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# PRESERVING WHAT IS RIGHT: FINDING SIMILARITIES BETWEEN COLLABORATING WITH A LIVING ARTIST AND BUDDHIST MONKS

CÉLINE CHRÉTIEN

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This article draws a parallel between two experiences. The first one, in the context of contemporary art, involved collaboration with the artist Richard Fauguet for the conservation of his piece, *Mirida*. The second experience, in the context of religion and ethnography, took place in the Buddhist monastery of Matho in Ladakh, India, and involved collaboration with Buddhist monks and owners. Numerous similarities emerge from this comparison, such as the importance of the immaterial value, the object's status, and the conservation approach that consist in an active participation and conversation from the conservator with artists and stakeholders. A potential collaborative approach is proposed between the conservation of ethnographic objects and the conservation of contemporary art.

KEYWORDS: Richard Fauguet, Immaterial, Contemporary art, Buddhism, Religious, Ethnographic, Interview, Religion, Silicone, Immateriality

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Conserving cultural heritage can be challenging when an intangible value that constitutes the integrity of an object comes into conflict with Cesare Brandi's *Teoria del Restauro* (1977), the influence of which is still strongly present in European conservation practice. First of all, his theory concerns fine art artifacts and architectural monuments only. Moreover, these artifacts are considered from a contemplative perspective only. As a result, the religious value, the functionality of some cultural heritage objects, and the aesthetical experience desired by some contemporary artists are some of the aspects that are not considered by his theory. I will highlight two of my projects in which the immaterial characteristic had an eminent place in the integrity of the objects. One was in the context of contemporary art, involving collaboration with a living French artist, Richard Fauguet, for the conservation of his piece, *Mirida*, from 1994; the other was in the context of ethnography and religion, which took place in the Buddhist monastery of Matho in Ladakh, India, and involved collaboration with Buddhist monks and owners. These two experiences involved similar issues regarding an intangible heritage value, and they enabled me to compare the way they were approached. This article presents those two projects and leads to a comparative analysis.

## 2. *MIRIDA*

For my graduation project at *L'Institut National du Patrimoine* (INP, National Institute for Cultural Heritage) in Paris, France, in 2010, I studied a contemporary piece called *Mirida* (fig. 1). Fauguet made the piece in 1994. The institution *Fond Régional d'Art Contemporain* (FRAC, Regional Fund for Contemporary Art) of Franche-Comté, situated in Besançon, in France acquired it in 1999.<sup>1</sup> This three-dimensional piece is composed of a trio of horse heads made from translucent silicone rubber—one component silicone rubber with acetic acid crosslinking—and glass marbles. As the silicone rubber is hollow, the heads are very soft and deformed.

Through his art, Fauguet enjoys expressing his vision of the world in a poetic and humoristic way. With *Mirida*, the glass marbles from children's game and the deformation of the heads are characteristic of his dreamlike world. This piece is a satire of the relationship between the artist and his art dealer. The artist



Fig. 1. *Mirida* in 1999 at its accession at the Frac Franche-Comté. Richard Faugué, *Mirida*, 1994, silicone rubber, glass marbles, each element 77 × 34 × 56 cm. Frac Franche-Comté, FR-1999-13 (1 to 3). (Courtesy of Frac Franche-Comté)

represented himself between two artist friends, Michel Aubry and Daniel Schlier, as drunken racehorses on which the art dealer would have wrongly bet. The first syllable of each name forms the title *Mirida*.

The piece has not been displayed since 2003 because of tears caused by the artist's mount, which relied on screws fixed in silicone to fasten the heads to the wall. Due to the weight—each head weighs around 10 pounds—several tears have increased from the screw holes (fig. 2) and one area of the silicone

