences is the increasing number of things to be conserved over the last few decades. The expansion of the number of objects deserving conservation has been so sudden that it is often described as a kind of explosive phenomenon. Henri Pierre Jeudy, for instance, speaks of "*l'éclatement de l'idée de patrimoine*" (Jeudy 2019, blurb text), Tim Winter (2014, 558) and Ullrich Kockel (2007, 28) use the term "heritage boom", and I myself spoke of the "heritage Big Bang" (Muñoz-Viñas 2013a) to describe this trend. Using a not-so-different metaphor, Nathalie Heinich (2009) developed the notion of "*inflation patrimoniale*" in *La fabrique du patrimoine* (significantly subtitled *De la cathédrale à la petite cuillère*). Rodney Harrison (2013, 166ff) posits that we are living through a "crisis of accumulation" and, as has been humorously suggested elsewhere, the obsession with conservation is being taken to

such an extreme that "we may be running out of the past" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 59).[4] This is directly related to what Pierre Nora (2002) called the "acceleration of history" —which could in turn explain why some people may think that "preservation is overtaking us" (Koolhaas 2004). This interesting cultural phenomenon, which is further discussed below, may be interpreted as both a cause and an effect of the 'obsession' with cultural heritage conservation. In any case, what matters at this point is to stress the fact that such a disparaging view of conservation has become widespread among many cultural heritage professionals.

## Second symptom: the 'accept-decay' trend

The second symptom is the growing tendency to passively accept the aging of cultural objects. Indeed, some traces of history have been considered valuable since antiquity and have not been countered deliberately. These valuable traces are what is traditionally known as 'patina' and can be directly related to what Riegl (1903) called 'antiquity value'. However, this appreciation of the signs of aging was limited to certain aspects of cultural heritage objects: a specific type of color change in a painting, for example, or a particular type of metallic corrosion. Today, however, there is an ideological trend towards the acceptance of deterioration of objects in a much broader and non-selective sense. A concise and clear expression of this attitude was made by contemporary artist Anselm Kiefer, who stated: "I'm not interested in conservation. If something falls down, it has meaning" (Black 2021, 62).

The 'accept-decay' ideology has developed more or less strongly in some branches of the conservation profession. For example, it is not that strange among conservators working in libraries and archives, where it is common to transfer the textual contents of the documents to a different support rather than attempting to keep the original sheets or books. The rationale here is purely practical: the number of documents is ever-increasing and storage space is finite, thus making it necessary to purge the less valuable documents to make room for other, more valuable ones. On the other hand, in the field of contemporary art conservation there exist many examples of deliberately ephemeral works, works that cannot be strictly 'conserved' beyond a relatively brief timespan. The self-destructing sculptures by Jean Tinguely are a case in point, as are, e.g., Sonia Alhäuser's chocolate sculptures (expected to be eaten by the spectators), a real, living horse (like Mark Wallinger's "A Real Work of Art") or the dishes cooked by Ferrán Adriá in 2007 as a part of *documenta 12*: these kinds of artwork are designed to perform or undergo biological or physical processes leading to its partial or total loss. Also, performances like e.g. those of Marina Abramovic or happenings like

[4] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett quotes a piece in the US satiric publication *The Onion*: "U.S. Dept. of Retro Warns: 'We May Be Running out of Past", *The Onion* vol. 32, 14, 2000.

those of Alan Kaprow cannot be conserved in a strict sense either, but rather recorded or documented in the hope that such information will allow for the staging of a similar —though unavoidably different— performance in a more or less distant future. In all these cases, the conservators have to accept the disappearance of the work, or, at best, try to make possible a replica that is close enough to a presumed canonical version. Conservators of contemporary art are thus better prepared than the rest to accept the evanescence of the works.

