Conservation Treatment: A Risk Factor

Adrian Heritage
Is the conservator a —best kept— secret agent of deterioration?
Can we be more honest about risk?

“truth is that which makes a people certain, clear, and strong.”

Martin Heidegger
Wall Paintings: irreversible treatment processes

CLEANING  *selective* removal of material

UNCOVERING  *selective* removal of material

AQUEOUS TREATMENTS, e.g. poulticing

FIXING

CONSOLIDATION

GROUTING

DETACHMENT
10 Agents of Deterioration (Negative Risk)

1. Physical Forces
2. Thieves and Vandals
3. Fire
4. Water
5. Pests
6. Pollutants
7. Light, Ultraviolet and Infrared
8. Incorrect Temperature
9. Incorrect Relative Humidity
10. Dissociation

Stefan Michalski 1987: 1994
Robert Waller 1994
10 Agents of Deterioration  (Negative Risk?)

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Preventive approach

"first, do no harm“  
[Primum non nocere]
Deterioration Agents

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Where is conservation treatment in all of this?
Deterioration Agents

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Preventive conservation

Where is conservation treatment in all of this?
10 Agents of Deterioration (Negative & Positive Risk)

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Two roles for conservators:

Preventive conservation
Remedial conservation
“Deterioration” Agents

...five stages:

1. avoid sources of the agent
2. detect the agent
3. block the agent
4. respond to the agent
5. recover from the agent

Michalski 1990:589
Agent 11: the potential for gain and or loss

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Detecting the 11\textsuperscript{th} Agent

CLEANING
UNCOVERING
AQUEOUS TREATMENTS
FIXING
CONSOLIDATION
GROUTING
DETACHMENT
Deterioration Agents  Role of conservator and treatment

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Conservator =

An agent who *tries* to do good!
Deterioration Agents

Role of conservator and treatment

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Treatment = Risk

= Opportunity
NECESSARY RISK in treatment processes

Dualism:

Negative Risk

Positive Risk

two necessary aspects of the treatment process
Two *necessary* aspects of the treatment process

**Negative**
For example: Irreversible information loss or treatment failure

**Positive**
For example: added value(s) like new or enhanced information (understanding), function, stabilisation
Value Shaping Agents

1. Physical Forces
2. Thieves and Vandals
3. Fire
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7. Light, Ultraviolet and Infrared
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10. Dissociation
11. Conservation

The agents are interrelated: complex interaction!
Role of conservator and treatment

4 Aristotelian Causes

1. material change (addition, subtraction, alteration)
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2. formal change  (aesthetic = appearance or shape)
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2. formal change (aesthetic = appearance or shape)

3. interacting agent of change (conservator as carer, mender, maker,)
Role of conservator and treatment

1. material change (addition, subtraction, alteration)

2. formal change (aesthetic = appearance or shape)

3. interacting agent of change (conservator as carer, mender, maker,)

4. use or purpose (function, legibility, display, storage, transport)
Role of conservator and treatment

4 Aristotelian Causes

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... a work of art has something to say and seeks to share its truth in dialogue

Hans-Georg Gadamer
what should be the limit of acceptable lifetime and acceptable decline in properties for conservation-quality materials to be used in long-term contact with artifacts? **The subject remains to be addressed.**

Feller 1994:11 *Accelerated aging: photochemical and thermal aspects*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Classification</th>
<th>Intended useful lifetime</th>
<th>Approximate equivalent standard of photochemical stability</th>
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<tr>
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*Table 1.1. Standards of Intended Use and Photochemical Stability for Materials in Conservation (Feller 1975).*
Feller 1994: “LIFETIMES” of objects and added materials

.... what should be the limit of acceptable lifetime and acceptable decline in properties for conservation-quality materials to be used in long-term contact with artifacts? **The subject remains to be addressed.**

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Feller 1994:11 *Accelerated aging: photochemical and thermal aspects*
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Cleaning Method</th>
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<td>1861-65</td>
<td>(Painted)</td>
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<td><em>mechanical</em></td>
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<td>1938 <em>additive</em> Wax</td>
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<td>1963 <em>subtractive</em> Wax removal</td>
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Treatments

Royal Gallery, Palace of Westminster, England

WATERGLASS WALL PAINTINGS:  = Inorganic Binder (Potassium Silicate)

1861-65  (Painted)

1874   subtractive  Dirt removal  [Cleaning mechanical
1875   additive     Washing with water]
1878
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1963   subtractive  Wax removal  [Cleaning solvent-based]
“Cleaning” with light – experimentation with colour temperature  (The Royal Gallery, Palace of Westminster)

„The meeting of Wellington and Blücher after the Battle of Waterloo“ - Beleuchtungsreihe bei wechselnden Lichtfarben

2700 Kelvin  3500 Kelvin  4000 Kelvin  5000 Kelvin  6500 Kelvin

„The Death of Nelson“ - Beleuchtungsreihe bei wechselnden Lichtfarben

2700 Kelvin  3500 Kelvin  4000 Kelvin  5000 Kelvin  6500 Kelvin
"Cleaning" with light – experimentation with colour temperature

Detail:
Ambient lighting in the Royal Gallery

Detail:
Lighting at 6800 Kelvin
Needed:

1. Change thinking away from isolated Deterioration Agents to interrelated Value-Shaping Agents

2. Explicit acknowledgement of risks posed by treatments and integration of dual roles (preventive – remedial) within risk management

3. Consider risk ratings for generic treatments (risk benefit)

4. More evidence-based research into treatment outcomes

5. New and better scientific/humanistic tools to help our decision-making

6. Recognition of creativity in conservation = decision making
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"
– that is all Ye know on earth,
and all ye need to know.

John Keats (1819), Ode on a Grecian Urn
The most thought-provoking thing in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking.

Martin Heidegger

*Was heisst Denken?* (1951–1952)
Das Bedenklichste in unserer bedenklichen Zeit ist, dass wir noch nicht denken.