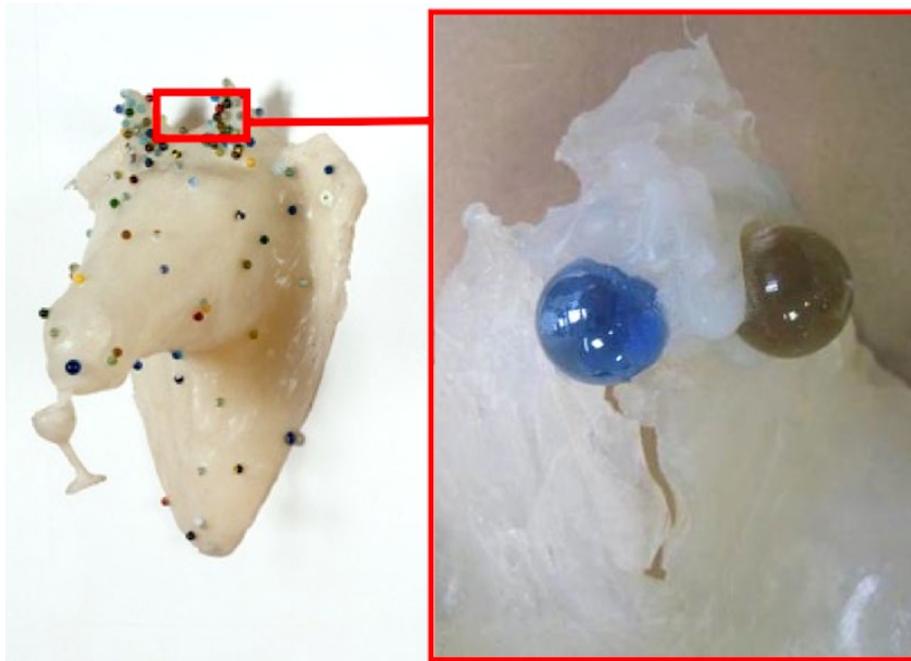


Fig. 2. Tear and former repairs (Courtesy of Frac Franche-Comté/Céline Chrétien)

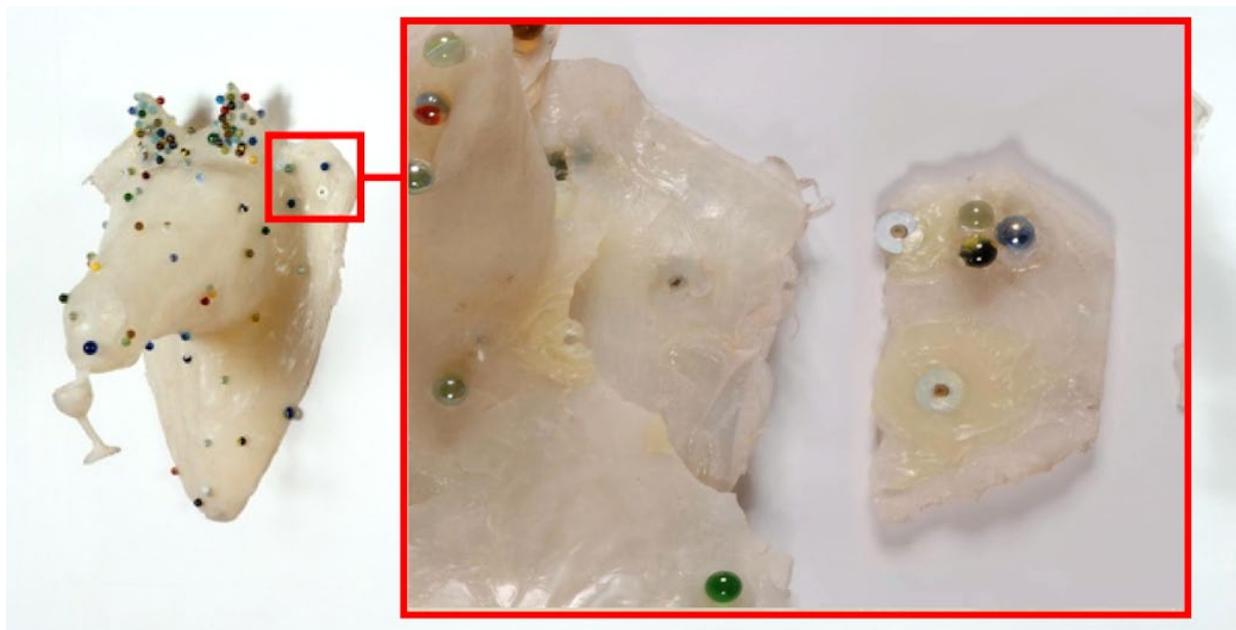


Fig. 3. Fragment of *Mirida* (Courtesy of Frac Franche-Comté/Céline Chrétien)

detached from the piece (fig. 3). The piece also showed other alterations, such as a slight yellowing of the silicone. Deformations and tears in the folds were apparent, as the piece was stored folded (fig. 4).