However, the 'accept-decay' trend does not remain confined to these conservation specialties, as the arguments have been extended to the concept of conservation in the broadest sense. In an interesting series of texts on the conservation of artistic performances, Rebecca Schneider suggests that all objects 'perform' a series of actions over time: "Can it be said that all objects, like my gesture, but also like something like the Venus Willendorf, participate in the dynamic field of appearance / disappearance / reappearance that marks performance? Perhaps what I have been asking is whether all objects cohere to some degree as performance? Aren't all objects time-based art?" (Schneider and Hölling 2023, 51). This view is indeed in line with those of authors who suggest that objects can actually be seen as "processual events" (Bennett 2004, 350), wondering if "can we not think of all things as events that unfold over relatively longer or shorter periods of time" (Poh 2022, 8). Fernando Domínguez-Rubio illustrates this view with a well-known example: "When we look at *Starry Night*, we are not looking at a finished object made in June 1889, but at a particular moment of a slow event that is still taking place as it unfolds through organic and inorganic processes" (Domínguez Rubio 2020, 4). Drawing on this idea, Alva Noë has concluded that "we must let go, accept loss, accept time, accept the destruction and disappearance of even the art we have come to love, just as we accept with regret and heartbreak the loss of people we have loved". This acceptance leads him to conclude that "we must therefore renounce preservation" (Noë 2022, 86). In the same vein, David Harvey and Jim Perry (2015, 3) have called for a new view of heritage that "embraces loss, alternative forms of knowledge, and uncertain futures". Needless to say, embracing loss is exactly the opposite of what conservation (as we understand it) aims at doing. This ethos unavoidably works "against this conservative ideal of permanence and preservation" (Bangstad and Pétursdóttir 2022, 9).

An elegant expression of this 'accept-decay' trend has been elaborated by Caitlin DeSilvey in *Curated Decay. Heritage Beyond Saving* (2017). In this book, DeSilvey argues that heritage managers should accept that all materials are perishable and that aging is not avoidable. As a consequence, DeSilvey suggests, it is necessary to accept that decay is inherent to all materials and that their eventual disappearance is inevitable. The goal of conservation, therefore, should not be to prevent or delay this decay, but to allow it to unfold in a way that is both natural and harmonious, and in order to achieve this, we must learn to appreciate the beauty of decay rather

than fight it. Contemporary spectators should recognize that forgetting also has enormous creative potential, as suggested by Marc Augé (1998), for whom 're-commencement' —i.e. non-preservation—, should make it possible "to recover the future by forgetting the past, to create the conditions for a new birth which, by definition, opens the doors to all possible futures without giving priority to any one of them" (Augé 1998, 67; my translation[5]).

In short, the tendency represented by Augé, Kiefer, DeSilvey, Noë and many other authors assumes that all things are perishable and that it is therefore unwise to try to preserve them beyond their natural lifespan. This acceptance of the transience of things inevitably implies a denial of the ultimate foundations of conservation, which is to a large extent tantamount to saying that it implies the rejection of conservation at large: the full development of these postulates would lead to the disappearance of conservation as we have known it.

## Third symptom: conservation as evil

Another relevant symptom is the fact that conservation is perceived as harmful or negative by more and more people, and not necessarily laypersons: on the contrary, the harshest criticism of conservation often comes from academics, professionals and intellectuals who know the field of cultural heritage well and have a solid intellectual background. This criticism revolves around two main lines of argument, or maybe two and a half. On the one hand, conservation is regarded as negative for it alters the history of the object. On the other hand, conservation is seen as an activity that prevents the natural, creative evolution of a culture —and as a derivative of this criticism it is also argued that, as it prevents evolution and change, conservation serves the interests of a powerful elite and is therefore politically conservative by nature.[6]

A particular conservation treatment may be considered negative and controversial if the perceived change is detrimental to the aesthetic or symbolic impact of the object. For many people, the most famous of these controversies at a global level are those arising over the paintings in the National Gallery of London in post-WWII, and, more recently, the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel. However,

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[5] "La tercera figura es la de comienzo, o, podríamos decir, del re-comienzo ... Su pretensión es recuperar el futuro olvidando el pasado, crear las condiciones de un nuevo nacimiento que, por definición, abre las puertas a todos los futuros posibles sin dar prioridad a ninguno".

[6] Another way in which conservation has been perceived as evil is when it has been used as an alibi for the looting of artworks from less developed areas to rich museums with better conservation conditions, as happened in the colonial times. The dispute about the decolonization of Western museums has gained momentum in recent decades, but conservation (this is, the ability of former colonial power to preserve the works in better conditions) is no longer at the center of the debate; instead, cultural or historical rights are what make up the bulk of the argument nowadays.

