

DISCUSSION #1

Summarized by Harriet F. Beaubien*

While conservation decision-making for any cultural artifact involves balancing information about its context and intent, treatment needs and "owner" expectations, we are -- as one participant [PH] noted -- "blessed with a dilemma" regarding materials from living cultures. As illustrated particularly by Smith, and Levinson and Nieuwenhuizen, conservators are participating in a dynamic process which includes representatives of the cultures that produced the objects being treated. These representatives may bring viewpoints which challenge how we have traditionally approached conservation decision-making and the choices we might have made. From the presentations and the discussion which followed, it was clear that this process has implications affecting not only compensation, but also documentation, exhibition and storage.

The process through which the decisions were made was the subject of much discussion, with a focus on who the participants were, and the range of perspectives that tribal participants (or consultants) might bring [EH,LS,JL]. Consultants included curators, chosen for their understanding of museums and knowledge of the culture, as well as representatives of all cultures presented in the exhibits [LS]. An example of a situation in which one opinion would usually take precedence was illustrated by a mask; in the case cited, the prevailing opinion was that of the family owning rights to the character that the mask represented [JL]. Even the consultants within one cultural group, for example a scholar and a weaver, might have different attitudes, reflecting their vocational perspectives on the material. Participants nonetheless worked to reach consensus [LS].

Several artifacts served to illustrate how varied native approaches to treatment could be: in one culture, an artifact's history might be honored by keeping intact all signs of age, where in another it was honored by refurbishing. Perhaps indicative of how uncharted this territory is for conservators, participants grappled with the question of how to choose a treatment approach when tribal consulting assistance was not possible. Could cultures be "classified" in their approach? were there points of view (or modes) other than these two? should these be considered the endpoints of a continuum [BA,LM]? While it seemed practical to think about the choices along a continuum, we were reminded that approaches taken within an individual culture might also vary. For example, some Navajo objects were made to deteriorate; others were meant to be renewed continually [LS]. Several participants noted that attitudes within a culture also change and evolve with time, with politics cited as only one of the factors [TR,SQ]. We were urged to resist the tendency to generalize. As one participant [MK] emphasized, for all objects in our labs, we (the conservators) are temporary guardians of their place in their culture. The objects occupy places on a continuum to which we may never be privy; their whole essence may

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not ever be apparent or accessible to us.

In undertaking a treatment involving compensation, a conservator is thus faced with reconciling these sometimes conflicting approaches, complicated further because our profession's *Guidelines for Practice* may advocate a more conservative and noninvasive approach. In the discussion, examples were given which illustrated the limits that conservators were able to place [JL,LS]. One object was ultimately refurbished but only to the point that Levinson felt met a more conventional museum conservation standard. In another example, Smith compensated painted portions of the face but did not replace parts such as feathers which for the culture had spiritual potency.

Other areas of decision-making which illustrated the impact of this more inclusive process were storage and exhibition [EP,JL,LS]. Examples discussed were the storage of Kachinas in an upright, not prone, position, and the arrangement of objects to respect a particular ordering of deities [LS]. One of the issues governing exhibition was whether the material was considered "sensitive" for a particular culture. Smith offered as an example the Rio Grande Kachina figures, which were not displayed locally; by extension, neither were items depicting parallel deities in the neighboring Hopi and Zuni cultures. It was interesting to note that some of the Hopi material was approved for loan, as long as it was exhibited beyond the Rio Grande region to avoid causing offense. The kachinas are being displayed on bases, already nailed on at the time of museum acquisition. While convenient for handling, they are still a subject of debate [LS]. From the conservators' standpoint, precautions taken in the preparation and presentation of "Chiefly Feasts" resulted in an exhibit which has traveled exceptionally well [LH,JL].

Discussion specific to the conservation of the Javanese gamelan touched on questions of its acquisition and fumigation [JK,SQ]. The pursuit of a Javanese ensemble, rather than one from Bali, reflected not only Quigley's scholarly interest in Javanese music but also the greater possibility of still finding an intact set in Java. There they are preserved more consistently than in Bali where old bronze components tend to be remelted to fabricate new ones. In addition, the nineteenth-century date of the ensemble which he located fit in well with the museum's collection.

This gamelan presented an interesting example of variable notions of "value." Instruments recognized as "valuable" were often redone, yet from the museum's perspective this would have devalued the ensemble. Quigley noted that in this instance museum acquisition ironically made its preservation possible. With regard to the decision to fumigate rather than freeze the instruments, this was primarily a compromise to appease the local Fish and Wildlife Service office, as the U.S. Customs office had stated no strong preference. The local office was already upset by the importation of the gamelan's ivory components, despite proper documentation, and was additionally skeptical about the efficacy of freezing.

The speakers admitted that conventional documentation of treatment steps, however thorough, did not adequately capture nuances of the discussions which shaped their choices [JL,LS,SQ]. Solutions they developed included recording and annotating all conversations, articulating as much as possible the reasons behind choices, and developing a "survey" form which included cultural considerations, rationale for treatment, and notes from conversations [JL,LS]. This sparked comments about the applicability and usefulness of this approach to documentation for other types of material, and was suggested as an area to receive commentary in the revised *Code of Ethics/Guidelines for Practice* [TDW].

Contributors to the discussion (listed alphabetically); presentors appear first, marked by an *asterisk:

JL	*Judith Levinson/Linda Niewenhuizen
SQ	*Sam Quigley
LS	*Landis Smith
BA	Barbara Appelbaum
LH	Len Hamilton
PH	Pamela Hatchfield
EH	Elizabeth Hendrix
MK	Marian Kaminitz
JK	Jeff Kimball
LM	Lisa Mibach
EP	Ellen Pearlstein
TR	Toby Raphael
TDW	Terry Drayman Weisser