Collection manager Norbert Robert and myself agreed that collaboration with Fauguet was necessary for several reasons:

- He retained moral rights on his piece even though ownership has been transferred since the FRAC acquired it in 1999.<sup>2</sup>
- At the time of the purchase, the necessary conditions for the respect of the integrity of *Mirida* had not been stipulated in the sale contract, and no artist interview had been performed. As a result, the description of the meaning of the piece, the information about its execution, and the way it should be exhibited were all missing.



Fig. 4. *Mirida* at its arrival at the INP in September 2009, tear on a fold (Courtesy of Frac Franche-Comté/Céline Chrétien)

## 2.1 DOCUMENTING AND REDISCOVERING THE PIECE

In response to this missing documentation, I gathered information from exhibition catalogues and archived documents that were exchanged between Fauget and the FRAC of Franche-Comté. I also interviewed Fauget, his assistant at the time of the creation of the piece *Rainier Lericolais*, and his art dealer Jean-François Dumont. From the facts I gleaned from those documents and interviews, information about the description of the piece—as Fauget and his two friends’ portrait—has been re-established. Moreover, the artist’s intention has been updated: Fauget wanted the public to live an aesthetic experience. The ghost-like translucence and the deformed aspect of the horse heads, as well as the marble decoration, were supposed to generate feelings of rapture and curiosity. The interview has also revealed that the memory can be selective and inconsistent; for example, Fauget’s assistant remembered using some tools that the artist forgot to mention.

## 2.2 A COLLABORATIVE INTERVENTION WITH THE ARTIST

After the documentation, it was necessary to learn about Fauget’s expectation regarding the conservation of his piece. The first time I contacted him on the phone, it was clear that he wanted the piece to be refabricated, and he did not mind about doing it himself or letting me do it. I wanted to understand why he felt the need to make the piece again. He feared that the silicone has become too discolored—which would have affected the aesthetic experience—and he thought that it would be too complicated to put the fragment back. The problem with this proposition was that the piece would have lost its original material, the evidence of the hand of the artist, and its historical value. Moreover, Fauget wanted to improve the execution of the piece, which would have changed its “DIY” appearance. As a consequence, the collection manager of the FRAC refused to consider this option. Since Fauget had not seen his piece since 2003, I asked him to come to the INP to see it. He noticed that the silicone was not