these two cases are only two of the best-known ones since these controversies have been occurring for a long time (see, e.g., Keck 1984; Walden 1985; Beck and Daley 1994). Nowadays, in fact, controversies over conservation treatments seem to be quite common.[7] This might have something to do with the fact that conservators are trying to make our work more visible, which exposes us to further public criticism and scrutiny. In some ways, this public exposure, and even the criticism itself and the debate it generates, could be seen as a positive thing, allowing conservators to better know the public for whom the work is done and, in turn, allowing the public to get to know the work of conservators and the dilemmas they face. However, regardless of the cause, the fact is that many people, both inside and outside the world of heritage, regard conservation not just as an "expensive nuisance" (the expression is taken from Caple 2000, 183) but also as a "high-risk" activity (Van Saaze 2013, 43): as a hazard rather than a benefit. On January 6, 2001, for example, the French newspaper *Le Monde* published a five-column article on certain controversial restorations under the headline: "*L'Etat saisi du droit des chefs-d'ouvre à vieillir en paix*" ("The State has taken over the right of masterpieces to age in peace"). In this vein, perhaps the most remarkable and striking example is the manifesto published by the renowned Italian historians Carlo Ginzburg and Salvatore Settis in the newspaper *La Repubblica* on October 3, 2007. This manifesto, which was disseminated by many different media outlets and caused a great deal of controversy, was entitled "*Fermiamo i restauri. Cambiano la nostra storia*" ("Stop conservation treatments. They change our history"). As the title implies, the core argument behind Ginzburg and Settis' criticism of conservation (of conservation in general, and not just of those particular interventions that may have gone awry) is that conservation interventions change the works upon which they are performed.

Ginzburg and Settis are right on this point. As I wrote elsewhere, "alteration is a trait of conservation. ... The result is nearly always something different from the object as it actually was before: the object is not properly conserved, but actually altered" (Muñoz-Viñas 2013b, 124). In other words, conservation treatments always change the objects to some extent (e.g., the yellowed varnish on a painting is removed, the size of a flattened paper sheet is imperceptibly altered, the beams in a building are replaced with new, stronger ones, etc.). These changes can be perceived as a loss (and there is indeed a loss of some of the information the object could convey before the treatment), despite the crucial fact that they are done in exchange for much greater benefits (increasing the lifespan of the object, improving its symbolic or aesthetic appeal, enhancing its usability, etc.). However, emphasizing the negative consequences of conservation may lead to understanding conservation as a form of destruction. For Holtorf, in fact, "preservation is not

[7] The curious reader may visit the website of Artwatch (http://artwatch.org.uk), an organization whose main aim is to discuss and expose what its authors perceive as damaging consequences of some conservation interventions.

categorically different from destruction, as both processes transform the site in fundamental ways" (Holtorf 2006, 106); and further: "'destruction and loss are not the opposite of heritage, but ... part of its very substance" (Holtorf 2006, 108). Arguably, it is this perceived 'destruction' and 'loss' that led Settis and Ginzburg to issue their dramatic call to bring all conservation treatments to a halt. As they affirm, conservation treatments do change the history of the object —and many knowledgeable people believe that these changes are always unacceptable.

The other main reason why conservation can be perceived as harmful is that it prevents the natural evolution of cultural heritage items, and therefore of culture in general. Many authors in the cultural heritage field use stinging metaphors to reflect the idea that conservation brings the life of its objects to an end, or at least to a halt, suggesting that conservation *mummifies* (e.g. Olivier 2022, 84; Oliver 2014, 12; Franke 2012, 174), *freezes* (e.g. Marçal et al. 2013; Chirikure and Hölling 2023, 114ff.; Zargaran 2017, 356), *reifies* (e.g. Wells 2021; Harvey 2001, 326; Matero 2013, 93), or even *embalms* (e.g. DeSilvey 2017, 167; Rosengarten 2012; Conti 2007, 348) heritage instead of "allow[ing] life to continue" (Forlini 2018, 4). This criticism underlines the fact that the objects of conservation lose their dynamic character and become dead material relics: conservation would thus actually kill the living culture, transforming its objects into something inert and static. Byrne has noted how "the approach to heritage conservation that treats materiality as an end in itself [excises] the material past from its social context, past and present, hollows it out and deforms it. What you are left with are things minus feeling" (Byrne 2009, 231). In a recent publication, artist Jeffrey Gibson expressed this idea in a bold way: "Conservation and preservation ... I know the intentions are good. Trying to save a cultural narrative, for example. But in fact, it sabotages cultural survival" (Miller 2023, 95). Jean Clair has expressed it even more boldly: "a civilization *ceases to be human* ... when artworks are restored and tirelessly polished" (Clair 2010, 41; my translation[8]; my emphasis).

This phenomenon is often related to a presumedly conservative political stance that would be inherent to the discipline of cultural heritage conservation. According to this criticism, conservation serves a conservative agenda and the interests of an elite group. Conservation would thus be a direct consequence of what Roger Fry (1920, 39) called the "plutocrat's worship of patine" (which he qualified as "pathetic"), a worship that Jean Baudrillard would explain as "the will to transcend economic success, the will to consecrate ... a social triumph or a privileged position" and thus as an activity "pertaining to privileged classes willing to transform their economic success into hereditary grace" (Baudrillard 1974, 23; my translation[9]).

[8] "...una civilización deja de ser humana ... cuando las obras se restauran, se lustran incansablemente".

[9] "...el gusto por lo antiguo es característico del deseo de transcender la dimensión del triunfo económico, de consagrar en un signo simbólico, culturizado y redundante, un triunfo social o

Paraphrasing Roger Taylor (1978), it could be said that, no less than the very notion of 'art', conservation may be seen as 'an enemy of the people', or perhaps as a "bourgeois sickness: that cultural pestilence of decadence and illegitimate wealth that treats art as one bauble among many" (Wiggins 2012, 59).

These views strongly resonate in the reflections of thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu or Gustavo Bueno, but they have gained traction in the last decades in the cultural heritage field. Nowadays "the representation and production of the past in the present" may be seen to "operate as an arena of power, injustice, exclusion, hegemony and so forth" (Winter 2014, 558). It should thus come as no surprise that some authors feel the urge to stress that "wanting to conserve cultures and their heritage must not lead to a cultural conservatism that creates 'new tyrannies'" (Arizpe 2004, 133).

### Fourth symptom: future generations may not want it

Another relevant symptom is the growing awareness that future generations may have different cultural needs, preferences and tastes from our own. As Erica Avrami, Randall Mason and Marta De La Torre point out, "the ultimate aim of conservation is ... to preserve (and shape) the values embodied in the heritage ... To achieve this goal, so that heritage is meaningful to those it is intended to benefit (i.e. future generations), it is necessary to examine why and how heritage is valued, and by whom" (Avrami et al., 2000, 7). The problem is that no matter how detailed and careful this examination its outcome will always be a forecast, a projection into the future that may or may not be accurate. Bluntly put, and to paraphrase Jonathan Kohl and Stephen McCool (2016), all too often "the future has other plans". Conservation treatments are done at a moment in time, to make the work last longer and to make it more valuable within a contingent, historical set of tastes and needs —a set that might change in the future. This was also one of the core arguments in "*Fermiamo i restauri*":

> "Is it right for a generation to arrogate to itself the right to intervene drastically, irreversibly transforming ... the Italian artistic heritage on the basis of a specific visual culture —our own, shaped by color photographs and spotlights, by the slashes of electric light that transform the play of light and shadow into playing cards? Is it right to take such a risk?" (Ginzburg and Settis 2007; my translation[10]).

una posición privilegiada. ... Será, pues, lo que corresponde a unas clases privilegiadas a las que importa transmutar su status económico en gracia hereditaria".

[10] "E' giusto che una generazione si arroghi il diritto di intervenire drasticamente, trasformandola in maniera irreversibile, su una parte così cospicua, qualitativamente e quantitativamente, della tradizione artistica italiana, sulla base di una cultura figurativa specifica —la nostra, modellata dalle fotografie a colori e dai faretti, dalle sciabolate di luce elettrica che trasformano il gioco delle luci e delle ombre in carte da gioco? E' giusto correre un rischio del genere?"

The criticism of being historically contingent is applicable to all conservation interventions, and not just to some of them, which in fact calls into question the ethical and theoretical underpinnings of conservation. A clear expression of this idea appears in the text by MaryJo Lelyveld and Joel Taylor published in 2021:

> "The projection of current values into the future for 'future generations' assumes that future generations will value and use heritage in the same way as current generations. This in turn ... assumes that one's vision of future generations is the norm, without acknowledging alternatives". (Lelyveld and Taylor 2021, 3).

This inherent uncertainty, and the constraints conservation imposes on future generations are often regarded as a source of concern: thus, Henderson (2020, 205) warns that "conservation's commitment to extending the lifetime of things pins us to an outdated perspective where access and preservation are in conflict with our perceived moral obligation to serve it, even when that future consumption may never arise". Indeed, conservation (as well as so many other activities) is not completely future-proof: "conservation is imperfect and subjective by default, as the selection of meaning (even based on objective facts) depends on the current needs for heritage communication" (Georgieva 2022, 96).