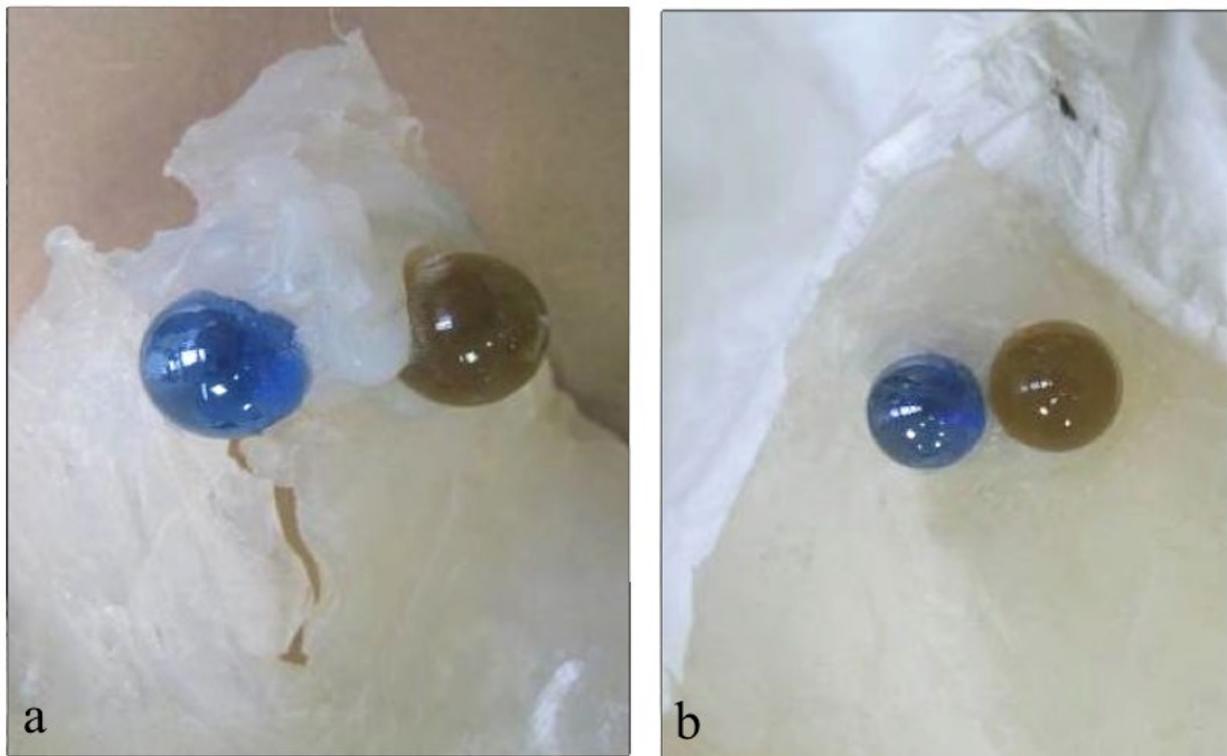


Fig. 5a. Tear before treatment; 5b. Tear after treatment (Courtesy of Frac Franche-Comté/Céline Chrétien)

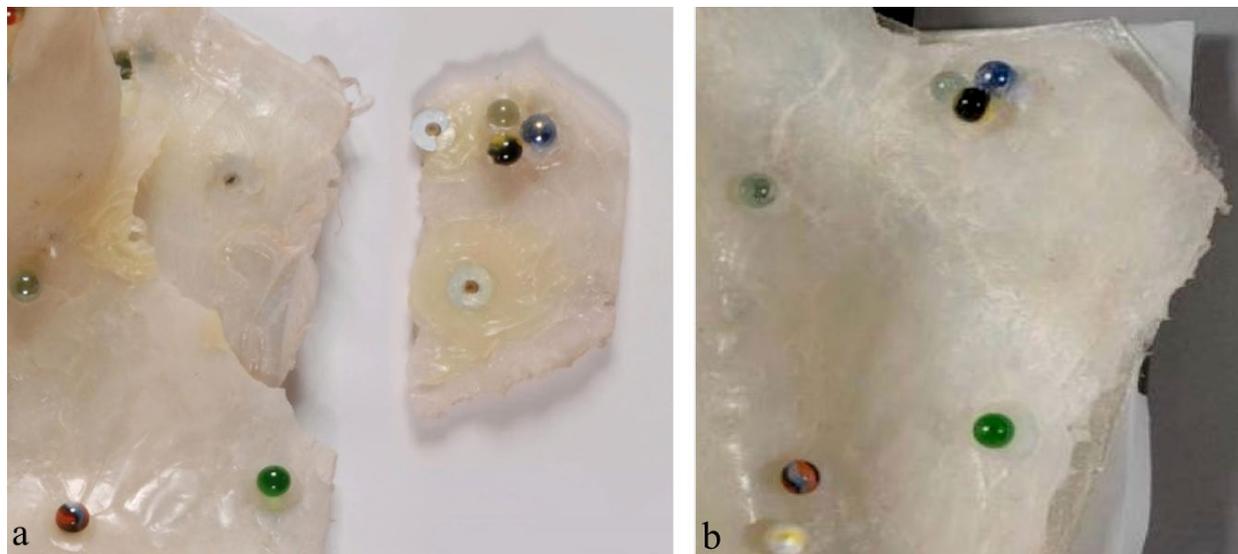


Fig. 6a. Fragment before treatment; 6b. Fragment after treatment (Courtesy of Frac Franche-Comté/Céline Chrétien)

as yellow as he thought and that its appearance was still acceptable. Moreover, I organized a survey among the students and faculty at the INP: I took note of people's reactions and feelings in regard to *Mirida*. The result showed that the piece was still efficient in provoking the aesthetic experience that Fauguet sought. As a result, Fauguet recognized that his piece could still embody his intention, and he no longer felt the need to refabricate it.

From there, I could start working on the treatment proposition. I first had to find a way to put the fragment back and consolidate the tears. This intervention required that I test several adhesives—silicone Rubson SP2, Plextol D360, and Beva 371 film—and to make samples to show the final aspect to the artist. After the research, Fauguet agreed with my suggestion of a reversible bonding, with fumed silica and Beva 371 film, as aesthetically satisfying. With his agreement and the collection manager's agreement, I carried out the stabilization treatment of the tears and the bonding of the fragment with this method (figs. 5, 6).

Last, as the original hanging method led to the deterioration of *Mirida*, a new mounting had to be created. As before, Fauguet's contribution was helpful to understand the requirements of the project. The intentional deformation and the translucence of the piece had to be respected. Fauguet also showed me how he stretched the silicone rubber when fastening the heads to the wall himself. After seeing a prototype of the supports that I devised with a polyester resin and fiberglass, Fauguet agreed that it fulfilled his request. The supports are located inside each of the heads, which are hollow. The support structure helps to distribute the weight over a larger surface, inside the forehead, and keeps the rest of the head hollow to preserve the intentional deformation. After receiving the artist and the collection manager's agreements, the final supports were fabricated using translucent conservation-grade materials: polymethyl methacrylate and polyethylene terephthalate glycol (fig. 7). The heads are fixed on the supports with neodymium magnets.

As the three-dimensional volume of the piece needed to be maintained during storage, three crates were created and the supports and some polyethylene foam help to maintain the volume inside the heads (fig. 8).

After the treatment of the piece, an annual checking by the collection technicians of the institution has been recommended. Even though the silicone rubber is currently stable, it might disintegrate in the future, and this might lead to a non-exhibitable state. The successors of the current collection manager may conceivably need to deal with the refabrication of the piece. If that situation occurs, the precise documentation that I have undertaken would be an important tool.



Fig. 7. Support to be introduced in the hollow part of each head  
(Courtesy of Frac Franche-Comté/  
Céline Chrétien)



Fig. 8. Crate for *Mirida* (Courtesy of Frac Franche-Comté/Céline Chrétien)

### 3. MATHO MUSEUM PROJECT

The second project took place in the Buddhist monastery of Matho, situated in Ladakh in the north of India and founded in the 15th century. The monastery owns a collection of liturgical objects and *thangkas*, many of which are still used and some of which date back to the ninth century. A subset of the collection was publicly available in the meditation rooms. The others were exhibited in a room used as a museum. In this museum the objects were difficult to access, as the showcases were closed with nails. Deteriorations such as dust, grime, flaking paint, deformations, cracks, gaps, breaks, and missing parts were noticeable on the objects. Dungsay Gyana Vajra Rinpoche, senior lineage holder of the *Sakya* order of Tibetan Buddhism and manager of the Matho monastery, wished to build a new museum and wanted the damaged objects to be treated. He entrusted the French association Himalayan Art Preservation with this project, led by Nelly Rieuf, painting conservator.

It is in this context that I joined the team for a month in 2011 to handle the inventory and conservation assessment of the unfired clay objects. A year after, with the help of a French grant from the Carnot Foundation, I came back for two months to perform the conservation treatment of some selected objects. The unfired clay objects comprise portraits of Sakya masters, Buddha figures, and ceremonial masks worn by the monks (fig. 9). By examining the objects during the collection assessment, and by visiting the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (Choglamsar, Ladakh, India), which still teaches traditional clay sculpture making, I found that those objects were actually made of a blend of clay, animal glue, cotton fibers, cotton cloth, threads, and wood.