Again, this criticism is not entirely new. T.S. Eliot, for example, formulated a similar idea a century ago, concluding that the conservation of cultural customs and expressions (which he calls 'tradition') should not be necessarily encouraged; rather, "if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, 'tradition' should be positively discouraged" (Eliot, 1928:43). However, regardless of its lineage, the argument is as clear and simple as it is hard to rebuke: tastes change, societies change, cultural needs change, and in the third decade of the 21st century we can confidently say that cultural needs can indeed change very rapidly. There is therefore an inevitable uncertainty about the rightness and timeliness of our decisions on what to preserve for the future and how to preserve it. It is, in fact, highly likely that some of the things we painstakingly preserve today will prove useless in the future. Elizabeth Pye (2016, 26) has summed this up very clearly: "We do not know what future generations will think of these collections (they may have other preoccupations)". Pye does not use this as a reason to criticize conservation, though, most likely because she is aware that every time we make a decision, some alternative futures are unavoidably rendered impossible: this is a given in any human activity.

Other authors, however, describe this phenomenon with a strong critical undertone, reminding us that conservation does limit the possibilities of future generations by making technical and semantic choices, and even go as far as stating that conservation "effectively 'colonises' the future" (Lelyveld and Taylor, 2021:3). Shadreck Chirikure develops the same criticism: "Why should one generation

think that it has the moral, philosophical, ethical right to say that what it has seen is what all future generations should enjoy?", he asks. The answer he offers once again shows how conservation could become irrelevant in the cultural arena: "Each generation looks at the same culture and the same materials from its own position", and so "there is no need to fix things" (Chirikure and Hölling 2023, 115).

## Fifth symptom: the 'heritage Big Bang'

The expansion of the concept of heritage, or more precisely the consequences of this expansion, are another of the most remarkable symptoms that could lead to the end of what we call 'conservation'. As noted at the beginning of this essay, the notion of cultural heritage —from which the notion of conservation arguably derives— was invented in Europe in the late 18th or early 19th century. This concept had ideological implications that were very innovative for the time: the category of 'cultural heritage' came to include a series of objects of great value, for which the responsibility lay not only with their legal owners, but also with the State, whose duty was to preserve them in the best possible way, and to make them accessible to all the citizens. Further, the cultural and aesthetic values of these objects were considered universal, and in practice the cultural superiority of the European canon was taken for granted. This state of affairs remained unchanged for about a century and a half, but in the two or three final decades of the 20th century, the notion of 'cultural heritage' began to expand. The criterion of artistic or historical value came to be seen as a manifestation of colonialism and elitism, so the category of cultural heritage was broadened to include objects of popular culture —and not just masterpieces, magnificent palaces or impressive monuments, which catered to the needs and tastes of powerful people but were not representative of the general culture of the time. As a consequence, the field of cultural heritage expanded to include items from popular culture on an equal footing to the most extraordinary examples from the arts or architecture. This process of 'deaxiologization' of the cultural heritage field [11] also led to its geographical expansion, as cultural expressions from non-Western cultural settings were recognized as valuable as their Western counterparts. At about the same time, and closely linked to this expansion, the items of the so-called 'intangible cultural heritage' came to be considered cultural heritage as well. Intangible heritage brought into the realm of cultural heritage such cultural expressions as languages, traditions, crafts, rituals, dances, or folk festivals.

[11] This term describes the deliberate trend towards not making value assessments when selecting cultural heritage items (see Muñoz-Viñas 2023, 3ff). According to this view, value assessments cannot help being somehow biased, and thus should be avoided. To put a well-known example, the deaxiologization of the notion of cultural heritage is the reason why the 1972 UNESCO Convention refers to items of 'outstanding' cultural value while the 2003 Convention instead refers to 'representative' items.

The inclusion of intangible items in the category of cultural heritage has had a remarkable transformative effect on all heritage disciplines, as it poses logical or conceptual as-of-yet unresolved (and maybe unresolvable) problems. One of them is how increasingly difficult it is becoming to identify which cultural expressions are cultural heritage and which are not, so that the very notion of cultural heritage is now dangerously close to the notion of 'culture'. This crucial topic is too complex to be discussed here and lies beyond the scope of this paper, so it may suffice to note that some heritage theorists "consider the notion [of intangible cultural heritage] to be a 'cultural aberration'" (Bortolotto 2014, 1; my translation[12]).