#### 3.1 UNDERSTANDING THE RELIGIOUS STATUS OF THE OBJECTS

Preliminary to the conservation treatment proposal, an interview with the monks was essential to know their expectations and to understand the role of those objects in the monastery, as well as the importance of their aesthetic appearance and their history.

First of all, those objects still have a religious value for the believers. When we visit monastery museums in the area, we can notice that people still perform offerings to the objects in the museums,



Fig. 9a. Ceremonial leopard mask. Creator unknown, date unknown, cotton, clay, animal glue, pigments,  $34.5 \times 23 \times 23$  cm. Matho monastery, Ladakh, India, St 13; 9b. Chitipati mask. Creator unknown, date unknown, cotton, clay, animal glue, pigments,  $43 \times 33.5 \times 19$  cm. Matho monastery, Ladakh, India, St 9. (Courtesy of Himalayan Art Preservation/Céline Chrétien)

such as oil lamps, incense, water, sculptures made of butter and barley flour (*tormas*), fruits, and flowers. For Buddhists, the deities live in the artifacts that represent them: when a newly made artifact is complete, a ceremony is celebrated to invite the deity to embody the picture or the object that has been dedicated to it. Once the object is damaged, the deity leaves the object, as it is not worthy of being inhabited. Therefore, the religious use of these objects is inextricably linked to their aesthetic condition, and their religious value can be restored only if their aesthetic integrity is rehabilitated.

### 3.2 A COLLABORATIVE INTERVENTION WITH THE MONKS

To our knowledge those objects have never been treated by anyone other than natives of this region. Moreover, they were still going to be used by them. This context differs from Western museums and necessitated finding an approach that would be compatible with the Buddhist culture.

In accordance with their belief, the monks initially wanted the missing parts of the objects to be completed and have a polished finish. This interfered with Brandi's wish to have the ability to recognize the restored parts at near distance. In agreement with the monks, we decided to proceed step by step, from a minimal conservative intervention to a restorative intervention, acknowledging the monks' point of view between each step. We started with stabilizing the objects, by dusting, cleaning, consolidating, and filling the gaps. To differentiate the restored parts from the original ones, we proposed the use of different materials, such as a mix of Klucel G, cellulose powder, chalk, and pigments. We carried out a minimal aesthetic improvement by reshaping the masks with a humid treatment (fig. 10). Upon request



Fig. 10a. Leopard mask before treatment; 10b. After consolidation, cleaning, and reshaping; 10c. After gap filling. (10a. and 10b. Courtesy of Himalayan Art preservation/Céline Chrétien; 10c. Courtesy of Himalayan Art Preservation/ Anne-Laure Goron)

of the monks, we reconstituted the two missing skulls of one of the Chitipati masks. At this point, and unexpectedly, the monks, who at first wanted a visually cohesive restoration, were satisfied with the appearance of the masks after the gap fillings and the reconstitution of the two missing skulls. They did not feel the need to have them painted with the original colors (fig. 11).

During this project, locals have been trained to provide the maintenance necessary for the good conservation of the pieces. And the new museum has been built with a view to ensure satisfying conservation conditions, such as a stable climate and a low exposure to light.

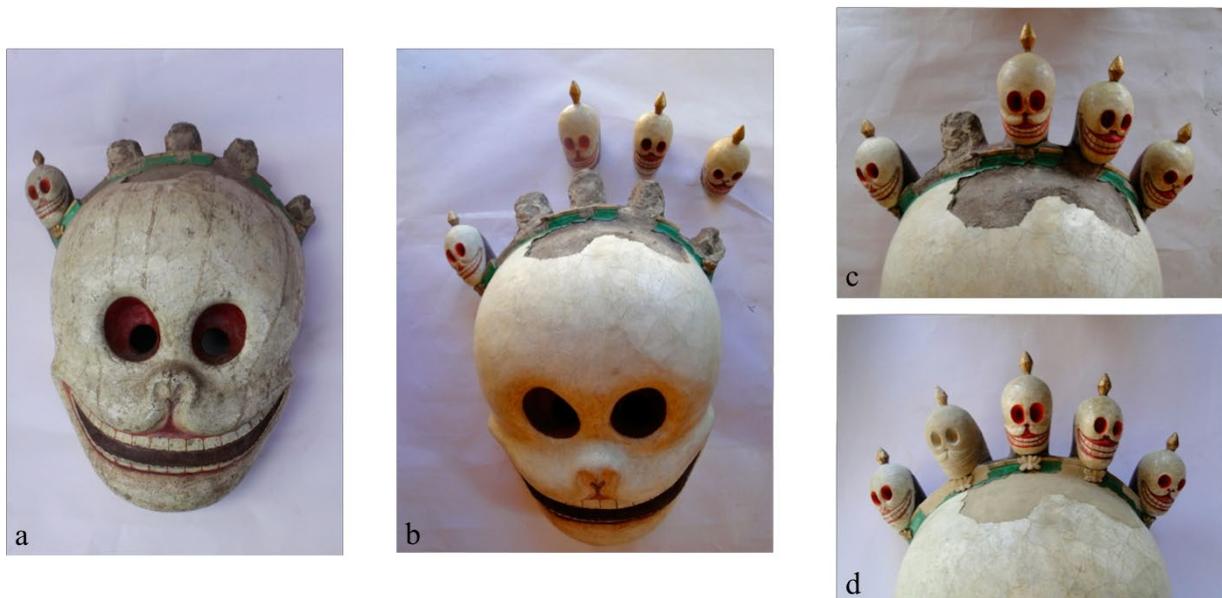


Fig. 11a. Chitipati mask before treatment; 11b. After cleaning; 11c. After bonding fragments; 11d. After gap filling and missing ornamental skull reconstitution. (11a. and 11b. Courtesy of Himalayan Art Preservation/Céline Chrétien; 11c. and 11d. Courtesy of Himalayan Art Preservation/Anne-Laure Goron)

## 4. ANALYSIS

Despite the differences between *Mirida* and the Buddhist clay objects, those two experiences reveal many similarities, which can be classified as discussed next.

### 4.1 BOTH ETHNOGRAPHIC AND CONTEMPORARY OBJECTS

Both *Mirida* and the Buddhist clay objects meet the definition of ethnographic objects by Benedicte Rolland-Villemot: they are “witnesses of social systems and of modes of thinking” (Rolland-Villemot 1998, 16). Moreover, the comparison performed by Hal Foster (1995) between the artist and the ethnographer, and the one made by Vivian van Saaze (2009) between the conservator and the ethnographer of contemporary art, reinforce this idea: the artist observes the world and transposes his observation into his art, and the conservator explores the artist’s world with the ethnographer’s tool—the interview.

*Mirida* and the Buddhist clay objects also both have characteristics of contemporary objects: *Mirida* could not be approached like an artwork from previous centuries due to the importance of the artist’s intention for this piece. The liturgical objects in Matho still have a role to play in the current activity of the monastery. As a result, and despite their traditionalism, they could not be approached like the ethnographic objects present in Western museums.

### 4.2 THE CONSERVATION OF THE IMMATERIAL VALUE AS A PRIORITY

At first these two projects presented comparable conflicts between the artist and the religious believers and Brandi’s theory, which implies a minimal intervention and a recognizable restoration on behalf of the respect of the authenticity of the piece:

- Fauguet wanted his piece to still be able to express his dreamlike world. To him, his artistic intention induced the necessity for his piece to have a perfect aesthetic, and this prevailed over the conservation of the original material.
- The monks needed the deities to embody their objects again. To do so they needed their objects to have a perfect aesthetic, and this was at first more important to them than conserving the marks of their history.

### 4.3 AN ACTIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OBJECTS

During these projects, I understood that the origin of this conflict was due to the fact that the artist and believers still had an active relationship with their objects, which is not considered in Brandi’s theory:

- As Fauguet is the creator of *Mirida*, he still considered his piece from a creation process perspective. As he evolved, his consideration of his piece evolved as well.
- The religious believers considered that these objects were alive, endowed with a spirit, as deities embody them according to Buddhism. Moreover, these liturgical objects still had a place in the believer’s everyday life.