The soaring number of cultural heritage items and the conceptual changes from which they derive have given rise to particularly important technical and theoretical issues for the conservation profession. As a result of the disappearance of the criterion of historical and artistic value, the category of tangible cultural heritage has begun to include objects not intended to last, and whose conservation is therefore particularly challenging from a purely technical standpoint. Unstable plastics, for instance, or outdated technological items that are no longer in production may be difficult to stabilize, repair or replace. However, things may become even more difficult, because the deaxiologization of cultural heritage may be taken further. Thus, nuclear waste or the islands of plastic residues that form in the oceans can also be considered cultural heritage according to various authors (e.g. Buser 2015; May and Holtorf 2020; Bryant 2022, 69; Pétursdóttir 2020), an idea which, if accepted, would call for a thorough repurposing of what we know as cultural heritage conservation.

In particular, conservators are not well prepared to deal with the conservation of certain cultural heritage items of immaterial or ritual nature. For example, the conservation of a traditional festival, such as the Guild Day of the Butchers in Gars am Kamp, Austria, or the traditional embroidery techniques of Al Talli, United Arab Emirates, involves working with people, not with objects. These people have to be trained and persuaded to behave in a certain way at a certain time: the necessary rules of behavior and the skills needed have to be transmitted between the persons involved in the ritual, and then put into practice. In addition, the conservation and restoration of these intangible cultural expressions often involves carrying out historical and anthropological research or documenting certain cultural phenomena. These pedagogical, social or documentary activities are becoming increasingly important in the field of cultural heritage conservation, but they are not part of the traditional conservators' toolkit.

The expansion of the notion of cultural heritage can go even further, thus making things even more complicated for conservators of 'cultural heritage'. Some

[12] "Si la irrupción del PCI [patrimonio cultural intangible] plantea problemas concretos a los responsables del establecimiento de las políticas culturales, los teóricos del patrimonio denuncian sus límites conceptuales, ya que perciben en la noción una 'aberración intelectual'".

authors have pointed out that the very notion of cultural heritage includes elements of nature itself. Already in 2000, Félix Guattari posited that "nature cannot be separated from culture" (2000, 43), an idea that has gained momentum. In recent years, more and more people have started sharing the vision that "the ... nature-culture bifurcation" is "arbitrary" (Winter 2013, 395). Needless to say, the identification between cultural and natural heritage might also have unexpected consequences for the discipline of heritage conservation because conservators could be requested to work on natural phenomena too. The 200-year-old conservation discipline —the discipline that Viollet-le-Duc or Boito discussed, the discipline that Bartolomeo Cavaceppi, Pietro Edwards, Simon Horsin-Deon, Alfred Bonnardot, Vicente Poleró y Toledo and so many other pioneering conservators shaped through their work and which has kept evolving slowly into the present day— is not equipped to deal with these new types of heritage and is thus bound to change in response to a new and challenging scenario. This is arguably the main reason for the frequent call for the development and acquisition of 'new' conservation skills. It is also closely related to the last of the symptoms outlined here.

### Sixth symptom: the decline of traditional conservation skills

The last important symptom pointing to the end of conservation is the loss of the conservators' skills and knowledge. These skills and knowledge are unique, hard to develop, and difficult to pass on. They are the kind of skills that make up what Hungarian philosopher Michael Polanyi (1983) called "tacit knowledge" or what is now often called "embodied knowledge", that is, a kind of knowledge that cannot be conveyed by words or numbers, and that cannot be easily transferred through photos, graphs or videos. It is the kind of knowledge that, for example, allows an expert conservator of archaeological materials to join several pieces of a ancient vase with astonishing accuracy in a very short time; the kind of knowledge that allows a painting conservator to successfully remove graffiti from a valuable painting without noticeably altering the original paints; the kind of knowledge that allows a paper conservator to line a large sheet of extremely fragile paper so it can be safely exhibited; in summary, the part of the profession that has an impact not just on the lifespan of the objects but also on their aesthetic, semantic and emotional impact.

Jonathan Ashley-Smith (2018a, 11) has posited that "conservation is experiencing both a regulatory and an ethical drift ... towards a hands-off approach to conservation problems" —towards what Van Saaze (2013, 45) calls "the dominance of the hands-off dictum". This hands-off ethos could perhaps be a major reason for the loss of the conservators' "intangible skills", a loss that Brown already considered "imminent" in 2017 (Brown 2017). In 2019, at a congress of conservation professionals, Anthi Soulioti explicitly acknowledged this problem in

her lecture "Bargaining Bench Time: When managerial tasks overshadow the conservator's desire for hands-on practice". In this lecture, Soulioti stressed that conservators are spending less and less time working with the objects and more and more time on management, dissemination or documentation tasks, and highlighted a number of damaging consequences for the profession, including "lower productivity", "less knowledge" and "less confidence in manual skills". As noted by Nil Bayda, and as is common wisdom among conservation practitioners, "when practical work is paused, the hand skills, tool affinity and reflexes suffer. It takes time to warm your hand and regain those skills" (Günel 2022, 10). The 'hands-off dictum' and the loss of conservation skills thus feed back on each other: the less treatments developed, the less skills gained —and consequently the more reluctant the conservator becomes to develop these treatments, and the more willing to abide by the hands-off dictum. Some knowledgeable authors have already suggested that the conservator's skills are waning so much —and are so valuable— that they should themselves be the object of conservation. For example, Sampatakos and Chatzigiannis (2018, 13) see it as "a challenge to the conservation community to preserve [the conservator's] technical skills and knowledge", while Brown (2017, 133) has stated that "these skills, which are fundamental to the conservation of our tangible heritage, should themselves be written into the mission statements of conservation organisations and be taken to government level for support". In the same vein, Mahdi Hodjat (2009) has spoken of the "preservation of conservation methods". This step has already been taken in Japan, where "conservation techniques for intangible and tangible cultural property" are considered one of the three basic categories of intangible heritage defined by law (Alivizatou 2022, 109).

The 'imminent loss of the conservator's intangible skills' can have a very significant impact on the discipline. As Pye (2016, 19) has pointed out, "for conservators, highly developed practical (tactile) skills are essential, and many see these skills as defining their profession". Their loss would therefore put the conservation profession is "in danger of forgetting what distinguished it from other groups of heritage professionals" (Ashley-Smith 2018b, 7). In other words, if these skills vanish, the discipline itself will become something different from what it has been since its invention.

## Conservation is fluid

The field of conservation is fluid and dynamic —or, for its critics, volatile and unstable. It changes, evolves, reacts and adapts to the social, cultural and technical realities of the world to which it belongs. As a cultural construct, it is made up of a cloud of actions, beliefs, practices, and customs that get transmitted in formal and non-formal ways: through official documents, lectures, books, and reports, for instance, but also by way of example, in casual conversations, or through real-life practice. All these actions and ideas shape the field at practical and theoretical

levels, although, as it may be surmised, the shape is blurry and changing. The field of cultural heritage conservation results from the interaction of these ever-changing factors, which explains why it remains in a continuous flow and why, despite all our efforts, it is so stubbornly difficult to precisely define. This is not necessarily a bad thing, of course, but the magmatic or vaporous nature of the field hampers the identification of the trends and patterns that hint at what the field is or where it might be heading. Furthermore, these patterns largely depend on the position from which each one is looking at the cloud.[13] In addition, the cloud keeps moving, so the patterns are bound to change more or less rapidly.

This is in fact a trait of any cultural phenomenon (conservation *is* a cultural phenomenon too), and a reason why conservation can, or should, be seen as contingent. It is also a reason why this piece of research is contingent too: it does not aspire to communicate quantifiable data or establish semi-definitive truths; rather, its aim is to present some ideological and practical patterns that can nowadays be perceived in the field.

Much could be written about each of the six 'symptoms' described above: any of them could be the object of a monographic essay. However, in this paper I do not (I could not) attempt to analyze each of them in any depth: I have not aimed at compiling an exhaustive list of sources, examining their causes, telling their histories, or classifying their different varieties; moreover, I have not aimed at discussing their ethical and theoretical tenets and much less at expressing my own opinions about any of them. My main aim has been to concisely map out six patterns (or trends, or 'symptoms') that can be made out in the fuzzy aggregation of beliefs, ideas, terms, concepts and practices that make up the field of cultural heritage conservation at this point of its history. With this in mind, we may reasonably ask what these patterns may imply.

## The end of conservation?

Although conservation has undergone several metamorphoses in its *circa* 200-year history, the trends outlined in the preceding sections suggest that the next one

[13] My position is that of a university professor of paper conservation and conservation theory working in a slightly off-center city in a slightly off-center European country. Because of my previous research work and my engagement with other colleagues and institutions, I have a relatively good knowledge of the field, but the keyword here is 'relatively'. I can only access the reflections published in the few languages I can read —and the weight of the Spanish and English sources on my professional worldview is massive, which further influences my perception of the field. Importantly, none of these languages is Asian or African: reflections published in, e.g., Japanese, Korean, any variety of Chinese, Persian or Arab are beyond my reach, and thus I have a very fragmentary idea of the evolution of conservation thinking in non-Western areas. It is from this position and through these lenses that I am looking at the cloud of conservation practices. Other readers may well have different perspectives or different lenses, but I still hope that they may find this piece of thinking somehow useful.

could have an unprecedented depth. The increasing perception of conservation as the consequence of a mental disorder; the passive acceptance of processes of deterioration and aging; the criticism that conservation alters the thing conserved and prevents cultural development; the realization that conservation could be useless or detrimental to future generations; the unbridled expansion of the concept of cultural heritage to include a huge variety of cultural expressions, both physical and metaphysical; the "imminent loss" of skills and knowledge that had characterized the conservation profession: if seen in combination, all of these patterns or 'symptoms' suggest that a radical change in conservation —and in the conservation profession— might be about to take place, if it is not taking place already.