### 4.4 AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

As both contexts were different from the conservation of ancient objects in Western museums, I had to adapt my approach to the different characteristics of these objects. I wished to avoid an ethnocentric perspective: instead of considering the need of the objects according Brandi’s theory only, I attempted to consider the artist and the monks’ requests according to their culture.

The solution was to start by studying the objects in the most neutral way possible. This required interaction with the artist and the monks. In both cases, the interview was a successful tool for performing this work, as it enabled me to understand how these people related to these objects. In addition, I had an outside position regarding these objects because I came to the projects with a distance that they did not have, with a conservator's point of view, with different references, and with an ethic to respect. As a result, the interview also enabled my subjects to discover and understand the different options offered by conservation. Fauguet was eager to learn about the best conservation conditions to conserve his pieces, and the monks were quite involved and enjoyed following the evolution of the treatments.

The fact that this approach worked in both projects is easily explained if we consider that before being commonly used in contemporary art conservation, the interview was an ethnographic tool. To me, studying the artist's world is just like exploring a newly discovered society: they both have their own codes and references that need to be deciphered.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Despite the clear and important differences between this contemporary piece and these active religious objects, the comparison has exposed some similarities in their issues and their approaches. Starting from those case studies, this article seeks to provoke thought about contemporary art conservation and ethnographic objects conservation from a wider perspective. These two fields occasionally present values not considered by Brandi's theory. As a response to this issue, and despite their parallel evolution, these two disciplines have adopted at times similar approaches. For both disciplines, dialogue and collaboration with the creators or the owners of the pieces has often been the key to solve ethical issues. This latter resemblance tends to reinforce the legitimacy of these approaches. As a result, it highlights the benefit of collaboration between these two disciplines: learning from each other and legitimizing new approaches.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The initial project was undertaken at *L'Institut National du Patrimoine* (INP), Paris, France, on a piece by Richard Fauguet that belongs to the Fond Regional d'Art Contemporain Franche-Comté, Besançon, France. I want to thank artist Richard Fauguet and collection manager Norbert David for entrusting me with the conservation of *Mirida*. I want to acknowledge Juliette Levy, head sculpture conservator at the INP, Marie Payre, assistant sculpture conservator at the INP, Sylvie Ramel, conservator of modern materials in private practice, and Alain Pouchelon, expert in physical chemistry of surfaces and polymers, for their time, encouragement, and support.

The second project was undertaken at the Buddhist Monastery of Matho, with the French association Himalayan Art Preservation (HAP), and was supported by a French grant from the Carnot Foundation. I want to express my gratitude to Nelly Rieuf, painting conservator and manager of the Matho Monastery Museum Project, for inviting me to join the team working on the project and for putting her trust in me. I am grateful to the monks of Matho monastery for entrusting me with the conservation of their liturgical objects. I would like to acknowledge the Carnot Foundation, which has made this project possible. I would like to thank the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (Choglamsar, Ladakh, India), its teachers and its students, for sharing knowledge of the traditional clay sculpture making, and Anne-Laure Gauron, sculpture conservator in private practice, for her involvement in the conservation treatment of the clay objects.

## NOTES

1. A FRAC is an institution by which each French region finances, collects, and broadcasts current creations.
2. In France, the artist's rights are defined by the articles L. 121-1 to L. 122-12 of the Intellectual Property Code. Conservation of contemporary art is particularly concerned with the right of the respect of the integrity of the piece with which these articles deal.

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## SOURCES OF MATERIALS

Beva 371 film; Fumed silica; Cellulose powder  
 Talas  
 330 Morgan Ave.  
 Brooklyn, NY 11211  
 212-219-0735  
<http://talasonline.com>

Neodymium earth magnets  
 Adams Magnetic Products  
 34 Industrial Way East  
 Eatontown, NJ 07724  
<https://www.adamsmagnetic.com>

Klucel G  
 Kremer Pigments  
 247 West 29th St.  
 New York, NY 10001  
 212-219-2394  
<http://www.kremerpigments.com>

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