Anthi Soulioti (2019) already spoke of 'Conservation 2.0' in her lecture, implying that conservation may be undergoing a version change, a kind of important update —an update that could be easily linked to the renewed set of conservation ethics that Jonathan Kemp called "Practical Ethics v2.0" (Kemp 2009). Diverse forward-thinking authors are already envisioning intriguing alternatives to traditional conservation: for example, the 'evolutive conservation' proposed by Lino García-Morales (2019), the 'disruptive conservation' introduced by Eleanor Sweetnam and Jane Henderson (2022), the 'creative conservation' espoused by Leonor Loureiro and Ricardo Triães (Loureiro et al. 2016; Triães et al. 2023), Alfredo Vega Cárdena's "epistemologic conservation" (2011), or Kemp's view of conservation as "version control" or "art development" (2022; 2023) can be interpreted as paths leading to a new ethical and theoretical paradigm: even if they retain important traits of classical conservation, all of these 'conservations' foster a freer, more openly interventive attitude towards the objects of conservation, understanding them as living and dynamic cultural elements rather than as historical documents. On a not so different note, other authors have already spoken of an 'expanded conservation' (Dekker 2014), an 'expanded field of conservation' (Fowler and Nagel 2022) or an 'extended conservation toolkit' (Houbart and Dawans 2018) to reflect a broader vision of the scope, goals and methods that is different from those of traditional conservation. In fact, it is already common to find new concepts being substituted for the notion of "conservation" in the academic literature, in official documents, in the classrooms, etc. Concepts such as 'safeguarding', 'change management', 'custodianship', 'care' or 'safekeeping' are already widespread. For the time being, these and other similar terms exist in an early, almost tentative state, and their meaning is usually imprecise, but they are becoming increasingly popular, and are slowly displacing the notion of 'conservation' in the cultural heritage discourse. Some authors have gone even further by introducing concepts such as "postconservation" (Tonkin 2023) or "postpreservation" (DeSilvey 2017, 1ff.; Hölling 2023), which imply that conservation might already have become an outdated or obsolete concept in certain scenarios. The proliferation of all these concepts could in fact be seen as yet

another symptom that a substantial change might be starting to take place in the field.

Is this *the end of conservation*? It might be, though only in a certain sense and to a certain extent. What we have always understood as 'conservation' may reach its end in the next future, but it is unlikely that the term 'conservation' will ever disappear from our language: the signifier /*conservation*/ will probably remain in use in the cultural heritage field even if its meaning becomes very different from what 'conservation' has meant until now. Further, new *conservators*, and arguably new *conservations*, will probably emerge in the coming decades, or are emerging already: *conservators* (and *conservation*) specialized in replicating artworks and documents; *conservators* (and *conservation*) specialized in the preservation of digital data; *conservators* (and *conservation*) specialized in risk assessment; *conservators* (and *conservation*) specialized in documenting ephemeral artworks and performance art; *conservators* (and *conservation*) specialized in re-enacting festivals and rituals; *conservators* (and *conservation*) specialized in public engagement; etc. The traditional conservation profession, the profession devoted to the delicate physical maintenance and enhancement of drawings, sculptures, archeological findings, and so many other valuable historic and artistic objects could therefore become a subset of a new (expanded, innovative, re-purposed, different) conservation profession working under a new (creative, evolutive, disruptive) ethical and theoretical framework.

No matter how different, though, this new conservation (this *conservation 2.0*, this *postconservation*) could still be called 'conservation', so it might be argued that the 'unprecedented', 'tectonic' shift discussed throughout this paper could actually not be the end of conservation *stricto sensu*, but rather another stage in the history of conservation. This is certainly a reasonable argument. However, it could also be reasonable to argue, along with Aristotle,[14] that "all things are defined by their function and by their powers, so when these are no longer such, things cannot be said to be the same, but of the same name".

[14] *Politics* I,2.

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